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On Cortez Road My Search for One Homeless Man

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ON CORTEZ ROAD
My Search for One Homeless Man

By

Brian Robert McMillan

THESIS

Submitted to
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

ON CORTEZ ROAD My Search for One Homeless Man

By

Brian Robert McMillan

This book tells the story of my search, both physical and historical, for one homeless man, Lee Sandspur, on Cortez Road, in Bradenton, Florida. I met Lee when he was in the process of joining the same church I was attending with my family. When I learned how open he was about his homelessness, I proposed a writing project to him: I would write his life story, and we would split any money that might come from it. He agreed, and we began a long series of interviews that would stretch over a period of four years.

One of my motives for the project was that I would be able to fellowship Lee as he made big changes in his life, from joining the church to finding a job and a more permanent place to live. Not long after we did our first interview, though, Lee returned to his alcohol and quit his job. I persisted with the project by interviewing people who knew him well, including family members, and learned that the life story he had been telling me was much more complicated. In fact, it seemed that he had lied about important events in his life. All of this made me question my own purposes for writing the book, and also ask myself whether I was helping him or hurting him by digging up painful memories.

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2009

DEDICATION

For Hailey, Jackson, Grant
and Lee

PREFACE

The stretch of State Road 53 from my apartment in Bradenton to Lakewood Ranch, Florida, was mostly a straight shot, and only about eight miles long. I drove it round trip every day, and occasionally, two and three round trips depending on which sporting events I needed to cover for the weekly newspaper that had hired me in 2004. About halfway home from the office, I passed the Braden River Library. When I grew tired of the sports and news talk radio shows, I stopped at the small library to check out books on CD.

Over the next couple of years, I listened to dozens of audio books, and much of it was nonfiction: histories, biographies, political commentaries. One book, *American Sucker*, opened my eyes to a new genre. It was an author I'd never heard of—David Denby, a film critic for *The New Yorker*—and the subject matter at first didn't seem particularly riveting: a chronicle of Denby playing the stock market. But I had already exhausted much of the library's audio book collection on CD, and my car didn't have a tape player. I checked out Denby, figuring that anything was better than more Rush Limbaugh clones.

The book opens with Denby's realization that he has been “jabbering.” On the phone with a friend, he was

speaking as breathlessly as a cattle auctioneer in full cry. Jumping over verbal fences, mashing participials, dropping qualifiers . . . I was talking to an old friend about movies, and I said something like this: *Movie people think platforming works only with quality-word-of-mouth and slow-building-three-four-million-a-week pictures in which buzz rolls into multiple viewings like*

The English Patient *or* Shakespeare in Love . . . I had trouble saying one thing at a time. (3)

Denby's style was fast-paced, and it matched the content. I listened carefully to the remaining few hundred pages of the book, always fascinated by how he crafted a topic like tech stocks into a story with an arc, metaphors, characters and themes. Really, it read like a novel, rather than a "nonfiction" book. Moreover, the act of writing the book was an intriguing variable in the plot. As Denby sat down to lunch with important figures in the tech stocks boom, they knew he was writing a book, and sometimes the line of friend and journalist was blurred. Would he have become "friends" with these people were it not for the book?

Although *American Sucker* may not be particularly significant in the long run, it was the book that introduced me to creative nonfiction. Around the same time, I also reread James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as well as a few biographies of Joyce. To my surprise, I learned that *A Portrait* was so autobiographical that it was even cited as a source to clear up aspects of Joyce's childhood in biographies. Moreover, critic Zack Bowen points out that "Joyce went so far in identifying with his character as to append Stephen Dedalus's name as author in the original publication of some of the stories later to appear in *Dubliners*" (para. 23). I decided that if Joyce had written his famous novel not in 1916 but in, say, 2004, publishers would have labeled his book a "Memoir," just like Denby's. Both writers essentially turned "real life" into art. I began to see creative nonfiction and memoir as an intriguing artistic goal.

But the two authors chose much different strategies for creating their art. I am grossly oversimplifying here, but one way to think of it is that Joyce employed a third-person point

of view despite writing about himself, while Denby wrote in the first person as a journalist. In other words, while Denby was front and center in his book, Joyce essentially hid behind the “fictional” persona of Stephen Dedalus, which was a technique that reinforced his philosophy of the author remaining “invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (217). It seemed that Joyce, or at least Stephen, would disapprove of Denby’s role as both the main character and narrator in his artwork. In any event, the two strategies intrigued me and would eventually inform the book that I would write, and help me to think through the problem of where to place myself as an author and narrator.

The project all began when I met Jerry. He was homeless, he was willing to talk and he needed a ride. He agreed to let me interview him to tell his story. At the time, I wasn’t sure what shape the book would eventually take, but I wanted to know everything about the world of this homeless man so that I could turn him into a character in a book that would read just like a novel.

Once I got to Northern Michigan University, I was able to concentrate more fully on my book, *On Cortez Road*. On Dr. Paul Lehmborg’s recommendation, I read two books that further demonstrated the different roles the author can play in his own story. One was Susan Sheehan’s *Life for Me Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair*. In this work, Sheehan removes herself from the story, instead focusing completely on her subject, Crystal Taylor. The book begins with Crystal waking up and noticing that she was “bleeding lightly” (3), and following her through the birth of her child and other struggles in the American welfare system. Not until the book’s final pages does Sheehan reveal how she came to know Crystal and learn about her through interviews.

Although Sheehan and Joyce are much different—one is reportage, the other a fictionalized memoir—their stance on the role of the author in the story seems to coincide: the author is absent, seemingly indifferent.

In the other book, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, author Dennis Covington is a central character. The premise is that he is trying to write about a snake-handling Pentecostal churches in Appalachia. But as the story progresses, he finds himself becoming converted to the faith, and he actually handles a dangerous snake, just like the other church members do. In this story, the writer/reporter begins the story thinking he'll write a more objective, third-person account, but ends up going through a change so unexpected that his own awakening dominates the work. It moves from reportage to memoir.

Covington's book, then, is more along the lines of Denby, who places himself unabashedly at the center of the action.

The challenge of writing *On Cortez Road* was in large part an effort to answer the question of authorial presence. Whose story was this? Was it Jerry's, or mine? In other words, who was the real main character? Should I write in the first person and include my own thoughts as they came to me, or should I focus on Jerry and write about him as a third-person, invisible narrator?

All of this was further complicated by the first class I took at Northern Michigan University, Dr. Stephen Burns's study of the contemporary American novel, with an emphasis on metafiction and postmodernism. We studied John Barth, whose 2001 novel *Coming Soon!!!* can be seen as a case study in the extremities of metafiction. It's a novel about two characters who write a novel about a competition to write a novel about a novel (this last novel being *The Floating Opera*, by John Barth). One character, Novelist Emeritus,

is based on John Barth himself. N.E. summarizes his literary beginnings this way: “My first published novel happens to have been suggested by my chancing upon a photograph of a certain tug-towed tidewater showbarge” (81), which is precisely how Barth himself first decided on his subject for *The Floating Opera*. Later, as if to bat away any lingering doubt, N.E. is identified as “the author” and “Mister B” for Barth (121).

In some ways, Barth’s metafiction appealed to me, because it was so clever. Still, it was often frustrating to read, because I felt that the story and characters were a secondary concern to the metafictional hoops and tricks. I took it as a warning not to focus too much on the writing of the book within the book itself.

And yet, as I did more research for *On Cortez Road*, it became more and more clear that it was not Jerry’s story, but mine. The most interesting arc, I felt, was in the discoveries I was making about his past, and in my changing perception of him. In reality, he seemed to change little in the course of the book. The problem was, my arc was partly shaped by and dependent on the act of the writing of the book. In my interviews with him, Jerry occasionally made comments like, “You might want to include this in your book.” In fact, his awareness that I was recording our conversations and planning to write about them seemed to have a dramatic impact on both of us. I often questioned my motives: was I pressing him on certain points because I wanted to write a more interesting book, or because I cared about him and wanted to help him? My ethical dilemma in writing the book, I believe, is analogous to the difficulty many people have when they try to help the homeless as a kind of “project,” rather than as a purely altruistic act. In that way, I felt I had to write about the writing of the book, and I did my best to avoid crossing too heavily into metafiction.

Moreover, the role of the writing complicated the decision I had to make about where to place myself in the book. Do I act as an objective journalist like Sheehan? That seemed impossible. Do I write all about myself like Denby? That would discount Jerry's story, which I was very interested in telling. In the end, I decided to try a hybrid of the two. In some sections, I would write in the first person, and it would be my story. In others, I would take the information I'd learned from my interviews, and rewrite it into an accurate third-person account that kept me apart from my handiwork—"invisible," as Joyce recommends. Covington's book was a good model, because while he was writing about himself, he seemed reluctant to do so, as though he had hoped he could have remained invisible, but he was dragged into the story, just as he was supposedly dragged by the Holy Ghost up to the front of the small, mountainside chapel.

Once I decided on a strategy for my point of view, I continued writing and rewriting, and as I did so, a few other books were influential. One is Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. He had a similar problem of needing to include many minor characters surrounding one major character—Chris McCandless, in his case. Many chapters in *Into the Wild* begin with a seemingly unrelated story, and only after a page or so does the reader find out the connection to McCandless. I liked the sense of discovery that accompanied that connection, and I decided to use that technique to introduce my minor characters, too.

Another important technique I borrowed was Norman Mailer's close narration from *The Executioner's Song*. He had tremendous access to recorded interviews with Gary Gilmore, and he also interviewed Gilmore's sister and girlfriend. In order to make the voices more distinct and believable, Mailer preserved characteristic phrases and diction of his

subjects. He removed himself completely from the story, seemingly allowing the facts of the story to stand for themselves, but in reality opening up more questions about the subjectivity of the characters' accounts of the actions. How reliable are the various narrators? This was just the type of effect I wanted in my book, because there were so many contradictions and discrepancies between Jerry's version of events and the versions of his family members. By keeping characteristic diction and phrases, I tried to emphasize the unreliability of all narrators other than myself. All of this changed when I reached the final section, however, which I'll explain next.

For the conclusion, I drew again from Joyce. Although *A Portrait* is a novel, it was influential in steering me toward nonfiction. But it was *Ulysses* that helped me to find a solution to the end of my book. After having interviewed Jerry so long, and seeing very little change if any for the better, I had become somewhat disillusioned. But in the final part of the book, my attitude changed. As a result of yet another long search for Jerry, I was so happy to find him that my love for him increased to the point where I accepted him as he was, and no longer saw him as a failure in life. Originally, I wrote the last chapter in much the same style as I had the rest of the book, and many of the same topics were covered: I was hesitant to give him money, and he often was frustratingly ungrateful for the effort I was making in his behalf. But really, I did feel differently about him. I decided that I needed to show my change in the structure of the writing, and not just by reporting the facts of what happened.

And so, I thought about *Ulysses*, probably the greatest exploration of form and content in a novel. One of my favorite sections is the Ithaca episode, in which Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus arrive together late at night at Bloom's house. It is some of the most moving writing I've ever read, and yet the form is as cold and objective as possible—

it's told in a question and answer format, inspired by the questions and answers of Catholic catechism. I thought that a colder, more objective form would also help my story, and keep it from moving into sentimentality. Since I had set up the structure of the book with a lot of movement back and forth between my voice and the voices of my interviewees, I decided this would be a good fit: I wrote the concluding chapter about my interactions with Jerry in the third person. In that way, I hoped to surrender the privilege of being the voice of authority, and instead include myself as just another part of the story—just as unreliable and subjective as I had implied he was throughout the book. In a sense, I was shifting from the Denby model to the Joyce model in the conclusion of the story in order to show the connection I had developed with Jerry. We were united not only as friends, but in our unreliability in the narrative itself.

One of the final touches to the book was the preface. I wanted a way to introduce not only the themes of the book, but also the narrative style. Rather than take a step further back in time, I decided to use a short scene from the middle of the action. As a model, I used Jonathan Harr's preface to his book, *A Civil Action*. In that story, a cocky lawyer starts out seemingly in control of his destiny, but then ends up humbled by failure. The book begins when the lawyer has his Porsche sports car repossessed—an inauspicious beginning. But this strategy helped to manage the readers' expectations. If the beginning had shown the lawyer in the height of his success, it might have given the wrong idea of the themes of the book, which was more about the vagaries of the law, and the dangers of reckless ambition. In the same way, I didn't want to begin with Jerry in a cleaned-up, sober state, because I didn't want to make the reader think that this was how he would end up. Instead, I wanted the reader to see that this book was not going to attempt to find a solution to homelessness;

rather, it was an exploration of a way to live with the homeless and help them on their own terms.

The books I've discussed are only a small portion of the works that have influenced me as I've written this book. Others include the precise diction of Cormac McCarthy, the metafictional subtleties of Richard Powers, and the detail selection and dialogue of Don DeLillo. Just as much as I did from all of these authors, though, I learned from Dr. Stephen Burn, Dr. Diane Sautter, and most of all, Dr. Paul Lehmborg, my thesis director, who pushed me to move beyond the simple sentence structure of the journalist, and to make Jerry come alive on the page. Overall, I think what I learned most from this process, and from my MFA at Northern Michigan as a whole, is how to learn to write through reading. I am sure that I will continue to hone my voice and style as I learn from great authors for the rest of my writing career.

Note: Names are changed in this project to protect anonymity.

Note: This thesis follows the *MLA Style Manual*.

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INTRODUCTION

2006

The road was indifferent. It demanded no payment, offered no refuge; neither remembered, nor prophesied. It was the path of lonely men who, by volition or vagary, awoke to a bus stop bench, or a stand of trees wedged between office parks, or fragments of an unforgiving past.

By day, Lee walked the sidewalks, battered with gusts of metallic wind from passing cars, memorizing the opening and closing times of shops, the schedules of cleaning crews. It was a journey to evening and the next place to sleep.

One night, as I was driving toward my apartment in the spring of 2006, I was mesmerized by the light from streetlamps passing by slowly, rhythmically, like waves. No matter when or where I was headed on Cortez Road, it was habit to scan the sidewalks for Lee, and I often saw him: the homeless man who had briefly shared my church pew, who had eaten spaghetti at my kitchen table, who had appeared so ready for a change, but who had chosen instead to continue slugging it out with life on the streets.

I didn't usually stop for him, because I had no answers. What was my moral obligation to him? If I have it, must I give him money, even though he will only drink it away?

There he was.

He walked slowly to the corner of an intersection and stopped, and for a reason clear only to my subconscious, on this particular night I pulled into the parking lot of the bank on the corner. I approached him under a streetlamp, and we were bathed in green, unnatural light, a fluorescent aura. Shadows buried his eyes and contoured his cheekbones and

wrinkled face. He was five-and-a-half feet tall, and 53 years old—about the same age as my father.

Lee's clothes were soiled and ill-fitting. He wore whatever pair of shoes the latest good Samaritan had given him, regardless of size. Throw away the old pair, put on the new. No room in the backpack for duplicates, no matter how useful. He was careful about utility-weight ratios and space management. He was likely a good computer programmer in his day, when he was making over a hundred grand in D.C. Before he threw it all away.

His arms were dark from the sun, and thin like a bird's legs. He smelled awful. Without money for the Laundromat, he rarely washed his clothes, and the stench of week-old sweat surrounded him. I sat close to him on the cement curb under the lights, our backs to the red-bark bed of the manicured bank grounds. He caught his breath, glad for the excuse to stop walking, to jump off his train to nowhere.

We didn't talk about anything that night, really. He often had a story about a run-in with rude store employees who shooed him away from drinking fountains and restrooms. He'd tell me about other homeless who followed him around, trying to join forces perhaps, but he would have nothing of it. Forming alliances on the streets was too dangerous. The next thing you know, you wake up and your friend is gone, and he's wearing your shoes. You can't walk these streets in bad shoes, or you'll get blisters, and infection is the homeless man's worst enemy, aside from the red ants and maybe other homeless men who were out trying to prove something.

I had heard these stories before. It must be a horrible life. But what do I say? *It's too bad all these things have happened to you. Or, Then why don't you do something about it and get a job?*

It was time to go, and all I had in my wallet was tomorrow's lunch money: five bucks. I entertained the thought that he might break the pattern of a decade and get himself something to eat, rather than buying more rotgut vodka at the Drift In bar a few blocks down. If only he would lay off the booze tonight, it might be easier tomorrow. If only he had some nourishment, some strength in his body. If only he had the disposition to clean up and walk into a mechanic's shop. I'm Lee Sandspur, and I'm looking for work. I'm good with my hands, and I've done a little of everything. I'd appreciate a chance.

But I didn't believe it. He had been defeated by the road. I was wasting my money.

Still, I gave him the five, almost out of spite. He couldn't ever blame me for not trying to help. "Maybe you can use this," I said. "Sorry, it's all I have on me."

Lee took the money and looked away, his face shrouded in the night. He rubbed the bill between his thumb and index finger, moist with sweat and grime. When he turned back to me, his eyes shone, and he was weeping, his face twisted in something like grief. He extended his hand to me, and I grasped it.

"Thank you," he said to me. He wiped his eyes. "Thank you. Not for this," he said, waving the five. "This doesn't mean anything. It won't make a difference. The fact that you stopped and thought enough to give it to me, that you treat me like a human being, not a piece of filth. It's not the money."

He looked me in the eye, his eyebrows raised in an expression that might have said, *What would I do without you? Or, Is there any hope in this world?*

I turned away and searched the stars. If only I were more merciful and compassionate. If only I could amount to his estimation of me. If only his thinking it could purify my faithless offering.

He sniffled and breathed deeply, still holding my hand.

2005

If you drive southwest out of Tampa on I-275 across the bay, between the soaring suspension cables of the Skyway Bridge in St. Petersburg, and between the old churches and city high rises in downtown Bradenton, you will have taken the scenic route to Cortez Road.

When I first arrived, alone in a twenty-foot U-Haul with my teal, 1994 Toyota Corolla in tow, my wife and son to follow by plane within the week, I took the inland route on I-75. Dark green trees lined the interstate, and miles passed between small towns tucked behind billboards advertising one tourist trap after another. I parked the U-Haul just off the interstate at the office of *The East County Observer*, the small weekly newspaper that had hired me and provided me and my family with this adventure. I had just finished my English degree at Brigham Young University in Utah, and my wife, Hailey, had given birth to our first son, Jackson, just three months earlier.

The newspaper office was located in Lakewood Ranch, a wealthy master-plan community that had made headlines for its growth and its tremendous increases in home prices. It was 2004, and Lakewood Ranch felt like the Mecca of the housing boom. One man I would eventually meet there told me that his house made more money the previous year than he did at his job. Lush, green lawns were watered on a schedule determined by the community association, and the houses were built in regulated shades of tans and browns so that each neighborhood surrounding the pristine golf courses was color coordinated. People

were moving in so fast that a lottery system was set up for the right to purchase the newest homes.

After meeting my new co-workers, I left the U-Haul in the parking lot, unhitched the Corolla and drove into town. Several miles toward the Gulf, I entered the street grid of Bradenton city limits, population 40,000. A block to the north, and I was on Cortez. This road was very busy—eight lanes of traffic at the intersection with US 41—and yet few if any of the buildings was taller than two stories. Burger King, Marshalls, Jiffy Lube, Big Lots. Grocery stores, banks, and a good number of funeral homes and crematoriums. Palm and palmetto trees were interspersed with used car dealerships, bars, trailer parks, and old, gated apartment complexes. A large corner shop sold swimsuits, souvenir beach towels, T-shirts and snorkels. Orange, turquoise, aquamarine—many of the buildings were painted with bright colors, but had since been faded by the sun.

And on bus stop benches, on cement ledges in front of drug stores—at seemingly every corner—the homeless held creased cardboard signs that were wilting in the heat.

2005. A Mormon fire brigade: a dozen people in single-file handed boxes—Fragile, Master Bed, Living Room—from one person to another—Storage, Master Bed, Kitchen—off the yellow moving truck, down the metal ramp, the driveway, into the mobile home. Sweaty hands stamped boxes in the summer sun. I had lived in Bradenton for a year at this point, and I knew everyone present—all regulars at church—except for one man, who was homeless and only recently had begun attending. His untucked, green button-down shirt flowed to his thighs, accentuating the slenderness of his frame. Looking to be in his 50s, he was extremely

active, almost like a mouse, and he grabbed small boxes from the truck and scurried around other, larger men, who hefted the heavy furniture. As I took boxes from him and passed them along, he made comments almost to himself about them: “This one’s got dishes in it,” or “heavier than it looks.”

When we all took a break, I introduced myself. “Where are you from?” I said. It was the first question of thousands I would eventually ask Lee Sandspur.

“All over,” he said. “My dad was in the Navy.”

He seemed bright, without the loads of baggage I assumed all homeless people carried with them. Most of what I knew about the homeless came from a William Kennedy novel called *Ironweed*, in which a bum named Francis Phelan is haunted by visions of people he has killed, including his infant son, whom he dropped on his head. Sometimes Francis speaks to these visions and sometimes they speak back. Is that really what the homeless deal with? If not visions of murdered people, then other ghosts?

A few weeks later, I met Lee and two other people at the church building and gave them a ride to Lakewood Ranch, where we had volunteered to help yet another family move into the area.

My curiosity got the best of me on that car ride, and I asked Lee what it was like to be homeless. Nervous the questions would offend him, I attempted to convey my sincere interest in him. He answered each question plainly. He said he had been homeless for twelve years. I asked him whether he knew many other homeless people in the area. He said he rarely associated with other people at all, homeless or otherwise.

“I don’t want anyone to bother me, and I don’t want to bother them,” he said. “When I’m on the street, I try to be invisible.”

“How do you get enough money to buy food to eat?” I said.

“You might call it soliciting or panhandling—we would call it flying the sign,” he said.

He explained that he would write a message on a piece of cardboard and hold it up. Flying the sign. I was enthralled. This man lived down the street from me, but he experienced the world in a way I couldn’t imagine. His main concerns were primitive—finding food and shelter—and yet he lived in a modern world.

“I’m *glad* you’re asking me these questions,” he said. “I get annoyed when people hedge around it.”

I was so encouraged that, in a rare moment of spontaneity for me, I told him that I thought his story would make a good book. I asked him if he would let me do some interviews so I could write about him. We’d share the profits if it was ever published. He agreed. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. Not only would I be able to work on a long writing project—something more substantial than the short articles I had been writing as a newspaper reporter—but more importantly, I would be able to fellowship Lee, to befriend and become part of a support system for him as he attempted to change his life around. It was great luck. I had stumbled on a great story just in time to take part in a real metamorphosis.

We drove to the end of Cortez Road.

We turned onto State Road 53, which led to Lakewood Ranch, a commute I made every day to work, and a trip I would eventually make several times with Lee over the next couple of weeks, recording our conversations—with his permission—as I drove him to odd jobs.

I looked up at Lee in my rearview mirror—on this drive out to the second moving project, he sat in the back seat. The interior of my car was gray, and rough cloth covered the seats. Since it was eleven years old, the car progressively rattled in more and more places as I drove faster and faster on the highway. Something under the hood rattled at low speeds, the plastic on my door came next, and at about 55, the rearview mirror vibrated dramatically. And so, as I looked behind me at Lee, I could barely make out his facial features. I saw an image of him, an outline, but he blurred and flickered, as though he were a newsreel—as though he were disappearing. I thought I could see right through his head to the car behind me, as though he were invisible.

PART I

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in the land;
and he began to be in want.

—Luke 15: 14

Lee Sandspur

The homeless man was bitten by a brown recluse spider in the fall of 2004. It itched—that was all at first. But over the next few months, the infection spread, and patchy stains appeared on his body, like birth marks; a fever raged. One night, at the beginning of December, 2004, he collapsed. He woke up on the sidewalk as paramedics picked him up and carried him to the ambulance. But there on the sidewalk lay his bag containing everything he owned. It was drifting away. Wait. Stop.

There is no bag, the paramedics said, still carrying him.

He grew angry. The bag is right there. A shoulder bag—it says “Pepsi” on it.

They continued to help him to the ambulance.

He shouted, See the bag? Pepsi?

He awoke in the emergency room. His clothes were being removed. He passed out again.

It could have been the next day, or it could have been five days later. He was in the progressive intensive care unit, on IVs, screaming from pain. The doctors decided not to amputate his leg, but instead removed a portion of flesh where his hip and buttock came together.

One night in bed, the bandage came off. He couldn't see the gaping wound. How deep was it, exactly? As he lay on the bed, he reached behind to his leg and felt the hole. It was about eight inches long. He inserted his fingers.

“It was real deep,” Lee said, as we rode out to Lakewood Ranch. “I couldn’t get my finger tip to the bottom. It wasn’t wide enough, really.”

My tape recorder was rolling, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. I was often amazed at the level of detail he could recall. But he described touching this wound so casually he might have been talking about petting a cat. “So is it all healed now?” I asked.

“It’s filled in as much as it can.”

“So, is that when they told you they might amputate your leg?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think then?”

He shook his head quickly. “I wasn’t gonna let them. They weren’t going to take my leg off.”

“What would that do to you if you had one leg and you were homeless?”

“Oh, I’d just as soon die. I don’t want to live like that.” Then he became sarcastic, waving his hand in surrender at the roof of the car. “You know, it’s like, good grief. You know, enough’s enough.”

I laughed. He did not pity himself—he made light of it. Somehow, his sarcasm was full of hope. I was happy for him: he was leaping off the homeless cycle. We passed upscale supermarkets and “New Homes From 300K” already lined with imported, mature palm trees.

“Nobody to blame but myself, but, no,” he said, “enough’s enough. You know, it’s like, I’m not living anyway, I’m existing, I’m barely surviving. I told them, ‘You don’t have the legal right to, because I’m conscious, I’m coherent.’”

We pulled up to Lakewood Ranch, where Lee would be painting light posts for the day, twenty-five bucks each. A family from our church had made the arrangements to give him a chance to save some money, and I was happy to play a small role by giving him a ride.

He finished his thought, frowning, displaying the defiance he must have adopted at the time: “‘No,’ I said, ‘You advised me, and I’ve said *no*.’ It’s just like, they gave me blood and plasma. I didn’t have to take that; I could have said, no.”

Lee Sandspur

From the hospital, Lee was transferred to Oregon State Rehabilitation Center of Bradenton, where he stayed from January until June 2005. He had been in the 300 wing for six months and rarely left except for cigarette breaks. He was told he would be released from OSRC mid morning on June 7.

Down the hall of OSRC, blue tiles bordered the white floor. Elderly patients sat motionless in wheel chairs outside their rooms, their faces stiff as wax. He got up at about six, showered, shaved, and ate French toast, bacon, and orange juice for breakfast.

Then he began packing. He rolled tight each item of clothing. One pair of jeans, one pair of khaki slacks, two button down shirts (one green, the other red) and three t-shirts: one white with “Las Vegas” across the front; another, plain yellow; a third, a Florida souvenir white t-shirt with dolphins on it. He rolled up three pairs of black polyester dress socks, and added handkerchiefs and a light-weight, nylon baseball jacket with a thin liner and no team name.

Lee placed all of these items in his emerald green, American Tourister shoulder bag, and then added toiletries:

two toothbrushes, and little tubes of Colgate toothpaste. He added a bottle of no-rinse body soap that could be applied with a wash rag; the nurses used it on patients that had to be bathed in bed. In went some single-bladed, disposable razors with white handles, as well as two sets of plastic eating utensils, which he had washed and saved from meal times. He had plenty of shaving cream left in the bathroom from previous roommates who had died or moved on. In went a couple of ink pens—one from the hospital, and the other from OSRC. He added a partial roll of toilet paper a housekeeper had given him—they were going to throw it away, anyway. He was offered more partial rolls, but he had declined. Where would I put them?

Lee gathered up 67 pennies he had collected in a Medicaid envelope. For how little they could buy, they were disproportionately heavy, and he hesitated. Better take them. Last, he added two plastic shopping bags. One was empty—they always come in handy. The other contained three bottles of medicine. He kept one bottle—vitamin B—but didn't trust the other two. He was on medication for manic depression, but what did the others do?

He threw them away in the first garbage can he saw outside of OSRC.

As soon as he entered the bright sunlight outdoors, Lee began sweating; the bleakness of his own situation struck him. He had grown accustomed to three meals a day and a firm bed. Away from the air conditioning, out in this humidity, he had nowhere to sleep, and no food.

The one comfort he did have was his cigarettes—only two missing from a pack of full flavor, king-size Bridgeports. He lit one with a half-filled, lime-green, plastic lighter he had found

in the pocket of some clothing donated to OSRC, and he placed the rest of the pack in his front pocket. He had tried to quit smoking a few times, tried playing games with himself by only smoking one every two hours or every hour, but it never worked. Today, he wasn't interested in quitting. Gotta find some more.

As for alcohol, however, he was through with it. Aside from month-long reprieves in motels here and there, he had been drunk on the streets for a dozen years. But thanks to his mandatory stays in the hospital and OSRC, he's been sober for six months. Now that he was out again, he dreaded the prospect of begging for change or flying the sign on the street corner. He was 52 years old—too old for sleeping on concrete, eating food from trash cans. And without the constant pressure of quenching his thirst for booze, he had as good a chance as ever to start fresh.

As he walked north toward Manatee Avenue, his eyes swept the sidewalk, scanning for partial cigarettes discarded by drivers, and for coins that he could add to his Medicaid envelope. Just as important, he needed a water bottle—any kind of soda or sports drink bottle he could rinse out and fill with water. Although it added considerable weight to his bag, it was always worth it to have water with him in this heat.

Social Security office first. He had to replace his card, which he had lost in the Pepsi bag last December. He still had his driver's license, and with both, he could get a job. If he could save a little money, he could find a room to rent, and there you go: a remade Lee. Four miles east was the Social Security office. Then, walk south toward Cortez Road, the boundary of the Bradenton City Police. The trip would be several miles, but if he were to be stopped for trespassing, he

would much rather it be the County Sheriff's Office in their green uniforms. Bradenton Police officers seemed to hate him. One in particular, a young officer who wore light blue, mirrored sunglasses, seemed to be everywhere.

Better get started. He was already sweating heavily, and it showed through his shirt.

His pack of cigarettes rubbed against his thigh in his pocket with every step, and they were sure to get wet, even in the package. He wound the cigarette package up in a shopping bag, which was a staple of his gear, and then placed it in his shoulder bag. Over the years, he had acquired brand new backpacks hoping to find one that was waterproof. If he were caught in a rainstorm with a leaky bag, it was almost impossible to get everything dry again in the humidity, and he didn't want to waste coins at a Laundromat. Hopefully, this American Tourister bag was waterproof, but he didn't trust it with his cigarettes. He unwound the plastic shopping bag and pulled out a cigarette. Then he smoked another. Sixteen left.

Lee Sandspur

Soaking with sweat, Lee threw away the butt of a cigarette—he now had 13 left—and walked past the cylindrical ash trays and scraggly bushes standing guard in front of the Social Security office. He swung open the door on June 7, 2005, and was bathed in cool air.

Not many people—good. He sat on an uncomfortable, plastic chair. Out the window, a tall-grass cemetery ran adjacent to the Social Security lot. Cracked palm fronds littered the grounds, and Spanish moss dripped from tree branches. Across a field, past a barbed-wire fence, a water tower loomed: “Bradenton, The Friendly City.” A few tables were available for people to fill out forms, and he picked up a one-page request for a new card.

Name: Lee Sandspur.

Address.

He’d never get the card unless he had an address. He wrote down the location of a half-way house he had stayed in for a while. Looks better when the addresses match. He pulled a number, 14, and waited his turn. Everything moved slowly in the office. A security guard eyed him from the corner.

Beep. The monitor changed from 9 to 10, and a recorded voice said, Ten. Another person went up to be helped.

Two older people, one white, one black, came from the back. Another woman came in with children.

Beep. Eleven.

This is going to take forever. Hopefully people get tired of waiting and go home. Lee looked again at the security guard, a woman, black, heavy set. Looks like she hates everybody. He

gave her the same look back. I'm not doing anything wrong.
You can't arrest me.

After he completed the brief interview, Lee left the office, card in hand. Blanketed again by the heat, he immediately lit another cigarette. Twelve more. Nothing to worry about yet, but he walked down the strip of offices to check the ash trays for butts. He was also on the lookout for an empty cigarette package to put the extras in.

He walked towards the downtown area, where he planned to fill his water bottle at the First Methodist Church drinking fountain. As always, he searched for coins, too, but had no luck. Whenever someone walked by him, he kept his eyes focused on the sidewalk so he wouldn't feel obligated to say hello. He wanted no contact, didn't need it. Wasn't comfortable. Didn't want some homeless person asking him for a cigarette. Just leave me alone. I'm not bothering anybody.

"I'm downtown again, and there's homeless," Lee said one night, as we ate tacos in my apartment in July, 2005. "And I haven't got enough cigarettes to share."

"If they asked, would you give one to them?" I said.

"If it's someone I knew. Depends on how they asked, if they asked like I'm human."

"What's the difference?"

"'Give me a cigarette'—that doesn't work with me. I keep walking, or I just look at them and don't say nothing—that seems to drive them *crazy*."

"Do you *want* to drive them crazy?"

"Yeah, to a point."

"To get them mad because they're asking you in that way?"

“Yeah, I’ve even been known, when I have plenty of cigarettes and/or money, to not give them a cigarette, to take one out and crush it in front of them, to tell them, when they’re looking totally puzzled, ‘That’s not how you ask for a cigarette. You know, you don’t tell me to give you a cigarette. I don’t know who you are, but I’m not your baby sitter.’ That didn’t happen on this day.”

Lee Sandspur

The trip from the Social Security office to the city limits was another two miles, and Lee was parched. It was about 2 p.m. by the time he approached the First Methodist Church, a block south of the courthouse—just outside the bustle of downtown. He reached the drinking fountain, where a brown plaque read:

WELCOME, Take the Water of Life Freely

The water that I give you will be a spring welling up
to eternal life.

John 4:14

If your soul is thirsty, we offer the living water here.

In Memory of Judge Richard H. Bailey.

Under the large tree by the sidewalk, a middle-aged black man approached on an old one-speed bicycle with a basket. He stopped at the drinking fountain, too. He looked around, but in a distinct way—a way Lee recognized. It was not as though he were looking at the surrounding buildings, looking for an address—not as though he were new in the area. He seemed to be scanning, sweeping with his eyes. The man’s clothes were dirty, but not from working in a ditch or in a garage—they had the grime and dirt that came from having slept in them for several days, an oily dirt from old sweat. He wore brown wingtips with no socks, a collared shirt, gray and wrinkled.

Homeless.

It was as though, for an instant, the hardened looks in their eyes and the sun shining off beads of sweat on their foreheads connected them like stars in a constellation.

Lee saw something like apathy in his eyes. He doesn't care. People don't care about him. He is not a threat.

No words were exchanged. The man on the bicycle nodded to Lee: You go first. Lee leaned over the fountain and drank, soaking his dry mouth, and then filled his bottle.

“He was one I would have shared a cigarette with,” Lee said quietly. “If I had more, I might have lit one for me just to see if he was interested.”

His eyes were peaceful, his face relaxed, his stomach full. In the distance, the thunder rolled. I wondered how he could remember so many minute details of experience, from the number of pennies in his Medicaid envelope to the missing socks on the man on the bicycle.

The rain beat against the sliding glass door on the balcony of the apartment.

Lee Sandspur

Drenched with sweat, Lee reached the intersection of Cortez Road West and 26th Street in the mid-afternoon on June 7. The four blocks surrounding these street lights were familiar territory: Walgreen's, Jiffy Lube; two abandoned lots straddled Cortez to the east, a former Eckerd's and a Shell.

The Eckerd's was a likely hideout, and one he had used before. A deputy had once told him he could stay there because there wasn't a No Trespassing sign anywhere on the property. Because it had a dumpster, he could keep the area clear of cans and trash, and avoid attracting attention. But when Lee

approached the lot from the north, he counted eight homeless under a shade tree toward the rear of the lot. Another man was flying a sign on a bus stop bench in front of Walgreen's across the street. He knew the strategy: take turns with the sign, make your twenty bucks, blow the cash on booze. He had made fifty in an hour before—enough to stay drunk for two days.

These lazy homeless at Eckerd's wouldn't last long, probably, but no—it was out of the question. As frail as Lee was, it wasn't safe to sleep in the company of other homeless.

He walked eight blocks to the west, where he sat in the aquamarine covered bus stop bench in front of a Shell station. He was safe here, at least for a while. It wasn't Shell's property, so they couldn't kick him out. Under the covering, it was humid, and the Plexiglas sides of the bench blocked any breeze. Every few minutes, a line of cars formed in front of the light at 36th near McDonald's and Taco Bell. Spare a cigarette? Lee sat in the shade of the bench and watched. Now and then a window rolled down, a cigarette butt spun end over end and sparked on the sidewalk in front of him. Too far gone, not worth the lighter fluid.

Sleep. At Oregon State Rehabilitation Center of Bradenton, he napped twice a day, and he wasn't used to so much walking, especially without lunch.

Lee walked west on Cortez. He avoided small parking lots—too much risk of bumping into employees. But in larger lots, like Albertson's grocery store, he walked up and down the aisles of cars. If someone stopped him, he wasn't bothering anybody. Nobody could call the police for this. Simply taking a short cut through your parking lot, if you want to know. Up and down the rows of cars, the sun shone off chrome, rearview mirrors. A white line, a bumper, a white line, an empty stall, he

scanned left and right, sweeping the steaming pavement for cigarettes or something shiny, a coin perhaps. He needed a place to sleep where he would not be bothered. A bench behind a building. Somewhere with a water spigot nearby so he could refill his water bottle.

It was hopeless. He knew this area better than anyone. The cleaning crews came at 11 p.m. at that store, at midnight across the street. This restaurant didn't open until 10 a.m. weekdays. He reached 59th, and he turned around to walk back to the bus stop bench at 34th in front of the Shell.

As I interviewed Lee while driving him to his light-post painting job in July, he recalled that he didn't stay sitting in one spot for very long that day just a month earlier. He made several coin-and-cigarette expeditions to nearby parking lots, where in the past, he'd even found dollar bills.

"You know, bars are great," Lee said. "Early in the morning, drunks pull stuff out of their pocket and don't even realize it. I've found *five dollar bills* before."

He was upbeat, talking quickly, using his hands. This was a real collaboration, and we were a team trying to make a book. I asked about his priorities for spending whatever money he found in the parking lots.

"I mean, you gotta have money," he said. "Soup kitchen in this town—once you *pay*, you get a meal. And most of us won't go to the Salvation Army."

I asked why.

"The staff I deal with—they're not ones *you* might call up on the phone, or see in person if you went there to donate a television or a pile of used blankets. The ones I deal

with, they've only been clean from drugs for two weeks to two months. Now these are not people to be in charge of *anything*."

I laughed. In fact, on assignment from my newspaper I had once visited a Salvation Army in Sarasota, the town to the south, and interviewed a man in just that situation. He had been in jail for stealing more than \$100,000 worth of DVDs from a cluster of Blockbuster stores, and when I met him, he was living in the Salvation Army and working as a janitor as well.

"There's alcohol in there, there's drugs in there, there's fights in there," Lee said.

"So it's better to go in a dumpster and get some sort of rotten food than to go there?"

"Yes," he said. "It may not work for anybody else, but this is after what, twelve years? This is what works for me. It's kept me *alive*. Mostly kept me out of jails."

"Okay," I said. "So from about 3:30 to midnight, you're looking for money, looking for cigarettes."

Lee Sandspur

Near the bus stop bench at Shell, Lee's base of operations for the day, a self-serve car wash and Laundromat called Splash N Dash was hopping. After giving up on a nap, Lee decided this was his next best option for a place to sleep that night. The Laundromat had no front doors; two benches with wide wooden slats sat back to back in the open-air entryway. From the sidewalk Lee saw people doing laundry inside. He waited.

As night replaced evening, Lee moved to a carpet store that was closed for the night, and he sat on a short ledge to watch the customers in the Laundromat until it was safe to go lie down. He was exhausted, but he believed he would soon be

able to sleep. He could wait it out until about midnight, and when it looked like the dryers would go unused the rest of the night, he would lie down on the bench facing the Laundromat.

But each time it seemed the last customer was going to leave, another would drive in and start unloading. They're going to wash. Dry. Another hour-and-a-half. As midnight approached, more customers arrived. He was more desperate for sleep with each arriving car. Twelve-thirty came and went, and then 1 a.m. Other than the time waiting at the Social Security office, and some fifteen minute breaks on various benches up and down Cortez Road, he'd been on his feet since 10:30 that morning. He was so tired, he could ignore his growling stomach.

At 1:15 a.m., he abandoned the Laundromat and walked east under the streetlamps. At 26th Street, he saw no homeless—even at Eckerd's—but he wasn't about to sleep there in case they returned. He walked all the way around the Walgreen's property, almost like a dog circling his sleeping spot. Amscot to the west. In the back, he found a dumpster where in the past he had found expired boxes of Triscuits and Cheez-Its lying on top of the garbage. No luck tonight. The funeral home parking lot was empty.

Walgreen's was closed by that time of night, but it would open early. With no alarm clock, he'd have to hope that he'd wake up with the arrival of the early-morning newspaper deliveries and be sure to leave before the employees arrived at seven. He placed his emerald green bag on the wooden slats of the wrought-iron bench, laid down his head, and he fell asleep. His first day back in the real world was over.

In the 1850s in Denmark, Christopher Paul's great-great-great-great grandfather dreamed about a man being murdered in jail. Two years later, two missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appeared at his door and described to him in detail—down to the smell of gunpowder and the murderers' faces being painted black—the same scene from his dream. The man was Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. Grandpa Paul was baptized and, following the direction of Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, he emigrated to the United States and traveled to the Utah territory to be with the rest of the saints. He practiced polygamy. When the church discontinued the practice, some men he knew reacted against it, abandoned their families and fled to the hills. He grew disillusioned with the church himself.

Two generations later, Red Paul became a notorious horse thief, and Red Canyon in Zion's National Park in Utah was named for him, because that's where he kept his horses.

Two more generations passed, and parts of the Paul clan rediscovered the Mormon Church. Christopher Paul's father became a missionary for the church.

Christopher himself was a shy student. In elementary school, he got in trouble for reading Ray Bradbury and Roald Dahl during class. Because both of his parents worked full time, he and his three younger siblings went home every day to babysitters and nannies. His mother was a theater teacher and an actor, eventually playing the angelic role of Mary Magdalene in *The Lamb of God*, a film made by the Mormon Church and distributed worldwide. Her picture, as she knelt in soft light and looked in vain for Jesus' body in the tomb, was

reproduced on the back cover of an issue of *The Ensign*, a church magazine that is also distributed worldwide.

Once Christopher was in seventh grade, his parents stopped hiring nannies, and he was the man in charge. He learned to cook and to take care of himself and his siblings. By the time he was a senior in high school, he had overcome his shyness. He was a star in the high school's drama department. In his senior year, he put on a film festival at the school. He stayed up the entire night before the festival editing a short detective film he had written and directed. The same day as the film festival, Christopher also had to take two tests. Then, once the festival was over, he invited all his friends over to his house for a party—a party without alcohol or drugs, of course. Christopher never did get in trouble for any kind of mischief—only for reading.

But Christopher also suffered from depression, and he took Paxil. Not liking the idea of taking a pill every day, and also knowing he would be going on a mission a year after he graduated, he decided to try to take a year off from the drug to see how he'd do. He also had a serious girlfriend. She was supportive of him going on a mission, but it hit him during that last year how many things he would miss while he was on his mission. The rules for missionaries were strict: no television; no radio; no movies; no girls—not so much as a hug from a girl; no books other than the approved “Missionary Library,” a set of doctrinal books written by church leaders.

Still, Christopher always knew he would serve a mission. His mission call came in a letter from church headquarters in Salt Lake City, informing him that he'd be assigned to the Florida Tampa Mission. For the next two years, he would be called “Elder Paul,” and he would live in apartments all around

the Tampa region with one assigned companion for six weeks to six months at a time.

One year into his mission, Elder Paul and his companion, Elder Nielsen, left their apartment in Bradenton and turned left onto the sidewalk on Cortez Road, heading east. It was about fifteen minutes before 7 p.m. on Thursday, June 9, 2005. Their apartment was only a few blocks from the church, and from there, they would meet up with two men from the ward, split up, and visit people interested in learning more.

Elder Paul was the senior companion, since he had several months' more experience than Elder Nielsen. Elder Paul was of medium height and build, and wore round eyeglasses. His brown hair was clean and lightly gelled in a stylish way, but unevenly cut. Living on about \$140 per month for food and personal items, he typically had his companions cut his hair with an inexpensive trimmer kit from Wal-Mart. He wore a short-sleeved white dress shirt with a polyester tie, dark slacks, and dark leather shoes and belt. He wore a backpack to carry his personal scriptures and extra copies of The Book of Mormon, which he distributed with each lesson they taught.

The two young men worked ten to twelve hours six days per week, often performing the tedious task of walking through one neighborhood after another, knocking on doors, and essentially delivering a sales pitch to invite themselves into strangers' homes and present introductory lessons about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Despite the constant rejection, Elder Paul managed to maintain a high level of enthusiasm for two main reasons. First and foremost, he was genuinely motivated to talk to everybody he could about the church. He believed he had the truth, and that everybody needed to hear it.

Second, he was an actor. He knew how to memorize a script, and how to act happy in front of a crowd. The truth was, he hadn't been getting along very well with his companion, and it was wearing on him. Also, the girlfriend he had left behind, and who had written him constantly for the first year of his mission, had suddenly stopped writing altogether at the same time he had been sent to Bradenton. In a regularly scheduled interview with his Mission President, Elder Paul revealed all of these concerns and requested to meet with the mission's doctor. He went back on Paxil.

One day, a block away from the church, Elder Paul saw a man on the bus stop bench, and he struck up a conversation with him. The man was slightly built, had shaggy brown hair that covered his ears, and appeared to be homeless. He was alone on the bench save for his green shoulder bag and two shopping bags stuffed full and wrapped tight. He wore a stretched-out, yellow T-shirt, black jeans, and white, New Balance sneakers.

“When you sat down,” I said, “were you trying to make it look like you were waiting for the bus?”

It was a hot morning, and I was driving the missionaries and their bicycles out to Lakewood Ranch so they could meet some teaching appointments. As long as I had them in the car, I asked Elder Paul if I could interview him for details about the first time he had met Lee.

“Nah.”

“You didn't care?”

Elder Paul said, “We just sat down and started teaching. And we weren't...”

He stopped.

I said, “You weren’t too optimistic?”

“We weren’t too optimistic.”

Elder Paul

Hello, Elder Paul said, with a wide smile that accentuated his chubby, boyish cheeks. He introduced himself and asked for the man’s name.

Lee’s eyes were big, almost in shock. Sitting there, drenched in sweat, he wore an expression on his face that seemed to say, “What are you *doing* here?”

Great! Elder Paul said, well practiced and keeping an upbeat attitude. He asked Lee if he had faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, I do, Lee said, still puzzled, but sounding humble.

Great! he said. He then went on to say that God has always called prophets to teach people about the mission of Jesus. Lee seemed to be concentrating. The missionaries told him about Joseph Smith and pulled from a backpack a copy of a thin paperback book with a dark blue and gold lettering: *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*. Elder Paul flipped through the thin pages and marked a few passages to read. Then, with the traffic rolling by on Cortez, the three men bowed their heads and said a quick prayer. Standard procedure.

Well, we’d love to have you come to church with us, Elder Paul said, as he stood up to leave. Our services are at 9 a.m., and we’re just around the corner.

They did not expect him to be at church on Sunday, or to read the book. They didn’t expect to cross paths with him again.

On Sunday morning, however, Lee appeared in the church foyer, holding his backpack. He had hand-combed his hair, and he wore a loose-fitting yellow T-shirt with a pocket, as well as his black jeans with white lines of sweat like creases. He followed Elder Paul to the chapel to find a seat. The chapel was made of white cinderblocks, with a dark wood rostrum. It was still about twenty minutes before the service was supposed to begin, and Elder Paul tried a few times to begin a conversation in the pew with Lee.

After the first portion of the services, the missionaries led Lee to Sunday School, where the lesson happened to be about the Word of Wisdom, one of the doctrines that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is best known for. It prohibits coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco, and encourages eating healthy foods like whole grains.

Elder Paul was worried about Lee's reaction, since Lee clearly smoked. In the third hour, the missionaries sat with Lee again to hear the Priesthood lesson. The topic: the Word of Wisdom.

So, Lee, Elder Paul said cautiously, after the third hour was over. What did you think about that Word of Wisdom?

Oh, Lee said, that was really good. He said he was a former alcoholic, and he knew it wasn't good for him. He had no problems with the doctrine.

The missionaries bumped into him again on Tuesday, June 14, at the bus stop in front of Shell, just a block or two from their apartment. They brought him to the church building on a sweltering afternoon, this time meeting him in the Primary Room, where the children met.

The missionaries set up a few children's chairs, and they wheeled a chalkboard into the room. It was a large room with blue, coarse carpet, and white cinderblocks dotted with images of Jesus with children. As the missionaries reviewed what Lee had read from The Book of Mormon, Lee squinted at the chalkboard. He sat with his knees together in that tiny chair, holding his book on his lap. He was soaking wet, with his shaggy brown hair matted down on his bright red, sun-burned forehead. He took notes with a broken ball point pen. It required two hands to operate, one to hold down the clicker, and the other to guide the tip and write with the purple ink. The missionaries gave him a new pen.

Before they ended their lesson, the missionaries asked Lee if he'd pray to ask God if The Book of Mormon was a true book, if Joseph Smith was a true prophet, if the church was true. And, should he find these things were true, would he commit to be baptized?

Yeah, Lee said.

That week, the missionaries twice left food for Lee on his bus stop bench. In another mid-afternoon meeting, he told the missionaries he was ready for a new life. I can't *take* this anymore, he said. I'm getting too *old*. I gotta get off the streets.

We can't give you place to stay, Elder Paul said. But we can do your laundry, we can give you haircuts, and we can give you a place to store your things, and we can give you instruction in the gospel.

That's great, Lee said, excited. That's all I need.

While Lee began looking for jobs, the missionaries did his laundry. As Elder Paul opened the grocery sacks of dirty clothes rolled up like newspapers, the stench of sour milk blossomed out. He made the water as hot as it would go, added

extra soap, and began unrolling. White, crusted sweat marked the pants and shirts. There was no underwear in the bag. He ran them through twice before putting them in the drier.

Also that week, Lee came over for a haircut. He walked in through the screened-in porch, and Elder Paul sat him down near the sliding glass door in a plastic chair they had borrowed from the church. Elder Paul had changed out of his shirt and tie for this, not wanting hair all over his good clothes. He draped a maroon towel around Lee's shoulder's.

I have to warn you, Lee said. I have really terrible dandruff.

Elder Paul plugged in the hair clippers and began. The clippers were not in the best of shape; they were borrowed from another set of missionaries in a different congregation, and a few teeth were missing from some of the attachments. Lee's hair was three or four inches long, shaggy, and it curved around his ears. He said a buzz cut would be best, so that it would last longer.

Wait! Elder Paul said, after buzzing off some of the hair in the back. We need to get before and after pictures.

In the before shot, Lee grinned and revealed a dimple in his right cheek. Deep wrinkles ringed his eyes. Elder Paul stood behind Lee, showing his perfectly white, straight teeth, radiating enthusiasm.

After grinding away with the clippers for a few minutes, the smell of burning grease filled the room. Before he finished trimming around Lee's sun-scorched neck, Elder Paul had to take a ten-minute break to allow the metal face of the clippers to cool.

In the after picture, Lee was seated in an old arm chair with dark stains on the arms and back. Lee leaned forward

slightly, and his hair was cut short, the sides gray, the top dark brown. His face was blank, the dimple gone.

Elder Paul suspected that Lee was self-conscious about having the pictures taken in the first place, and that he simply didn't smile. There was no reason to conclude that the changes from one picture to the next should have been a sign of things to come.

By the time of the haircut, Lee's skin had moved beyond redness and appeared dangerously burned. Blisters as small as water droplets and others inches long bubbled on his nose, hands, and arms. Occasionally, as the missionaries drove by to their next appointment, they saw Lee sitting at his bench, peeling skin from the weeping, crusted blisters. Before the haircut, Lee's ears had been protected by his hair; in the upcoming weeks, the tops of his ears would burn and eventually become black.

As time wore on, his arms were noticeably swollen, and he carved his way through the hot air, walking to Our Daily Bread—the once-a-day soup kitchen—to hunt for more coins, to buy or bum a cigarette, to keep himself awake nights on the sidewalks of Cortez Road.

While attending high school in Las Vegas, Reed Walker got a job at Shadow Creek Golf Resort, where a round of golf begins with a limo ride to the first tee and costs five hundred dollars. The course, built below ground level, is an oasis in the city. Standing on the fairways, a golfer sees only rolling, man-made hills and tall pine trees, which block the view of the city. Reed washed cars and played the course for free once the high-rolling casino customers had all teed off for the day.

Reed was never much of a spiritual guy. He had been a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for his whole life, and his father had served a mission, but Reed never planned on leaving Las Vegas behind. He gradually distanced himself from his family and drank and smoked in his off time. He ran around with some friends and lied about it. Rather than save up money for a mission, he bought a black 1991 Nissan Maxima and put in a new sound system: twelve-inch subwoofer, amp, 6x9 speakers in the back, 6½-inch speakers in the front, Alpine deck, \$1,200.

One night, Reed and his friends were drinking at their chill spot when the cops showed up and busted them for underage drinking. Reed's dad came to pick him up at jail.

That night was the only time Reed ever yelled back at his father. He stood face to face and let him have it. Reed was drunk, and his Dad knew it, so he didn't yell or cuss at him or do him any physical harm. He merely said, Look at yourself.

Once he sobered up, Reed never drank again. He began studying his scriptures in earnest for the first time. His faith exploded. He felt as if he were on fire, feeling the influence of the Holy Spirit in his life. He felt then that he had a testimony,

a true faith that would change his life, and he decided to serve a two-year mission.

One day in the fall of 2004, Elder Walker met Elder Paul at a church building where several sets of missionaries were being housed overnight during “lockdown,” a mandatory order to stay indoors as a protection against a threatening hurricane. Elder Walker was not charismatic in the same way Elder Paul was, but he was articulate and cerebral, able to explain complicated doctrines easily. He had a great ability to study the scriptures and recall chapters and verses from memory. He worked hard.

Before falling asleep on lockdown, Elder Paul and Elder Walker got to know each other. They both were interested in film, and they said, Maybe we’ll get assigned to the same city some day.

As it turned out, that’s what happened. Every six weeks, transfer calls came down from the Mission President’s office. Elder Walker finally heard from Elder Paul again on June 25, 2005, four days before he would be transferred to Bradenton to serve with him. Elder Paul gave Elder Walker directions to the apartment on Cortez Road, and told him about the area.

I’m excited to serve together, Elder Paul said. He had a way of conveying enthusiasm that seemed rehearsed, almost as though he were acting, and yet he was so likeable that it was easy to overlook that sense of artificiality.

We’re teaching an awesome guy, Elder Paul said. His name is Lee! He’s awesome! He’s homeless!

Elder Paul was telling me all of this as we sat on the couch in my apartment. He said all of these phrases with the same voice inflection, the same enthusiasm, as though each bit of information was as positive as the next.

Next to him sat Elder Walker, who had replaced Elder Nielsen in the area. He said, “I’m like, ‘Yeah? A homeless guy...’ I thought, ‘That’s weird.’ All the homeless people I knew, there was a reason why they were homeless. We saw people every day in St. Petersburg drinking beer.”

“I was just excited,” Elder Paul said. “I thought, ‘I’m going to see a miracle on my mission.’”

“It *was* a miracle,” Elder Walker said.

“Yeah,” Elder Paul said. “Until it became a tragedy.”

Elder Paul and Elder Walker

Hauling everything in a couple of suitcases and boxes, Elder Walker brought his possessions into his new apartment, where Elder Paul was waiting with one-dollar Totino’s frozen pizzas in the oven.

The sliding glass door was a novelty, and Elder Walker liked that aspect of the apartment. The rest wasn’t as impressive, though it wasn’t abnormal for missionary apartments. Although they were taught to live with “quiet dignity,” they were still 19- or 20-year-olds for the most part, and often, especially in the confines of their own living quarters, they acted like it.

And so Elder Walker found that the brown carpet was desperately in need of a vacuum. But no vacuum would take care of the stains, which were everywhere. It looked like

someone had spilled about a gallon of Kool-Aid near the kitchen long ago. There were grease stains from earlier missionaries working on their bicycles on the carpet. The couch, which was against the wall to the left, was so old and beat up that when he sat down, Elder Walker felt like he would sink to the floor. The couch also was dotted with pen and marker graffiti with names and dates of other missionaries who had lived in the apartment. Even more puzzling were burn marks and duct tape patches covering holes cut by missionaries with pocket knives.

Elders Walker and Paul got reacquainted briefly over pizza and unpacking, and then it was time to meet with Lee, who had by now committed to baptism, at the church. Elder Paul directed the conversation toward the Word of Wisdom, since that was the one doctrine that was blocking Lee from being baptized on July 9, less than two weeks away. They first brought up alcohol, but Lee assured them that that was behind him.

The Lord's cured me of it, Lee said.

For the next week or so, the missionaries continued to meet with Lee, and Lee continued to open up more about his past. He had been married before he was homeless. His wife had left him and taken everything in the divorce. Then he had turned to drinking, and the rest was history.

Two nights before Lee was scheduled to be baptized, it rained through the night. Elder Paul woke up to a crack of thunder. Out the window, rain poured down in sheets, and he knelt by his bedside and prayed for Lee, who was alone in the windy storm. Water was swept in waves across the parking lot. Lightning flashed, lighting up the apartment and the world outside, and then it was dark.

The next morning, the missionaries were ordered to stay indoors on “lockdown” to avoid Hurricane Dennis, so they invited Lee to spend the day with them in their apartment. Elder Paul baked more frozen pizzas for lunch. After having stayed awake most of the night, Lee was exhausted. He leaned back in the recliner and was out cold. Later that afternoon, the three of them played Monopoly. Lee was the train, Elder Paul the battleship, Elder Walker the car. They dealt out the money and played a full game on the coffee table. After Elder Walker added a house to one of his purple properties, the cost of rent for someone landing on the space went up from \$2 to \$10—a measly increase.

You’re a slum lord! Lee said. What did you do, put a light bulb in the stairwell? He was laughing so hard he nearly fell out of the chair. His dimple reappeared.

When it came to improving his own properties, Lee was deliberate. He rubbed his chin, checked his property cards and double checked them. He stacked his money neatly, the one-dollar bills on top down to the five-hundreds. He kept his hands folded in his lap.

When Lee picked a Chance card that read, “Go Directly to Jail,” he pretended to celebrate. Free vacation for me! he said.

They broke for dinner at about five o’clock. Elder Paul grilled cheese and barbecue chicken on bagels. Lee sat in the salmon colored arm chair with a paper towel tucked into his shirt like a bib, and ate slowly, savoring every bite, sucking on the meat before chewing and swallowing.

Toward the end of the game, Lee risked everything. He blew large sums of money improving his property, calculating how much he’d have after passing GO again. The game continued until about 9 p.m. Elder Paul came in dead last and

thought about the irony of the situation. I just got beat in a game of financial strategy by a homeless man who's been on the streets for twelve years. Things are not looking good for my future.

That night, Lee slept on a bench under an overhang at FirstCare, an emergency care facility with a brightly lit parking lot, which would deter meddlesome teenagers from coming by and beating him up.

The next morning, since the weather was still tame, the local church leaders decided to have the baptism after church that day, rather than wait until the following Saturday. When Lee got to church, the missionaries told him he could be baptized that afternoon. He was full of practical questions: what should he wear? Who would be there to watch? In the second hour, a newly baptized member smiled and said to the small class, Bless his heart. He's nervous. Lee nodded, smiling, his head lowered.

After church, a few dozen members gathered in the primary room, where several rows of padded, folding chairs faced a wooden podium. After a short program, Elder Paul led Lee to the baptismal font. After he came back out of the water, Lee smiled broadly.

After Elder Paul and Lee changed into dry clothes, they returned to the primary room, and the bishop welcomed Lee as the newest member of the ward. Then Lee stood up to speak.

I was there in the audience that day, and I remember thinking again that Lee didn't look homeless at all. He was clean shaven, his hair was cut short, and he was wearing a white shirt and a tie. He spoke in a humble but confident manner, which was captured on a home video by one of the church members.

“I’d like to thank everyone for being here,” Lee said. “You honor me. I sincerely appreciate it. I’ve got a few little notes. I’m nervous. I’m not a public speaker.”

He took a piece of paper out of his pocket and put on a pair of magnifier reading glasses that the missionaries had bought for him at the Dollar Store. He said, “I was baptized today entering into a covenant with our Father in Heaven, and to me baptism is—I was obeying his word. I have a desire to endure to the end. I know this is real. There’s not a list of ten things I can offer to prove it, but—” Lee put his hand on his heart. “I know it in here,” he said, “and I know it because I prayed, and God has answered my prayers. It’s a feeling. It’s a *good* feeling, it’s a *full* feeling. Thank you for letting me speak.”

After Lee's baptism, he and the missionaries searched for a job. Lee was determined to get off the streets and find a real place to live. For the most part, though, the job applications asked for previous employment, and his work history was spotty at best. He knew his best chance was at a locally owned shop—a place free from corporate regulations that might disqualify him immediately. In the meantime, I drove him to and from Lakewood Ranch, where he painted lamp posts. I used the commute to roll tape and continue interviewing him. I asked him about his parents.

Lee said his father was in the Navy for thirty years. "He spent a lot of his time in the job category, 'out at sea,' gone. He didn't like it, but he was doing the best he could."

"Was he a good dad?"

"Yes and no. I have two younger sisters, and we were never physically or sexually abused, but I believe we were emotionally and mentally abused. I don't know. I love him, I respect him, but I don't honestly have anything to do with him. He hates me, and that's my fault, and I don't blame him."

"Why does he hate you?"

"Oh, it started when I had a full academic scholarship to University of Texas at Austin, and I threw that away. I dropped out in January, February of 1972. I left for the Navy in April '72. When I got out of the Navy, he was upset with me, thought I should have stayed in. And then when I got divorced, he wasn't happy. He thought I rolled over and played dead. With him, like so many people, the fact that I'm homeless—it's a moral problem, it's not a physical drug dependency. And being manic depressive, to him it's like, 'snap out of it.' That's his attitude. It's like, fine, Dad. You're an expert."

One day on the way back from Lakewood Ranch one evening, I invited Lee to my apartment to have dinner, and he accepted. I called home to warn Hailey ahead of time. When we arrived, Lee struggled up the flight of stairs to my apartment. His hands were a patchwork of black spray paint and sunburned skin. He asked to use my bathroom and scrub some more before we ate, and came out apologizing repeatedly for the remaining black paint that he couldn't remove.

I gave him a tour of our small apartment. Jackson's bedroom was neat and tidy: bins of brightly colored toys, a half-book shelf full of children's books, a miniature basketball hoop, a baseball bean bag chair.

"It looks like he's going to put Toys 'R Us out of business," Lee said, as we stood in the doorway. He smiled and looked at me, as though waiting for me to catch on.

I laughed and met his eyes. Something in the way he grunted told me that he was comfortable here—he was happy, light hearted. I hadn't ever heard him make a joke before, and it seemed extraordinary, as though I was watching a man awoken from a mental illness.

At the table, I saw with Hailey on one side, Jackson in his high chair in the corner. Lee had a full side of our six-foot long table to himself, and it made him look that much smaller. We prayed to bless the tacos and ate.

I waited for some time before asking if I could record the conversation, but when he began talking about OSRC, the rehabilitation center in which he had recovered from his spider bite, I couldn't resist. I set my small tape recorder in the center of the table with his permission.

"So you saw the nurses there several times a day?" I asked.

“In the beginning, because I was still on the antibiotics,” he said. “Up until then, four times a day.” He motioned at the pile of tortillas and, with his eyes, asked for more.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said, practically upsetting my glass in my haste to help him to more food.

“Yeah, any time,” Hailey said. We both had been watching him eat with curiosity. How many tacos would he eat? He was so small, but when would he eat again?

Lee said the nurses had him on several medications. But staying there was a blessing in disguise, because he was also getting meals and a place to sleep.

“I was—,” he started to say with his mouth full. “Medicaid paid for all this. I was a shoe in.”

I said, “You were below the income bracket?”

We all laughed. I was again relieved that we were comfortable enough to joke about things like this. Lee felt at home.

He continued, stuffing his mouth with another taco, “Yeah, I didn’t want to leave. You know, I’d been like institutionalized for six months now. I knew I’d be back eating out of trash cans, hunting for pennies. And the doctors decided I can’t go back to labor pools because I can’t walk right. I never will walk right.”

In 1982, while he was still married, he and his then-wife had been in a bad car wreck, and as a result, two metal rods ran the length of his back.

It was silent for a moment, and we continued eating. Hailey said, “I was just little in 1982.”

“I was two years old,” I said.

Hailey said to Jackson, “I was about your size.”

Lee paused and then looked up from his food. “And this makes me feel better *how*?”

We all laughed again. He ate another taco and shifted in his chair. I imagined what it would be like to have rods in my back.

“Do you want to move to a more comfortable chair?”

“No, doesn’t matter,” he said.

“You mean it’s uncomfortable no matter what?”

“Pretty much. And I don’t take medicine unless I don’t have a choice.”

I gave Lee rides to and from Lakewood Ranch a handful of times, and whenever he entered the car, whether in the morning or the evening, a distinct smell accompanied him. It wasn’t body odor exactly, but some combination of tar and exhaust from Cortez Road, sweat, and drier sheets that he had found at the Laundromat and had used to wipe his clothes down as if with a sample of cologne from a magazine. But regardless of the odd smell, he was always clean. His hands were red and raw from exposure to the sun, and they were often sweaty, but not dirty. In our car rides, he looked out at the road and sometimes out his window as we talked, always at ease, his brown eyes relaxed.

One day we approached his normal hideouts on Cortez, and I wasn’t sure what to do. I felt horrible just dropping Lee off and saying, “Okay, have a great day,” when I knew he would be wandering around, trying to find something—anything—to eat.

I said, “Do you want to come over and keep talking? Do you have other stuff to do?”

“Sure, I don’t have anything going on.”

“I do need to get some more tapes, though. Do you know where there’s a dollar store?”

We pulled up to a dollar store in a strip mall, and I asked him if he wanted to come in, but he declined. Should I take the keys in with me? I thought. Is it possible he might jump in the driver’s seat and leave without me? I took the keys out of the ignition, left him in the car, and I went in the store. Hopefully, he won’t take it personally.

As we approached my apartment that evening, Lee told me about his most recent experience in Sunday School. The lesson was about charity, and immediately, it turned into a discussion on homelessness.

“The Elders kept looking at me, like—” He opened his eyes and looked sideways, mimicking the missionaries’ embarrassment. He laughed. “I heard one thing said that was right. This lady said, ‘If they tell me the truth, it’s amazing what I’ll do for them.’ She said one guy told her he was a drunk and he was going to buy alcohol with the money because he was starting to shake, he had DTs, delirium tremens, and he needed the alcohol. Somebody else in the class started chewing her out for doing it, and she said, ‘I’m not a nurse, I’m not a doctor, but I can keep them alive this way for a while.’ I wanted to stand up and applaud her. Everything else I’m hearing here—help, don’t help—is so far off the mark. I’m sorry, but if he’s a lumberjack I’m not going to tell him how to cut down a tree. I’m homeless, don’t tell me what I need and don’t need.”

I laughed, and said, “Almost like it’s a profession or something.”

In my apartment, Hailey was setting the table, clinking plates down, as well as a bowl of spaghetti sauce.

Lee said he could cook the basics. “I can handle boiling, follow directions, Ragu, Prego, whatever’s on sale.

“Brian makes homemade spaghetti sauce,” Hailey said.

“I do.”

“It’s the only thing he knows how to make,” she said. “He didn’t even know how to make grilled cheese when we met. When I first made it, he said it was so good—he didn’t know you have to butter the bread.”

Lee laughed. He was a guest in my home, and I was so pleased that he was having a good time. I felt protective of him.

We ate, and Lee cleaned off his plate.

Later, he talked about suicide: “I always said I’m too big of a coward to commit suicide, because I don’t like pain, and I don’t have a hand gun, and to me, everything would be painful, or, with the kind of luck I have, if I try to throw myself in front of semi, he’d shatter every bone in my leg, so my leg would have to be amputated. I may not ever get out of bed again, but I’d be fully conscious and alive.”

His grim smile made it clear he was making a joke, and I laughed along with him, nervously.

Later that week, the missionaries called me at work. They had helped Lee apply for several jobs around town during the last two weeks—it was all part of Lee’s plan to save up a few hundred dollars and then find a room to rent. After working long enough, he might be able to work his way back into computers, which is how he made his living before he became homeless. Elder Paul told me on the phone that someone had left them a message offering Lee a job at Cortez Car Wash.

I was ecstatic. It’s really going to happen, I thought. It was possible for a homeless man to get off the streets. I was so happy that I had undertaken the project of writing about Lee. I didn’t pretend to have a huge role in his change, but it seemed that my experiment was working, and that he saw me as part of his support system.

I picked Lee up from Lakewood Ranch, where he was waiting after painting some more light posts. He didn’t seem to be in a great mood. He was worn out and sunburned, his eyes troubled.

“I needed more supplies,” he said as he sat in the passenger seat, ushering in a pungent wave of sweat and laundry detergent. He had run out of black spray paint, and wasn’t able to finish all the posts he’d planned on.

He didn’t know about his new job yet, and while I wanted to tell him, I felt it should be the missionaries who should break the news since they had spent so much time helping him look. We rode in silence, until I tried to lighten things with a sort of riddle I’d once heard. What do you do if you’re lost in New York City, and you have no way of contacting the person who is looking for you? The answer I had read was Grand Central Station at noon—the place two people were most likely to think of independently.

Just then, as I was stopped at a light, two cars collided in the intersection.

“Watch out,” Lee said, talking to the drivers of the other cars as though they could hear him. He was frowning, shaking his head. His voice had a note of contempt in it. How could these drivers be so stupid?

“Dangerous out on these roads, I guess, huh?” I said.

He didn’t reply.

I drove around them and turned west. A few miles down Cortez Road, we reached the missionaries’ apartment, and I followed Lee inside. He sat down in an armchair, and Elder Paul pushed play on the answering machine. It was a man’s voice with a heavy Hispanic accent.

“Hey, Lee, it’s uh, Alberto from Cortez Wash. I have an application here, and you need a job? If you still need it, you can come in Monday morning at 8 o’clock, ready for work. Have a good day.”

In near darkness, profiled against the bright sliding glass door, Lee leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and he stared at nothing.

“Message. Friday. 12. 46. pm. End of messages. Beep.”

“You can go into work on Monday!” Elder Walker said.

“What do you think about that?” I said, following the lead and adding enthusiasm to my voice.

“Hm. Huh,” he grunted. “I was hoping for an inside job.”

“It’s a job,” Elder Walker said. “It’s a start.”

“Monday morning,” Lee said. “Eight o’clock.”

“Yep,” Elder Paul said.

“He said, ‘Come in, ready for work,’” Elder Walker said. “We came in and saw the flashing light on the machine, and we were so excited.”

“I wanted more time to paint,” Lee said.

“Well, maybe you can go in and talk to them and figure out a schedule,” Elder Paul said. “Maybe you can still paint.”

Lee leaned back in the chair, and his eyelids seemed instantly heavy, as though he were fighting to stay awake.

“Well, we’re glad you got the job,” Elder Walker said. “We’re happy for you.”

Lee said, “I was hoping that after everything that’s been talked about, it would be inside, so I wouldn’t be subject to the weather.”

Elder Walker said, “He didn’t say whether it was inside or out, he just said, ‘Come ready to work on Monday.’”

Lee said, “Well, I mean, it’s a car wash.”

“He just grunted,” I said later to the missionaries. They were over for sandwiches one day some weeks later, talking about that day.

“Yeah,” Elder Paul said, “finally, he just said, ‘Hm hmm huh,’ the Lee Grunt.”

Elder Walker said, “He went that whole week to the car wash.”

“Then there was the one night,” Elder Paul said, “the last time I saw Lee sober. He knocked on the sliding glass door at midnight.

“Tell me about that,” I said.

Elder Paul

He had tossed and turned in his bed until midnight before finally he got up and started writing a letter in the living room of his apartment. He heard a tap and saw Lee at the screen door. He motioned for Lee to come in, but he declined.

Lee, what's going on?

I got kicked out of my spot at First Care. They said, "You have to leave or I'm callin' the cops." They caught me cold. I didn't even have my shoes on. I had to leave barefoot and put my shoes on later. I'm sorry I came so late—I wouldn't have even come, but I saw the lights on, so I decided I might as well come and get my church clothes, so I don't have to do it in the morning.

It's all right, that's fine.

Lee dug through the bin between the screen and the sliding glass door. He smells like smoke, Elder Paul thought. I thought he was over that.

What have I been doing wrong? Lee said. I've done everything I'm supposed to do. I did just what you said I should do. I've been reading and praying. What else am I supposed to do?

Lee looked depressed and tired, though still sober. Elder Paul said, Can we say a prayer?

Lee leaned his left arm against the door frame, and Elder Paul said a prayer just inside the door. Then Lee prayed, asking for forgiveness of his sins.

Don't give up, Elder Paul said. You've come so far, you've done so many good things. Please don't give up.

Lee left just after midnight, and Elder Paul didn't feel like writing the rest of his letter home. He turned out the lights and went into the bedroom, where he knelt at his bed and said

another prayer for Lee. The next morning at church, he waited, but Lee never showed up.

I woke up to my cell phone ringing at 7:27 on Wednesday morning, July 29, 2005.

“This is Lee. I’m with the missionaries right now, but I have to go.” He paused, then said, “Do you want to meet?”

I cleared my throat and said that would be fine. He said he would meet me at the Kash n’ Karry on 26th Street and Cortez in fifteen minutes.

I jumped in the shower, knowing I’d probably have to go straight to work for my 10 a.m. appointment afterward. When I got out of the shower, I wrapped my purple towel around my waist, and my phone buzzed again.

“This is Elder Paul. I wanted to let you know that Lee’s not doing too well,” he said. “He’s drunk.”

“Great.”

“He says he got jumped last night, but we don’t believe him.”

I hung up. I didn’t shave or eat breakfast. What if he tries to walk in front of a bus? What else could he try if he’s really drunk? If he wanted to, Lee could come to my door in the middle of the night and break in, or even just ask to sleep there. What would I do then?

I parked near the covered bus stop. No sign of Lee. I walked into the abandoned corner lot, where a convenience store had been abandoned months earlier. Plywood had been screwed over windows, and bright orange spray paint read, “We’ve moved,” with the new address. Grass grew in the cracks in the pavement, and wooden barricades kept thru traffic out. Four lanes of traffic hummed in all directions, and my palms began to sweat. Never having drunk alcohol before, my knowledge of drunkenness came only from TV and the rare party I had attended in high school. Was Lee a mean drunk? A mellow, depressed drunk?

Then I saw him at the cross walk waiting for the light. He wore a button-down shirt with black pants and white shoes, along with his green backpack. He stumbled as he approached me, and I noticed a gash on the left side of his bottom lip. His eyes were bloodshot.

I said hello and shook his hand, trying to act as normal as possible, like we were simply meeting for another trip to Lakewood Ranch. His face was stoic, perhaps because it was painful to move his lips for even a frown. I motioned for him to sit down on the curb on the perimeter of the lot, and he did. The curb was cool in the shade.

“So what happened to your lip?” I said.

“I gotta get off the street,” he said slowly from the back of his throat, as if he were imitating someone with a lower voice.

“Not doing too well, huh?” I said.

He had a disgusted look on his face and motioned to his shirt and pants and backpack. “Look at me,” he said. “Does it *look* like I’m doing well? Come on, you’re an intelligent guy, can’t you understand that I’m *homeless*?”

“Yeah, but I’m just wondering how you’re doing right *now*,” I said, trying not to upset him further.

“Last night was rough,” he said, suddenly calm. He pointed to his lip, then clutched his side and showed me his cracked watch and scraped elbow.

“Three teenagers jumped me last night,” he said. “I did all right with three of them, but when the fourth one came, it was all over.”

I stared at the ground. “Lee, something doesn’t seem right,” I said. “What’s wrong?” Then I added quickly, “I know you’re homeless and you were mugged last night, but something else seems wrong. Have you been drinking?”

“No, I haven’t been drinking,” he said.

“Would you tell me if you had been?”

He turned to look at me directly in the eye and said, “Yes, I would. I wouldn’t go to your home and eat with your wife and son and disrespect you like that.”

“Okay,” I said, wanting to believe him. It was about 7:50 by this time; he was supposed to be at the Cortez Car Wash at eight. I offered him a ride, but he refused.

“It’s too late,” he said.

“No, it’s not. It’s only a mile or so down the road.”

“I need to call them,” he said. He reached into his pocket for a Ziploc baggie full of paper scraps, and he found a business card from the car wash. He stood hobbled in the direction of a pay phone that was a few feet away.

“Here,” I said. “You can use my phone if you want.” I flipped it open and handed it to him. He took it from me, but then looked disgusted again and handed it back.

“I can’t use those things—you dial it,” he said. I punched in the number, but didn’t hand it back.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“I don’t know, just give me the phone.”

“Are you going to quit?”

“Please,” he said. “Just give me the phone.”

“What are you going to say?”

“I don’t *know*,” he said, his voice louder, his neck straining. “I’m going to *wing* it. Please give me the phone.”

“Tell me what you’re going to say first.”

He turned and walked away, and I followed him close behind. If he was going to step out on the street, I was prepared to grab his shoulder before he got too far. He turned right, heading east down Cortez, and I raised my voice to be heard above the traffic on our left.

“Lee, wait,” I said. He didn’t turn around or slow down. “You can use my phone if you want.” I caught up to him. He ignored me and crumpled up the white business card and threw it on the ground. I had to get him to the car wash before he was fired. But then, what would Alberto say if Lee showed up drunk?

He walked behind a covered bus stop at the edge of the Kash N Karry parking lot and stopped in front of the newspaper stands. “Here, look,” he said. “I’ll show you how I look for news about storms in the newspapers. Maybe it will help you with your book.”

“Lee, I don’t care about the book.” It seemed obvious that the book had not been an effective tool in helping him adjust.

He walked slowly and aimlessly around the bus stop, set his backpack down on the bench, and picked up a soda can. He emptied out a beer bottle, picked up another can and a fast food wrapper. Next to the bench, he found a black garbage bag and tossed in more litter. I joined him. I picked up pieces of newspaper and cans and put it all in the black garbage bag as he held it open. We were a team, and it was as though this was part our daily routine. We meet and pick up garbage. On the ground, he found a twist-tie and sealed the bag.

We sat on the bench. Cars drove by in front of us, and we just sat there. Sweat beaded up on my forehead and arms. The temperature was in the 90s, and the air was saturated and thick.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said.

“Why not?” I said. “I care about you. I want to help you.”

“You shouldn’t. I’m not worth it.”

“Says who?”

“That’s what a police officer said last night. After the teenagers beat me up, I was laying there on the sidewalk and a policeman found me, and he said it wasn’t even worth it to take me to jail. He said, ‘You’re not worth the trouble.’”

“So who cares what he says?”

“He’s got the badge.”

I laughed, but he didn’t. “A lot of people care about you,” I said.

“They shouldn’t. You don’t know what I did in Vietnam.”

“I don’t care what you did in Vietnam. That’s all in the past. Don’t you remember what you did three weeks ago?”

He didn’t say anything, but looked at me, puzzled.

“On Saturday,” I said. “Remember? You got baptized. That means all your sins were washed away. Even what you did in Vietnam.”

He looked at the ground, but I saw tears in his eyes. I felt a surge of hope. Or was he simply more prone to weeping when he was under the influence? He reached for his backpack again, and headed east, saying he needed to fill up his water bottle.

“Lee, let me take you to work.”

“I’m not going.”

“But you’ll be throwing away the money you’ve earned.”

“They aren’t going to pay me.”

“What are you talking about? You worked for it. They *have* to pay you.”

“You don’t understand these places,” he said. “That’s why I need daily work, daily pay. Don’t mess with bank accounts, just give me the money that I’ve earned.” He added that he also hadn’t been paid for his work with the lamp posts. The church member who had made the arrangements for the job had handed entrusted his two teenage sons to collect the money, but they hadn’t gotten around to it yet. “They don’t understand that I need money. They don’t care.”

I reviewed in my head the causes of Lee’s current decline: he had worked hard painting, and hadn’t been paid for it; he didn’t trust the car wash to pay him; he’d been badly treated by a police officer; he’d been beaten up by teenagers; he was struggling to overcome addictions to alcohol and tobacco; he was likely running on little sleep or food. I couldn’t relate to any of these problems.

Changing the subject, I suggested he fill up his water bottle at Kash n’ Karry’s drinking fountain.

“They don’t let people like me use it.”

I assured him that he could.

“You don’t understand. I’m not a person to them. I’m homeless.”

“Lee, I *know* you’re homeless.” I was becoming irritated. I walked beside him in silence. We crossed Cortez and walked behind a storage shed to check for a water spigot.

“Why are you following me?” he said. “You’re not helping me.”

I was starting to doubt if he were really drunk or only depressed. I pleaded with him to let me take him to work, but he said it was too late.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “I’ve already lost the job.”

He didn’t seem to care, and I was in disbelief. We found a spigot on the side of a dry cleaning business, and he bent over to fill up the water bottle. A car drove slowly past us, and I felt like the little tag-along brother. I nodded to the driver and smiled. Don’t mind me. I’m just following around a drunk homeless man.

We headed west again, and by now, my car was several blocks away. We stopped at a stoplight, and Lee again told me to leave him alone.

“Look,” he said, “I understand you’re trying to be nice to me, but it’s not good for homeless to be seen with other people. It draws attention. You’ll be able to leave and go home after this, but I have to deal with the police tracking me down. Just go away.”

I felt a surge of confidence. This was an adventure, I thought. “You know what, Lee? I bet I can outlast you. I’ve got all day to follow you around.”

The crosswalk turned green, but he didn’t move. He turned to look at me in the eye. His face was red and looked about as rough as beef jerky. He had small patches of white skin that had recently peeled off. His buzzed hair cut was starting to get a little longer. Standing a few inches shorter than I did, he looked up at me with worried eyes and called my bluff.

He said, “You have no idea what you’re talking about. I was famous in the military. I could go eleven days without food and not even complain about it. I’ve been on the streets for twelve years. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lee walked away. He got to about the middle of the street before I decided to keep following him.

“You’re right. I can’t outlast you,” I called out to him. “That was dumb of me.”

“I know,” he said over his shoulder.

I followed him again down Cortez Road West, but I left a little more space for him this time. We were approaching the church at 34th Street, and I knew Elders Paul and Walker were there having a meeting.

About fifteen feet away from the bus stop at the Shell Station, I stopped, and he kept walking. Then he sat at the bus stop bench and looked around on the sidewalk for coins, but didn’t find any. He checked the coin slots of the vacuum kiosks and pay phone before walking away. Have I done enough? I thought. What if we never find him again? What if he leaves town and never comes back?

Then I remembered that I had entered Cortez Car Wash into my phone, and I called the number. I got Alberto on the phone and explained the situation.

“That’s okay,” Alberto said with a heavy accent.

“If he came in tomorrow would that be okay?”

“Sure. Lee is a good worker. I don’t have any problems with Lee.”

I thanked him. I looked down Cortez, and Lee was barely visible. The sidewalk was straight and flat and I could probably see for a mile. I hung up and walked back to the church to tell the missionaries what had happened. Later that afternoon, while I was at work, I called the missionaries’ apartment and asked if they had seen Lee, but they hadn’t. We agreed to drive around town to find him if they hadn’t seen him by nightfall.

It was about 9:30 p.m., and it was hot and humid, but we had the windows down. I was tired, and the street lights looked blurry in the distance. We headed west on Cortez Road, passing by Lee's normal haunts, the Laudromat, the bus stop at the Shell station, the First Care complex, the old abandoned CVS building, the car wash.

"He probably knows we're going to come after him," I said. "He either wants us to find him, and he's in a normal spot, or we're not going to find him." I remembered the riddle I had told Lee about being lost in New York, and I drove to our normal meeting place, at Kash N Karry. Sure enough, there, with his bag open on the ground in front of him, Lee was lying on the bus stop bench. I parked, and we approached him cautiously.

Lee sat up and rolled his eyes. He groaned and winced at the loud echoes of the passing cars reverberating in the sheltered bench. The missionaries sat next to him, and I sat on the opposite end, sure that he wouldn't be happy to see me. Across the street, someone entered Walgreen's through the brilliantly lit glass doors.

Lee shook his head. "I just—I can't be seen with you guys. It's not safe."

"All right, let's make a deal, then," Elder Paul said. "If you don't want us to come to you, then you come to us. We read our scriptures every day at 10 a.m. How about if you come and study with us in our apartment?"

"Yes *sir*," Lee said sarcastically.

We watched cars go by. I could see that Elder Paul was hurt by Lee's tone. He told Lee that I had called to try to save his job.

"I know you called him," Lee said to me. "You think I don't *know* that?" He shook his head again. "You guys just don't know what it's like to be out here on the streets. You probably don't notice those three people standing in the shadows on the other side of that

sidewalk,” he said, motioning with his chin. “I can walk across the street, and you won’t even be able to see me. I can walk across dried leaves without making a sound.”

We sat in silence. Finally, Lee said, “Here’s a joke. Okay, what’s wrong with jumping out of an airplane?” We didn’t say anything. “The plane’s working perfectly fine. The pilot’s okay, it’s all gassed up,” he said. “Okay, you guys don’t get it.”

We laughed, even though we didn’t understand the joke, hoping he would stay in a good mood. We asked him what he wanted to do next, what his plans were, whether he would consider going back to the car wash.

Lee stood up and put on his backpack. The conversation was over. As he walked away, he muttered in a slurred voice: “No stress. No stress.”

On August 10, 2005, I drove Elder Paul and Elder Walker about an hour north to a town called Brandon, Florida, where Elder Paul would begin to work in his new area. After several months in Bradenton, he was being transferred, just as Elder Nielsen had been transferred before Elder Walker arrived.

“And so,” I said into the tape recorder as we drove, “this will be the last tape ever recorded of Elder Paul about Lee. And we just saw a guy walk by that could be homeless.”

Elder Paul said, “I’ll never look at homeless people the same again.”

I knew Elder Walker had met with Lee the night before I had walked up and down Cortez with him, and he told me the story.

Elder Walker

On July 28, Elder Paul and Elder Walker were visited by another missionary, Elder Matsui, who was essentially their supervisor. They had told him what a great success story Lee was, and so Elder Walker took Elder Matsui to meet him. They drove along Cortez Road until they spotted him, sprawled on a bench outside the Laundromat, his backpack open on the ground.

Elder Walker, who had never seen Lee look anything but neat and under control, called to him. Something had to be wrong if Lee’s backpack was all messed up. He looked groggy; his lip was split open, his nose bloody.

I fell asleep, Lee mumbled. He showed them a tear in his backpack and said, I’m worthless.

Lee, you’re the coolest guy I’ve ever met, Elder Walker said. Why do you think we spend so much time with you? I

love talking with you and playing Monopoly with you. You're not a piece of garbage.

You don't know what I did in Vietnam, Lee said. He walked away, and Elder Walker and Elder Matsui followed him next door to a rug shop, which was closed for the night. The three of them talked in the shadows of the overhang outside the shop.

You guys have been so good to me, Lee said.

There's a reason we found you, Elder Walker said. God knows where you're at, and He wants you to be forgiven, and He wants you to forgive yourself. Why would He lead you to the way of true repentance if you can't be forgiven?

Lee seemed calm, and he agreed. Then suddenly everything changed: his face grew angry, teeth clenched, and he started shaking. He yelled, I killed people! I killed them! I had to do it! I killed people!

He said he had done two tours of duty in Vietnam, from 1971 to 1975. He said, We were in places we shouldn't have been in. We rode on a river boat up and down this river, up and down all day every day. We were the guys that went in, and we either came out with our objective, or we didn't come out. We went after pilots that went down. I'd go in, and the pilot would be screaming, and I'd say, "Don't be stupid!" And I'd hit him with morphine to shut him up. Then I'd pick him up, as scrawny as I look, and carry him and get out of there, running, while pumping him with morphine.

We were told to take people out. I'd have a 50-caliber machine gun and do a sweep, a hose down. I could cut this building in half if I had the ammunition. There were innocent people involved. I wasn't a baby killer or anything, you know,

cutting women's breasts off, burning babies, but I did kill people.

Lee said there was one incident for which he could still be prosecuted by law. He was on the boat, and every one of his men had been shot. He had been wounded himself, and some were dead.

Lee continued, And then the lieutenant says, "All right, gas up, we're going back in there." So I pulled out my personal firearm out and just went *psssh*, and I *shot* him. I did it because I was saving lives, because they all knew they were going to die if they went back in. The lieutenant was dead, and nobody said anything.

Elder Walker paused.

"That one was intense," he said. "I can't imagine what it was like. I wasn't even going to bring that one up, because it's kind of personal."

We debated whether I should include the story in the book. I didn't want to upset him by publishing stories he hadn't approved. But then, it seemed that his past was a key to understanding why he was homeless, and perhaps why he had relapsed after such a promising episode.

"He's still fighting the war," Elder Paul said. "Every time we've seen him since he's crashed, he's talked about Vietnam. It's like he's still out there trying to evade the enemy."

Elder Walker brought up the meticulous way Lee packed his bags, which reminded him of a soldier's routine, almost like the lists of gear and supplies in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. "That's why I believe him," he said. "*That's* why I believe him."

I asked them to tell me about any recent times they had seen Lee since our late-night visit with him on the bench in front of Kash N Karry.

Elder Paul and Elder Walker

It was the middle of day, and Lee was plastered. He wore no shoes. His beard was filling in, and his head had been clean shaven, and it shone in the sun. The missionaries drove by, and he looked at their car, but didn't acknowledge them. They turned around and stopped, but he had stumbled over to a bench and lay panting, as though he were about to spew. The missionaries looked at each other and drove on without talking to him.

A few days later, they saw him again, this time in front of Walgreen's, chugging water or some other clear liquid. They stopped to say hello. Down the street, the police were arriving at the scene of a car accident.

You gotta get out of here! he said to them.

Okay, Elder Walker said. Where do you want to meet us?

At the plumber's place. Now move!

They arrived at the shop across the street, and Lee followed. He said it wasn't safe for them there because the cops were going to interview people. He said, If I say move, you move!

All right, Elder Paul said. Next time you say something, we'll do it right away.

He seemed one hundred percent sober—but in a different universe.

A third sighting occurred several days before Elder Paul was scheduled to leave town. Elder Paul was hesitant, not wanting to cement his memories of Lee as a drunk. But Lee

approached them and knocked on their door, so they welcomed him into their apartment. Sure enough, he was wasted. He cried a lot at first.

Then he said, I am very good at math. I am faster than computers. That's what the scientists said: "He's faster than computers, so don't get out your calculators."

Then Elder Paul broke the news that he was being transferred. Lee was shocked. Elder Paul asked him if they could meet one last time before he left.

I can't make any promises. It's rough out there. It's rough out there.

You can do it. Because the Lee I know is one of the most dependable people out there. You always brave the elements, and you make your appointments.

Lee said, That's what I'm trying to *tell* you. Things have gotten *rougher* out there. It's getting *worse!*

Well, I can meet you tomorrow at 3:30 at the church.

The next day the missionaries showed up for the appointment. Neither of them had received any letters from home that day, and they were disappointed about the upcoming transfer—they had worked well together. Lee wasn't at the church, so they waited. Elder Walker went into the chapel and played depressing songs on the piano, and Elder Paul sat alone in the lobby. Lee, please show up. But part of him didn't want Lee to come, because he would likely not be sober.

He never came. Then, later that night, they saw him near their apartment waiting on a bench, and Elder Paul went out to say goodbye.

When Lee saw him, he quickly hid a bottle he'd been drinking from. Elder Paul sat with him and they talked about

the weather. It was something they could always relate to, since they were outside most of the time.

Did you get soaked this morning? Elder Paul said.

Oh, yeah, I got soaked.

But it's cooler now.

Lee told more stories about how he could walk over dry leaves with a 75-pound pack and not make a sound. His hands and T-shirt were filthy. His head was just starting to grow a little bit of scruff, which matched his unshaven face. His eyelids drooped, and he reeked of tobacco and alcohol.

Lee began to tear up, and he said, I want you to know you've made a difference in my life, and I want you to know that I love you.

I love you, too. Elder Paul put his arm around him, and Lee put his head on his shoulder, and he didn't say anything—he just got all choked up.

Lee said, I'm gonna have a hard time losing you. It's part of my Navy Seal training—I try not to get too close to anyone, because it hurts too much when they get killed, but you've really made a difference to me. I'm really going to miss you, Elder . . .

He couldn't remember Elder Paul's name, and it made him feel terrible. He put his hands in his face, and leaned forward, and Elder Paul put his arm around him.

It's okay, Lee, because here's the good news: I haven't been killed, I'm not dying, and you know what? I'll see you again. If nothing else, after all is said and done, I'll see you on the other side.

Lee looked into his eyes like a child. He said, Is that really true? You really believe that?

Before they parted ways for the last time, Lee grabbed Elder Paul's wrist, and he said, I'm going to show you something. This is a Navy Seal code sign. It's called the Waggle-Waggle. It means, somehow, we're going to be okay—we're going to get through this.

He made the sign by twisting his hand from side to side, and then said, But I shouldn't have even told you that. It's a secret Navy sign. Forget you ever heard it.

We approached Elder Paul's new apartment, where he would live with a new group of missionaries an hour away from Bradenton. As Elder Walker helped unload Elder Paul's meager belongings, we sat in the front seat talking for a few final minutes.

He said, "It hurts a lot when you go out every day and try to teach good people, and they don't respond at all. And to have someone like Lee respond, even though he's in that condition, even though it didn't last, it gave me a lot of faith."

He added, "We ended on a good note. He said, 'You keep out of trouble,' because he's always teasing me, like I'm the one who needs it. 'You behave yourself, you stay out of trouble.' I was like, 'You too, Lee.' We said goodbye. The end."

PART II

“Nobody’s a bum all their life. [He] hada been somethin’ once.”

—*Ironweed*, William Kennedy

A year passed, and soon, I would be moving from Florida to Michigan to attend graduate school. One night midweek at the church, on July 25, 2006, one of the congregational leaders named Bret Fitzgerald asked me to follow him down the hall.

“He’s sleeping outside the rear entrance,” Bret said. Since I knew Lee best, well, maybe I could help remove him from the grounds. Through the glass door at the rear of the church, Lee’s blue-and-white sneakers and skinny shins jutted into view like the Wicked Witch of the West. We opened the door, and there, lying flat in a brick alcove under a yellow fluorescent bulb, Lee was snoring. It was dusk.

“Lee,” I said. He was startled, and looked up at us, annoyed.

“Brothers,” he said. He contorted his face as he squinted at the light. “I know you don’t mean any harm, but *never* wake me up like that.” He wore blue jeans with a few small holes in them, and a green T-shirt. “You never wake us up by shouting or by shaking us,” he said. “You tap us on the bottom of the shoe.”

“I’ll remember that next time,” I said. I knelt a few feet away from him.

“Did your wife have the baby?” Lee said, sitting up.

“Yes, she did, about ten days ago now. She’s doing great, and so is the baby. His name is Grant. And I’m moving now in about a week or so.”

“So that’s still happening, huh?” he said.

“Yep.”

Just then two other men from the congregation walked out the door. They said hello to Lee, and they each shook his hand. I stood up to join the others, which left Lee on the ground, surrounded by four men.

“I feel like the posse has been called on me,” Lee said. He smiled.

Somebody said they had missed Lee, and wished he would come back to church.

Then Bret knelt down and spoke quietly. “You know Lee, if you want to sleep here, I don’t care. But we just can’t have you here on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, because that’s when the children are here.”

Lee appeared to be completely sober, if still groggy from his nap. He said he understood. “I promise to *obey*,” he said.

Bret sighed. The three men looked at each other awkwardly and, thinking of no other way to leave, they shook Lee’s hand once again and walked away; I lingered. Lee picked up his new black backpack and his plastic Taco Bell cup and asked me if I had time to talk. I told him I had a few minutes, but he shook his head and said just to forget about it.

“How much time do you need?” I said.

“About two hours,” he said, plaintively. He squinted as though he were under some kind of mental strain.

The tapes from our interviews and the interviews with the missionaries had sat on my shelf at home for months. I figured that because I was about to move and go to graduate school across the country, I’d likely never see him again, and I had lost my enthusiasm for the book. But his request made me wonder whether I could still reach him. Now that Elders Paul and Walker were long gone, maybe I was his best contact with the “real” world.

“Well, I could call home and see how things are going there first,” I said.

“Have to ask permission,” he said. His eye twinkled, and he smiled.

“Exactly.” I stepped away and called my wife, Hailey. I told her I was going to spend some time with Lee.

“Be careful,” she said.

He suggested the McDonald’s just west of 34th Street, where we could sit outside at a stone table. We parked, and he struggled with his hulking backpack, hobbling to the bench as if he were eighty years old instead of 53. Before sitting down, he picked up trash around the table. By now it was dark outside, and parking lot lights and headlights shone on his face. He sniffled constantly, and every now and then I noticed that constant smell of sweat and filth that clouded him. I didn’t detect the smell of drier sheets.

I stared in the distance, facing south, as a terrific heat lightning storm lit the clouds to the east like Patriot missiles. About thirty yards to the west, a train of cars waited at the drive-thru window.

I piled pebbles in different formations on the rough, stone table. Lee reached his frail hand deep into his shirt pocket and retrieved a blue lighter. He lit a cigarette. No money, but a constant supply of cigarettes.

“Have I ever shown you the scar on my back?” he said. He lifted up his T-shirt to expose the faint scar that ran in a horseshoe up and around his shoulders and down his frail, skinny back. It was from the car wreck in the early 1980s, back when he was married. For the better part of an hour, I sat and listened without making a sound.

“I’m terrified of fire,” Lee said, as he put out his cigarette butt on the rocks in front of the bench. He hobbled a few feet to the garbage can, rolled the butt in his fingers and finally dropped it into the barrel. Pink lightning sparkled to the east.

“I got my fear of fire from the Navy,” he said. “If you’re on the boat, which way do you run? You have to decide if you want to take a swim with the sharks, which may or may not be hungry, or you have to try to put the fire out. And do you know what they use to put

the fire out? Water. Normally, you try to keep water *out* of the boat, but now there's water inside.”

Lee said he was in the armed forces for 16 years and, with great clarity, he told me one story he remembered about a special assignment he had as a Navy Seal.

Lee Sandspur

Sandspur worked alone. His night mission was to break into the house of a North Vietnamese general, who had three children and two dogs, and retrieve information on troop movements.

As approach the house, one of the dogs woke up, and Sandspur aimed his firearm of choice, a Smith & Wesson with a silencer, and shot the dog in the head. He knew the second would soon follow, so he found and shot it, too. Because Sandspur was so slender, he knew he could enter through the small bathroom window.

He prayed silently: Please, Jesus, don't let anyone wake up. Don't let anyone come through and get a drink in the middle of the night. Help me to find where the papers are.

He crept into the general's office, and there on the desk, he found the papers with information about U.S. troops and Vietcong troops. He stuffed the papers in his waterproof oil sack, and dropped a Navy Seals business card in their place. Now they would know that a Navy Seal had been there, and that if he wanted to, he could come again.

“That lightning is something,” Lee said. Cars filed past us through the McDonald's drive-thru, and I brushed my pile of pebbles off the table. Lee took a drag on his cigarette. He

recalled sitting in a tent in Vietnam, opening letters from his mother in Orlando. She sent him clippings from the *Orlando Sentinel* with quotes from government officials claiming there were no troops in Vietnam. He held up an imaginary newspaper clipping, looked at me, and rolled his eyes; he pretended to roll it into a ball and throw it over his shoulder.

I thought back to my last conversations with Elder Walker and Elder Paul. *That's why I believe him.* Lee had so much detail at such easy recall: sixty-seven pennies in his Medicaid envelope at OSRC; twelve cigarettes remained when he left the Social Security office; the Walgreen's employees arrived at seven; and now, the two dogs outside the North Vietnamese general's house. I was impressed with his memory, and yet, his war stories left me uneasy. Why did it seem that his war stories all surfaced only when he had been drinking?

Navy Seals used code names rather than given names, because it wasn't a good idea to get too close to anybody, Lee said. The one exception he could remember was Mark R., his close friend who was killed saving eighteen marines. Lee was asked to write the letter home.

"It went something like this: 'Dear Mr. and Mrs. R., You don't know me, but I am in the United States Navy. I served with your son. I knew him well. He died in the service of his country. You should be very proud of him.'"

Lee was silent for a moment. Tears flowed down his cheeks, and he apologized. I said I didn't mind.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Twenty-six," I said. He shot me a look of disbelief, even though I had told him my age several times over the past year. "Lee, can I ask you a question?" I said, falling back into

interview mode. “You’ve told me about Vietnam, your divorce and about alcohol. What do you think was the biggest factor that led to you hitting the streets?”

“Myself,” he said. “I don’t blame anybody. I’m not angry. Sure, my ex-wife got a boyfriend and took the house. And she took both cars. I never did figure out how she got both cars, but I was never angry.”

He went on to relate what he considered the pivotal moment in his descent to homelessness, the tragic tipping point.

Lee Sandspur

Lee woke up one morning in his empty house, put on his robe and went down to make some coffee. It was a Braun coffee maker, Folgers coffee. He walked in and turned on the Weather Channel, because he wanted to know what to wear that day. Washington, D.C., weather was so unpredictable.

He took a sip of the coffee during the seven-day forecast. He thought, I don’t want this. He poured it out into the sink. Then he turned around and opened the fridge and picked out a beer. He had never done anything like that in his life. He was a social drinker. Who cares. He waited until the time when he knew his boss would be in, and he called him and said, I’m not calling in sick. I’m calling because I quit.

Lee grew silent and smoked another cigarette. We bounced from one topic to another, until finally I asked him when he had eaten last. He couldn’t remember. By this time, it was about 10 p.m. We ate Whoppers and milkshakes and drove to the Big Lots parking lot on Cortez. Before he sat down on the bench outside the store, Lee picked up a few cigarette butts and

corralled a few shopping carts. He said he always liked to clean up because the police were less likely to give you trouble if the area was nice and clean. “It’s a homeless trick,” he said. “You can put that in your book.”

It was nearly 11 p.m. now, and I was ready to go back home. At the same time, I knew this was likely the last time I would ever see Lee Sandspur. I was moving in about a week, and it was only seemingly by pure chance that I had bumped into him again.

“Lee, I have a question to ask you,” I said. “Surprise, surprise, right?”

“Right, right,” he said, bobbing his head, smiling.

“What are your plans? Do you have any goals? Where do you see yourself in a year or two years or three years? I know you’re not satisfied being homeless.”

He told me about a camp in Mexico where military veterans grew, harvested and sold vegetables.

“There are no free loaders at these camps,” Lee said. “If you can’t pull weeds or harvest the vegetables, you have to wash dishes.” He said all he needed was to save enough money to buy a Greyhound ticket to Mexico.

It was an odd dream, I thought. He reminded me of George, the thin, wily character in *Of Mice and Men*, who dreamed of living off the fat of the land with his slow friend, Lenny. Or maybe Lee was like a combination of the two, depending on how much he’d had to drink.

“So that’s my plan,” he said. “Lee’s life has been lived. I’ve used up my usefulness.”

I told him he was valuable for his stories, if nothing else—for history. His experiences could help people, I said. He must have thought I was referring to the top-secret knowledge and skills he’d acquired as a Navy Seal. He nodded.

“I know for a fact that if I went down to Miami or up to New York, I would be snatched by the mafia and organized crime like *that*,” he said.

I stared at the red fluorescent Outback Steakhouse sign, the dim lights on posts in the lot. Before I left, I gave him a hug—gingerly so as not to hurt his back—and I got into my car. He had met a woman named Gloria at the Laundromat, he said, and she had given him permission to use her address and phone number if he needed a place to receive mail or calls. I thanked him and promised to write.

“I’m going to miss you, brother,” he said. I said the same.

As I drove away, I could see him still sitting there on the bench at Big Lots, a small, frail man, a ghost, a teller of tales of several lifetimes.

PART III

Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little
from the past that was not.

—*Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy

1

Well into my first year at graduate school, in response to a Christmas card I'd sent to Gloria Beatrice's address, I received a baby blue envelope containing a thinking-of-you card that had been torn in half, right down the fold. On the card, Lee had written a short note:

Dear Brian, Hailey, Jackson and Grant,

I am doing ok.

Toys 'R Us misses Jackson.

I miss Hailey's spaghetti.

And thank you again for all
you did for me.

I can get phone messages at

Gloria Beatrices (a friend)

But having no funds

I cannot return calls.

I have been praying for you
and will continue to do so.

Love to all,

LEE SANDSPUR

Shortly thereafter, I received a research grant to fund a trip back to Florida. I transcribed all the audio cassettes of interviews I had done with him in 2005, and I was engrossed in the story once again. This time, I wouldn't expect a miracle. But I nursed the hope that spending a full week with Lee in Bradenton could at least be a step toward a real change. In addition, I hoped to fill in more details about his past. I knew a few fragments about his marriage, his

car accident, his divorce, but nothing about his childhood or his years without a home. I was particularly interested in his Navy Seals experience.

With Gloria's help, I talked to Lee on the phone to arrange a July meeting time and place. He said he had a book for me. And he said he hadn't been doing well physically; a local church had given him a walker.

"It's got these large, rubber wheels," he said, "and it rides very smoothly over the cracks in the sidewalk. I call it my Cadillac."

From my bedroom in Michigan, I laughed. He seemed in good humor—and sober. It had worried me that I might arrive in Florida only to find that he was drunk and unreliable.

"I also have a book. It's called *Whattaya Mean I Can't Kill 'Em?* It's by Rad Miller Jr." He was speaking deliberately, apparently reading the title right off the book. "It's about a Navy Seal who served in Vietnam, and it'll give you a good idea of what it's like." He added, "He should *never* have written this book. They could come after him for this."

"It has pictures," he continued. "Pictures of me in Vietnam. We were trained to be invisible, and I was dressed all in black hiding in a bush. They told me to take off one glove so they could see me, and, well, there's a picture of me in that bush, and some pictures of me rappelling on the side of a mountain."

"That's great," I said, hardly able to contain myself. For the book to work, I felt I needed to answer this question about Vietnam. If nothing else, I needed to satisfy my own lingering doubts about his stories. I told him I'd love to take a look at it.

"Well, I'm going to give it to you. If you can't use it, you can throw it in the trash—I don't want it anymore."

This book sounded like the solution to my problems.

Gloria Beatrice's toll booth was cramped. A small fan to keep cool, the cash register, and it was pretty well full up. After having been married four times, at 68 years old, Gloria was single. In 1990, her disabled sister moved in with her, and for some time, she supported them both by working two full-time jobs. Days, she worked in a toll booth on the Skyway Bridge in St. Petersburg.

One day she came in and the light bulb overhead was missing. She kept telling her supervisor that the light was out, and the supervisor kept telling Gloria to write it up on the report. Every time working on that booth, she wrote it on the report. Light still out. Next time, light still out. After a dozen times, the supervisor wrote her up for excessive reporting. She would have just quit, but she didn't want to give the supervisor the satisfaction.

But Gloria won.

The supervisor died.

Then Gloria quit and worked day shifts at Wal-Mart. She liked how it was a family-oriented store. No pornography. No Playboy—that's not Wal-Mart's forte. She picked through the children's books every night, and if she found anything remotely pornographic, she sent it back to her boss with a nice little note: Since when did Wal-Mart start selling junk like this?

Problems arose when her customers got to be so loyal that the other cashiers got to be jealous. The customers would line up all the way to the back end of the store, and leave all the other ladies standing there with nothing to do but tap their fingers and look bored. It wasn't hardly fair, so Gloria absented herself by requesting the night shift. She worked eleven at night to seven in the morning.

In about 2005, Gloria went to the Laundromat on her night off—well, technically three in the morning—on Thursday. She liked how quiet it was, with no kids squalling and running into carts and what have you. She'd be sorely tempted to step in and give those kids a talking to. Lookee here. No fighting.

She always had three loads to do, and she'd take a book and just set there and let it spin. Some lady used to come in there all the time that was talking about Jehovah's Witnesses. She had dark hair and was a younger type. She had tracts.

Ma'am, Gloria said, I don't want to be short with you or anything, but I belong to the Mormon Church. I don't think you could change my mind on anything.

Oh, she said. You're one of those people that believe in something really far out about Jesus.

Ma'am, maybe you should oughta come to our church for a change, and learn what there is about Jesus. You might be very surprised.

Your church doesn't believe in Jesus.

Gloria said, Ma'am, surely it would not be called The Church of Jesus Christ if it was not about Jesus.

The woman kept on trying to tell Gloria that Mormons weren't Christians, and Gloria kept telling her yes it was so. Finally, the woman took her tracts and left the Laundromat. The place was fairly hopping with people, and Gloria hadn't noticed a man sitting on the bench, listening the whole time, taking it all in.

He said, I couldn't have said it better myself.

I didn't want to be mean, she said, but it's crazy, people trying to tell you what you believe.

Turned out, this man was a member of the Mormon Church, too, just like Gloria, and they struck up a conversation.

“So Lee was just sitting there on one of the benches?” I said. I was sitting in a white arm chair across from Gloria Beatrice in her ground floor apartment in Bradenton in July 2006. I had flown in the night before and picked up my rental car—an economy subcompact, big enough to fit one suitcase—and stayed the night at the home of Bret Fitzgerald, the bishop of the local Mormon congregation. At one in the afternoon, I was supposed to meet Lee in front of Burger King. But first, I had called Gloria. In the year that had passed since I had moved, she had seen him on a regular basis, and I hoped she could bring the story up to the present for me.

The apartment was small and cluttered: a pair of scissors, a yogurt container, shelves overflowing with paperbacks, papers stacked a foot high on the coffee table. Cloth flowers filled vases on bookshelves in the corner next to a small, unplugged TV on the floor. Matching salmon-colored lamps cast a rosy light on a canvas painting of sea shells, which hung above the couch where Gloria lay. She wore khaki pants and a navy blue polo shirt—her Wal-Mart uniform. Her short white hair was bobbed, and she had thick, black-framed glasses.

“I’m not trying to be rude, but I have to lie down here on the couch,” she said. “I got into an accident seven years ago and herniated a disk in my back. I’ve got a horseshoe cut in my scalp”—she waved her hands in the air above her head for several seconds, and I wondered if she’d forgotten I was there—“fifteen staples. The doctor told Wal-Mart, ‘If you let her carry more than twenty pounds, you leave yourself open to the largest lawsuit ever seen in the history of this state.’ That set my boss back on her heels some.”

Gloria laughed, showing all of her teeth. She unlaced her white tennis shoes, shook them off, and stretched out on the couch. She rested her feet on a stack of mail.

“What did Lee look like when you first saw him?” I said.

She shrugged. “How do you describe a bum? He always got his clothes out of whatever garbage can that was handy. At least the clothes were clean in the garbage can at the Laundromat. The clothes had been washed. He didn’t smell to high heaven at least.” She stared at the table. “He used to at least smell clean,” she said. “Anymore, he doesn’t.” Her eyelids drooped, and she struggled to stay awake after a long night of patrolling the Wal-Mart magazine racks.

She said, “He said he was a member of the church. And I’ve been doing laundry for him ever since. Whatever he wants done, I’ll do it for him, and he knows it. I’m like that. Fetch it, don’t be shy. I’ve got dryer sheets. Shucks, it don’t cost me any more to throw in a few more rags. The next week he was sitting there.”

Gloria held a black pen and waved her checkbook around, tapping it on the couch. She sighed. “He knows what times I arrive. He’s normally there ahead of me, and he picks up the trash off the floors, the dryer sheets. Of course, it’s got cameras all over the place, and the owners know what he does, but they pay the cleaning lady to do this job, and she gets mad at him every so often. Heavy set black lady. Lee lives in constant fear that she’ll show up and read him the riot act again.”

I asked her if Lee was usually sober when he came to have his laundry done.

She said yes, and she rested her head on a pillow propped on the arm of the couch. “I refuse to give him more than twenty bucks anymore. He kept saying, ‘If I just had forty bucks all together at one time, I’d get myself a room to sleep in, and I’d sleep.’ Well, I tried

that once. One of Lee's friends, Roger—brown beard, brown hair, glasses—came with Lee to the Laundromat one night, and I did his laundry, too, about four months ago. I met Roger after he got out of his wheel chair and neck halo.”

Roger had been in a car accident, and Gloria drove him to see the doctor regularly, as well as doing his laundry. Lee, though, still refused to see a doctor.”

“That is Lee for you,” Gloria said.

Now we were getting somewhere. Why did Lee refuse to help himself? I couldn't understand why he had quit his job at the car wash and why he wouldn't take advantage of all the help the church had tried to offer him.

I began, “Actually, that's part of why I want—”

Gloria interrupted me in a rage: “Look, you stupid drunk! You need to go see the doctor! I'll take you!” But, no. I said, ‘You're a mighty stubborn man, you know that? So, let me put it to you this way: if I hear you grumble one more time about how bad you feel, I'm going to reach out and kick your other leg out from underneath you, all right?’”

We were silent for a moment. Papers scattered on the coffee table partially covered a paperback book: *NASCAR Ladies, Start Your Engines, with a sneak preview of the first-ever officially-licensed NASCAR romance series.*

“As a matter of fact,” she said, “I went down to see Lee on a Wednesday night and told him I would not be there on a Thursday, and I gave him twenty-five bucks. Lee stayed drunk for two days.”

I was surprised she would be willing to give him even that much.

She sat up, her eyes wide, and she spoke rapidly: “He was staying down there at the old Ale House, by Albertson's, sleeping on those benches right in front of it. It was 8 a.m.,

and he was there, and well, he'd wet himself. He smelled like some sort of whiskey. It wasn't exactly pleasant."

I asked if she was upset that he'd spent the money on booze. She half-smiled.

"Where does Roger live?" I said.

"He's in Michigan. I paid for his bus ticket—he *better* be in Michigan."

"Where did he used to live?"

She gave me directions to the trailer, and I said I might try to find him. She said, "I'm not going to be happy one bit if he's there." Gloria closed her eyes, nearly nodding off the sleep. Then she sat up and shuffled a few pieces of junk mail.

Gloria said, "I tell Lee every time I see him that he needs to see a doctor. I think we've pretty much come to an impasse on the issue."

I said, "Sometimes I think, If he won't help himself, why should I keep helping him?"

"Well, I'm just a stop gap. I don't know if I'm a help or a hindrance, really. But I think he's been kicked in the teeth enough times."

Gloria said she let Lee come over to her house one day to take a shower because he smelled like an outhouse. She let him borrow a pair of her pants to wear since he had no clean clothes to change into. When she asked for the pants back, he said, If it's all right with you, I think I'll just wear what I got on. Then Gloria looked for the towel she'd let him use, and realized he'd stolen it.

"So why continue to help him?" I said.

Gloria rubbed her eyes. She stared through her thick lenses and said blankly, "God put me on this earth to do something, honey, and I think this is what he put me on this earth for: to help people in whatever way I can."

“What do you think keeps Lee in his present condition?”

Gloria, still in a daze, spelled it out: “P-r-i-d-e. That’s it in a nutshell.”

It was mid-July, and within seconds of exiting my air-conditioned rental car, I was sweating heavily from the heat and humidity. Two men on a bench faced Cortez Road, their backs to Burger King. One of the men was Lee—I could identify him by the back of his head by now—but I didn't know his companion, and I approached them from behind with caution. Parked next to the bench was an orange, plastic grocery cart that had evidently been wheeled from Big Lots several blocks away. An overstuffed maroon duffle bag and three tightly-wrapped shopping bags filled the bottom of the basket; a clear Gatorade bottle half-full of amber liquid lay on top next to a paperback book.

From between the slats of the bench, I noticed that Lee's black pants were sagging down so low that his rear end was exposed, and I could see that it was smeared.

Feces, reddish brown.

I shuddered.

I walked around the shopping cart and said hello. Recalling that Lee's hand had been injured, I extended my hand without gripping. He winced as if preparing for a shock of pain. I smiled and said, "I won't shake."

"Hello, brother," Lee said, struggling to his feet. He introduced me to Carl Danson III, who made room for me on the bench. Carl looked to be younger than I was—in his early 20s—and he wore jeans and a loose-fitting, cream-colored thermal shirt. A full, red beard covered his cheeks and chin.

"It's good to see you, Lee," I said.

Lee leaned back on the bench. He wore a navy blue NASA cap and, despite the intense heat, a zipped-up black windbreaker. Sweat pooled in the dip of his collarbone. A

rubber band held together the clasp on his black digital watch. His black cotton pants appeared to be made for a short, stout woman—Gloria, I presumed—and reached only to mid-calf when his legs were crossed. He wore loafers with no socks, and his heels were red and chafed. Flies swirled around his legs and arms. Was this the same Lee I had left on the Big Lots bench a year earlier? I felt as though we were meeting after a decade, rather than only a year.

He had a thin gray beard, and short hair. The skin on his face was red and deeply wrinkled, as if scored by the sun. I recalled that he had once refused sunscreen, saying skin cancer was the least of his problems. He squinted, his brown eyes scanning as the sun glared off the four-lane road in front of us. Cars and trucks whirred and roared by. When Lee began to talk, the grumble of a truck made it impossible to hear, and he rolled his eyes and waved his hand sarcastically at the driver. He was irritable and worn out. The thick air smelled like the exhausted road.

“Oh, is that the book?” I said, reaching for the paperback in his cart.

“*Wait*,” he said, his voice hoarse and nasal. “Can we just sit and *talk* for a minute? I mean, I haven’t seen you in a *year*.”

“Sure, sure. Let’s talk.”

“How is your family?” His eyes relaxed, and he seemed to want to make the most of this rare moment when he was not homeless, not drunk, not manic or depressed, but simply Lee Sandspur.

“They’re good.”

“Is Jackson still putting Toys ‘R’ Us out of business?” he said with a smile.

“Yep, he’s got more than ever.”

“And Miss Hailey? Does she still make that delicious spaghetti? And those tacos?”

I said she did. I suspended my arms so as to avoid printing dark crescents of sweat on my pants.

“She is a *great* cook,” he said. He smiled. But then a motorcycle whined at him, and he yelled, his voice crackling, “Oh, come on! Why do they have to *do* that?”

His sudden energy startled me, and I did my best to defuse it. “So what happened to your Cadillac?” I said, motioning to the grocery cart in the grass.

“It broke down,” he said. “I threw it in the trash.”

Motorcycles, semi-trucks, cars. The sound was rhythmic, as if we were watching waves instead of this expanse of asphalt. When had Lee last experienced the natural world? Some of the most beautiful beaches in the world were just a few miles away, and his world consisted entirely of a few intersections on Cortez Road.

“Well,” he said, “I have this book, as I told you on the phone.”

I reached for it, and he held it farther away from me, as if punishing a disobedient child.

“Just a *minute*,” he said, again cranky. “I don’t *like* it when people *take* things before I’ve given them.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, trying to sound cheerful. “No problem.”

“Now, let me show you the pictures I told you about.”

He took the pictures, which had been torn from the spine, and handed the book to me. It was a small, cheap paperback with red and black borders around a grainy color photograph on the cover. Rad Miller Jr., the author, was standing in a marsh under the open sky with thigh-high, brown grasses all around. Three men in fatigues crouched behind him in the

distance. It was a sunny day, and Rad was squinting, which made his smile seem almost sadistic—a good match for the title of the book. He wore a mustache, and a green headband matted down boyish, strawberry-blond hair across his forehead. He held one automatic weapon, pointing it casually in the air, and held another at his hip, with bands of ammo in an X across his chest.

“That’s a sawed-off .60-caliber,” Lee said. “And there’s the cloth on the barrel. They would get so *hot* you’d get *burned* if you touched it after firing it.”

I had been expecting, for some reason, a handsome hardcover—something that seemed more legitimate. A subtitle ran across the top of the book: “The True Story of One Seal’s War in IV Corps, 1969.” The book was printed by Ivy Books, an imprint of Random House. And there, on the spine, were the words, “Vietnam/Nonfiction.”

The photo inserts were grainy but printed in glossy black and white. He explained each torn out page, and then handed it over so I could reinsert it into the book.

“Here’s how we did our rappelling,” he said. “You would call it mountain climbing, we called it rappelling.”

I flipped through the book. Some of the pages were carefully folded down at the corner. On the inside cover above another list of books were printed the words, “Look for these true accounts of blood and courage in Vietnam from America’s *real* action heroes.” On the inside of the back cover, Miller’s bio said that he had retired in 1995, and, “after a few years of rest and looking around, started a new career as a writer.” Sounded simple enough. He was quoted as saying, “I’ve read thousands of books.”

Most of the pictures had been taken of people's backs, or from too great a distance for me to see many facial features. One picture showed three columns of soldiers running into a large body of water. The caption read, "Hit the bay!"

Lee handed me the last page. "That's the picture I was telling you about. That's me hiding in the bush. You can see my glove is off, otherwise you can barely see me."

This page had three small pictures on it, with the bottom picture showing a small close up. It was a young man with a headband and camouflage face paint. Sure enough, he had no glove on and was holding a gun. I looked at Lee, then at the picture. It was possible that this was him. I'd never seen any pictures of him as a younger man.

Then I read the caption: "Me, in ambush position, during SEAL training at Niland, California, April 1968."

I thought back to our phone conversation a month earlier: *There are pictures of me in it. I think it might help you in your book.*

Me.

In ambush position.

I looked at Lee again, his thin gray beard covering round, scorched cheeks. His legs were crossed, his right knee over his left, dangling his brown dress shoe, a dignified pose for a man seemingly unaware that his rear end was partially exposed and smeared. Flies circled his head. Landed on his face and arms. Lee didn't bother to swat them away.

I said, "But Lee, when it says, 'me,' doesn't that mean 'me,' as in the author? Isn't that Rad Miller?"

Lee became more animated. He reached over and stabbed the picture with his long, yellow fingernail. He said in a voice suddenly more forceful and hoarse, almost in a scream to be heard above the roar of the traffic, “That’s *me!*”

Too stunned to respond at first, I finally suggested we eat lunch. If nothing else, it was cool inside Burger King. Since there didn't seem to be a polite way of getting rid of Carl, I invited him along, too. He was a nice enough guy—he held the door for Lee and me.

“What are you doing?” Lee whined. “I can't get out of the way that fast, you know, when you open the door like that in front of me.”

Carl rolled his eyes and didn't respond.

At the counter, Lee and Carl's eyes darted from the menu to me and back again. “I'll just take a small fry,” Lee said quietly to me. “I'm really not that hungry.”

“Really?” I said.

“Me, too,” Carl said.

“You're sure? You can order something else, if you want.” They didn't respond. I shrugged and ordered a Whopper value meal.

“Actually,” Lee said, “I think I might like a Whopper, too. If it's not too expensive.”

“No, that's fine. Do you just want the full meal?”

“If it's not too much trouble, yeah, I think I'll just have that.”

Carl said, “I guess I'll have the same.”

I add two more meals to my order.

As we ate in a booth near the door, I told Lee that I'd like to continue the interviews for the book. I said I had talked to Elder Paul about their first meeting with him, but I wanted to finally get his side of the story.

“I'm getting a steak and lobster dinner out of this right?” he said with a smile. “Joke, joke. Okay. I was sitting at the bus stop in front of the Shell gas station on Cortez Road West,

Bradenton, Florida. Two missionaries, elders, come up to me, and they said, ‘Can we talk to you?’ ‘Well, of course you can.’ I respected them. They didn’t have to be doing what they were doing. We went from there.

“One Saturday, there was a very, very bad tropical storm. It hit Tampa the worst. They said, ‘Lee, we have been confined’—or something—lockdown. And they said, ‘Will you come over and stay with us? We’ll play some monopoly.’ So I did. We had something to eat, and then we played monopoly. I was doing really good for a while, and then I—”

Lee turned around in the bench and glared at a teenage girl who was emptying the garbage. He yelled at her, “I’m not in the *mood* for that—for that—” and his voice trailed off, as if he were too angry to finish. The girl continued her work—I think she was too far away to hear him. Other customers chatted away, and the equipment behind the counter buzzed and hummed. Lee continued, saying that he’d lost to Elder Walker, but beaten Elder Paul.

“Were you surprised?” I said, thinking of Elder Paul’s commentary on the game. “Did you find it ironic that you, a homeless man, was beating this missionary, a young guy who probably knew how to handle his money well?”

“Well, I wasn’t too surprised. That’s what I have a Masters in, is Mathematics.”

“You have a Masters? I didn’t know that!” His past and his present seemed more and more incongruous. How could a man who had accomplished so much be doing so little now? “When did you get it?” I asked.

“1982. At the University of Texas at Austin.”

Lee grunted as he ate more of his French fries. I noticed then that he was inhaling a combined pile of both his and Carl’s fries. Lee added more salt and pepper to his ketchup, which was already a dark red paste.

“Let’s talk about Gloria,” I said. “When did you meet her?”

Lee Sandspur

Lee was in the Laundromat when a young crack addict—a big guy—came up and started harassing a short, white-haired woman he didn’t know.

This is not happening, Lee thought.

The woman looked at Lee with these eyes—she was almost crying.

He grabbed the crack addict by the neck and tossed him out into the parking lot.

You need to get out of here, Lee yelled. You’re not bothering this 66-year-old woman.

The addict walked away, and Lee returned the Laundromat, where the woman introduced herself as Gloria. She gave him a big hug, and that made him uncomfortable. Navy Seals don’t like to be touched. Period. But he didn’t get upset—she didn’t know that he was a Seal, and he wasn’t about to tell her. He didn’t go around advertising his military record—it was nobody’s business anyway.

Thank you so much, Gloria said. I was really scared there for a while.

Gloria invited Lee over to her condo.

All right, he said.

We’ll have some waffles and some coffee.

All right, fine.

Lee knew that all she wanted was a friend—somebody to talk to—so he wasn’t too worried about getting into a commitment situation. She didn’t give Lee any money, and he didn’t ask for any for his trouble. At her condo, they sat on her

patio and looked at the lake, watching the ducks go by. It was peaceful.

They became friends. And so he came to the Laundromat most weeks to keep her company—she was just lonely—and she did his laundry for him. No sex—nothing like that.

Lee ate another fry dipped in his blackened ketchup, and then stopped suddenly and looked at Carl.

“Oh. Is this yours? Sorry.” He pushed some of the fries over to Carl. “Sorry, that’s why I don’t want stuff so close to me. Sorry about that.” Lee asked me, “Have you heard from Elder Paul?”

“Yeah, I talked to him a week or two ago. He’s doing great. He’s majoring in theater to become a director.”

“Well, tell him Lee the homeless jerk said hello.”

I asked again about Gloria.

He said, “On the nineteenth, she leaves to go on vacation somewhere in Georgia with her sister. She wanted me to watch her place, but I told Gloria, ‘The only way I would watch your place is if you print me a letter authorizing me to be there, and you tell your nosy neighbors ahead of time so they leave me alone Otherwise, I ain’t doing it. I’ll stay out on the street.’”

Carl took another bite of his Whopper and began wrapping the rest of it up. Lee saw him and shook his head. Carl stopped. Lee said, “It don’t look good. Employees are looking at you.”

I brought up Roger Kitchens, and Lee said he used to see Roger often, but that he had left town to take care of family business in Michigan.

Lee sighed and stared at his pile of ketchup. His bottom lip quivered, and his eyes shone. He seemed embarrassed. "I'll try not to cry when you leave," he said. "I don't know if I'll ever see you again." He wiped his eyes. He turned to Carl and said, "His wife makes the best tacos and spaghetti. His wife is a fantastic cook." He said to me, "God really blessed you."

A drip of snot rolled down Lee's mustache. He sniffed, but it continued down to his upper lip. He didn't seem to notice.

"I've got to get off the streets," he said, now sullen and somber. "I'm getting too old for this nonsense. Obviously, I can't work. I'm walking with a shopping cart. I'm supposed to be wearing a splint, too. I'm tired of walking around with no money in my pocket, tired of eating out of trash cans."

A Burger King worker behind us raised his voice at another worker, and Lee was suddenly furious, yelling, "What are you yelling at me for? I'm a paying customer for crying out loud!" The workers didn't seem to hear him.

I finished my food and put my tray away. Lee's outbursts were starting to embarrass me. What was I going to do with him for an entire week? And how much money would it cost me if he always had friends along? I was the kind of guy who usually tried to eat lunch for a couple of bucks. I only bought the value meal because I didn't want them to be too shy to eat enough food to get full. Now I was starting to regret it, since they weren't even finishing their burgers.

I brought out two sheets of paper for him to sign. One was a release form, saying I could interview other people about his life for the book—anyone I wanted to. I planned on talking to a few of the church members about Lee, including Bret Fitzgerald and Bill Carver. He said that was fine, and he signed his name. Then I brought out a second form that would give me permission to talk to any medical personnel and have access to any of his medical records as I saw fit to finish the project. Again, he signed it willingly.

But one thing was weighing on my mind the most: I needed to know if the story Elder Walker had told me was true. Had Lee shot his superior officer in a boat in Vietnam? If so, would he allow me to use it in the book? I was hesitant to bring it up without warning, so I asked Lee for more details about his military service.

He trained with an Underwater Demolition Team. Then a Navy Chief Petty Officer approached him in basic training and said he had an offer to make.

"I didn't understand what I was getting myself into," Lee said. "I had no idea. Yeah, you got an offer for me. Obviously, I'm doing everything I can to avoid being sent to Vietnam. I'm no hero, I'm a coward—I don't want to go to Vietnam." He said, "Well, that's where I ended up."

I asked him whether the survival instincts and the techniques he'd learned as a Seal had transferred to the streets.

“In the night time, you stick to the shadows,” he said. “You may trip because you can't see, but stay in the shadows. In the day time, act like a normal person. If you want to cross the street, use the intersection, use the pedestrian signal. Don't cross in the middle of the block—it attracts attention, drivers get nervous. I mean, I'm pushing a shopping cart, I'm out there by myself, but nobody knifes me, because I know how to move.”

He seemed shaken by the noise, and was silent for a moment. Then he said, “You're bringing up some bad memories. Is this really important for the book? If it's important for the book, fine, otherwise...”

“If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to.”

“These guys are dead,” he said. “They're dead, they're gone. They served their country, and they gave up their lives for it. And a rotten piece of filth like me? I'm still alive. I don't know. So be it.”

He took a bite out of his Whopper. I waited for him to speak next, not wanting to press him if it was painful. He said, “I got some names for you.” He listed off a few names: Mark, Dale, Roy. He stared at his Whopper wrapper and ate a French fry, shaking his head. Mikey. “That was my team,” he said.

“What happened to them?”

“They got wiped out. I don't know why God let me get away, but he did.”

I thought again about the story Elder Walker had told me. Lee on a river going up and down, up and down, waiting for orders. His whole team shot up, and his commanding officer

standing up, surrounded by wounded and dead men. *We're going back in.* Lee cocking his weapon.

“I mean, I was shot up.”

“Where were you?” I asked.

“I was serving my country.”

“Where?”

He stopped again and looked at me with pain in his dark brown eyes. “You’re worse than the NIS. I thought the Naval Investigative Service was bad.”

Carl stood up and asked Lee if he wanted a refill. Lee handed him his cup.

“I’m sorry to be so grumpy,” he said to me. “I’m in a lot of pain.”

We sat in silence for a moment. Carl returned with refills.

“I was on a river,” Lee said. “It was called the Brown Water Navy—it doesn’t even exist anymore. We were checking the Vietcong’s sampans—small boats. We wanted to know what they were carrying. After a year or two, we got very aggressive. We didn’t care anymore about United Nations regulations. We shouldn’t have been doing what we were doing. Shouldn’t be over there in first place.”

“What were you doing?”

“Breaking into their houses, stealing maps, taking photographs.”

“Tell me the most unusual one.”

“By now, I’m E9. They called me the dummy, boatswain’s mate. That’s what they called it. They wanted me to go to this house, to not hurt anybody—” He shouted again, “Shut up, idiots in Bradenton!” He shook his head, and continued. “There is no team—you’re by yourself, totally on your own. And when you read that book by Rad Miller Jr., he explains

that better than I can. You had to break in this house, steal some maps, take some photographs or other things, and get out and get away, and it explains this in the book. Then you make your own extract, you get away. And that's where the U.S. Military falls apart. Oh, they'll get you there, no problem. You fly in a C130 at two thousand feet, and you jump out. Hopefully your parachute opens, and you swim ashore."

"Where did you jump out?"

"Over the Pacific Ocean."

"How far did you have to swim?"

"It must have been twelve miles."

"Twelve miles! Really?"

"Come on, Brian. Do you think I had a yard stick so I could remember it years later?"

It might have been eleven, it might have been thirteen miles."

"I wasn't saying 'Really' because I didn't believe you. I just think it's amazing. Did you have to do all this at night?"

He was animated, talking with his hands, seemingly comfortable. He said, "All at night. We never, never inactivated during the day. I don't care how serious it was. We liked the lousy weather, too. It's rainy, it's windy—it helps to camouflage us. We're wearing three small air tanks underwater, and we can tell we're getting near because the bottom's coming up on us. We drop all our gear that we don't need anymore."

"Who were you with?"

"On this particular mission? Mikey." He stared out the window and sniffed futilely at the steady stream pouring from his nose.

I asked him to describe the beach.

“Lots of sand, some coral. A little rough.”

A conniving thought entered my mind: Could I track down any information about Navy Seals missions to verify the story? I asked, “What city was it near?”

“We were outside the city, in the country. It didn’t have a name. At least, if it had a name, I don’t know what it was.”

“And then what happened?”

He shook his head and grimaced. “You’re dragging me back into some painful memories.”

“We can stop if you want.”

“No, let’s get this over and done with.”

I waited.

He said, “Well, actually, can we get out of here first? I have to get out of this air conditioning. It’s freezing in here.”

Carl wrapped up the uneaten portion of his Whopper, but Lee pushed the rest of his food onto the tray.

“You don’t want to eat any more?” I said.

“No, I’m stuffed. My stomach is so small, I can barely eat anything anymore.”

“You could save it.”

“It attracts ants. Besides, there’s too much mayonnaise on it.”

Outside the double doors, in the parking lot, I instantly began to sweat again. Carl and I both offered to help Lee off the step, but he waved us away.

“You guys try to help, but you don’t know my injuries,” he said.

I knew I had to ask Lee about his trip down the river in Vietnam, but I didn't want to ask at a time or in a way that seemed insensitive. When I did ask, would he deny that it had happened, or be angry at the missionaries for betraying his confidence? Would he be mortified that I knew? Would he refuse to let me print it? If he did refuse, would I do it anyway? Lee and Carl walked over to my rental car, and I followed them. Lee's pants were stained with his own feces, and I wasn't thrilled with the idea that he'd stink up the car. But I couldn't think of anywhere else to go besides into the car.

From his bag, Lee pulled a jacket and spread it out on the back seat before sitting down—out of courtesy for the rental car, he said. Carl sat in the front passenger seat, and as I drove down Cortez Road, I noticed that his right hand, which he was resting on the door, was bleeding. He moved it to adjust his seatbelt, and a smear of blood like a daub from a full paintbrush, remained on the gray plastic molding.

“Where are we going?” I said, suddenly feeling queasy.

Lee directed me out onto Cortez Road as if I were his taxi driver. We drove for a few miles before I asked where he wanted me to drop him off. I had arranged meeting times with a few other people throughout the week, and one of these appointments was within a half hour. We went to one bus stop bench after another, and Lee grew more and more angry that each was already occupied. After about fifteen minutes of driving, we returned to Burger King, behind which, allegedly, there had once been a huge homeless camp.

In the corner of the parking lot, we sat on a cement ledge next to a dumpster. I balanced my laptop on my knees and tried to find a good place to rest my feet without touching the huge puddle of putrid water in front of us. The place smelled worse than a dumpster should, and I wondered if any human waste lurked among the rafts of mossy

sludge. Lee finished smoking a portion of a cigarette and inadvertently sprinkled ashes on his black pants.

“That didn’t last long,” he said, looking at the cigarette butt. “I don’t believe that. That was a Marlboro light. That should have burned a lot longer than that. That’s like a damn generic, excuse my bad language.”

He sniffed, and we sat silently in the heat. Lee said, “At least it doesn’t smell bad here.”

Carl stood a few feet away, as if he didn’t want to be seen with us. Lee put his right ankle on his left knee. His left shoe, a brown penny loafer, was firmly planted in the cesspool.

A teenager in a Burger King uniform came out with a bag of garbage, and tossed it in the dumpster. After he left, Lee shook his head and said, “Some of these employees around here.”

“Incompetent,” Carl said.

“They must give you an intelligence test, and if you pass too high, they won’t hire you.”

Lee and Carl laughed together.

“It’s absurd,” Carl said.

Lee smiled broadly. “And people wonder why I’m so stressed out.” He looked up at Carl and said, “You and I have always gotten along. Okay, to be honest, we have our occasional tiff—”

“I should have kept my soda instead of throwing it away,” Carl said. “Oh well.”

A car inched forward in the drive-thru, and an employee's voice asked someone for their order. Carl imitated the scratchy voice of the speaker: "Do you want everything on that Whopper?"

"No," Lee said, "I don't want the meat or the bun."

Carl busted up laughing.

"People tell me there's no such thing as a stupid question," Lee said, "but I disagree. It's like, one guy at the Laundromat asked me if I could use a microwave. I'm walking down the street with a shopping cart."

Carl said, "Dumb and stupid."

Lee cackled.

I was antsy. I couldn't leave without getting some answers about the murder in Vietnam. I took a deep breath and said, "Last year, I did some interviews with the missionaries."

"Yes."

"And they told me a story about you in Vietnam."

"Okay."

"And I wanted to make sure it was okay with you before I included it in the book."

"I don't care. Brian, I already signed over the forms to you. I trust you. You can do whatever you want. I'm just a piece of filth."

"Well, this story is something I want to hear from you personally. Elder Walker told me that when you were in Vietnam, you rode up and down a river on a boat."

"That's right."

“And that one day after a tough mission, most of the soldiers in your boat were killed or injured.”

I looked in his eyes. He looked back at me.

“And then your superior officer stood up and said, ‘We’re going back in.’ Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And then you shot him?”

He sighed. “Yes, it’s true. I knew that killing him was the only way to save our lives.”

I hesitated. “And it’s okay for me to write about that?” I said.

“It’s okay.”

I exhaled. Was it relief I felt? Excitement? I imagined the book being better with the story of this murder, and I was glad that I could include it. But I was ashamed at the lack of outrage I felt at Lee’s casual admission of guilt in a horrible crime. Was I helping Lee by pursuing this line of questioning? Or was I exploiting him in order to write a book?

I arranged to meet Lee again the next day. As I got up to leave, Carl found his half-eaten Whopper covered with ants.

“Those ants are exasperating!” he said. “One crawled in my ear drum.”

“I told you not to take the food,” Lee said. “If you’re going to hang around me, you’re going to have to listen. I’ve been doing this for twelve years. It’s just not worth it to bring the food with you.”

“It was frivolous of me to expect that I could keep it.”

Technically, Roger Kitchens was discharged after forty-five days in the United States Army. But the military kept him on secretly as a medic and sent him on recon and recovery missions for five more years—this was at a time when the United States government claimed that there were no troops in Southeast Asia. He is still scared of what he did then. He only went into the military in the first place to rebel against his emotionally abusive mother.

Afterward, Roger got married and bought a house, but then gave it all up in favor of crack cocaine.

In the late 1980s, he moved from Michigan to Florida and got licensed as a certified nurse's aide. But he didn't stay with it long. In fact, at 48 years old, he's never worked at one job longer than three years.

One night a group of five men attacked him and held him down, and then branded him. When they finally let him up, he didn't fight back. He took that same piece of metal and laid it on a gas burner until it turned red hot, and he laid it right there on his arm and let it melt in, and he said, You can't hurt me. You can't hurt me. Then the five men jumped him again.

In August 2005, Roger walked out of his trailer and was heading to the supermarket when a car struck him and sent him flying into the windshield of another car. In the helicopter on the way to the hospital, he flat-lined. He had broken his neck in thirteen places, and was fitted with a vest and a metal halo that was attached with screws into his skull. When he woke up, he was told that he hadn't been given anesthesia. The doctor said, You got enough cocaine in your system, you wouldn't have felt it anyway.

He left the hospital in a wheelchair. He told his friend that all he wanted was to get laid. Four young ladies later, and it was clear that Roger was as virile as ever. His friend said, That man right there is the personification of being a soldier, because you can't kill him.

He was turned down for disability. The letter from the government said his personality disorder was “drug-induced.” He said, If I didn't have the disorder, I wouldn't be doing the drugs. Roger was known around town as Home Depot, because he arranged drug deals there so often that that Home Depot removed their pay phone. If there was a dealer in the city, and Roger didn't know him, his product must not be worth buying.

Roger was in a wheelchair and a halo for about six months, and in that time, he came to know a homeless man named Lee Sandspur. You had to take Lee's stories with a grain of salt. Car accidents and titanium rods and whatnot. But now, Roger had a titanium rod of his own, and sure enough, it ached something fierce when the weather changed—ached like an abscess tooth. Maybe Lee isn't as much of a con man as I might have would have thought. They shared cigarettes and beer. Roger knew a guy from Papa Johns who would leave a half dozen leftover pizzas behind the Laundromat, and Roger would wheel himself home from Cortez Road and heat them up in the microwave for a late dinner.

He met Gloria Beatrice at the Laundromat with Lee late one night. The entry points of his halo had become infected, and he needed help, so Gloria offered to give him rides to the hospital in St. Petersburg. Roger became good friends with both Gloria and Lee.

In fact, once Roger had fully recovered, Gloria gave him enough money to leave town and head back home to Michigan,

but complications arose as a result of an experience he'd had months earlier. He was sitting in somebody's trailer right in his trailer park, drinking and smoking cocaine. Come a knock on the door, and this guy he knew said, Give me a hit or give me a drink. I think I just killed somebody.

They all thought it was bull. Ten to fifteen minutes later, Roger got in his wheelchair and was coming up the street when—cops everywhere. They'd found a body. Had three crushing blunt instrument blows to his skull, seven stab wounds to his back, one to his heart. Then Roger got a thing in the mail saying they wanted him to come down and do a deposition about what he knew.

“And blah, blah, blah, there were complications, and that's why I'm still here and not in Michigan.”

Roger was sitting on a rotting brown arm chair on a patch of grass. A tall, middle-aged man, he wore large glasses that rested on a button nose atop a bushy mustache. He had no teeth, and his lips curved inward and almost clapped when he spoke. His chin was angular and pronounced. As he told me about himself, he rested his hands on the armholes of his sleeveless T-shirt. He wore gym shorts, tennis shoes, and a mesh AutoZone baseball cap.

It hadn't been easy to find his trailer in the park, and a few of his neighbors were less than thrilled when I came prowling around looking for him. My sparkling white rental car was conspicuous in the narrow alley between the two rows of trailers. But he had been friendly, and agreed to talk. I sat in an old wicker chair by a rusty weight bench and typed notes on my laptop.

He continued in a wheezy, breathy voice. “He has moments—like bipolar moments, extreme mood swings—but Lee’s a good person. He’s very delicate, and he needs help. It’s rough out here on the street.”

Roger told me more about the halo he had worn, and asked if I’d like to see it. He was about to get up when a young man in a red shirt ran by with a stack of DVDs. Roger jumped up and sprinted after him. I was alone for a few minutes before Roger returned. He said, “That young man is going to get himself into trouble.” He lit a Swisher Sweet cigar, and looked at me. “I don’t move too bad for someone who just got out of a wheelchair, do I?” He laughed.

He stood up and started hunting through bags on the small patio in front of his trailer. “It almost appears as a medieval device,” he said as he found the halo. “The head piece is adjustable. You can see how deep it went. I had four screws into my forehead.”

I wasn’t sure what was more odd, the contraption, or the fact that it was lying around with a bunch of beer cans and old couch cushions.

“I know Gloria won’t be happy to know I’m still here,” he said. “Gloria’s my angel. Gloria—and if you repeat this or you write it down, I’ll call you a liar. As far as the way I feel about myself, Gloria has taken me from down here to up here. That’s the kind of person she is. I point blank tell people right up front: ‘You mess with Gloria, God will have mercy—I won’t.’ There’s been a couple of nights when a couple of homeless came up and started giving her trouble, and I’d get right up in between them and her. ‘Excuse me, you’re too close to her. You’re making me uncomfortable. You need to step back.’ I’m not big and I’m not bad, but I’m not afraid to go to jail—I’m an old convict.”

This sounded like the story Lee had told of his first meeting with Gloria. Had Lee heard it from Roger? Why should I believe Roger's story, but not Lee's? Either way, it was amazing to see Gloria's impact on both of these men.

"Every time I turn around," Roger said, "she's getting me something to eat, or getting me a few dollars. She won't buy me cigarettes, so she give me money and I have to buy my own cigarettes. But I'm not a drinker. Okay?" He smiled and continued in a ghoulish, goofy voice: "I don't play well with others when I'm drunk, Brian."

We sat in silence for a moment. Roger hung his hands on his shirt and bounced his knee. He looked up at the sky. The clouds were growing darker, and the daily afternoon thunderstorms seemed at hand. He agreed to come to Burger King with me and talk some more. When I had made my plans to come down to Florida for the week, I had not known him at all, and now he seemed like an ideal person to interview about Lee's day-to-day living. Besides, Roger was a colorful character, and he had a good sense of humor. I had never hit it off so quickly with a crack addict.

We drove to Burger King, and I paid for two sodas and found a booth near the tree growing from an island in the middle of the restaurant into a vaulted ceiling.

"You could have ordered something to eat, if you'd wanted," I said.

"No, I never eat much during the day. It's too hot to eat."

We sipped. The rain started to come down, and windows turned gray.

Roger continued, "I would personally like to see something done with Lee, because I feel so bad for him. Lee is where he is and what he is because that's his choice, as we all are. But at times—there's times when I just want to choke him and say, 'Lee, man, what are you doing?'"

“What should he do?” I said.

“Live his life the only way he knows how, because that’s all he can do.”

I asked him if Lee’s lifestyle was really a choice, and he insisted that it was. He said, “It’s very, very simple and basic. It’s so simplistic that it’s going to take your hairline back another two inches.”

He gave me a sideways look, and I laughed. He was refreshingly blunt.

“It’s freedom,” he said. “It’s absolute freedom.”

“To be homeless?”

“There’s no responsibilities, no nothing. Absolutely nothing. He gets some money, and he wants to go get a drink? Hey, screw it. He goes and gets a drink. If he wants to go and get something to eat? Screw it. He goes and gets something to eat. He doesn’t have to worry about rent, and utilities, or anything else.”

One of the results of this attitude was that small pleasures seemed more dramatic against the grim realities of the streets. Roger had once given Lee an old, insulated rain coat, because Lee had complained about the cold.

“He put that thing on, and Brian, let me tell you something, it was almost as good as sex. He was like, ‘Ohhh, ohhh, this feels so good!’”

Roger included himself in a class he called “street people,” which he described as people who had institutionalized this raw, dog-eat-dog, drug-suffused, responsibility-resistant, subsistence-living culture. Many street people, he said, were addicted to drugs or alcohol or both, and many suffered from mental problems, including a paranoid distrust of the government. One man he knew, for example, declined any kind of employment except for under-the-table pay, because he didn’t want to leave any kind of paper trail.

Roger said, “I have my own mental issues that I deal with, my own demons. Low self esteem. But for many, many years, I was trying to lead the quote ‘normal’ life. I had a wife, two kids, blah, blah, blah, but I just can’t do it.”

I was incredulous. Roger *couldn't* live any way other than as a street person? Wasn't it all a choice? Once he allowed drugs to take hold of him, he had given up some of his ability to choose, perhaps, but in his most sober times, he or anyone else, I believed, could bring themselves out of the ditch.

I pressed the issue.

“Why he can't you live the “normal” life?”

He shrugged. “Why can't Lee?” he said. “Why *can* you?”

I didn't have an answer. Maybe I was proud of my normality, my ability to succeed in society in some way that Roger and Lee and other street people hadn't—it was a distressing self-realization. What was so different, really, between Roger and me? Or between Lee and me? Was it impossible for me to become homeless one day? Was it all about the choices we had made? Or was there something more to it? Why were we the way we were?

Roger was amused by the puzzled expression that had apparently spread across my face, and he said, “Ahhh!” He pointed to the ceiling as if at a cartoon light bulb over my head.

I said, “I don't know why I can.”

He swished the ice in his drink and smiled. The rain poured down outside. Whether diving in a dumpster or running from a cab to a high rise office building, people were getting soaked all across town.

I changed the subject.

“Do you believe Lee was a Navy Seal?” I said. This wasn’t a subject I had intended to cover with Roger, and immediately it sounded accusatory, as if Lee’s military service was a question of faith, and not facts.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Well. Have you ever been in the military?”

I said no.

“They don’t discuss it.”

“Even if they’re drunk? Homeless? Far removed from it?”

“No.”

“They don’t brag about it all the time. They distill it in you at the outset when you’re in training. You take it to your grave.”

“So how does he know so much about it, then?”

“It’s called the public library. Public record. I could sit here and tell you all kinds of stuff about my military involvement.”

I thought about the Rad Miller book. “Just from stories you’ve heard or read?”

“No, from my own personal experience. I was in Vietnam in the late 70s.”

“So, what—I’m not calling into question anything you’re saying, but how is what you’re saying to me right now different from the type of stuff Lee says? How could you tell he’s full of it?”

“Because you asked me. I answered the question. I didn’t volunteer the information. People that have been in the special forces, people that have been in black ops, ghosts, people

in the CIA and what not—they don't willingly offer that information. Okay? I didn't give you any specific information.”

“And you wouldn't because that's just ingrained into you.”

“Well, yeah, but more importantly because I choose not to. That's a part of my life I try to shut out.”

“Do you think part of the difference is that Lee isn't able to shut it out? He says he has nightmares.”

Roger said Lee might be a Seal—he didn't know for sure. But he might be making these claims because he wanted sympathy. Roger told me the same story Gloria had about how she'd given Lee money for a bus ticket to the hospital, but then Roger had found him near the Ale House.

“And he peed on himself and everything, you know,” Roger said. “He loses all control. And then he disappeared for four, five, six weeks, and we were getting quite concerned. With Lee, you gotta handle him with kid gloves. One minute he'll be talking nice, and then”—he snapped his fingers—“boom! You say something and he's off like a butterfly.”

Roger said he was surprised Lee was still alive. To illustrate the danger of street life, he told me about a former pro body builder named Gary, who had become homeless after getting too heavily into steroids and other drugs. One day Roger saw Gary, who was homeless, staggering down the street, and he'd been beaten so badly by other homeless people that his head was ripped open.

“It was crushed! Just crushed!” Roger said. “Skinned off. And then some of them go into the bathroom, and because of the drugs and the alcohol, they crap all over the wall, all

over the toilet, and everything, and you know that can't be healthy. Lee, it's the same thing. He craps his pants. He's incontinent. And that's what I think could kill him—the disease.”

I said, “In the end, do you see this story as a success story, because of that sheer will to survive—”

“No.”

“—a testament to the human spirit?”

“Lee is going to be a tragedy,” Roger said, “because it's going to be the loss of a good person.”

I asked Roger what Lee's tragic flaw was.

“His alcoholism. That's what's going to kill him.”

I was conflicted. Was it alcohol that kept him on the streets? Or was it the alluring independence, with no commitment? Not far from where Roger and I were sitting in Burger King, I had sat with Lee and the missionaries under a covered bus stop bench and watched Lee stumble away: *No stress, no stress*. And further, if his present condition was purely the result of self-destructive choices, what should I do to help him? Why should I give him money?

“I feel the same way,” Roger said. “There used to be a guy, Bubba, sitting on this corner with a sign: ‘Why Lie? I Want a Beer.’ I'll give him five dollars in a heartbeat.”

“Because he's being honest.”

“And then there's one who had an old Bronco, and he'd park over here at the Hess station at night, and sit there at the bus bench with a sign, a great big old fat old guy. And he'd sit there and beg for change right there in front of Walgreen's. I have seen people down on Manatee and 59th sit there with a sign—and that's a pretty wealthy area—and get three or

four or five hundred bucks, and do you know what they do with it? They go right out and have some crack. I have a problem with that. I have a big problem with that, okay?"

Roger pulled an envelope out of his pocket and showed me a medical bill for his accident.

"That's one partial bill," he said. "Somebody gave me some money the other night, and he told me to go get something to eat, and I told, him, 'No, that money is going to pay for my room. I'll eat out of the trash can.' I have a problem with the people that are able to do something, and are out there flying a sign or begging. In Lee's case, that's different."

Roger took off his blue, mesh AutoZone cap and replaced it on his head again. He put his hands in his sleeveless T-shirt to keep warm under the air conditioning, which was giving me goose bumps. We had long since finished our sodas, and it was getting late. The sky had transformed from gray to slate to a dark purple descending on the wilting city glow.

Roger said, "I used to be a Seal."

"A what?"

"A Seal. Confidential. I don't want that published."

"Interesting."

We left Burger King just before 10 p.m. and drove west on Cortez Road before pulling into the Splash n' Dash, a self-service car wash just next door to the Laundromat. Blue and green neon lights illuminated vacuum stalls lined up parallel to the washing garages. Rain dripped from the gutters above a stainless steel sink.

We got out of the car. Roger had offered to show me some of Lee's typical hangouts, and this was the first stop of the night. He said Lee used to clean himself off at the sink, and as a result, the owners had removed the handle and shut the water off. Other nights, he would lock himself in the bathroom and pass out. Too proud to beg for money, Lee ate from a dumpster in the corner, and he observed the trash routines of stores. The gas station across the street, for example, sold eggs, sausage, sandwiches. On Fridays at midnight, an employee would leave with a dozen clear plastic takeout trays full of food.

Roger said, "They throw it right out there in the barrels outside the store, and you come along, and you got thirty pieces of chicken and coleslaw. And it's nice and cool out, so you know it's not spoiled."

He pointed to the vacuums on his left. "Take these eight stainless steel canisters. The bottoms of these have big rubber buckets that collect everything: change, crack pipes. All kinds of stuff. Last week I come up here, and they're all open, and all this stuff is there on the ground. There's supposed to be someone who empties these periodically, and he was getting, like, over three hundred dollars in change every two weeks."

Roger lit a cigar.

"Now," he said, "I don't know if there's enough light to see, but I'll show you this dumpster. For Lee, it was hard to get in here and get the food out, but there's quite a bit in

here. See them trays? That comes off of the lunch truck. Now that one, that particular one's got beans in it. Here, I'll show you."

Roger grasped the edge of the dumpster, stepped on a metal bar that was almost at waist-level, and leaped in. Inside, fluorescent light sparkled off mounds of wet plastic bags, bottles, and cardboard.

"These come off the lunch truck today," he said, his ankles and feet swallowed up in the garbage. "Here are some beans, but this is open, so it's no good. You can't dig too far. But all that down at the bottom of that bag, that's all fresh from today. Here's a sandwich. Ham, cheese, lettuce. You just got to get it before the ants and the rats."

From inside a white paper wrapper, opened up a sandwich covered in black lines that, in the dark, looked like worms.

"What's that?" I said.

"Jalapeño. Those are off the truck today. I'll take them home, and that'll be dinner tonight. A little mayonnaise and mustard: good eating. Any money I get, I prefer to put on the bills. When I find something like this, I know it's fresh and edible."

He took a big bite and chewed it up with short, quick, toothless bites. He said, "You wanted to know, and this is first-hand experience."

Several blocks west of the car wash, we parked again at the Ale House surrounded by a large parking lot near Applebee's. It was hot and wet out, even though it was close to eleven o'clock.

“These are the two benches that Lee used to sleep on,” Roger said. “He lived here six or eight months.”

We stood in the shadows of an overhang in front of the abandoned restaurant. Two round windows in the double front doors eyed us. The moon was wrapped in fog.

“So what happens if another homeless person comes before Lee gets back here one night?”

“Out here, it really is survival of the fittest. Jungle law. If I come up here, and I don’t like you, I might rob you right here, or I might beat you up. I might urinate on you or spit on you.”

“Just sitting right here on the bench.”

“Yeah. But that’s not an uncomfortable bed.”

I lay down on the bench, and the wooden seat didn’t cover the span of my shoulders.

He said, “We’re not talking about a home with a full-sized bed, you know? This is a makeshift deal. You’re surviving the way you choose to out here.”

“Is it liberating to say, ‘I can survive on my own’?”

“I can do whatever I want to, as long as it’s not illegal. It’s very empowering, because you don’t have to answer to people.”

“But you’re always running away from the cops.”

“Depending. There are people out here that are crack heads and what not. Of course, if you’re not doing anything illegal, you don’t have to run. Lee didn’t do anything illegal other than drinking beer or liquor. And if a cruiser drives by and you’re tipping up a sixteen-ounce can of Natural Ice, he’s going to stop and arrest you for an open intoxicant, an open container. But if you get you a Gatorade bottle, or a McDonald’s cup, and you pour it in

there, and you dispose of the can, and you're suckin' on the straw, the cop don't see it and he don't know any different, so, hence, invisibility."

"Lee always talks about being invisible. That's when he brought up the Navy Seals, like he's trained to be invisible. He says he can walk on a bed of dry leaves, and not make a sound."

"I don't know about all that. *I ain't even that good.* But like I told you in the restaurant—"

He cut himself off, dropped to the asphalt parking lot, and did about a dozen pushups on his fingertips. He popped back up and said, "And that's with this arm being shattered five times, with a titanium rod in it. I've only been back on my legs for about five or six months. But when it comes down to it, I'm going to survive, or you're going to survive. If you're attacking me, if you're within my personal space, you better come real strong. Because it's life or death out here. A couple of years ago, I don't think a week went by without people hearing on the news about one of the homeless people getting accosted, or killed. You got these teenage kids running around and beating the homeless."

I asked him why the freedom was worth all of the fear that came with the lifestyle, and he said it had a lot to do with addictions. First to drugs, but also, in Roger's case, to adrenaline—living a hyper-real life because he was always on the verge of being killed or getting high.

"Is there a high that comes from stealing the money to get drugs?"

"I didn't steal money to get drugs," he said. "But you have people that actually make a living doing what they call 'boosting' out of the stores. Shoplifting. And when you're out here in this street culture out here, it don't take long. One of the big items they boost is

cigarettes. Let's say you've got ten cartons of cigarettes. That's a hundred bucks instantly.

Instantly."

"Just by shoplifting them, boosting them."

"Dude, you don't have a clue."

I laughed. "No, I don't."

We agreed that many unfortunate circumstances could result in someone losing his home, but the reasons people *remained* homeless for long periods of time were more complicated. Roger said it came down to people making selfish choices, living only for themselves.

I said, "Where do relationships fall into this? Because to me—"

"Very few lasting relationships out here.

"But isn't that an important part of fulfillment in life?"

"No," he said.

"What about your relationships? Like how you said Gloria has helped you out emotionally? Doesn't Lee have a need for love from other people? Lee still talks about those two dinners I had with him at my house. It seems like—"

"There are certain people that step in and out of our lives that make a lot of difference. Personal difference. It really makes you remember what being a human being is."

"What does it mean to be a human being?"

"Compassion. Respect. Compassion."

"Not freedom?" I said.

"The homeless people, the street people, are treated so horribly, *so horribly*, that when someone comes along with a kind word, or a dollar, or a meal, or something, it's like it

just hit them in the head with a hammer to remind them that they actually are a human being. Not just some piece of trash that society's kicking around out there. Dude, I have seen it so many times: 'Get away from me. I don't want you here.' People are afraid they're going to catch something. You can't catch homelessness, you can't catch mental disorders, you can't catch alcoholism."

"You can catch disease, though."

"Communicable diseases like that out here in the street are not that common, really. What's the chances of me giving you anything communicable at all, other than an airborne collagen?"

Roger raised an eyebrow and looked at me. "Oh, you liked that one, didn't you? *Airborne collagen*. Didn't think I was that articulate, did you, young man?"

We both laughed. It was getting late, and Roger yawned. I drove him back to his trailer. I thanked him for all the time he'd spent with me.

He said, "And if you find any change or anything you don't need, you let me know."

I took out my wallet. Four one-dollar bills. It struck me that this changed things. We had been colleagues, it seemed, discussing homelessness. He was my expert witness. My friend? But when money changed hands, it was as though our relationship was now that of the privileged and the under privileged, homeowner and homeless.

"There you go," I said. "Sorry it's not much."

"Oh, no, don't apologize. I didn't even ask."

The day after I had met with Lee and received the paperback, I visited Oregon State Rehabilitation Center of Bradenton on July 18, 2007. As I waited in the front lobby, I peeked down the halls. It smelled like the convalescent homes I had visited with church groups as a teenager—a unique smell that made me think of bed sheets and of warm vegetables on plastic trays.

This was where Lee had lived for six months. He had wandered these halls, told his stories to nurses, and likely walked out those sliding glass doors when he had left for good. After the conversation with him at Burger King, I was so puzzled about the man that I felt I needed something concrete, unquestionable—something I could trust. Medical records would be the first step to help untangle these new threads, but I also wanted to talk to every nurse who could possibly remember him—any scrap of information could be a clue as to who he really was.

But it was not to be. After several minutes, the OSRC manager said he'd have to call corporate. Until then, permission form or no, I couldn't talk to anybody. And I never did get permission. To say the least, I was frustrated as I left the lobby. I lived across the country, and I knew I wouldn't be able to come back any time soon.

I was no longer in a hurry. It seemed impossible to be in a hurry in the thick, wet air outside OSRC. As I reached the entryway and exited through the glass doors, I saw a man in a wheelchair in front of an enormous green bush, which was framed by pillars on either side directly in front of me. His left leg was amputated, the stump wrapped in white gauze. He was looking in my direction, but did not seem to see me, his face frozen in a frown. It looked like he had been posed for a portrait, or a photographic study of veterans.

Of course, Lee likely had never seen this man. But he very well could have witnessed a similar scene. I remembered what he had said in our interviews about packing all of his clothing, his 67 pennies, the way he had smoked a cigarette before he began his long walk to the Social Security office. I had facts about him, or at least a record of his memory of that day, but what was he really thinking? He told me he had planned to get a job, to be done with the streets. But here he was, two years after he had left OSRC, and he seemed to be in worse shape than ever. Did he really prefer being homeless? Were his chemical dependencies too fierce to overcome without medical help? Were the ghosts of his past overwhelming his ability to function in society? Was the stress of responsibility so debilitating?

I drove up 59th Street West toward Manatee Avenue. I imagined Lee walking down this road two years before, toward the Social Security Office near 4th Street West. I pulled over. I would never know exactly what he saw, but could I come to know him better by exposing myself to similar environments and sensory impressions?

I got out of the car on a side street and stood on the sidewalk. One-story adobe homes with arches, SUVs in driveways. The Church of the Nazarene, a large shady park, an orange bench with an advertisement for Brown and Sons Funeral Home and Crematory. Large puddles like lakes bordered the curbs near intersections, and sprinkler systems added more water to soaking, grassy medians. Here was another bench with an ad for Shannon Funeral Homes. What did this scene mean to Lee, someone who had spent six months in a convalescent home? Did he feel a new sense of freedom, now that he was back to the “real world”? Did he see the church and the funeral home ads and think of his own mortality?

He must have crossed here and headed east on Manatee Avenue. A Denny’s restaurant, where he had once worked as a dishwasher, had been boarded up. He had told me

once that he'd been surprised to see this. It had been busy and successful, as far as he could tell, when he had entered OSRC. He had been indoors a long while.

A bombardment of unwelcoming civilization: cracks in the pavement, humps and heaves, a cement parking barrier. Gravel and crushed rock lay strewn along the sidewalk in front the Manatee Memorial Auxiliary Thrift Store, 50% off. I saw no coins on the sidewalk—only black circles of old gum, like tar. No cigarettes. A Powerade bottle, but it was smashed up, wouldn't do. A water bottle someone had driven over.

Jessie P. Miller Elementary. Tall fir trees lined the gate, and long, red needles carpeted the sidewalk. Gates closed for the summer. Regardless, this was not a place to linger. Lee was cautious around children, because homeless men made parents and teachers nervous.

Dozens of bicycles shined in racks in front of Ringling Bicycles.

A few cigarette butts littered the ground, but nothing worth picking up.

A gust of hot air followed a bus. Trucks, cars. Trucks, drowning the chirps of insects in a tree in front of a shop.

A hearse.

Amscot across the street with a sign in the window: "You're OK With Us." I knew Lee was often bothered by the unrelenting traffic. Did he feel mocked by the Amscot sign? Would he even have looked at it, or would he have looked down, hoping to avoid attention and maintain his illusion of invisibility? This was not a large city, but the four lanes of Manatee Avenue were saturated with grumbling vehicles, and men and women in business suits walked in and out of offices along the sidewalk. And yet, this was a lonely venture. The loneliness of crowds of the unknown.

Cars like flies in constant motion. Grass in sidewalk cracks. A boy in black slacks rode a bicycle to work, talking on a cell phone under palm trees swaying with the sticky breeze from passing trucks' exhaust. The sun reflected off waxy palm fronds, windshields, chrome, the oncoming four lanes of traffic, a thousand suns in the eye. Trucks shifted gears, grumbling, hacking. My cheeks were flushed, swelling with the heat, and my eyeballs were hot. A cigarette butt. Too short, nothing left. My shirt was clinging, wet with sweat.

28 ST WEST. An ABF truck crashed into a branch of a tree hanging over the road. Gary D Trapp Certified Public Accountant. Ozark, Perron, and Nelson Attorneys, Law offices of Carl E Rencus. A flower shop: "Celebrate America." Richard's Whole Foods. This was not Lee's world. Celebrate what? Whole foods were for the wealthy. These attorneys did not have signs in their windows in the hopes that somebody like him would walk in.

21 ST WEST. Lizards scurried under rocks, and dried leaves from manicured bushes blew across the white sidewalk. Grant's Psychic Palm and Card Reader. Horizontal lines in the sidewalk, triangles from cracks and driveway cutouts. Integrity Wealth Management. Lee's wealth management consisted of a Medicaid envelope that served as a change purse.

13 ST WEST. The street extended downtown and in between the tall, city administration buildings. What did Lee see in the churches? First Baptist Church of Bradenton, blue and white marquee: "Will God Bless America?" Next door, another First Baptist, a burgundy sign and marquee: "Has God Abandoned America? Special Sermon this Sunday."

Law office of Edwin T Mulock. A sign overhead revealed what lay behind me: BEACHES. I wondered again when Lee had last visited the beach. Would he feel like just as much of an outsider on the beach, on more natural ground?

Red ants crawled the crosswalk. Spray paint marked sections of the sidewalk that would soon be cut and replaced. The smells of hot dogs and sausages from vendors at the courthouse mixed with the odors of rubber and exhaust. I reached into a clinking pay phone hatch, no coins. The breeze was hot and wet, and sweat covered my arms. My hair clung to my forehead.

Periwinkle painted steps led to Juvenile Court. Law Offices of Patrick Ford, Earl W. Baden Jr. Attorney. Bail Bonds, ABC 24 hours. I always thought of the law as being on my side, protecting me. Who advocated for Lee? His experience with the court consisted of a two-week sentence for possession of an open container in public. A deputy in a white shirt and tie with green pants and black shoes crossed the street and entered a Crown Victoria with a radar gun in the window.

I stopped on a street corner to lean on an old fire hydrant and wondered if Lee had seen it on his own walk through downtown Bradenton. The hydrant had been painted blue, but some of the paint had chipped away, revealing a layer of aquamarine underneath. The result was continent-shaped green splotches. This might as well have been the map of the world, distorted and arbitrary, without political boundaries. This map not to scale, a missing legend, and no arrow for true north. What affect did the maneuverings of politicians have on Lee anyway? His world was one of nickels and dimes, greasy leftovers of fried food in garbage cans, minding his own business, pretending to have somewhere to go, beer in an old McDonald's cup.

I thought back to the image of a homeless man Lee had told me two years earlier, when he was still sober and working toward something. He'd said there was a man on a bicycle, and Lee had filled a water bottle at a fountain in front of the First Methodist Church.

Now, in July 2007, I stood in front of that very water fountain. It was as if I had reached a relic on a pilgrimage. What had Lee thought as he stood here?

On a bench in front of the flag pole, under the shade of a tree, a man in black jeans and a black T-shirt cradled in his hands a brand new water bottle from Sam's Club. I walked to the drinking fountain and sipped. The man had a full, white beard and hair yellowing under his baseball cap, which read in green writing, *Days of Thunder*. Around his mouth the beard was darker—perhaps the color of his hair as a younger man.

I stood in the shade and drank deeply, wondering if he was watching me. I sat down on a nearby bench and looked at him, but he didn't return my gaze. His fingers were thick as sausages, and he had long, dirty fingernails. He kept fiddling with his pants around his tan boots. I felt like I had to do *something*, offer him money.

I asked him, "What are you up to?"

"Just killin' time," he said. He had a soft, polite voice. He had few teeth, and when he closed his mouth, it collapsed.

"For what?"

"Nothing, just killin' time."

We sat in silence.

I said, "Do you know a man named Lee Sandspur?"

"No. Or if I did, I forgot."

It was awkward, but I remained a bit longer. I desperately wanted to know why he was sitting there, why he was homeless if he was. Would it be offensive if I approached the subject? Would he ask me for money? I didn't have any cash.

It was still hot, and the sun seemed to scorch the thick blades of Bermuda grass. But it was peaceful. Next to a granite monument of the Ten Commandments at the corner, a marquee read, “God Will Supply Our Daily Needs.” Wrought-iron hand rails led up sixteen steps to three sets of white double doors framing stained glass windows. Over an arch behind the Ionic pillars, FIRST METHODIST CHURCH was chiseled in black letters. Palm trees towered twenty feet above the ground, and carefully rounded bushes decorated the grounds. Next to the bench I was sitting on, an American flag waved in the breeze. At eye level, graffiti covered the flag pole in pencil and marker:

What’s 1/3 of Total Government Debts Owed
Amount Earned I Can Count On
interruptions by a Schools Police without Cause for
Failure to Aid Judge’s Order of Removal by Eviction.
No injunc
and Evicts
Supports
by This Cty

Words, words, words, poetry of the disenfranchised, cryptic notation, listed fragments forming a riddle—the solution to a host of social ills, isolation, and loss. Lee, I knew, stood by this pole, this water fountain. Did he read these words? I don’t believe he would have written anything: he was not interested in leaving behind any trace of his existence.

And yet, he was willing to reveal to me scores of details and stories from his life in hours upon hours of interviews.

Why?

Why had he ever agreed to become the subject of a book?

And how could I discover who he really was when he, like the words on this pole, seemed to resist anyone's attempts at deciphering?

Lee.

Lee was nowhere to be seen. I didn't even know this gentleman's name. And I didn't ask. I didn't do anything, only sipped on the water, and the homeless man fiddled with his jeans again. It was quiet under the tree by the drinking fountain.

"Well, good luck, sir," I said.

"Good for what, I don't know," he said, and he smiled. "But I need it."

I drove back to the Burger King on Cortez for another appointment with Lee. When I pulled up to the bench, once again, Carl was there, too, and they both wore the same clothes they had worn when we had eaten lunch together the day before. Lee was in all faded black, his windbreaker a shade of gray, his pants, which were three inches too short, were faintly green. I was a few minutes late, and Lee threw his arms up in the air, his face red, and his eyes wide, as if it say, “It’s about time!”

“Sorry I’m late,” I said.

“You gotta be very careful around here,” Lee said, his back hunched over and stiff. “I can’t stay in one place at a time for very long. It’s just not safe.”

“I know. Sorry about that.”

I sat down with them on the bench, and my nose was flooded with the smell of rotten, sour clothes. We watched a few cars drive by. It was often hard to think of small talk with Lee. I said, “So where did you sleep last night?”

“Bank of America. The bad thing is they have ATM machines at banks, and they can be used twenty-four hours a day. But I haven’t seen any fire ants down there.”

As he had the day before, Lee wore a splint. In May he had passed out on private property, and someone had called 911. At the hospital, he was treated him for a badly sprained wrist, and for the past two months, he’d been wearing this tan canvas splint, the underside of which was now streaked with green, sweaty grime. He hadn’t been arrested, just “trespassed,” which he saw as essentially a legal statement of disgust.

He said, “A lot of people don’t like the homeless, don’t want them around. They steal, they pester people. Not all, but a lot of them.”

Carl, who had been as still as wax, was apparently listening. He said, “Urinating and defecating outside of public places. Only because they choose to.”

But Lee didn’t seem to be in the mood for this conversation. He said, “I need to get my driver’s license replaced. I lost it. If I can just get that, I can find a job and then get enough money together to get out of this place.”

I had heard this story before from him. Would he really go through with it? This was a way I could help. I offered him a ride to the motor vehicle department.

To my surprise, he nodded, and the light in his eyes made me think that this could be why I had come to Florida. If I was here at just the right time, where I could physically take him from one place to another and help him get a job, maybe this time he’d make some changes that would be lasting. Despite all Roger had said about the homeless being trapped in the culture, Lee wasn’t beyond hope, was he?

Carl sat in the front seat, Lee in back, as he had the day before. We drove to a strip of shops on US 41, just a few miles from Burger King. Carl stayed outside, while I helped Lee in the direction of the motor vehicle department’s satellite office. Lee gripped my left arm tight, and I led him slowly, as though I were helping an infant across the parking lot. He motioned to a ramp, and we walked about fifteen feet out of the way so he could avoid having to step up onto the curb of the sidewalk in front of the store. It was an ordeal, but I felt it was a momentous occasion. Lee was willingly entering civilization.

But when I opened the door for him, he froze. Dozens of people were sitting in chairs and standing along the sides waiting to be helped. The office was packed. He shook his head and backed up slowly, like a frightened dog.

“No,” he said. “Let’s not do this today.”

“Are you sure? We’re already here, we might as well—”

“We can come back another day.”

He again gripped my arm, and I served as his cane as he hobbled back to my rental car. I didn’t have anywhere to go, and I didn’t want to drive around aimlessly like we had the previous day, so I drove to a shady spot in the parking lot, rolled down the windows, and turned the car off. I leaned the seat back and sat cramped in front of the steering wheel with my laptop. I was discouraged, and I realized how high I had allowed my hopes to climb. Moving on, I half-heartedly asked Lee if we could continue with his life story.

“My life isn’t really interesting.”

“Can you tell me how your marriage ended?”

Lee Sandspur

I kissed somebody on New Year’s Eve, she said. What do you think about that?

January. 1989. A cold night in D.C. Lee sat on a couch in his living room in front of the television. Surrounding him in the room were a lamp, an easy chair, and an antique lawyer’s bookcase that he had bought and refinished while he and Kathy had been stationed in England.

Kathy, who was half Japanese, stood in front of him, wearing blue jeans. He could see the outline of her bra in her lightweight sweater. She had been stationed in Naples, Italy, for the last year without him, but was back for a brief training over the holiday.

Lee said, I’m not too happy.

Would you rather I tell you I had sex with him?

No, I definitely wouldn’t rather you said that.

Well, I did.

Were you drunk?

No.

Did he wear a condom?

No.

Are you pregnant?

She said she didn't think so.

Lee said, If I had been there, would it have been different?

Yes, it would have. I might still have wanted a divorce, but I wouldn't have been unfaithful.

After that night, Kathy flew back to Italy, and Lee never saw her again.

Alone in Washington, D.C., Lee wrote computer software for IBM mainframes that managed medical inventory. He made the eleven-hundred dollar house payment. Always thought we'd do the civilized thing and get a divorce if it came to this, he thought. Before she hooked up with somebody else.

Kathy and her new boyfriend wiped Lee out financially. She had copies of his two Visas, two Mastercards. Nasty notices started coming in the mail, saying they wanted at least partial payment immediately. He had an unlisted telephone number, but credit companies started calling him. Bank of America threatened to turn him over to a collection agency.

She was still stationed in Italy when she called him again in 1991. Now what? He had been sleeping in on a Sunday, his normal day to do laundry. He could hear the fear in her voice when she told him she had ovarian cancer.

They're sending me back to the naval hospital in San Diego, she said, for radiation treatment.

The divorce went through in the early part of 1992. He refused to attend the hearings to protect his interests—he just didn't care. They were getting a divorce—that was the end of it. He wanted to stay married and patch things up, but she wouldn't hear it. Thank goodness we never had children, he thought.

Lee's brown eyes were bright in the late afternoon sun. His lips shook, his eyebrows knit together. Still wearing his grimy splint, he touched his mouth and, looking out the window, bit a piece of skin off his thumb. He looked at his hand in disgust.

I said, "And you still haven't seen her?"

"No. And I still don't want to. I don't want to have a cup of coffee with her. She got the house, and somehow she got both cars. I still don't understand that, but like I said, since I didn't show up in court, the judge wasn't very happy with me. So that was another expense—I had to go replace my car. I got a Dodge Colt. A piece of junk. It had a tray made out of cardboard, instead of a glove box, for crying out loud."

"Where does she live now?"

"Not sure. I assume she moved to San Diego to be with her mother, Kendra. Now, this woman is full-blooded Japanese, and her name is *Kendra*. I never figured that out. I wasn't there when they named her."

Then Carl, who had left the car to go for a walk, came back toward the car followed by a man and a woman I didn't know. They wore shabby clothes and carried grocery bags stuffed to the breaking point.

Carl leaned over and said, "I told these nice people that you might be willing to oblige them a ride to their destination."

The man and woman stared at the ground several feet away.

In the back seat, Lee rolled his eyes and groaned quietly. Somehow, that made me want to help these people, almost just to spite Lee. If it was right to help him, why not these other people?

The woman, whose dirty blond hair clung to her forehead, sat in the front seat next to me, while Carl and the man piled in next to Lee in the cramped backseat. She said, “Oh wow, this is a nice car.”

“Thanks. It’s a rental.”

I drove the couple a few miles down the road, back to 26th Street and then south several more blocks.

“This is good,” the man in the back seat said.

Dilapidated single-story houses lined the street. Cars on blocks sat like lawn ornaments in several front yards, and the lawns were made of sand as much as grass. The man and woman got out of the car and thanked me. It was not obvious which house they were intending to visit. As I turned the car around and drove aimlessly again, looking for some shade to continue talking with Lee, Carl sulked. He put his forehead on his hand and looked out the window.

“They swindled me,” he said. “I offered them a ride if they’d give me a dollar, but they never paid.”

We pulled into a shady corner of the parking lot at Sweetbay Supermarket. Carl left to use the bathroom, and Lee agreed to continue with his story. He said that shortly after the divorce, he became homeless in the summer of 1992.

Lee Sandspur

A knock came on the door of Lee's D.C. house, and a county marshal stood on the step. The house was officially Kathy's.

You got four days, he said.

Lee packed clothes, shaving kit, extra shoes. What is she going to do with a house in the United States when she's in Naples, Italy? His debts had caught up to him, and he had nothing left, so he drove his Dodge Colt to a homeless shelter in Alexandria. He was frightened. If only Kathy hadn't done what she did, I wouldn't be going through this right now.

It was a bad part of town. He walked in with two heavy suitcases and met the counselor. An enormous woman. Needs to lose about three hundred pounds. She wore short hair, and was kind to Lee. The deal was this: When you get paid, you have to deposit half of it with the shelter. Once you get to fifteen hundred dollars, you're sent on your way.

I got no problem with that, he said. That's what I want to do anyway. Save money and get out of here.

She led him to a large bay of beds where the men slept. He was assigned a small locker to keep his wallet in when he took a shower. In the morning, he ate oatmeal with sugar and butter. He was embarrassed and ashamed and began looking for a cheap studio apartment or a room to rent. He still had a job at a video rental place, and he talked to the manager, who kept saying he was sorry for Lee.

It's not your fault. No reason for you to be sorry.

"How long were you in the shelter?"

"Maybe seven months," Lee said. He spoke in a soft monotone and stared out the window, detached, as though he were speaking about someone else.

"What was the cause of it all?"

“Going through a lousy divorce.”

“Alcohol had nothing to do with it?” I said. I recalled the scene he’d depicted for me some time before, when he had poured out his coffee one morning and filled his mug with beer instead.

“No. I felt bitterness. For a long time, I wanted to hurt her like she had hurt me—not physically, but emotionally.”

If it wasn’t the alcohol, I was puzzled. He seemed to be haunted much more by his military exploits than by his divorce, and I asked him whether he thought much about Vietnam while he was living in the homeless shelter.

“I think a lot about my time in the Navy,” he said. His head was down, and he picked skin off his fingers. He sniffed, but long strings of snot dripped into his mustache and beard.

“Probably too much.”

Lee Sandspur

Lee ate well at the shelter. Churches fixed the meals, and there was always enough for seconds. He got some more clothes there, though it was hit or miss when something useful would be donated. He washed pots and pans to earn his keep and passed the random breathalyzer tests.

In 1993, as he was getting ready to move out of the shelter, Lee was laid off from his video store job. More stress. He got a job at BJ’s as a night stock clerk, and moved into a cheap motel for \$140 per week. He smoked three full packs per day and opened a fourth, but managed to stay away from alcohol. Alone in the hotel room, he read James Michener novels and got to

know a coworker, who started giving him rides, meals, and spare clothes. After the holidays, he was laid off at BJ's.

His friend, who was not laid off, said, Sorry.

Nothing you can do about it.

Lee didn't have a suit and tie, so he figured he couldn't find a job in computers; he also didn't have a presentable car for bringing clients to lunch. He found a construction job, and moved from motel to homeless shelter to cockroach-ridden motel.

May 1995. Lee got a phone call from his sister. His mother had died. No one had told him in time for the funeral, and he was devastated. Not even a simple phone call. He decided to find a way down to Orlando, Florida, so he could help his father. He left a message on his father's answering machine, sold his car for six hundred dollars, and got on a Greyhound bus heading south.

"I was glad to get out of D.C. I didn't enjoy the cold winters where our marriage ended. I thought, 'There's no reason for me to be here.' I wasn't dating anyone, and I didn't plan to."

Lee sniffed. He hunched his shoulders and shuddered, pulling his windbreaker tighter around his ribcage in the July heat. He said, "These days it would be especially ridiculous. I can't even support myself. I can't support a girlfriend, and I have nothing to offer any decent woman anyway. My life is a complete *mess*. I'm out of control. I can't work, because I have this"—he pointed to the splint on his wrist—"plus I don't have any ID. I appreciate you taking me over there."

I wasn't sure whether he was being serious. The splint seemed to be the least of his obstacles to getting remarried. I said, "We can go back tomorrow, if you want."

Lee Sandspur

He mostly slept on the bus. He finally arrived in the Orlando suburbs and found the house in the middle of a large yard with a fence. It had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, a screened-in porch, and a formal dining room. When he saw his father for the first time, they both cried. His father, Raymond, apologized for not having contacted Lee about the funeral, but Lee said he didn't blame anybody. He could see his father was grieving and didn't want to upset him. Raymond had already gone through plenty, and even had asked Lee's two sisters, Denise and Beverly, to pack up their mother's clothing and donate them to clear the house of painful memories.

Over dinner at the Golden Corral that night, Raymond told Lee that Hazel, Lee's mother, had died in her sleep. He didn't say it to his father, but he was glad it had happened in her sleep. God was merciful. She was on so much medication. Bedridden.

But tension built quickly. Raymond wasn't happy that Lee had lost everything in the divorce. You should have gone to court, he said. You should have fought her. She wronged you.

Well, Dad, it was my marriage. I did what I wanted to do.

They stopped talking about it that night and tried to enjoy a pleasant dinner together. Raymond loved the Golden Corral, and often took his wife there before she died. They both said tender things about her, and consoled each other, the two lonely Sandspur men.

We sat on the curb. Lee's odor was less intense now that we were outside the car, and I breathed deeply. Between the Sweetbay parking lot and the Burger King next door was a

small patch of woods—what little was left after the grove had been cleared out to keep the homeless away. Birds flew in and out of the treetops, and Lee picked at his mustache. His eyes were red, and his eyelids heavy.

“So your dad couldn’t understand that she had taken it all?” I said.

“He chewed me up. I lived with Dad for four years, and we were just having too many arguments. Disagreements mostly about me and the divorce. He wouldn’t let it go. You should have fought for your furniture, your car, this, that. Well, I didn’t, Dad. It’s over and done with. He wasn’t physically in bad shape, but he still hadn’t come to terms with my mother’s death. I tried, but there was nothing I could do about that. The last time I talked to him was in 1999.”

“Where does he live now?”

“He’s dead.”

Lee Sandspur

After leaving his Dad in Orlando, Lee again hopped aboard a Greyhound bus to visit his other aunts and uncles in Florida. But before he got there, he made a stop at his mother’s gravesite in Dade City for the first time. He went to a grocery store and bought some flowers—white, plastic flowers, so they wouldn’t fade or wilt in the sun.

Before he found his mother’s grave, he recognized the name of an old fashioned country doctor who had made house calls when Lee was a child. Whenever Lee showed signs of the mumps, chicken pox, or the measles, she called this doctor, and he came by to give Lee medicine. A good man. He was pleased that he had found this grave, and he was unexpectedly

saddened. He laid down some of the plastic flowers in front of the tombstone.

When he found his mother's site, he wept.

Lee had planned to visit more family, but he realized he had spent his last money on the bus ticket. That night, he found an old abandoned fried chicken restaurant near a stand of trees by the highway. He spread out on a bed of needles and slept until dawn.

The next day, he decided he'd like to stay. This was as good a place as any. He signed up for a labor pool in town, and showed up at five in the morning every day for work. He got lucky and wound up on the "steady ticket," meaning he'd get work seven days a week. Forty-two dollars per day after taxes. Money in my pocket. I'm happy as can be. No responsibilities. If I don't want to go to work one day, I don't have to.

A woman who worked at a convenience store across the street from the abandoned restaurant gave him a mummy-style sleeping bag. Lee began attending a Baptist church on the corner, and the pastor gave him a water repellent Army surplus canvas tent. The tent had a floor and could be zipped up to keep the mosquitoes out.

"And that was in 1999," I said. "So why did you leave that setup in town if you felt so content?"

Lee looked out the window. Finally he said, "I'm not sure. I just felt like moving on. I really don't know why."

"Do you remember the last thing you did there? Something must have triggered it, if you were only there for two or three months."

“It wasn’t so much that I felt like I needed to leave, it was that I wanted to. I went to Tampa. I knew there would be lots of labor pools, and I shouldn’t have any trouble getting work.”

“Were you planning on doing labor pools? I mean, why weren’t you planning on getting a normal job?”

“Because I had no place to live. I couldn’t take a shower. If I ran out of money, I couldn’t go to a Laundromat and wash my clothes. And my clothes looked so shabby anyway. I mean, no decent job like a Publix stock clerk or anything—they’re not going to hire me. They’re most likely going to kick me off the property.”

These were problems that didn’t always occur to me. How easy was it to get off the streets, once you were homeless? Was it simply a matter of choice and will? Was the freedom so alluring and were the conditions so embarrassing that traveling from town to town, looking for a new start seemed to be the only choice?

Lee said he had stayed at a Salvation Army in Tampa, signed on with a labor pool called Right Hand Man, and worked at an oil refinery. Before long, though, he moved again, this time to Atlanta. There, he stayed at a half-way house for ninety dollars per week, and he worked at a Polaroid warehouse. Again, he stayed only a few months and was off again. He lived in several small towns in Georgia and Mississippi before finally returning to Florida. He never had reasons for leaving, and I wondered if he was fleeing some sort of trouble that he didn’t want to talk about. Or maybe his addictions had played a larger role than he was willing to admit. Why else would someone move so often? At the same time, I had to ask myself a similar question, a question Roger had implied: Why did *I* stay *put* for so long?

Lee Sandspur

By 2004, he was entrenched on Cortez Road West in Bradenton. One day in the late fall, he had some money in his pocket, so he bought a small coffee at a 7-Eleven and sipped it outside. Refills on the same day were free as long as you had the receipt, so he debated getting some more when an elderly white man wearing bifocals and a sports coat walked out with a newspaper under his arm.

The man looked Lee up and down and said, Do you want to earn some money?

Depends, sir, Lee said. First thing is, it's got to be legal. Second thing, it's got to be safe.

I just want some help straightening out my garage. I'll pay you.

The man pulled out some cash from his pocket, and that convinced Lee. He had been ripped off before, with someone offering to pay him for a similar task, and then saying, Sorry, I don't have any money.

When we get the garage done—it should only take us like, four to five hours—I'll buy you lunch, and I'll bring you back here.

Lee agreed. He got to the garage and swept around cardboard boxes, a lawnmower, a shovel, a rake, a gas can. At one point, he felt a slight itch, and he slapped his hip. What he didn't realize at the time, was that a brown recluse spider had bitten him, dug a hole in his hip, and buried its eggs. As Lee was receiving his forty dollars and eating his lunch, the spider eggs were incubating. Over the next month or so, they hatched, and the baby spiders ate their way out.

In December, Lee's hip had become so infected that, combined with his subsistence diet and heavy drinking, he

passed out on the street and was taken to the hospital. After surgery, he landed in Oregon State Rehabilitation Center of Bradenton.

I knew the story from there. Lee had met the missionaries and joined the church. He had learned from Elder Paul about a family that needed help moving across town.

“That was the first time I met you,” I said.

The conversation stalled, and Lee said he wanted to use the restroom in Sweetbay. I opened the car door for him, and gave him my arm to lean on as he took baby steps toward the curb. As we approached the double doors, he bent down and picked up a cigarette that looked like it had hardly been smoked at all. While he was in the bathroom, I waited on a bench outside and called Hailey. When he came out, and I was struck by how well he seemed to be walking on his own. As he waited for me to finish my conversation, he bent down and rearranged things in his duffel bag. Did he really need my help to walk?

I left Lee at the Sweetbay parking lot to meet my friend at a Chinese food buffet. Long mirrors lined all four walls of the dining area, and I stuffed myself on orange chicken. That evening, we went with some friends to the beach. We grilled hamburgers.

I had brought my shorts, so I went swimming in the Gulf of Mexico. The water was as warm as bathwater. I waded out to neck-deep water and let the waves pick me up and set me back down on my tiptoes in the sand. The falling sun painted the clouds orange and pink. A breeze cooled my skin as I stepped out of the water and watched the sunset from the beach.

I felt complete contentment. Peace. And I thought of the expression I had seen on Lee’s face over the previous few days. He was at times anxious, fearful, angry, defeated. But it was impossible to feel that way out here on the sand. This was a life-affirming scene, a

transcendent beauty that was like a revelation, a reason to believe. I desperately wanted Lee to see this.

Later that night, as I drove back to Bret Fitzgerald's house, I passed a supermarket, where a black lady in a white shirt and black pants was sitting on the sidewalk, leaning against the side of the building. Grocery bags were piled around her slumped figure, her eyes closed, probably trying to sleep sitting up. Signs and streetlights lit up the eight lanes of Cortez Road. The whole town was illuminated, but the street was empty. At a red light, I was the only car in sight.

PART IV

He wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot

that you would feel exactly what he felt.

—*The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien

Back at the Fitzgerald home, I stayed up late and surfed the Internet on my laptop. Lee had given me names of his family members, and he'd told me where they had lived when last he knew, so I searched for some of their names. Nothing. I found the name Lee Sandspur a few places, but nothing about the man I knew. Finally I entered Lee's social security number into a Google search, and I found this posting:

I am acting on behalf of Rebecca Lynn who is trying to locate her brother, LEE SANDSPUR. He is a Navy vet. We do have recent information that has placed him in the DC area.

Who was Rebecca Lynn? Lee hadn't mentioned that he had a sister named Rebecca. Was he trying to hide something? Did he have a sister he had never met?

It was then 12:29 a.m. Since it was only 9:29 p.m. Pacific, I decided to try the San Diego phone number included in the posting. I took a deep breath and punched the number on my cell phone. Lee had given me permission to contact whomever I deemed necessary, according to the form he'd signed in Burger King. But is this what he had in mind?

"Hello?" a man's voice said.

"Hi!" I said. "Is Rebecca there?"

Wrong number. Dead end. I couldn't find anything on Denise Sandspur or Beverly, either. But the scent of the trail had encouraged me, and I tried Lee's ex-wife Kathy next. He had said she probably was living in the La Mesa area with her mother. On Whitepages.com, I looked up the last name Scott, first initial K, and got two hits. I sat back on the couch. It was closer to 1 a.m. now, and I was feeling lightheaded. Do I call these people? Is it too late on the West coast? What if they're upset with me for tracking them down? What if they don't

want to talk? I stared at my computer screen and held my cell phone in my hand. I realized I was even more nervous that someone *would* want to talk.

The first K Scott didn't answer, and I was sent to voice mail. My eyes scanned the room as though I were expecting someone to jump out from behind a chair. The sliding glass door across the room was black. I punched in the second number.

"Hello?" a woman's voice said.

I introduced myself, and she said her name was Kathy. I said I was writing a book about a man named Lee Sandspur.

Silence.

"What are you about writing a book about *him* for?" she said.

I explained that I had begun a year before, when Lee appeared on the verge of leaving the street life behind. Since then, the project had taken a turn, and I was looking for some verification of a few things in his life. "Would you be willing to talk for a few minutes?"

She hesitated, but then agreed. I realized I had been holding my breath.

I said, "Were you at one point married to him?"

"Mm hm."

"When?"

"I don't even remember. Late 70s I would say. We were married about twelve years."

"Remember the first time you met him?"

"I used to work with him in the Navy. We worked in computers. He was just this little guy." She laughed, and I again felt relieved. "He was in the military, so he had short hair," she continued. "It must have been 1978. I was in San Diego visiting my family, and he had

heard that I was divorced, and that made some kind of connection. I was married before him, and he was married before me.”

“Really. He was married before?”

“His first wife—I can’t remember her name—I don’t think they were married very long.”

How could Lee have failed to mention a first marriage? What was he trying to hide? Kathy said he was a prolific gambler in the Navy, and that he supposedly sent all his winnings home to his first wife, who then left him and cleaned out his credit cards. In fact, she said, it was his pool-hall gambling that got him kicked out of college, too.

I asked her how long Lee had been in the Navy when they got married.

“I know he went in before me, so he must have gone in during the early 70s. His draft notice beat him home when he dropped out of college. He was just my friend, a very hard working person, conscientious, a go-getter, always getting the job done. Plus he worked part time, too, as a volunteer policeman in the city El Cajon. He was kind of a serious guy.”

She paused. “I thought he had a lot of honesty and integrity, which I was wrong about.”

I asked Kathy if she had been in love with Lee.

“Of course I felt I was, or I wouldn’t have married him. He was romantic.”

I tried to picture Lee being romantic.

I told her some of the stories he had told me about the way their marriage had ended, like how she had cleaned out his credit cards.

“Let me tell you what *really* happened.”

Kathy Scott

Lee always wanted to be a police officer. After he had moved to England so he could date Kathy, he received a letter of acceptance to begin training at the San Diego Police Department.

You should go, Kathy said. This is what you really want to do.

I want to stay with you, Lee said.

Soon afterward, they were married and stayed at the Sherlock Holmes Hotel in London for their honeymoon. He paced back and forth in the room, and, whenever his shoes were off, he walked on his tiptoes.

If someone made a movie about me, he said, I would be played by Charles Bronson.

One day in the hotel restaurant, Kathy said she wanted to steal an ash tray as a souvenir. Lee stopped her and called the waiter over. How much for an ashtray? he said.

Because of his honesty, the waiter gave them an entire place setting for free. Kathy looked at Lee. How many people do that? I have married an admirable, honest man. She remembered the girls she worked with in the Navy who always said Lee would make a good husband because he was so considerate.

When he had been in the Navy, Lee seemed like he was always in a rush, and he would run and double check everything before allowing himself to leave. She thought nothing of it until after they were married, and she noticed that Lee washed his hands repeatedly, sometimes twenty times, to the point that his hands would get so dry they would crack and bleed.

Kathy and Lee moved to San Diego. In 1982, they went out to dinner and had a couple of beers.

Are you sure you can drive? Kathy asked.

I'm sure.

The drive home nearly proved fatal. As they went around a curve, the car swerved off a cliff and rolled again and again. They finally came to a rest some fifty feet down a cliff. Kathy regained consciousness as she was being pulled from the car by a man she didn't know. She was in the hospital for forty-four days, while Lee was out in twenty-two. Her family thought she was going to divorce him, but she refused.

Oh, it's all my fault, Lee cried. I'm sorry.

I never accused you, Kathy said.

The accident left Kathy with a bad leg and Lee with a bad back, so they bought twin beds and pushed them close together so that one's movements at night would not disturb the other. Kathy always left to go to work early in the morning, and Lee made the bed each day. One day, though, Kathy stripped the bed to wash the sheets. On Lee's side, the mattress was badly stained. She leaned over and smelled. Has he been peeing the bed?

Lee worked at the Hotel Del Coronado, a world famous hotel, in the computer department. One day in the early 80s, he came home crying.

They're not treating me right, he said. They're making fun of me. I have to quit.

Kathy consoled him and supported him. But then he started to lose other jobs. He complained the companies were unethical, and that he was leaving on principle. She was worried about him and suggested he try to spend time with

Gary, one of his friends from the police force. He started crying harder.

Gary's dead!

Oh, no. When did he die?

He died on the job.

Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't we go to the funeral?

He said he didn't want to talk about it. Later, Kathy checked it out. There were no officers by the name of Gary who were killed in the line of duty. She thought, This is how Lee closes doors.

In the mid 80s, they moved from San Diego to the Washington, D.C., area. By this time, Lee's quirks had become part of the routine for Kathy. They asked a friend to help load the truck, and when it was done, the friend said, Okay, I'll go ahead and meet you at the new house.

Don't rush, Kathy said. Just have a seat for a minute.

She explained that Lee was going to walk out of the house, circle the truck, and kick each tire. Then, he'd check the lock on the cargo door, flip open his wallet and make sure his driver's license was there. Then, Kathy said, he'll do the whole thing again two or three times.

You gotta be kidding, the friend said.

I'm as serious as a heart attack.

Sure enough, Lee circled the truck again and again.

After they made it to D.C., Lee found a job in computers with the United Letter Carriers in Virginia. Kathy usually went to work early and got home in the early afternoon, while Lee got home closer to dinner time. They were both workaholics, and it wasn't unusual for either of them to come home a little late when a project demanded more time. And so, when Lee was

late to come home one night, Kathy didn't worry about it. Finally, while watching TV, she got a call. It was Lee on a pay phone.

I'm being followed, he said. They're like the Mafia.

Where are you?

I'll call you back. I'm not sure if I'm being followed, and I don't want to put you in jeopardy.

She was puzzled. She continued to wait up, watching TV. Lee called her four or five more times.

I can't talk, he said from a different pay phone.

Just tell me where you are, and I'll come pick you up.

They might be monitoring this phone line.

When she finally picked him up at a gas station, it was midnight. He ran to the car and got in, then directed her to a spot on the freeway, where his car was parked.

Some thugs pulled me out of the car, he explained as they drove. They forced me off the freeway—some guys from the union—but I escaped when they parked. I'm lucky to be alive.

As Kathy drove, she wasn't sure what to say. She was concerned, but not about the union thugs. Should I believe what he is saying? she thought. What is wrong with my husband? They arrived at Lee's car, and he got out so he could follow her back home. Kathy looked closely at the car. It didn't look like it had been run off the road.

Soon after, Lee quit the job with the United Letter Carriers. He said, I know how the money is being siphoned off, and I can't stay any longer.

Then Kathy discovered that Lee had been drinking behind her back. One day in the summer she went into the garage and discovered bottles of beer in the dryer. She picked up a bottle, and it wasn't just warm, but hot from sitting in the dryer in the

hot garage. She wasn't sure what to think. So this is what he does when he tells me he has to go out and work in the garage.

"He told me he was a social drinker," I said.

I was typing furiously to get all the details of Kathy's stories. It was close to 2 a.m. It bothered me that I trusted her more than I trusted Lee. I felt like the whole project was fundamentally changing.

"No," she said, "he was a closet drinker. He was a functioning alcoholic. He could go to work, get off work and drink till he passed out, get up and go to work the next day."

"He said he was making a hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand dollars."

"Yeah, probably. We bought a house there in the suburbs."

"Were you happy?"

"Until I realized he was a drunk."

Kathy Scott

Kathy and Lee were in bed one night, when Kathy woke and realized she was getting peed on. Lee was passed out and didn't know he was doing it. She tried to convince him to go to AA, and he said, Okay, I'll go. He said he'd handle it. But he never went.

She kicked him out, and he came crawling back two days later, crying and saying he would go to AA, that he would get help. She considered leaving him, but this was her second marriage, so of course she tried harder. You don't want to admit you messed up twice.

More and more of Lee's actions puzzled Kathy. He always seemed to be looking over his shoulder as if someone were after him.

When I die, Lee said, if I get killed, someone's going to come see you, and they're going to give you a briefcase with some money in it.

What?

If anything ever happens to me, you're going to get a briefcase with a million dollars in it.

Okay. She thought, Whatever.

I have it arranged. Just take the briefcase and don't ask any question.

And where is this briefcase from?

When I was a police officer, I let some dirty people go—I helped them out. They're going to pay me back.

I don't get it.

You don't need to know the details, he said. It's for your own protection.

One day Kathy found a glass on the table with some kind of dark liquid in it. She took a sip and almost gagged. He must have mixed together every kind of alcohol in the house. She found beer cans in the garage again.

I'm recycling, he said. I picked them up in the parking lot.

In the early 1990s, Kathy mentioned divorce, and Lee didn't take it well. I can make you disappear, you know, Lee said.

What, you can give me cement boots or something?

If you go out with anyone, I can make them disappear, too.

Kathy said, Knock yourself out. That's not going to make me want to stay with you.

She asked for a transfer far away just to get away from Lee, and she got it. She told Lee she had orders to go to Italy, and Lee responded that he didn't think he could go.

I can't speak Italian, he said.

I didn't ask you to go.

She told him again she wanted a divorce. She said she had put as much effort into the marriage as she could, and she couldn't do it anymore. I still care about you, she said. I think we can do it on a friendly basis. You can have the house.

He pleaded with her not to divorce him, and she agreed to put it off.

When you're ready, she said.

When she was in Italy, Kathy discovered she had cancer. She flew back to the states for treatment and tried to call Lee, but the phone was disconnected. She called their neighbor, who said that Lee had sold the house and disappeared. What about the gifts her father had given her from Japan?

The last thing Lee had told her was that he was working in the computer department of a produce company, but Kathy didn't know which one. She got a copy of a D.C. Yellow Pages, and called all the produce companies in alphabetical order from her sickbed in San Diego. After twenty calls, she finally found the right company.

He doesn't work here anymore, they told her. Who is this?

This is his wife.

Silence on the phone.

Kathy said, Hello? Is everything okay?

He told us his wife was dead.

Kathy laughed in disbelief. She said, I'm sure he wished I was, but no, I'm not.

The employee told her that Lee had been fired, and no one was sure where he had gone. Lee had agreed to file for divorce by this time, and Kathy thought he would have already done it. Instead, she filed for divorce from California, and there was no settlement because no one could find him. Finally, her lawyer tracked him down in a gated apartment complex in Alexandria, Virginia, and she had the paperwork delivered to him there.

I said, "This is all much different from what he told me."

"I'm sure it is!"

I was reeling. What was I going to say to Lee about all of this? Should I even try to talk to him about it? Would it help him in any way to be "caught"?

"So it's not a surprise to you that Lee's homeless right now?" I said.

"I can't believe Lee's never pulled himself up and gone on with his life. Even if you were drunk, at some point, I would think you would stop and say, 'Enough is enough.' I think I'm his scapegoat. I don't know. I haven't thought about Lee in years."

She went on to say that she felt sorry for Lee, and for anyone who was homeless. "You always wonder how they got there. Lee was really good at what he did as far as computers were concerned. He's not a stupid man, he just has issues. He just probably couldn't hold down a job."

"Because of the alcohol?"

"I had heard he was on more than alcohol. I don't know. But he just didn't follow through with things in general. He had these big plans, and he would take one step and stop. Everything was like that. He signed up to go back to college. He was making plans to go back get his master's and doctorate, and didn't even take the first class. You do stuff by

taking small steps, and Lee would always leap forward and never take the steps. But I guess he chose his life. He's probably happy because no one expects anything from him."

We paused. I breathed deeply. "Did he ever talk to you about the Navy Seals?"

She chuckled. "Lee had nothing to do with them."

"He says he was a Navy Seal."

"No, I don't think so. Have you ever seen a Navy Seal? They're the really buff guys."

"Some are small though, right? So they can fit in tight spaces?"

"Lee was a computer programmer. That was it. I'm one hundred percent sure about it. I would have known, because I worked with him in the military. He always wanted to be a cop. That was his thing. So imagining he was a Seal makes sense doesn't it?"

I didn't know what to say. I stared at my computer screen. If it was really a secretive endeavor to be a Navy Seal, how could anyone be completely sure? I said weakly, "But he has all of these very detailed stories about being in Vietnam and breaking into people's houses."

"When did Vietnam end? He wasn't in the military until the 70s. Lee's a year younger than I am, I think, and Vietnam was winding down in 1970. I went in the military in '73, and there were no troops left in Vietnam."

"Could he have been a Seal on the side? Maybe he was a computer programmer for some of the time, and when he was deployed he was doing covert ops."

"I'm two-hundred percent sure."

The next morning, as I drove to the church to meet Bill Carver, who had worked with the missionaries when Lee was a new member, Kathy was so present in my mind that I felt as though, wherever he was, Lee should be able to sense that I had spoken with her. I had spoken with Gloria and Roger about Lee, but this was different. She was a first-hand witness of Lee from twenty years ago. I overlooked the fact that I had betrayed him by talking to people behind his back and nursed the feeling that he had betrayed *me* by not accurately representing his divorce. I had begun the project in order to befriend and help Lee. Now, not only had he abandoned his plans to get off the streets, but he had lied to me about his past.

And yet, when his stories contradicted those I had heard from Kathy and others, whom should I believe? Kathy's version of Lee's habits made him appear to have some kind of mental disorder, but to another observer, his habits might have seemed like harmless quirks. Was it possible to ever "know the truth" about Lee? About anyone? The reporter in me wanted to say that, if I could only investigate thoroughly enough, I would discover some evidence that would help me to figure Lee out.

At the church, I sat with the Bill on the coarse, rose-colored couches in the foyer. Bill was a high school Spanish teacher, middle-aged and overweight, and he wore wide glasses. He chewed gum and had a slight gap between his front teeth. He was a humble man, and I had gotten to know him fairly well when I had lived here.

I typed as he related a story of a time he'd encountered Lee after I had moved away.

Bill Carver

One day in the summer, the missionaries, who had the bad habit of never locking their apartment door, noticed that

someone had stolen some bananas and some spare change. They were almost positive it was Lee, and they began locking their doors.

When Bill heard about it, he was disappointed. Sure, Lee was not in his right mind at any point, but how could he use the missionaries like that, even in the fog of his mental . . . disease? Why doesn't he try harder to come up off the bottom rung? Does he like it? Is there something essentially appealing about the lifestyle?

That winter, on a cold night for Florida, near freezing, Bill was driving his old brown sedan home, and he decided to check on the missionaries' apartment, which had been vacant for a month or more. He noticed someone huddled on the screened-in porch, which did not have a working lock. The streetlights from Cortez Road were far enough off that it was difficult to see at first, but then Bill recognized it was Lee lying on the cement, shivering. He wore a button-up shirt and khaki pants, but didn't have a coat on. Bill got back in his car and drove to the store to buy some soup, canned peas and carrots, and a can opener. He thought back to the day of Lee's baptism about six months earlier, and how far it seemed Lee had fallen. He returned with the food and said, Do you want to come sit in my car?

Smelling of alcohol, Lee hobbled over to the car and sat in the front seat. Bill turned the heat up full blast, and Lee rocked back and forth, his eyes bloodshot.

This feels *sooo* good. This feels *sooo* good.

Bill opened a can of soup for him, and Lee ate. Although the soup was cold and straight from a can, Lee repeated over and over again, This is *sooo* good.

Lee stayed in the car for about forty-five minutes, while Bill patiently waited. He debated bringing Lee home with him, but felt nervous inviting Lee into his home. He considered finding a way to let Lee into the missionaries' apartment, but decided against it.

Bill asked him, Why are you doing this? Why do you live like this?

Lee told him stories his tours in Vietnam, and how he had terrible memories that still bothered him. He said his wife had left him, and then one day, he got drunk, quit his job, and gave up. It all happened suddenly, he said.

There are programs that can help you, Bill said.

I don't want to go into any programs. It reminds me of being in Vietnam, and being trapped. I was a POW, and I'm not going through anything like that again.

It might help you to get sobered up.

No. I would feel trapped.

Finally, he left Lee there and drove home to find some blankets and some old clothes. When he returned, he told Lee he'd come again the next day at 4 p.m. with a jacket and some gloves.

Please make sure you come, Lee said. It's not easy for me to walk and get places.

The next day, Bill arrived with a grocery bag of canned food, juices, chips, and by special request, chocolate milk.

Bill said, We'll keep some food in this closet in the porch. When you need some food, you can come back here and find some, and we'll keep it stocked.

Lee looked at Bill. He said, Why are you doing this for me?

Because I love you. I just want to help you. That's all.

Lee started to cry. He said, I just can't believe that anybody would make this effort for me.

Bill returned a week later and restocked the small closet in the porch, but he didn't find Lee there. After that, it didn't appear that Lee had been taking any of the food. Finally, missionaries returned to the apartment after it had been vacant for a few months. Lee asked them if he could sleep on their porch, and they said yes, as long as he was discreet about it.

“But the problem was,” Bill said, then stopped. He looked at the ceiling and fidgeted. “He began to urinate and defecate on their porch, and it just became disgustingly dirty and smelly.”

After that, Lee was told he couldn't stay on the porch anymore, and he disappeared for a while.

Bill said he couldn't imagine a human being surviving in a more base condition. “He literally slept out on the pavement. He urinated and defecated in the place where he was trying to sleep. I talked to him during that time period, and he described how he had—I never knew if this was true or not, because he's still trotting around—he said he had cancer, that he was in a lot of pain, and he drank to ease the pain. And I never knew if this was partly true, completely untrue, or just his own little construction in his mind to justify why he was completely down and out the way he was.

“When I first heard about him, when the missionaries first started bringing him to church, I didn't have much hope for him. It's like, ‘Oh boy, the missionaries run into people like that quite a bit.’ But that quickly changed as I sat in with him. I saw there was an intelligence, a sincere interest in the gospel. I saw his countenance and everything change

over time. To me it was amazing. And as he became more clear-minded and so forth, the real Lee emerged. He was intelligent and sensitive.”

Bill sat quietly, tapping his fingertips together. “But I had thought he had quit drinking to come into the church, so to speak, to be able to get baptized. I later found out that it was the indirect result of a spider bite, which caused him to be hospitalized. So it was a sort of a forced drying-out. And he was still in that dried-out period when the missionaries began teaching him the gospel. I remember feeling a little disappointed, because I thought he had made the effort himself, that he had quit drinking voluntarily and was accepting the gospel.”

The same thought had occurred to me. When my family and I had eaten dinner with him in my apartment, I assumed that Lee, who had been drowning in an alcoholic whirlpool, had finally pulled himself out of it, and was now safely on the sand and prepared to enter civilization. In reality, it appeared that he had merely bobbed to the surface long enough to meet the missionaries and get a job at the car wash before he was pulled back under.

Two missionaries arrived at the church, wearing their white shirts and ties, and their black name badges. One of them introduced himself as Elder Jenkins, and he had been on his mission for almost one year. I asked Elder Jenkins when was the first time he had met Lee Sandspur.

Elder Jenkins

Man, Elder Jenkins said. It looks like he’s coming right to our apartment.

It was one morning at the end of May, and Elder Jenkins and his companion sat in their apartment, the same place where Elder Paul and Elder Walker had lived more than a year earlier. As Elder Jenkins was talking about their plans for the day, a man in khaki pants, a blue jacket, and a shaved head walked toward the sliding glass door that looked out onto the parking lot. His skin looked like leather, and he had a brace on his right hand. A duffle bag was slung over a walker.

The man knocked on the door. I'm looking for a way to get a hold of Brian McMillan, he said. I'm supposed to call him. A lady I know is going out of town, and she said I could stay in her apartment. I need to tell Brian that he can stay with me there when he comes to Bradenton.

Elder Jenkins said, Who are you?

He introduced himself as Lee Sandspur, and Elder Jenkins recognized the name. All the missionaries knew this guy. Some of them gave Elder Paul a lot of crap for baptizing a homeless man, saying they were just trying to boost their number of converts. Elder Jenkins decided to try to help Lee out.

We'll make some phone calls and see if anyone knows how to get a hold of him, he said. We can meet you at the church tonight.

That night at the church, the missionaries saw Lee stumbling down the sidewalk, his face covered with blood. He walked in and sat down on one of the pink arm chairs. One of the missionaries ran to get some paper towels.

What happened? Elder Jenkins said.

Someone kicked me in the face, Lee said.

When asked for more details, Lee snapped back. What more do you want to me to tell you! Sorry for getting angry, but they kicked me in the face. They got me real good.

Elder Jenkins helped him clean up, being careful not to touch the blood himself.

I appreciate you guys, Lee said. You missionaries are so good to me.

Lee looked down and saw that some blood had landed on the chair he was sitting in. He started to cry. This is the Lord's house, he said.

They led him to the bathroom, so he could clean himself more thoroughly.

I got shot in Vietnam, Lee said. Three times. They got me real good.

They led him back to the chairs in the foyer again, and Lee kept bumping into the walls. Elder Jenkins thought, He must be drunk.

Stupid walker, Lee said.

He sat down and started crying again. I'm sorry, he said. I don't feel like I should be in here. Sorry for wasting your time.

It's okay, Elder Jenkins said. We're happy to help you.

Don't let me hold you guys back. I need to find some shelter before night comes.

He left. Some minutes later, the missionaries left, and they saw Lee standing on the sidewalk smoking a cigarette. They called out to him, but all he did was wave without looking up.

"Another time," Elder Jenkins said, "we saw him on the street. He was wearing a turquoise shirt that was really tight, and you could tell there wasn't much to him." He shook his head.

Bill Carver added, "I was taking my kids to seminary at the church one morning, and I found him sleeping in the front of the church here, right up close to the doors, just laying on the pavement, drunk. I can remember this poignant feeling: Here is a person that is

completely and utterly miserable, and yet he feels drawn to the church somehow. The thought has also occurred to me that, if he does die, I hope we would know about it. That way we could do something for him. A funeral for him of some kind.”

Lee hobbled to the car and climbed into the back seat, sniffing. A wave of hot air entered with him, and he asked me to turn off the air conditioning. We decided to go to Taco Bell for lunch, but when we got there, it was still only 11 a.m., so we sat in the car in the parking lot for a while. I was in the front seat facing Cortez Road, and Lee sat on his windbreaker in the back seat and told me about the car accident.

Lee Sandspur

Kathy and Lee lived near San Diego in the early 1980s. They needed a vacation, so they drove toward Hacumba, a gorgeous desert town in California near the Mexican border. Lee was driving a light gray Honda Accord, which he had bought just four days earlier. Suddenly, a truck smacked into his driver's side fender and plowed him right off the cliff. There was no guard rail.

Lee was in the Navy hospital for four or five months. The nurses said that as long as he was on morphine, he was one of the best patients they'd had, never complaining. One night a man and woman came to his bedside.

The man said, You're going to undergo some of the most major surgery tomorrow that's imaginable. They're going to split your back wide open. After the operation, you're going to be in such pain that morphine hardly even helps, and that's the strongest thing we have.

The man hesitated. Then he said, We're Christians. Can we please pray over you?

Lee hadn't been paying any attention to God in those days. But he said, Sure. I appreciate the visit. I appreciate the prayers.

I'm going to be the anesthesiologist tomorrow, the man said. I'm going to be the guy who conks you out. You probably won't be able to recognize me, because when you see me, I'll have on my surgical mask. But look down at my feet. You'll see my cowboy boots. Look down at the floor, and you'll know I'm there.

He prayed for Lee, and wished him well.

After the operation, Lee woke up in pain. He thought, My back is on fire. Two custom designed titanium rods now ran the length of his back, with triangular pins holding them in place at his shoulder blades and then just above his tailbone.

A doctor came to visit him. He said, You are prohibited from sky diving.

Lee laughed.

No, I'm serious. You Navy Seals, for some silly reason, like to jump out of a perfectly good airplane, where the pilot is sober, and there's plenty of fuel, and it's flying level. But you cannot skydive. You cannot skateboard, or anything like it. If you fall down on your back—the way these triangular pins work, these rods are under a lot of tension, like a spring. They're liable to come out of the triangular pins if you fall down on your back, and they'll tear right through all your vital organs, and then we won't be able to do anything for you. You'll be dead before the ambulance can get you to the hospital.

Okay, Lee said. I'm not going to waste any of your time by not following orders.

He had to stay motionless in bed for four days. A nurse helped him with a bed pan. A nurse gave me a crystal bell to ring for help. Ringdingdingding.

Finally, the doctors came back in to put a cast on him. They covered his skin with a cloth and then put the plaster on, leaving a hole over his abdomen.

That way, the doctor said, if you overeat and your belly wants to expand, it can.

When the time came to put on a fiberglass cast instead, the nurses and corporals signed the white plaster and drew funny pictures.

What are you *doing*? Lee said, pretending to be upset. You're messing up my *cast*.

Oh, relax, Lee, it's coming off anyway.

Well, he said, tomorrow they may decide *not* to change my cast. Then what? Look at what you've done to me!

That night, fried shrimp and French fries were on the menu for dinner.

Lee told the nurse who was going to remove the cast, I dearly love fried shrimp. I better not miss dinner.

When he was discharged, he considered keeping the bell as a souvenir. But he didn't feel it was the right thing to do. Some other patient might need this.

"Excuse me," Lee said. "I've got the hiccups. That, and I've blown my nose about twenty times today, and I know that's not over with."

He blew his nose again and leaned back, resting in the back seat of the rental car. Customers came out of Taco Bell behind us and drove away. In my mind, as he spoke, I was continually comparing his stories to Kathy's. I believed the bell story, because he had reacted

similarly to stealing the ash tray on his honeymoon. And he told the missionaries and me the joke about Navy Seals jumping out of a perfectly good airplane. Had Lee duped the doctor into believing he was a Seal? Had he come to believe that he was a Seal, when really he wasn't, and that fact had invaded his memory?

I said, "Do you remember the date of this accident?"

"June. No, July 2003."

"I thought it was 1980 something."

"Well, yeah," he said. "Eighty something. I'm sorry. I'm tired. But my Honda Accord—literally, Brian, the roof was down here at the window pane level. This car was *crushed*. Everybody said the same thing to me: 'We don't know how you managed to survive that.' I started praying, which kind of surprised me. I asked for a Bible, and they gave me a Holy Bible. The only reason I'm still alive is because God for some reason wants me alive. I don't know why he'd want a piece of filth like me alive. I'm surprised he hasn't destroyed me many times over."

"Why do you think He wants you alive?" I said.

Lee stared out the window. He said half-heartedly, "Because He loves me."

"Does He want you to be homeless?"

"Probably not. I'm sitting here knowing I look like a fool. I'm wearing women's pants with no belt loops, no pockets. I'm carrying this stupid white plastic shopping bag with my wallet in it."

"What does He want you to do?"

"To get myself out of this mess. But this is the only pair of pants I've got."

Lee opened his bag and took out an old Gatorade bottle filled with an amber liquid. He said it was apple juice.

I said, “Do you ever think about that job at the Cortez Car Wash?”

“That car wash closed down.”

“I mean, how close you were?”

He took a swig and screwed the orange lid back on. “I don’t think about those days. I’m embarrassed. I’m ashamed of it. You know, I’d like to be happy or serene or mellow or something—I don’t *want* to be depressed, but I don’t have any depression medicine, and if I think about those kinds of things too much I’m going to get depressed. Let’s talk about something else.”

Lee Sandspur

When Lee was five or six years old, his mother took him to an old cemetery. Some of the tombstones dated back to the Civil War. She showed him the stones of her mother and father, whom Lee had only ever seen in photographs. He didn’t know why he was there, but he wasn’t in the habit of questioning his parents. They wouldn’t put up with it. But he did ask what a cemetery was.

It’s where they place your body when you die, his mother said.

What does *die* mean?

Son, you’re not going to live forever. Everybody dies.

This wasn't the type of topic change I had expected. If he didn't want to be depressed, why bring up a cemetery? Or was there something inherently different and perhaps desirable about the sadness that came with these memories?

He said, "When I got there as an adult to place a flower on her grave, I just started crying like a baby."

Lee's lips tightened, and he looked at his hands. White lines of dry skin webbed his leathered hands, and he picked at a grimy fingernail. Tears streamed down his face. He said, "I miss my mother so much."

Lee Sandspur

I should never have come here, he thought. He recognized that he was becoming depressed. The undertaker at the cemetery approached him and said he knew the Sandspur family.

I'll take care of pulling those plastic flowers once the sun fades the color, he said.

Thank you for that. Thank you very much.

He pressed the flowers into the soil near the tombstone.

Yellow roses were his mother's favorite, so he had been sure to include a couple in the bunch.

I continued typing as Lee talked again about his experience camping out at the old abandoned restaurant. But this time around, there were changes. At first, he had specifically said the flowers were white so they would not fade. This time, they were yellow. I wanted the stories to be accurate, so this discrepancy bothered me, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to know what to believe.

But still, I wanted to tell him I had caught him.

I wanted to say I had talked to Kathy, and that now I knew the truth.

“She died in 1995,” he said. “Here it’s 2007, and I’m still crying like a baby, and I’m 54 years old. It’s embarrassing.” He looked down at his clothes and said, “I don’t think I stink. I took a damp rag and brushed at my pants—it’s the best I can do. They’re the only pants I got. I don’t want to offend anybody.”

We sat in silence for a moment. It was getting closer to lunch time, and the cars inched from one traffic light to another on Cortez Road.

“I’m going to go smoke a cigarette,” he said. He tried to open the door, but it was locked. He unlocked it and said, “I hate how GM does their locks. I would never buy a GM product.”

He got out, and I stared at the traffic. I had always assumed that a homeless man might complain about things like not having enough food or anywhere to sleep, but not something like GM car door locks. Lee got back in the car.

“While I was out there,” he said, “I did what we call *sniping*. You would call it putting it out, we would call it sniping, make sure there’s no fire. I step on the ashes, touch it with the tip of my finger, and if it’s not hot, I can put it back in the pack and I’ll smoke it later. What we call snipes, you’d call cigarette butts in an ash tray. We don’t even want those inch-long snipes. What you’ll do is burn the tip of your nose trying to get this thing lit. Now, if you have rolling papers, you can break open the snipe, and now I got tobacco, and I can re-roll it into a decent cigarette. You might want to include that in your book.”

He continued, “While I was out there, I thought of something else. I’ll tell you something on the lighter side, about my first girlfriend. Please, just let me talk, and don’t interrupt me. You’re on a computer. You can straighten it all out later on.”

Lee Sandspur

His family was stationed in Argentina. When he was fifteen, he met a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl named Emma Jane at the school for American military children. He was playing ping pong at the student lounge when he noticed her, and she started to flirt with him. They learned that they lived just two blocks away from each other, and after that, they spent many afternoons sipping Coca-Colas.

Emma Jane was so beautiful that Lee was the envy of the whole school. She asked him to teach her to play ping pong, and they played in the student lounge. Lee lightened up on her, serving gentle, high passes over the net, and the guys made fun of him. You're obviously sweet on her, they said.

He asked her to go to the junior prom, and she said yes. Lee's father went to Buenos Aires and rented him tuxedo pants, a white dinner jacket, cummerbund, bow tie, and Emma Jane's parents bought her a pale blue, sleeveless gown. Lee bought a corsage to match, and Raymond drove him to her house.

He was shaking so badly that he asked Emma Jane's mother to put the corsage on her.

I'm scared I'll stick her I'm so nervous, he said.

They snapped pictures, and finally went to the dance. As they were walking in, one of the popular kids at the school grabbed Lee's shoulder and said, You have the most beautiful date I've seen yet tonight.

They went in and sipped Coca-Colas from dark green bottles for fifty pesos apiece. Lee was no good at dancing, but Emma Jane liked to dance. The most popular rock band in

Buenos Aires had been hired to play English music: Beatles, Rolling Stones, Beach Boys.

After the dance ended, Emma Jane said, Let's go back to my house and have another Coca-Cola while we're waiting for your father to pick you up.

The doorbell rang, and Raymond walked in. Lee looked at Emma Jane and gave her a little kiss—the first kiss of his life—right in front of her parents. She squeezed his hand.

Lee leaned his head back against the headrest and smiled.

“Now, Brother Brian, I don't understand why she had anything to do with me. This girl was gorgeous. I cried like a baby when we moved back to the States,” he said. “We corresponded for many years. She became an airline stewardess. She's still one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen in my life.”

A clear stream of snot dripped right out of his nose and onto his pants. I shuddered. He took a napkin out of his bag and wiped his nose, but didn't see it on his pants.

“I'd almost forgotten some of this,” he said, still smiling. He grunted. “Huh. That's one of the best memories of my life. And it's only because of you that I'm thinking about it.”

Lee got out of the car again to smoke another cigarette. He said he'd meet me inside. “I need to have lunch,” he said. “I'm hypoglycemic, and I can't go too long without food.”

I watched him in my rearview mirror. He walked bow-legged to the curb in front of Taco Bell, his pants smeared. He bent down and picked up a snipe. Some teenagers walked by while he smoked near the entrance to the restaurant.

Now he's hypoglycemic. True? Or false? Are there medical records I can access to give me a concrete answer? Does it matter one way or the other? Should I ever confront him

about these discrepancies? While I wanted the truth, I didn't want to bring up more bad memories, when clearly his good memories had some real power to invigorate him and help him to shed, at least for a few minutes, the weight and warp of homelessness that I saw in my rearview mirror.

“I like tortillas,” Lee said, “but these are not what’s used in Mexico.”

We were sitting at a table near the back of Taco Bell for an early lunch.

“Hey, man. This is *authentic* Mexican food,” I said.

“Right.” He smiled.

“How could they claim it’s a Run for the Border if it wasn’t authentic?”

Lee peeled open his burrito and took a bite of the bean-and-cheese pile.

“When’s the last time you went to the beach?” I said.

“Been a long time.”

“You want to go to the beach on Saturday night? I went out the other day, and it was the most amazing feeling being in the water. I was thinking we could just go hang out there a bit.”

“All right,” Lee said. He leaned back and put his spork on the table. “That was good. I am full.”

“If we did, would you go in the water?”

He said he would, if he could borrow some shorts. I didn’t know why I wanted him to get in the water so badly. It seemed being surrounded by that warm salt water and watching the sunset would be the complete opposite of Cortez Road, and he might be able to forget about the street.

Lee ate another bite and thanked me for the burrito, even though he had only eaten about a third of the beans and none of the tortilla. Then he asked me to write down my address and phone number again.

“I want it in two different places,” he said. “That way, hopefully, if one gets wet, the other one won’t.”

I complied, he went out for another smoke, and we drove to the church parking lot to talk some more where no one would bother us.

Without prompting. Lee began telling stories.

Lee Sandspur

The Ferris wheel began to turn. Kathy and Lee were at a rinky-dink county fair in England, and once their seat reached the top of the arc, the ride stopped to let more people on. Lee looked out and lost control. Something in his brain was telling him to get out of the basket, and his heart started beating fast. He motioned like he was trying to climb out, and Kathy screamed. When the ride finally returned them to the ground, the attendant said, Mate, no more rides for you tonight.

I don’t *want* any more. I’ve learned my lesson.

They moved on to a counter to shoot pellet guns at balloons for prizes. The guns were in terrible shape, barrels twisted. Just trying to rip people off, Lee thought. Thanks to his shooting skills, though, Lee won a huge, dark green ash tray made of glass. It was beautiful.

And he won a gold fish. Now, this was their pet. They nicknamed him Shark. Once a week, they changed the water in his bowl. Now, Kathy had to fight with him to get him out of the bowl, but all Lee had to do was stick his right hand in, and he swam up and lay down on his side.

They also owned a parakeet. They bought a double-decker cage made of bamboo—two stories high. This parakeet had plenty of room, and they bought him little toys and a mirror.

And this parakeet tore up this bamboo cage in less than two days. They replaced it with a metal cage, because obviously bamboo and parakeets didn't get along; its beak was too strong. When the bird was upset—and he liked attention, too, just like the goldfish—he picked up a beak full of bird seed and spat it as far out into the room as possible. Lee was constantly cleaning the teak wood floor in their flat.

“I wasn't too upset about it. It was funny, you know?” Lee said. “This is another good memory for me.”

Lee was calm, his eyes relaxed. I saw in him the Lee of old that I had known before I moved.

I was happy that he was happy, but I was conflicted: I couldn't stop thinking about the night before. Was Rebecca Lynn a long-lost sister? If so, how could I withhold that information from him? I knew, though, that if I mentioned Rebecca Lynn, I'd also need to confess that I'd talked to Kathy. He had trusted me enough to sign over broad permission to conduct interviews, after all, and the least I could do was to fully disclose my research to him. Did I owe him a chance to rebut Kathy's claims? It seemed that the only logical alternative was to abandon the book altogether, take him to the beach, watch the sunset, and leave him in peace with whatever version of the past he preferred. But I couldn't bring myself to do that.

Lee sat in silence, content.

I told him. I said that I had spent the previous night surfing the Internet and trying to find people he had mentioned in our conversations. I told him I had found a posting from someone named Rebecca Lynn saying, “My brother, Lee Sandspur, is missing.”

Lee was startled. He looked at me from the back seat and said, “That’s my sister! The name she was given at birth was Denise Sandspur. She got married to a gentleman named Lynn, and for whatever reason she changed her name to Rebecca.”

He said the name change was puzzling to the whole family, and that he called her Denise regardless. I told him I hadn’t been able to contact her.

He looked out the window, seemingly lost in his own memories.

I hesitated, then said, “Then I looked for Kathy or Kendra Scott in San Diego.”

“Mm hm. Kathy is my ex-wife, Kendra is her mother.”

“I found two K Scott listings in La Mesa.”

“Okay, the last I knew that’s where her mother was buying this forty-year-old house.”

I explained how I had left a message for one, and then reached Kathy on the phone at about midnight our time.

“You talked to her?” he said.

“Last night.”

He thought a moment. “Is she married?”

“Yes. Living in La Mesa. One thing that I wanted to ask you about was—,” I started, then stopped. “She had kind of a different sequence of events a couple of different times.”

“Oh, no doubt. I mean, like I said, Brian, I didn’t write all this stuff down. This has been too many years.”

“Not sequence of events. I mean—she said that, when she left for Italy, you talked about getting a divorce at that point.”

“No, she told me she *wanted* a divorce. I told her I did not want a divorce.”

“Right.”

“I wanted to try and work it out.”

“And so she says, ‘Okay, well, we won’t do it right now.’”

He said, “The reason for that was, she was collecting an extra six hundred dollars a month because she was married. And she was collecting this money from the United States Navy, and she wanted to stretch it out as long as she possibly could.”

“She said that she never got the house, or the cars or anything.”

He shot me a fiery look and said, “Well, *I* don’t have them.”

“She said you sold them, and you got—”

“No. *No.*”

“That you benefited from it all.”

“No. I don’t know if I can find it. If it’s around, it must be at my father’s house, the subpoena or whatever you call it—served by the county marshal—that I gotta vacate this place, had to give them the keys, gave me four days to get my stuff packed up.”

“This was what year again?”

“I’m tired. I’m tired of going through all this, too.”

“I know.”

“This is starting to exasperate me and give me a migraine headache. I’m telling you the best I know, the best I can remember.”

I was starting to think this hadn’t been such a good idea. Just when he had been in his best mood of my whole trip so far, I had pressed the wrong button. But then his mood lightened again, and he leaned back in the seat.

“I’m making a bad joke now,” he said. “I do not believe in reincarnation, but if there is such a thing as reincarnation, in my next life, I’m going to write down every single detail

every three minutes so if I get asked, I can answer. I don't know, brother. I don't know. And I don't care. Like I said, I wish her no ill, but I don't want to see her or talk to her ever again. Never."

Did it matter whether he was lying, or whether Kathy was lying? Or was it possible that both versions of the story were true, depending on your point of view?

"She must have ended up marrying her boyfriend," he said. "From Italy."

"She said it wasn't the same guy."

"You know where they used to have sex, from what she told me? I don't know, I wasn't there. I'm going out to smoke a cigarette." He started to get up, then stopped. He said, "They had it in the men's barracks on the United States Navy Base in Naples, Italy. Now, the women's barracks had very tight security to keep the men out, but she told me the men's barracks had no security, and he had a private room, so they'd go up to his private room, and that's where they had sex."

"Why would she tell you all that?"

"Brian, I don't know. And she took a car over to Naples, Italy, and she writes me this letter, this is before any of our marital problems had started, saying she's been in an accident, and the passenger side of the car is all smashed in—it's a two-door car—and the passenger door won't open, you know. All right, this is just wonderful. I'm just really enjoying my life right now. And that was a pain in the neck to get that car shipped over there. That cost me a small fortune. I was required by the civilian shipping company to take out the radio and cassette player. They wouldn't allow it to be in the car. I had it shipped out of the port of Baltimore. *That* was a whole wasted day. *A lot* of fun. I had that car fully detailed before it was shipped. It looked as good as if it had just come off a dealership showroom floor."

I didn't say anything.

"Now this is a part of my life I'm really not enjoying. You're bringing up some bad memories."

Again, I didn't say anything. Had he shipped the car, or hadn't he? According to Kathy, when she came back to the states, he had already sold the house and disappeared. But then, he seemed to have such detailed memories of it . . .

"I'm glad to know that apparently, her mother is still alive," Lee said. "She is a very, very nice lady."

"I suppose you don't want to hear anything more about Kathy Scott."

"I don't want nothing to do with her. I wish her a good happy long life, just leave me *alone*."

I said nothing.

"I wonder whatever happened to all of her Llardo statues. L-l-a-r-d-o, a Spanish artist. Built these porcelain statues, about this high, eight inches. As expensive as all get out. Only buy them in jewelry stores. She had such a huge collection of them because that's what I would buy her on whatever occasion, her birthday, Christmas, whatever, or just for the heck of it. Expensive as all get out, delicate as all get out. And because the artist was *dead*, these statues were worth a small fortune."

"Did she also have stuff that her dad had given her?"

"Possibly. I don't remember."

"Things from Japan?" I said. "Gifts that had sentimental value to her?"

"I don't remember, Brian."

"We can just stop talking about this."

“Yeah, let’s please. May we? I’m not enjoying this.”

This time, he opened the door, his black pants sagging, and he mumbled a play-by-play to himself: “Okay, I got out of the car, that’s good. Stand up, Lee, don’t fall down.”

While Lee leaned against the car and smoked a cigarette outside, I thought back to my conversation with Kathy: *I’m two hundred percent sure*. But I desperately wanted to believe Lee’s side of the story. He was my friend, a man I’d come to care a lot about, someone I’d shared many meals with. But things didn’t look good. I couldn’t figure out why Kathy would try to convince me that Lee wasn’t a Navy Seal if in fact he was one. What could she have to gain?

It seemed there were three potential answers to the question of Lee’s military service. First, he was telling the truth about being a Seal, and he had kept it a secret from Kathy. Second, he was not a Seal, but he believed he had been one and was delusional. Third, he was not a Seal, and he was deliberately lying to me.

Why would he lie? Was he trying to con me? Get money from me? The most I’d ever given him before was five bucks.

Did he think that if his life story wasn’t interesting enough that I would abandon the book and therefore him altogether?

Was he right?

Lee sat back down and fiddled with some paper from his bag. He blew his nose twice, then said he’d thought of something else to add.

He said, “My personal weapon of choice, meaning my sidearm, was a Smith and Wesson Model 29, .44 Magnum. Now, what I would do, is I would go at the back of the shell casing where the primer was—and you had to do this very carefully so you didn’t set the

round off—and I would scratch an X in it, and I would pour in a couple drops of mercury, and I would seal the mercury in with candle wax. Now this thing is traveling at a very high speed. And it is documented that a Smith & Wesson Model 29, .44 Magnum, done up like that, will shoot straight through three engine blocks and still be accurate. And I've done it. And I will still hit that tree limb you want me to hit.

“I know that's a little bit morbid, but I thought it might be an interesting note for the readers. I'm not trying to write the book, or anything. I just thought of it.”

Somehow, Roger Kitchens finished his McDonald's hamburger, despite having no teeth. We left the car in the corner of a parking lot, walked down a gravel alley and approached a cluster of trees, which was the location of a camp where some homeless people lived. Conscious of how my presence as a reporter might impact what was happening, I asked Roger what he thought would be the least offensive or noticeable way of recording what happened. Should I just bring my tape recorder and hope no one cares?

"I don't know if anyone is going to be back there," Roger said. "And if anyone is back there, I don't know if they're even going to talk."

"I don't need people to talk necessarily, but I don't want to go in and then just forget everything I saw."

"Get a pen and paper."

"Is that going to be just as bad, though? Me standing there writing everything down?"

He thought for a moment. "Aw, screw it. Take the tape recorder. If anyone says anything, I'll beat them up."

We walked to the edge of the thicket. No tree stood higher than about twelve feet, and no trunk was thicker than a few inches. I followed close behind Roger.

"Incoming!" Roger said. He turned to me and said, "You always have to say that so people know you're friendly."

Just a few feet into the bushes, I felt like I was in a private room. The branches overhead formed a lightly-shaded, thin canopy. The enclosed area was about as large as a bus. With nearly every step, the carpet of palm fronds rustled. The lizards had not vacated the area, even if the people apparently had.

Roger told me that Bradenton used to have quite a few homeless camps, but that some of them had been cleaned out by the police. The camp that had been just behind Burger King before the trees were cleared to eliminate hiding places had operated almost like its own town. The leader of the camp was also homeless, and people called him “The Mayor.” When new people wanted to join, he told them where they could set up their tents. Huge tarps were strung high from tree trunks to provide shelter and shade for a common area, and many of the homeless used battery-operated radios and lights.

But the camp wasn’t a safe place for someone like Lee. After a heavy rain, the only way to enter the camp was through a shin-deep pool of garbage and waste, much like the pool by the dumpster where Lee and I had sat a few days earlier. Inside, drug deals and prostitution abounded, all supervised by the Mayor, who was rumored to have been a murder suspect. One night as he was drinking there with buddies, Roger had even seen one man attack another with a pencil, lodging it in his thigh.

“So tell me what you see here that I wouldn’t get,” I said, as I walked through the small abandoned camp.

“Bedding.”

Among the piles of newspaper were even some old issues of *The East County Observer*, where I had worked before moving to Michigan. A few shopping carts lay on their sides. Bottles of all kinds, plastic and glass, were piled along the edges of the main living space. A bicycle with no front wheel lay on the ground next to a white bag full of Natural Ice bottles. A black winter coat, a mattress and box spring, a Steelers T-shirt, a pair of black leather pants, a belt.

I asked why everyone wore black clothes, and Roger responded simply: “Night people.”

“What’s with these?” I said, pointing to some wooden pallets standing on end.

“That’s how you make a room,” Roger said. The pallets were arranged to separate a living space for someone. Spare pieces of bedrails sectioned off other corners of the “room.” Piles and piles of junk mail were strewn about. A spatula, a white hanger. Hot sauce packets from Taco Bell, a broken flashlight, plastic bags hanging on palm fronds.

Roger said, “They hang the food so the animals don’t get it. What you don’t see is the possums, the coons.”

“They come through here, even with people living here?”

“They live here, too! They’re pets.”

“A pet possum. Huh.”

I saw a silver-plated baby spoon, a stereo speaker, pots, and pans. “Do they ever make a fire out here?”

“Sure.”

“How do they keep it hidden? People just don’t want to bother coming in and checking them out?”

“Exactly.”

Toilet paper. Deodorant lying on the ground. Leaning against one tree was a book, its pages burned and stuck together: *Introduction to Numerical Analysis. International Series in Pure and Applied Mathematics.*

Roger saw someone approaching, and he stepped out of the camp. He said, “Hey, dude! Tracy, this is my friend, Brian.”

“What’s going on?” I said through the trees.

Tracy said, “I think I recognize him. Probably from America’s Top Wanted.”

“You got me,” I said.

“Are you still down here?” Roger said.

“No,” Tracy said, “I got an apartment.”

“Where you going to?”

“Man, you ditched me last time.”

I saw another book called *Back to Reading: Secondary School Teaching*. More newspapers. A pair of blue jeans half-buried in sand next to a pair of boots.

Roger re-entered a few minutes later and said he was going to leave and hang out with Tracy for a while. Before he left, he said, “These camps are dangerous. I used to spend a lot of time down in Detroit. Okay. And dude, let me tell you something. I’d rather be on the streets of Detroit. And that’s a fact. I’d rather be in Wayne County Jail than in some of these woods in Manatee County.”

I tried to imagine what I would do if I were homeless. Was it worth the risk of all the violence to be in a camp like this? Or was there protection in numbers? The alternative seemed to be wandering the streets and constantly searching for a new place to sleep. No lasting relationships. No friends. Nothing but the groan of civilization surrounding you, the sweat in your nostrils that smelled and tasted like exhaust from the one and only constant: the road.

The next morning, I met with Lee again, and we sat under the same tree in the church parking lot. Lee was in the back seat, and I in the front with some military records request forms I had printed off the Internet at the library.

“I gotta get some eye glasses,” Lee said. “That print is too small.”

“I’ll read it off to you. I just think it would be cool to have your military records in the book.”

“I’ve been through this, Brian, so many times, that I’m getting tired of going through it. But you go ahead and do what you want to do.”

“Okay.”

“Good luck getting into my military records.”

“Really?”

“Because the most you’re going to find out is—and then you’re going to set off red flags, and the NIS is going to be coming after me, wanting to know who is Brian McMillan, and how does he know your Navy call sign? How does he know your name, social security number, date of birth. But that’s fine. Because I really don’t care anymore.”

“Okay.”

“I just don’t care. But if a United States senator cannot get into my military records, how is anybody else going to get into them?”

I told him I’d just like to send it off and see what comes back. For the sake of the book, for completeness. And so we filled it out.

Name: Sandspur, Lee Eric

Date of Birth: November 2, 1952

Place of Birth: Dade City, Florida

I said, "Okay. Then we have 'Date entered.'"

He paused. Then he said, "April 26, 1968."

Officer/Enlisted: Enlisted

I read from the form: "Is this person deceased?"

"No. I'm alive as far as I know."

Deceased: No

I was listening, but I was also reviewing the form we had just been filling out. I said, "April 1968. So you were... I think that makes you 15 years old."

He didn't say anything, but looked troubled. His eyebrows furrowed, and he frowned.

"No. Must not have been '68 then. It must have been... 1971..."

"So '71 to '84? Does that sound right?"

"More or less, Brian. I don't have the discharge papers anymore."

I looked at him. Was he unsure? Or was he lying to me? Still, I didn't want to push him away from me by turning this into an inquisition.

He had told me before that he was in class 39, and I asked how the class system worked in the Seals. He said I could read all about it in the book he'd given me by Rad Miller, Jr.

He said, "I love that cover photograph of him wearing all these ammo belts. And I love the back cover, except I disagree with the wording: 'Arguably, the hardest warrior training in the world, the United States Navy Seals.' What? It's not *arguably*, it *is*. You know? You stupid *idiot!*"

I had started to laugh, but I stopped when I saw how serious he was. The sounds of kids screaming and laughing at a preschool next door to the church seeped in through my window. Clouds hung overhead, stagnant.

He said, “Serious training. That’s where you carry telephone poles over your head, running through the surf in full combat gear. Now, that’s hard. That is really hard.”

“Telephone poles,” I repeated. Was this an exaggeration? Or did he want me to believe this literally? Was it a team of seamen lifting a pole together?

“Telephone poles, over your head.”

“That was when you had a stronger back, I guess.” I forced a laugh, trying to keep things light. “How did you start as a Seal?”

“You don’t volunteer to be a Navy Seal. It does not work that way. Senior Seals come and recruit you. They make you an offer.” Then he stopped and said, “Are you interested in this?” All of a sudden he was engaged again. A few minutes earlier, he had complained about my incessant, discomfiting questions, and now he was offering material for exposition. He *wanted* to be the subject of this book.

“Yeah, I’m interested,” I said.

He said his cousin had been a diver for the Navy, and he took Lee to a pool when Lee was a teenager in Key West. He gave Lee an official pair of United States Navy swim fins, face mask, snorkel, and a buoyancy compensator.

I said, “Is that when you first thought being a Seal would be a cool thing?”

“Yeah, I think it was. I admired him. Now, when you graduate as a Seal, you go through a ceremony. Family members are allowed to come, and they take these 24-karat gold Seal symbols, and they pound it into your left chest. And those pins hurt, but out of pride or

ego or whatever—stupidity—you don't cry. Yeah, you're bleeding, so what. I made it. Training's over.”

I was confused. I repeated, “They pound a pin into your chest.”

We sat in silence.

I changed the subject. “It seems like I've heard that when people go in the military, they learn a special skill, like engineering. What did you do?”

“I was the dummy. In the U.S. Navy, that's what you call it. I was a boatswain's mate. I'm the guy that knows how to tie the knots. I'm the guy that cleans up the boat, the ship.”

I asked him if he was ever involved with computers.

“Not in the Navy,” he said. “I took that upon myself when I got out of the Navy because there was such a shortage of computer programmers, and they were paying so good. I mean, otherwise, what's my option? I can kill people. Am I supposed to become a hit man for the Mafia?”

His face seemed to be growing darker. His eyes appeared angry. He said, “I have nightmares *every single night*—even now. I wake up in a cold sweat. If I'm sleeping in a bed, the sheets and the pillow would just be soaked with sweat. People make the mistake of thinking the Navy Seals are cold-blooded killers. We only kill if it is absolutely necessary. If we have an option, we will use the option.”

I sat quietly and listened. The tape recorder was on a compartment between the two front bucket seats, and it continued to roll, slowly. Lee grew more reflective.

He said, “I am very proud of the fact that there are only two thousand Navy Seals on duty at one time, and we're still covering the whole world. Wherever there's trouble, we will

be there. But it makes for a miserable, rotten personal life. I agree with what my father called me one time. He was really angry at me, because I was re-upping for another tour. He said, ‘All you are is a low-paid, highly-trained assassin.’ I said, ‘Yeah, you’re right, Dad. That’s about it.’” He shrugged. “Somebody’s gotta do it.”

He continued, “It’s just like President John F. Kennedy said when he formed the Navy Seals. He knew terrorism was coming. He said, ‘What I need, what I want’—in his Boston accent—‘is a small group that can go in, get it done, and not embarrass the United States government.’ Tough assignment. A little hard. I remember he held his hand up like this. He said, ‘I want a very small group of men that can go in and get it done.’”

I thought for a moment. At the earliest, Lee went into the Navy in about 1970. John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, eleven years after Lee was born. What was going on in Lee’s head? I said, “So he’s holding his hand like this?”

“Yeah. I just showed you.”

“Boston accent and all?”

“Boston accent and all. And as far as I’m concerned, and I’m not a homosexual, JFK was a very handsome man.”

“Where was that?” I said.

“That was at Washington, D.C., at the White House. We had completed our training, and that’s the group he selected. That was his decision.”

“That was the group Kennedy—”

“President Kennedy and I didn’t sit down and have lunch together and talk for three hours, and disclose everything. You know, I’m just an enlisted puke, I’m a nothing, I’m a piece of filth. Come on, Brian. The President of the United States, Commander in Chief of all

the military forces, orders you to be there, you *better* be there! I'm sorry to be so *grumpy*, but you're making this really hard."

Lee took a drink from his Gatorade bottle full of foam. A drop clung to his lips. He said, "You must not have had any military service."

"Nope."

He put a cigarette in his mouth and searched in his bag. "So many questions. You're bringing up very, very painful memories."

He got out of the car, and I walked out with him. We leaned against the side of the car under a tree in the parking lot. I offered to help him sit down on the curb, and he thanked me.

"I don't know what's harder," he said, "getting down, or getting up. Saturday at the beach, a chair would be good. Anchor it in the sand, and then I can sit and get up and get down without asking anybody for help. You know, it's been a long time since I swam in the ocean."

"How long do you think?"

"I don't *know*, Brian. Long time."

"It's pretty warm—too warm, almost. But, once you're wet, and you stand back up, the wind cools you off."

"Yeah." He drew from the cigarette, and he said, "Once again, I want to apologize for being so grumpy, but I—two nights in a row with almost no sleep."

I nodded.

"And then I got eggs thrown at me by some teenagers. I don't know why people have to do things like that." He coughed and sniffled. Then he looked at his watch and said, "What time is it? What does my Mickey Mouse say? It's only 10:40 in the morning."

I thought this was funny. “Do you wear a Mickey Mouse watch?”

“That’s just what I call it.”

I let my imagination lead me to Lee’s bedroom as a young boy, and I pictured Mickey Mouse’s white-gloved hands marking the hours and minutes on the wall. What was the boy Lee like?

I asked him why he called it a Mickey Mouse clock. “Did you used to have a clock like that?”

“No, that’s just—I don’t care if it’s a four-thousand-dollar Rolex, I’m still going to call it my Mickey Mouse. That’s just what I *call* it. I don’t know *why*.”

I laughed weakly, and Lee was annoyed. He shook his head and said, “Boy, I tell you, Brian, I gotta be honest with you. You are tearing me to pieces with all these questions. You seem to want to know every detail about my life.”

“Well isn’t it kind of a good thing? Your life matters just as much as anyone else’s.”

“No, it doesn’t. No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does.”

“I’m a piece of filth.”

“Everyone’s life matters the same.”

“I don’t want to get into an argument. I’m a piece of filth. For sixteen years I killed people for a paycheck. How do you think that makes me feel when I go to bed at night?”

I felt myself becoming annoyed, too. I hadn’t meant any harm by the Mickey Mouse question. I thought of it as a pleasant subject change from the telephone poles on shoulders, the pins in the chests. And so, whereas I had spared him the potential embarrassment of

grilling him about seeing Kennedy in the White House, now I let my curiosity outweigh my generosity for him, and I steered the conversation there again.

“Do you remember where you were when Kennedy was assassinated?”

Without any hesitation, Lee said, “I was in Key West, Florida. I was in sixth grade on a Navy Housing Base a short walk from our duplex.”

He hadn’t understood that he’d been caught, and I was taken back.

He continued, “And I didn’t really understand what’s going on. I was just a young kid. I got home, and my mother was crying in front of the television. I think we were out of school for a week, maybe longer. I watched the horses carry the casket to Arlington Cemetery. That was not a good time. Now, when Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, I was in San Diego. And this good friend of mine in the Navy—we were crying and hugging each other.”

“This was when you were serving in the Navy?”

“He was in the Navy, I was in the Navy. We were both on active duty.”

“In 1968?”

“Whenever Bobby Kennedy was assassinated.”

“Yeah, 1968.” I was at a loss for what to do with this. In 1968, Lee was fifteen, and we’d just established that he was not in the Navy that early.

Lee finished smoking, and I helped him back into the car. Sniffing, he gathered some papers into a garbage sack on the back seat. I was supposed to meet my old boss from the newspaper for lunch, but I offered to buy Lee some food before I had to leave. Lee wanted a chili from Wendy’s, if it wasn’t too expensive. As I drove there, Lee described the White House luncheon, down to the manicured grounds.

“We had chicken salad sandwiches, egg salad sandwiches, potato salad, chips, all kinds of soda pop. I don’t remember if they gave us a dessert or not.”

“Did anyone get to shake the president’s hand?”

“Not us. We’re dirt, we’re filth,” he said, shaking his head. “You ask hard questions, Brian. You really do.”

“That’s what they pay me the big bucks for.”

“Now again, I apologize for being so grumpy. Two nights without sleep. And then tough questions. And again, I wish you had military service. Because then you wouldn’t ask some of these questions.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that being at the White House would be such a bad memory. It seems like that would be pretty cool.”

“Well, I’m not that way. I would just as soon have skipped it. I didn’t like it.”

“Well, when would you ever get to see President Kennedy again?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Like I said, I’m a peon. I’m a piece of filth. I don’t want to see my commander in chief.”

“But what made you a piece of filth? You were going through training—”

“Because of what I *did*, and the way I feel, the way I believe. I don’t *care* what anybody else *says*.”

“But what did you—”

“I *feel* about myself the way that I *feel*.”

We drove in silence the rest of the way. As we pulled in to the drive through, Lee told me he’d like onions with his chili. A young woman’s voice came through the speaker and asked if I wanted cheese with the chili. I relayed the question to Lee.

“I don’t want cheese,” he said, “I want *onions*.”

I said into the microphone, “No cheese. Do you have onions you can put on it?”

“Yes, sir. Anything else for you?”

I asked for two cups of water, and then Lee leaned forward and started saying quickly, almost desperately, “Do they have a—do they have a—”

“That’ll be one seventeen. Pull forward please.”

“Do they have a small hamburger?” Lee said finally.

I ordered a Junior Hamburger for Lee, pulled forward and paid for the food. But there was no chili in the bag, so I told the woman in the window.

She said, “What’s in there?”

Lee was getting angry. “The chili!”

She said again, straining to hear, “*What’s* in there?”

I said, “Just the chili.”

Lee screamed, “The *chili*! Stupid woman! I’ve been screaming it at you. Dumb piece of filth.”

“Just relax,” I said to him.

“Blast!” he yelled. “Another stressful day. I can see that already.”

I thanked her and handed the chili back to Lee. I tried to change the subject as we drove away. “You want to go back to that Burger King place with that cart, see if the cart’s there?”

“I guess so,” he said. “I swear, some of these places. They must give an intelligence test when you apply for a job. And if you’re not *stupid* enough, they’re not going to hire you. It really *irritates* me.”

I was angry at Lee for being so thick-headed. I said, “Still, you’ve got to admire her for trying to work hard, you know?”

He said I must be more patient than he is, since his blood sugar had dropped. He took a bite out of the hamburger.

“I don’t know what I’ll do later,” he said. “Figure out a way this afternoon to make some money so I can eat tonight. Thanks again for the food. It’s a lot better than eating out of the dumpster. I don’t know what I’ll do tonight. Figure out something.”

I knew he was fishing. It always made him feel better to drop hints, rather than ask for money outright. But I wasn’t in the mood to be generous. I was tired. I asked him, “Were you ever married to anyone before Kathy?”

“Oh, no. Before Kathy, my most serious date was a drive-in in Santee, California.”

Liar, I thought.

He ate more of his hamburger, and we parked near his shopping cart at the Burger King parking lot. We arranged to meet again the next day in the late afternoon to have some dinner, and then go to the beach. He asked me where I was headed now, and I told him I was going to meet up with some of my former co-workers at the newspaper in Lakewood Ranch.

“Now, please don’t get upset with me,” he said. “Do you mind if I just lay down in your back seat, and they won’t even see me? Get a little nap?”

“Um.”

“I’ve had almost two nights of almost no sleep.”

“I don’t know. But something about it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Okay, sorry to even ask.”

I hadn't been expecting that. His face dropped, and he stared into his chili and took another bite. His thin beard was streaked with gray, and his thin, sun-battered arms had goosebumps even though it was almost too warm for me in the car.

He said, "I mean, I wouldn't smoke in your car or anything. And unless they walked right up on the car, they're not even going to see me."

"I just might need to take people in the car, I don't know."

"Good point. Shoot," he said, almost to himself. "I'm just looking for a place to get a little sleep."

I didn't say anything.

"Yeah, sorry to even ask you, brother. I shouldn't have even asked. I apologize."

Again, I said nothing.

I imagined him wandering the streets, half asleep in the middle of the day, but unable to lie down anywhere. I said feebly, "Thanks, Lee, for all your help."

"I don't feel like I'm helping you any. I feel like I'm hindering you."

He closed the door, and I drove to one of the richest places in the county to have lunch at a nice restaurant on my old boss's tab.

I wished I could verify something—anything—about Lee’s past. I was supposed to meet with him again the next day, and I wanted something fast. After lunch with my old co-workers, I returned to the newspaper office. After a few phone calls, I was able to speak with the registrar’s office at the University of Texas at Austin just before they closed for the day. I said I needed to know if Lee had really gone to school there, and if he had really received a Master’s, like he had said at Burger King earlier in the week. On the phone, a young woman with a southern accent asked me for Lee’s date of birth, and I gave it to her.

“Those records are on microfilm,” she said. “I’ll have to get back to you about it on Monday. How can I reach you?”

“Wait,” I pleaded. “You’ve got to help me. I’m going to be out of town on Monday, and I need it today. Is there any possible way you can check now?”

She sighed and agreed to call me back. About five minutes later, the phone rang, and she said she had found Lee Eric Sandspur in the records. He enrolled in September 1970, and withdrew in January 1972. He did not receive a degree.

“Is it possible at all that he could have come back for a Master’s degree there?”

“Not unless he changed his name when he was going to school here.”

The next day, before meeting Lee, I searched the Internet and found an obituary that led me to the phone number for Madeline Lawrence, one of Lee’s aunts who lived in the middle of Florida. I pictured a white-haired grandma as she spoke slowly and without pretense.

“Why would you want to write a book about *him*?”

I explained how the project had come about, and that now I was trying to fill in some holes in his past. She said no one in the family had heard anything about him in a decade. But in the late 1990s, when Lee was about 45 years old, he had lived with her for two weeks.

Madeline Lawrence

Lee did his own laundry, washed the dishes and kept up with the coffee maker. But something didn't seem right. He was always pacing the floor, and he stayed up all night.

I could really use some money, Lee said. Do you have five dollars? I need to go to the store.

He called his cousins in the middle of the night, and they complained to Madeline that he had to stop. They needed their sleep, and Lee got grumpy when they didn't return his calls right away.

More than once, Madeline discovered she had less money in her purse than she had remembered.

Lee said he was a Navy Seal, but Madeline wasn't so sure. She called her brother, Raymond, who was Lee's father.

He was never a Seal, Raymond said.

Madeline was confused. She thought, Why would he be telling me stuff like this? I don't understand.

Lee then said he had cancer.

The doctor is going to have to amputate my leg, he said.

"How did Lee respond to Raymond's death?" I asked Madeline. I knew he had taken his mother's death hard.

"Raymond's death?" she said.

"Lee told me he died in 2002."

“What! Raymond’s not doing good—he hasn’t called me in a long while—but he’s still alive. He just turned 79.”

I was stunned. He had a long list of questionable stories, but I couldn’t imagine how he would talk his way out of this one. I thought of what Kathy had told me: *This is how Lee closes doors.*

Madeline gave me phone numbers for Lee’s cousin, and for his sister, Rebecca. I thanked her and asked if she wanted me to pass a message to Lee.

“That we all still love him. We don’t understand what’s happened to him or where he went to. We all did things maybe some people don’t like, but you can forgive, or you can overlook.”

All week, rather than staying in a hotel, I had been staying with Bret Fitzgerald and his wife, but I’d been so busy that I had barely seen them. After I spoke with Madeline Lawrence, and before I left to take Lee to the beach, I sat down with Bret to get his perspective on Lee. We were in the small den, which is where I had been sleeping on an air mattress for the week in the Fitzgeralds’ home. He recalled the brief period when Lee was sober and actively attending church.

“I was hopeful for him,” Bret said. He was sitting in a black swivel chair and dressed in a shirt and tie. “But I’m enough of a cynic to where, I would have been surprised if he had been able to keep his head above water.”

Bret Fitzgerald

In 2006, Lee arrived at church during a baptismal service for someone he didn't know. Bret saw him enter the room, where a few dozen people were sitting on folding chairs, and approach the microphone, where people were taking turns expressing their faith.

Lee was looped, drunk.

Oh, my gosh, Bret thought. Buckle your seatbelts: there's no telling where this flight's going.

Brothers and sisters, Lee said. Hold true to what you believe. If you don't, you'll end up like me.

Months later, when Bret became the bishop, or pastor, of the congregation, he also became responsible for ensuring that the church meetings were uplifting. This was a particularly delicate task on the first Sunday of every month, when members of the congregation were invited, as they felt so inspired, to testify for a few minutes from the pulpit without any kind of script or prior preparation. Bret had a plan in place for the rare situation when the speaker might say something offensive from the pulpit. He would tap a speaker on the shoulder and ask him or her to conclude. If the speaker should resist, Bret's assistant was to approach the microphone and announce, "The meeting is over. Please go to Sunday school."

One testimony Sunday, Lee showed up. He wheeled his walker to one of the rear pews.

He looks absolutely ripped, Bret thought.

Lee wore a red T-shirt, jeans, and he was hunched over and hobbling. The last time Bret had seen him, Lee was able to walk fine on his own. Testimony meeting started, and one minute in, Lee made his way to the front pew. Bret sent his assistant to talk to Lee and find out if he was drunk; if so, Lee

was would not be allowed to approach the pulpit. After the assistant spoke to him, Lee left the building.

“The thing is, I can relate to Lee,” Bret said. “I have an addictive personality. That’s why I run five miles every day: I replace the drug addiction with something physical. I’ve never injected anything into my body, but I have tried everything else. If it can be popped, smoked, inhaled, I’ve done it. And it never leaves you. I used to snort coke, and not a day goes by—not a single day—that at some point during the day the dozens of substances I’ve used bubble back to the surface. I used to do that stuff all day long. When I worked for Orkin, I would get toasted, smoke a joint, and spray lawns all day long.”

I had known Bret for a few years now, and this was news to me. But it gave me a hint of hope for Lee. If Bret could kick the habits and go on to lead a whole congregation, could Lee clean up, too? I asked Bret if his experiences with drugs made him empathize more with Lee.

“Not on the stand,” he said. “There, all I’m thinking about is my charge to keep the meeting a sacred place. I take those responsibilities as bishop incredibly seriously. I have to go report to the Lord at some point on my stewardship as bishop, and I’ll answer for that, whether I allowed testimony meetings to fly out of control, or I allowed someone to speak when I knew they were under the influence of something. But deep down inside, I have some sympathy because I know how hard it is.

“For me, the guilt is gone, but the memories aren’t, and if I could erase them, I would. Still, everything I have done has made me who I am, and I have to use all my experiences to try to bring about His will. I might be able to reach some people that others can’t.”

Lee spread out his windbreaker, with the outer lining down on the backseat, and sat down. He wore plaid shirt on top of other T-shirts, along with his black pants that came only to mid-calf. He was damp and shivering. I turned off the air conditioning.

“Hungry?” I said, as I pulled away from our meeting place at the Burger King overhang.

“I have a little bit of an appetite, how about you?” Lee appeared to be in a humble state. His questions were subdued and polite. “Hailey’s spaghetti would be wonderful. I know that’s not possible.”

I suggested we try a sub place nearby. I parked in front of the restaurant and helped Lee walk slowly through the rain to the overhang. We went inside, but the air conditioning was so strong, and Lee was already so wet, that he stood outside to stay warm. I brought the sub out, and we ate in the car.

In between chews, he said, “This weather’s gotta stop. I was so looking forward to going to the beach.”

“I say we still go.”

“I say we do, too. We may have to stay in your car.”

“Well,” I said, “I have shorts and towels. So what if it’s raining? We’re going to get wet anyway.”

“True.” His eyes were bright, and he looked content. I felt content, too. I was in Florida visiting a friend on vacation. I had no other obligations that day besides spending time with him, and I would be leaving the next day. I felt that I had done some good by spending so much time with, despite the testy moments.

“When I was stationed in San Diego,” he said, “I was renting an apartment with one of the guys I was working with—Kevin Heilmann. They had a swimming pool of course, rec room, all that nonsense, and they had a Jacuzzi. And this is in December. And in San Diego in December, you can still go swimming. Well, he and I were in the Jacuzzi relaxing our muscles. We’d had a pretty hard day. And it starts snowing. Now, of course it melted immediately. And we’re just sitting there in this Jacuzzi, letting the snow fall on us.”

He looked out the window and said, “Oh, no. More lightning strikes. I don’t believe this.”

“Yeah, hopefully the lightning doesn’t go on, because you can’t go in the water with the lightning.”

We pulled under the overhang at the Blue Dolphin car wash, so Lee could get to his bags. I asked Lee if he wanted me to pop the trunk.

“Please. I think I need you to. Otherwise, I don’t think I can get to it. Just kidding Bad joke.”

Lee prepared to get out of the car, talking to himself: Put this over here. Gather up this garbage. All of this is trash. Seatbelt off. He got out of the car, and I sat inside to wait. He leaned against the car and lit a cigarette with his silver Zippo lighter. He took a drag and then let the smoke fly away, a glamorous puff of smoke like in an old movie.

“It doesn’t work to try to smoke a cigarette with wet hands,” he said when he got back in.

A man with long hair walked by without noticing us. “There’s Sammy,” Lee said. “He’s an all right guy. He’s homeless, but he’s an okay guy. He served in Vietnam.”

The rain continued all the way as we drove to Bradenton Beach at the end of Cortez Road West, about twenty minutes from Lee's normal hangouts. I parked the car and waited, while Lee again stood outside with a cigarette in the drizzle. The wind picked up, and the flame flickered on the Zippo.

Our plan to swim in the Gulf appeared unrealistic.

When he got back in the car, I thought about Madeline Lawrence's last comment: *We all did things . . . But you can forgive*. Of all the messages Lee needed to hear, this may have been the most important. Surely it would do him some good to see that he was loved by the very people he had supposedly wronged. I told him that I spoken to his aunt on the phone earlier that day. Would he like to speak to her?

"Not interested."

"Why not?" I said.

"I just don't want to, Brian, it's that simple. There's no reason or rhyme, no serious, long, deep, involved thinking here. I don't want to. That's my reason," he said. "Because I don't want to."

The wipers clicked as they pressed down at the edge of the windshield. A shack-like restroom stood twenty yards in front of us, and in the distance, beyond a row of trees, a lifeguard tower guarded the beach.

Lee said, "Since we started this, a lot of things have been stirred up that I thought were dead, buried, over and done with, behind me, in my past. I did it, move on. I know you need to do it for research, but a lot of this getting on the Internet, and calling people and leaving messages—you're going to end up causing me problems. I don't *want* anybody to know that I'm in Bradenton. I don't want to see or talk to any of them. And I definitely don't

want them knowing Gloria Beatrice's name, phone number, address. I don't want it, I don't need it. I'm stressed out. I'm doing my best just to survive. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm not hurting anybody. I'm not breaking any laws. I'm just trying to live out the rest of my miserable life. In peace."

"Do you just get along with them that badly?"

"No. I'm embarrassed, Brian. I'm humiliated to be in the position I'm in. And begging people for money. Too much stress. Way, way too much."

We sat in silence and watched the wipers.

Lee said, "Even if I was going to, which I'm not, I can't even hang my clothes anywhere, on a fence. Not with this rain starts, rain stops, rain starts, rain stops. At least the lightning stopped."

I didn't respond. Cloud cover diffused the sunlight, and the world around us glowed a dim, evening gray. I tried to imagine myself without a home, estranged from my family, dependent on alcohol year after year. It must be horrible, but at what point does facing the past become less painful than persisting in such a present? Did he not believe atonement was possible? Drops of water rolled down the windshield, pulling other drops along, a downward momentum.

"You know, Lee," I said quietly, "I know a lot about you. But in some ways, I don't feel like I know you very well."

He said, "That's probably *my* fault. I'm a loner, I'm a private person. Nothing personal against you, it's just how I am. I don't want to play the 'why' questions, it's just how I am. Now, I've been cooperating with you. I signed the forms, I'm answering the questions to the best of my ability. Now, if you—whenever you ever get it, you know,

something on paper, and if I have the opportunity, I can look over and say, no, no, no, I told you wrong, it wasn't this date, it was *this* date. You know, I might have gotten things out of sequence. I've lived in so many places. I can't remember everywhere I've lived. I remember the places, but I can't always tell you I went from this city to that city to this city to that city."

"It's not things like what city you lived in when. I mean, I'm trying to do that out of some kind of curiosity, for completeness . . ."

I looked out again at the water in the distance. No lightning had flashed for some time. The waves crashed and spread themselves out over the sand. I imagined walking into the water with Lee and watching him transform from a bitter homeless man into a man. This was supposed to be an important moment in his life, a turning point, perhaps. But I realized now that the hope for change I had fostered was my own delusion.

I knew what his answer would be, but I asked it anyway: "Think it's safe to go in the water?"

"No. I'm not going in the water. See those whitecaps? I'm not going in the water. The red flag's still up. Plus, there's no lifeguards. And somewhere around here there's a stretch covered with broken shells between the higher beach and the water's edge, and once I just tore up the bottoms of my feet."

I was beginning to tune him out. If he would just get away from the street and into the water. If he would just try, and stop making excuses.

He continued, "Those whitecaps are building up. Somewhere out there, there's gotta be an undertow that will drag you out deeper, farther I mean, not deeper. No, it was a good idea, and I was looking forward to it, but the weather didn't cooperate. I'm not going in."

Everything he said made sense, sure. He was weak, and it might be dangerous. But so was stumbling drunk down a busy road all day. After everything I'd done for him, and everything Gloria and his family, and everyone at church, the missionaries—and he wouldn't even get his feet wet—

“You told me the other day that your mother died in 1995,” I said.

“November 2, 1995.”

“And your dad died when?”

“He was alive when I left in '99. It wasn't 2000. Maybe 2003? I don't know.”

“If you were here, and no one was contacting you, how did you find out?”

He sighed. “I was here in Bradenton. I went to the dollar store and bought a birthday card. I put my return address on it, which I probably shouldn't have done. But the card was returned to me, and the postmaster had stamped it, ‘Deceased.’ It wasn't ‘Bad Address’ or anything, it was ‘Deceased.’ So I just tore the card in half and threw it in the trash.”

“What if I were to tell you if he were still alive?”

“That would be nice. It would be wonderful.” He spoke listlessly, and I wasn't sure I believed it. Did he really believe his father was dead, or was this one of his stories?

He said, “But it would be a mean joke, whoever put that stamp ‘Deceased’ on the envelope. I could understand if he didn't want it and returned it back to me unopened. I understand that. You know, he could just hand-write ‘Return to Sender’ and put it back in the mail box,” he said. “He is alive?”

“Yep.”

“Still living in Orlando?”

“No. I haven’t actually been able to talk to him, but he lives in the Daytona Beach area.”

“How did you find this out?”

“I talked to one of your aunts. Madeline Lawrence.”

“Now I really got—I’m getting the shakes. I’ve got nerves here.”

“Why?” I said.

“I don’t know. All this is just stuff I don’t want to go through. I’m going to step outside and smoke a cigarette, calm my nerves down.”

He grunted and got up. He lit the cigarette as he sat on the edge of the seat, and when he closed the door, a wisp of smoke was trapped in the car. The windshield dripped, blurring the scene in front of me. Out the rear window, smoke curled around Lee’s head. His ring finger shook slightly as he held the cigarette between drags. A buggy painted in a green-and-brown camouflage pattern drove by. Marine Rescue. Lee waddled away from the car and toward the bathrooms. He almost disappeared behind a No Parking sign. I had been debating whether to bring up the discrepancies in his story, and now I decided to ask him about all of it. If we weren’t going in the water, maybe forcing him to face his own stories *would* make some kind of a dent. It didn’t seem like things could get much worse. And besides, I wanted the answers for the book.

After the bathroom, Lee came back and got his Gatorade bottle out of his bag in the trunk before sitting back down in the car.

“Okay, two things here,” he said in an energetic voice. “If you have to go to the restroom, the men’s is on the left hand side. Use the one closest to the car, because it has

plenty of toilet paper, and it flushes. The two going toward the water are nasty and won't flush."

I stared at the ripples in the flooded parking lot and the undulating palm fronds overhead.

He said, "So, I feel like I'm disappointing you, or irritating you or something. Making you angry. And I don't want to do that."

"It's not anything like that. I just—I've gotten pretty confused about a few different points."

"Well, ask the questions. Maybe I can clear it up for you. If I don't know, I'll say I don't know."

Here goes.

I said, "The first thing is about the book that you gave me. When you called me up to say, 'There's a picture of me in the book'"—

"No! I was wrong. My father had the pictures. Maybe he still does—you said he's still alive," he said. "No, those pictures are not me. I was wrong about that. I was confused."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "Sorry about that. I *had* pictures of me. Either I had them, or my youngest sister has them, if they didn't throw them away."

For some time, we didn't say anything. The waves rolled and rolled into the sand, and the tops of the trees swayed.

"Okay, does that settle that?" Lee said.

“When I talked to you outside of Burger King the other day, though, I brought that up to you. I said, ‘It’s says “Me,” but the author was referring to himself.’ But you seemed adamant. ‘No, that’s “Me.”’ In the book. And I almost wondered if you *believed* it was you.”

“Brian. How many times do I have to go over this with you? I just said, I apologized, I was wrong.”

“You asked if that settled the question. I was trying to answer.”

I took a long, deep breath. “And when you saw JFK at the White House. After your training?”

“Get out of here, fly.” Lee rolled his window down a few inches. “There! Now it’s gone.”

“But JFK died when you were in sixth grade.”

“That’s right,” he said, sounding surprised. “Yeah, I was in Key West, Florida, in sixth grade, and I came home from school. My mother was crying. I didn’t understand what was going on. Huh. So who talked to us at the White House? Maybe it was . . . Was it his brother Bobby? Who was attorney general?”

“He was killed in 1968.”

“Was it? I don’t know who talked. I’m not being much help, am I?”

“Because when we talked about it, I asked you where were you when he was killed, and you remembered that very vividly, but it seemed like you remembered the speech at the White House just as vividly, if not more so.”

“Who talked to us?” Lee seemed genuinely confused. Then he said, “My shirt’s all wet now. I don’t know how I’m going make all of this dry. I can’t make any money in this kind of miserable weather.”

Rain drops and wind textured the enormous puddle in front of the car, pocking the surface.

“Okay, anything else?” Lee said.

I didn’t feel satisfied in the least with his answers so far, but I didn’t have the patience to continue pressing about them, since he apparently had no intention of admitting anything. I said, “When we went to Burger King the first day I got here, we were talking about your Monopoly game with Elder Paul and Elder Walker. And I said, ‘Do you think it was kind of ironic that you, as a homeless man, were beating this missionary at a money game.’”

“Up to a point. Then Elder Walker—”

“Then Elder Walker beat him, I know—”

“He had all four railroads.”

“—but you said, ‘No, it wouldn’t be ironic, because I got my masters in mathematics from the University of Texas.’”

“I started there. I didn’t finish there. I finished at George Mason University, Washington, D.C., area. It’s not in D.C., it’s in Virginia, Fairfax City. There’s a Fairfax County, and also a Fairfax City, very small. Very small school.”

“Where did you do your bachelor’s degree?”

“I started at University of Texas, and then I got drafted. I finished it through the mail, where you write and get these courses, and you send your homework back in.”

“What was the school?”

“I don’t remember. I don’t think it was Texas. It might have been. No, no, no. San Diego area. Santee? I think it was Santee.”

“But you know you got your masters from George Mason.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s where. I don’t have any degree certificate. I’m sorry. I think I’m developing Alzheimer’s,” he said.

“One other thing.”

“Is it the last thing? Or is there more?” He looked at me like a child who was being punished. “Just to prepare me. I don’t mind it.”

“I don’t know if it’s the last thing,” I said, getting frustrated that I hadn’t been able to quite catch him yet. “Your aunt said that you’ve been married before. That you were married twice. You were married the first time to someone that—”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about her. Caren. In Pennsylvania, a farming community. It’s another one of these small towns, where you blink when you’re driving through it, and you’re going to miss it. Very small. Very bizarre place. In an intersection downtown, you could walk diagonally, corner to corner, you know.”

“So how did that end?”

“She divorced me.” He paused, looking out the window. “I hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“Do you know about what year it was?”

“The divorce? Let’s see. August. July to September, 1978.”

“Where were you living at that point?”

“I was in the San Diego city limits. I was renting a small one-bedroom apartment. I was driving a Dodge, full-sized van, making car payments on her car, a Ford. I sold that van to a guy in the Navy, and I bought his car, a little red Mazda with a rotary engine, Rx3—”

“It seems that—well, when I found out that you were married before, it made me feel a little funny.” I felt I’d been had. I had been lied to.

He said, “It makes me feel funny that I forgot her. It was a short marriage. I remember what the judge said. ‘This marriage is dissolved.’ The lawyer I used was Jim somebody. Recommended to me by Kevin Heilmann, because he had used him for something, not a divorce, but some legal matter.” Lee shook his head and rubbed his eyes. He said, “I don’t know. I’m getting all confused now.”

“Maybe because you’ve had to start over—maybe some things in your past have become built up to be more than they really were?”

“Sure, sure. I think that’s in most people’s human nature. Sure.”

“You think anything in your military service could be like that?”

“Some of it maybe. I don’t know.” He was acting distracted, rustling his bags, mumbling about what he was doing. “Got a new bag, don’t want this outside in the rain. Takes too long to dry.”

“Did you ever talk to Kathy about being a Navy Seal?”

“No.”

“How come?”

“Just didn’t want to.”

I paused before saying, “She said that she would have known about it.”

“Well,” he said, rolling his eyes, “I don’t know why she would have.”

“Didn’t you meet her in the Navy when you were both still active duty?”

He nodded and blew his nose. “That marriage was a mistake. That marriage was a big mistake. Ended in disaster.”

“She told me that you sold the house—”

“I didn’t sell the house.”

“—in 1992.”

“I didn’t sell the house. I don’t think. Pretty sure I didn’t.” He sat up and looked around, like he was searching for something else to distract him. “Got the shakes. I’m nervous here. Thinking about things I don’t want to think about. Is the A/C on?”

“Yeah, you want it off?”

“Please. Trash bag is no good. I’ll take that bag with me when I leave. I’m trying to think of things I like to do for fun. Somewhere back in our conversations you asked me about that. I remember my parents one Christmas bought me a train set. I had four or five cars, an engine of course. I think I had a caboose.”

I tried to keep my cool. Without turning to face him, I said, as if talking to myself, “One of the questions I had when I came down here is why, even when people want to help Lee Sandspur, he doesn’t want to help himself.”

“Yeah, that’s true. That’s very true. It’s hard for me to accept help, or to ask anybody for anything, and then I’m to the point where I am now, stressed out and getting close to desperation.”

In the distance, a man in swim trunks was walking on the beach.

Lee said, “Now the windows are steaming up. This flannel shirt really stinks when it’s wet. Flannel and wool, when they get wet, to me, they stink.”

I didn’t respond. I ran my hands over the steering wheel, restless.

Finally, Lee asked, “Did you ever find a phone number for Rebecca Lynn?”

“I have a phone number, but I haven’t been able to talk to her yet. Six-nineteen area code.”

“Been a long time since I called anyone in San Diego.”

“Would she be someone you’d want to talk to?”

“I don’t want to talk to anybody, Brian. I don’t want to talk to *anybody*. Nobody!”

His voice strained. He said, “Excuse me. I just want to get some air. There’s just a light drizzle. I’ll shut the door if it starts raining.”

“Do you believe that some of your family members love you?”

“No, I don’t think they do.” He blew his nose. “I think they’re ashamed of me.”

Then, without warning him, I finally said what I had wanted to say for so long: “A lot of the people I’ve talked to, that know you from before, seem to not believe that you were a Navy Seal.”

He didn’t reply right away, but looked out the window, steaming. Then he said, “I have no answer for that. How would they *know*? One way or the *other*? That’s irritating.”

“I did see on the Internet that it’s not classified if someone’s a Navy Seal. Just the missions themselves are—”

“Right.”

“—classified.”

“Right.”

“So all the Navy Seal stuff would be on people’s military records.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, Brian, that’s how they do it.”

It was almost eight p.m., and Lee got out of the car. In my rearview mirror, I watched him walk over to a stump near the parking lot and smoke half a cigarette.

I wasn't confident that it was the right thing to continue to push him. But what results had come about from everything else I'd tried? Was it possible that he would break down and admit to me that he had made up all of his Navy Seal stories?

Or was I cruelly prodding him just to satisfy my own curiosity, or even out of revenge for having spent so long on this book, only to learn that his stories were fictions?

What was a true story?

Lee got back in the car. "We're going to have to find another bathroom soon. Not immediately, but soon. It's too hard a walk to get to that one around that puddle."

I didn't want to talk myself out of it. I pressed on: "Maybe one way to approach it, in the book, is figuring out why it is that some people would seem to *not* believe the Navy Seal stories. I can't figure this out."

"I don't know. I'll think about it and let you know."

"Maybe because the SEALs are such an elite group."

"And I'm a mess-up."

We were on the same team, now. I was the good cop. I said, "You think that's it?"

"Might be. I wasn't always a mess up."

"What do you think turned the tide?"

"Kathy. The way she did things with her boyfriend. Personally that's what I think did it to me. I loved her so much."

The sun broke through the clouds as it was starting to set. The rain slowed to a light sprinkle.

Again distracted, or purposely trying to change the subject, he said, "The rain must be about to stop, because the flies are coming back out."

I sighed. “How about if we cap off the long interview week with something that would be just plain fun and enjoyment.”

“That would be nice. I’m very stressed out and depressed right now.”

“What do you think would be a way to cap it off with a good memory?”

“I can’t think,” he said. “You’ve just about drained me, wrung me out. It was good to see you. And I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I’m going to miss you terribly when you go back.”

“Maybe we could go walk out there, just on the beach, even if we don’t go in. I have an umbrella.”

“I’m not. If you want to, I’ll get out of the car and you can lock it up, but I’m not going down there.” Lee looked up at the sky through the window. Although it was getting later, the sky was growing lighter and lighter as the clouds emptied. Orange replaced gray, and the rain stopped pattering on the windshield.

He got out of the car to smoke. This time I followed him. If he wasn’t going to enjoy the sunset, I was going to alone. Leaving Lee at the bathroom, I passed the rows of tall fir trees between picnic tables and stepped over the puddles made by the buggy tracks. The sand was firmer than it had been on Wednesday, because of the rain. It would have been easy for Lee to walk out on this. I walked close to the water, a dock to my left, and stared at the gray horizon over the sea-green water. The sun was going down into pockets in the clouds, and orange rays of light shone like spokes.

My cell phone rang, and it was another one of Lee’s aunts who I had left messages with.

“Is he there with you?” she said.

“He’s a little ways away, just coming out of the bathroom now. I’m at the beach, on the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Can I talk to him?”

I told her I was sorry, but he wasn’t willing. I turned back and met Lee on the way back to the car. In a pile of pine needles, we saw a child’s toy, and I wondered again about Lee as a boy. Was his current state foreshadowed in any way by his home as a child? Or was he the product of his choices? Why couldn’t Lee live the “normal” life? I thought of what Roger had said: *Why can you?*

“Somebody’s plastic horsie,” Lee said. “Too bad.”

We drove back into town. The sun had set, the sky was dark. I asked Lee, “Want to fill your stomach one last time?” Somehow, it sounded bad, so I added, lamely, “This evening?”

We agreed on small pizzas at the Pizza Hut Express drive thru. But when we finally got there, Lee noted the \$3.50 price tag and changed his mind just as I was placing the order.

“Can we just split it?” he said.

I agreed, although I was hungry enough to eat two of the personal pan pizzas. We drove back to the church and parked under the tree, even though there was no need for protection from the sun.

“Why are there people here?” Lee asked.

I said there might be some kind of party going on at the church.

“You don’t think they’ll say anything to us, do you?”

“No. This is where we go to church.”

We split up the pizza and started eating.

Lee said, “I’m going to have to let this cool a little bit. I can’t take things too hot or too cold. When I had a house and had a microwave, if I wanted ice cream, I’d do what I call ‘nuke’ it. I wasn’t trying to melt it, just take that hard chill off of it that was coming out of the freezer.”

I continued eating. After he took a few bites, he said, “This is good pizza, except for one thing. I don’t care for their cheese. In fact, sorry, but I’m not going to eat it. It don’t taste right.”

Lee laid out his plans for the night. First, he’d go to the Laundromat and look for a discarded pair of pants. Then, he’d check the benches at First Care to see if he could sleep there. He said he’d do his best to find a pair of pants so he could come to church with me the next day. He’d check the trash cans at the Laundromat for a clean pair. I offered to let him borrow a pair of shorts so that he could wear something while washing the pants he had on.

“I could do that,” he said, “but I don’t know how I’d get them back to you.”

“At church.”

“I really don’t want to wash clothes tonight.” He blew his nose and started packing things up.

“This is all the change I have in my backpack,” I said. “Could you use it?”

“Please.”

“It’s a dollar fifty in quarters, and it’s another—”

“Okay,” he said, with a hint of annoyance, “where am I going to *put* this?”

It was getting late, and Lee said he wanted to be dropped off at Burger King, where he had left his shopping cart. As we passed the Laundromat, he spotted the car of Gretchen

the Cleaning Lady, who badgered him to no end when he hung around the parking lot. He seemed to be in anguish, and said, “What are you still *doing* here?”

I again offered to let him borrow some shorts so he could wash his black pants, and this time he agreed. As we pulled into the parking lot at Burger King, Lee said, “Okay, please, please, please be there.”

We turned the corner near the dumpster, and there it was: the orange shopping cart from Big Lots. Because it was plastic, it was much lighter and easier to maneuver than a metal one from a grocery store.

I gave him the shorts and asked him if he’d come to church the next day.

“I’m going to try, brother, I’m going to try. I’m not going to promise anything. But if I don’t make it to church, I’ll be at the bus stop bench in front of the Shell gas station at noon.”

Long after I had dropped Lee off, after the Fitzgeralds had gone to bed, I was up reading and preparing to hit the air mattress myself in the small den I was staying in. Bookcases lined the walls: political histories, novels. Framed, yellowed newspapers covered the walls: Man lands on moon; Nixon resigns, saying it would be best for the country. How did Lee remember the moon landing? As a teenager? Or as a Navy Seal?

My cell phone rang. It was Rebecca Lynn, Lee's sister. As soon as she introduced herself, her voice broke.

"How is my brother?"

She sobbed as I described his physical condition and explained my relationship with him.

Then she said, "He and I were really close when we were little. And my mother was such a nut job. Really, I'm still in therapy today for what she put me through, and I'm the only one of her three children that ever got professional help. We tend to repeat the pattern unless we get help, and I've witnessed and heard in their conversations traits of my mother. She was one that always played the martyr. If you ever hoped to get an apology from her, it was, 'I never should have had kids.'"

Rebecca went on to say that she changed her name because she felt the need to separate herself from her childhood. It was her way of refusing to play the victim.

Rebecca Lynn

People said the Sandspur children looked like their mother, had their mother's chin and mouth. They were all skinny, almost anorexic-looking.

As a young child, Rebecca learned that her mother followed a pattern. Whenever she got in trouble, Rebecca lost her mother's affection for a time, and that was worse than the actual punishment. Then, when Lee or their younger sister, Beverly, got in trouble, her mother played the martyr and was suddenly friendly again and offering to share a Coke. But there was still a sense of being doomed: the good times were only temporary.

One day Lee left his new sneakers on the school bus. When he got home, his mother had him on his knees praying. She told him he better get his old pair out. He scrubbed and scrubbed his old sneakers.

You better pray, she said. Because we don't have any money to buy new shoes.

It was just an accident!

Nothing is an accident, she said. It was your fault because you weren't paying attention.

When Rebecca got a gash, her mother conveyed what an inconvenience it was to get the doctor.

Now dinner's going to be late, she said. Now I don't know if there's enough gas for your father to go to work.

There was an article in the newspaper that showed girls at a strip club. Lee hid the picture under his bed, and Rebecca saw it. She needed her mother to be nice to her for a while, so Rebecca decided to sell him down the river, and she told on him. Her mother confronted Lee.

Do you have a picture up here that you know you shouldn't have?

No. No, I don't.

Are you lying to me? I think you better give me that picture.

He reluctantly got the picture out from between the mattresses. For punishment, all three of the children were forced to copy scriptures from the Bible for three hours. Rebecca found all the verses about the poor little children.

One day Lee and Rebecca were jumping from the closet to the bed, and Hazel walked in and didn't like what she saw. She accused Lee of being sexually playful. Rebecca could see he was really hurt that she would think that of him—the very worst of him.

In high school in Argentina, Rebecca found a lighter in Lee's things. She thought, Has he been smoking in secret? She confronted him about it, and he was so full of guilt that he threw the lighter across the street, got down on his knees on the spot and asked the Lord to forgive him, and said that he would never do it again. He convinced her not to tell their mother. Later, Rebecca learned he had been drinking, too.

Lee was so smart in high school that his teachers raved about him when Rebecca came up through the same classes a year later.

Your brother was so smart, he never took notes. Once he heard it, it was in his memory. He never had to study.

Rebecca did a collage of her emotions for a school project. She wrote a poem and showed it to her mother.

Hazel told Rebecca that no one would ever like her. You just want somebody to feel sorry for you, Hazel said.

“I knew I was doomed,” Rebecca me told over the phone. “There was no way I was ever going to win her affection. And I have since learned when my mother passed away—I got her diary—that her mother treated her much the way she treated me. I developed other personalities to cope.”

The implications of the diary were fascinating to me, and I thought again about what Roger had said. Why wasn't Lee able to live the normal life? Was it because he had inherited tendencies dating back generations? Was it because his mother had directly or indirectly taught him to feel such intense guilt? It was compelling that not only Lee, but Rebecca, too, seemed to have been affected by their childhood environment.

"When our mother died," Rebecca said, "I couldn't cry. I never shed a tear for her. There were times I cried when I saw my father's face, because he had lost his lifetime mate. I hated to see him look so lost and alone. But for me, I felt no loss at all."

Rebecca Lynn

Rebecca couldn't stand the manipulation, and she moved to California, where a family from church took her in. She got a job pumping gas and rode her bicycle all around town. She also got to experience a functional family.

The mother of the family had a brother in the San Diego Police Department. Through that connection, Lee was trained as a volunteer deputy. He carried the biggest gun he could, a Magnum, and Rebecca thought he looked like Barney Fife.

One night, Lee pulled over a young man. When the man reached across his body, Lee thought he was going for a weapon, and his reflex was to hit the guy in the head with his flashlight. The man was knocked out cold, and eventually became a vegetable as a result of that blow.

God's never going to forgive me, Lee told Rebecca. I can never be forgiven.

Rebecca caught Lee taking all of his police gear to the dumpster.

Don't need it, don't want it, Lee said.

Rebecca thought, It's just like when we were kids. He's looking for a way to atone for what he's done. He's playing the martyr, just like our mother.

Afterward, as Lee was going out to sea, Rebecca saw his gentle side again when she moved into his aging apartment. He knew how cold it was in the winter time, so he came in with an electric heater and blanket.

It's not cold now, but you're going to need it, he said.

After Lee got married and had his car accident, Rebecca went back and forth to the hospital to shampoo his wife's hair. He knew Rebecca didn't have any money, so he forced a fifty dollar bill into her hand and said, I know you can use it.

Lee moved to Washington, D.C., and Rebecca lost track of him. When Hazel Sandspur died, Rebecca searched for him for months to give him the news. She kept a file on him, but always seemed to be three months behind his latest move. She even called the morgues in the D.C. area, figuring that they might remember if a body came through with metal rods running the length of his back. No luck. She called a Salvation Army and learned that he had been there for detox, but he wasn't there now. She had someone post a notice on the bulletin saying if anyone knew him, they should let him know his mother had died and to call Rebecca collect.

Finally, when she was running late for work one day, she got a collect call from a pay phone. He said he had lost his job and sold the house without making any money on it. He wouldn't talk about how he had become homeless.

I gotta let you go, Lee said. There's some guys coming.

Rebecca was frustrated. She had worked hard to find him, and now he was cutting her off. She said, Well, just turn your back to them, or let them know you're still using the phone.

They don't care who you are. They mean business.

She said, I can call 911 if they bother you.

You don't understand.

Rebecca suspected Lee might be involved in some kind of drug deal. She called her father to tell him the news that Lee was still alive, and she gave him a phone number for him. Raymond was so glad and so lonely that he drove up to get him. He found Lee at an abandoned gas station behind a grocery store.

While he was living with his father in Florida, Lee again called Rebecca in San Diego.

I can't live with Dad anymore, he said. He needs to be committed, and I'm getting out of here.

He said he needed some money for a bus ticket to California.

Are you going to live with Kevin? she said, thinking of Lee's old Navy friend.

I was hoping I could live with you.

When Rebecca was reluctant, he said he'd had his leg amputated. She was shocked. She said she had another phone number to reach her.

Just a minute, Lee said, grunting. I'm trying to get around here on one leg and crutches.

She wired him eighty dollars, which was all she could spare, and he said he'd call her when he got out to California. Some time went by, and no Lee. Finally, she called her father in Orlando to find out what was going on, and she realized he probably wasn't coming, and that even if he did come, she'd be

better off if he didn't. Lee had been stealing from their father, and running up his charge card. In fact, Raymond had kicked Lee out temporarily.

“My father said, ‘I wish you'd never found him.’”

Rebecca was out of breath, her voice climbing, sobbing. And then, as though she had almost forgotten all about it, she said, “He told me he had a leg amputated—and I believed him! How do you make up something like that? I was so hurt.

“I got really worried that he might try to come out here, and I would be so torn because I would actually want to help him, but if he was on drugs, then I wouldn't really be helping him. I still care about him. I pray for him. But I'm scared of my brother—of the person I found out he was.”

Rebecca Lynn

Rebecca went to Orlando and cornered him about the amputation lie. She said, Why would you do that? Why would you lie about something like that?

I don't know, he said. I was probably just thinking about what it would be like.

Rebecca thought, He always has an excuse, an explanation. When he doesn't have one, he has convenient memory loss.

She asked him why he didn't go back into computers.

I can't stand the high level of stress, he said.

During her visit to Florida, Rebecca bought Lee a carton of cigarettes. Later, she saw that someone had been accessing her

debit card, and she accused her son. Lee overheard her and must have felt a prick of his conscience.

It could have been me, he said. I don't remember.

One day, Lee was talking to Raymond's neighbor. The woman had a bad liver, and Lee said, My life is such a waste. I have cancer, and I'm going to die anyway. You can have my liver.

Later, Rebecca said, First of all, if you've got cancer, I don't know if they could use your liver.

My liver's fine, he said. I have three types of cancer circulating in my body, but my liver's fine.

Lee was being absurd, Rebecca decided. But she attributed it all to the self-pity mode they had inherited from their mother. Lee was telling these stories because he had a dire need for someone to say something good about him.

On her way back to California, Rebecca drove to Dade City to visit her mother's grave. She wanted to buy a bouquet of her mother's favorite flowers, yellow bud roses, but didn't have the money. She went to the nearest grocery store—

“Wait, wait,” I said. “Lee told me this story. He said he bought some plastic flowers and brought them to the gravesite.”

“He was telling you what I did,” Rebecca said. “I told him all about it. I guess it's possible he did the same thing.”

Anything was possible with Lee, it seemed. Had he really placed the same kind of flowers on Hazel's grave? Had he lied to me about it? Had he adopted Rebecca's story as his own memory so completely that now he didn't know the difference? It seemed to be impossible to know the truth.

I asked Rebecca if she had a message for Lee.

“You might tell him his life isn’t over. It doesn’t have to end like this. I’m so sorry he’s not doing better.”

Again, she began to cry.

She said, “You can certainly tell him I talked to you. If he asks to call me, tell him, no. I don’t know that I can trust anything that he might say, and he’s taken advantage of me. At the same time, I want him to know the reason I feel that way is that I don’t believe he is the same person that was my brother. I’m not ready to talk to him yet, but I hope that one day I can. Tell him I love him.”

Lee didn't come to church the next day, which was Sunday, July 22, 2007.

As we had agreed, I walked out to the Shell station bench to wait for him after the meetings were over, but he wasn't there, either. It was about 12:10 p.m., and I was hungry. I looked around, and he was nowhere in sight. Cars whizzed past. To the west, I saw a blip in the distance down the sidewalk, framed by the row of light posts on my left all the way down, like a long corridor. The figure was pushing something, maybe a cart. I had my scriptures with me, as well as the program from the services. My tie flapped in the wind as I walked five or six blocks. Finally, Lee saw me and waved. He was wearing his pale yellow button-down, the black pants, the leather shoes. He was pushing a small shopping cart from CVS, with his maroon-colored duffle bag in the basket.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm running fifteen minutes behind." He handed me my blue shorts in a white grocery sack and glanced at the program in my hand. I gave it to him, and he looked more closely at the drawing on the cover. He handed it back.

"Do you want to keep it?" I said.

"No!" he yelled. "I already told you. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Sorry, Lee. But I didn't offer it to you before."

"Yes, you did. Where is your car?"

"Down at the Shell station."

He grunted and started pushing his cart down the sidewalk. I walked ahead, rolling my eyes in annoyance at his grumpiness, then slowed down to help him lift the cart when he got to a two-inch lip in the sidewalk.

"Thank you," he said.

We reached the bench, and he set his cart against the side. The bench was covered, and I realized it was the very same one where he had met the missionaries in June 2005. He sat down, unzipped his duffle bag and took out a Gatorade bottle about one-quarter full of an amber liquid.

“Whatcha got in there?” I said.

“Apple juice,” he said. He replaced the cap and set the bottle down on.

I figured he would have to come clean this time. He would never hand me the bottle and let me drink if it was beer. “Can I have some?”

“No, I don’t have very much,” he said, whining, protecting the bottle. “Please, please,” he said waving me away.

We sat silently for a moment watching the cars go by. He grunted again and began, “You’re the author—” then he stopped. “Did I give you your shorts?”

I said yes. I asked him if he could use the shorts, and he refused them. I didn’t press the issue.

He asked me if I had my tape recorder, but I hadn’t brought it with me. Truthfully, I was only expecting to get the shorts back or better yet, convince him to take them for himself. I took out the small pad I kept in my shirt pocket and began taking notes.

“I’m probably misquoting you,” he said, “and I don’t care. You said last night that you wanted a happy conclusion to the book. You wanted a happy ending.”

A pickup truck drove by and growled at us.

“Shut up!” Lee yelled at the truck. “I’m sick of that!” He shook his head and continued talking while staring out at the traffic. “You said you wanted to start another happy memory. I thought about it all night, and this is the best I could come up with: ‘Lee and I

went out to the beach hoping to be able to swim. There was a thunderstorm, and they had the red flag up to show it was not safe, but my brother and I shared this meal together; the rain stopped, and we were treated by God our Heavenly Father to a beautiful, gorgeous sunset.’ That’s what I came up with.”

“Not bad,” I said.

“Brian, I don’t know if that helps you or not.” He shrugged. “It was a sunset.” He lit a cigarette, and then continued. “I thought of a few other things, too.”

He went on to say that his mother and father had once gone on a fishing trip together. Hazel caught a nine-and-a-half pound bass using a shiner as bait near the end of the day, and she wanted to get it mounted for the front room. Raymond, though, said he wouldn’t mount anything less than a ten-pounder. Hazel cried as Raymond grabbed it by the jaw, wiggled it in the water until it came alive, and it swam away.

Lee said, “After my mother died, my father really regretted that. She never went to the lake again, from what I’m told. People can be so strange, cruel, mean. If I live to be a hundred years old, I’ll never figure it out. Never understand.”

Cars drove by in the street, and a pile of red mulch that had likely fallen off a truck bed at the stop light began to disappear. Flecks of mulch clung to his shirt. He got up and walked right into the road, and I was afraid he’d get hit. He hobbled over and grabbed the bag so there would be no litter in the street. Three-inch tall weeds in the cracks at my feet waved in the wind of the traffic.

“I like to be alone,” Lee said, seemingly to no one in particular. He was staring out at the cars. “I like no contact with no other human being. Leave me alone. How many times do I have to say it? Do I have a speech impediment, or is it just my Parkinson’s acting up?”

Then he turned to me said, “There’s an island. You can put this in the book. I have given up on life. I’m not suicidal, but I just don’t care. I’m not supposed to tell you this, but I trust you.”

His eyes filled with tears, and I waited patiently for him to continue. He said there was a small, rocky island called Diego Garcia off the coast of India. There are no inhabitants, and no bridges from the mainland. On this island, the United States Navy stores all of her nuclear weapons, he said.

The thin red line of mulch was fading more and more with each passing car.

“Diego Garcia,” he repeated, shaking his head. “What a miserable place. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I don’t care anymore.”

Lee took a swig out of his Gatorade bottle. He said there are two Navy Seal teams guarding the weapons, and he had been on one of those teams.

“One time,” he said, “they asked me to go down to the vault and look at the war heads, and I said, ‘No. There’s radiation down there.’ It was a miserable tour of duty, and I was glad when it ended. I did three in ’Nam, one in Afghanistan, some side notes in between those tours. It became clear to me that I was expendable. Nobody cares one way or the other. I was in Afghanistan, and I found an ink pen on the sidewalk. Yes, I picked it up. Somebody yelled, ‘What are you doing?’ They searched my bag, and I never had it, I didn’t know anything about the medication. All I know is, I refuse to take any medication unless I’m forced with an IV by a doctor.”

It was almost impossible to follow what he was saying, and I felt horrible for him. He must have been more drunk than I’d realized when we first sat down. His mention of medication seemed completely unrelated to Afghanistan or finding a pen, or nuclear

warheads. I thought back to what he'd said two years before about his medications on his way out of OSRC: *I threw them away in the first garbage can I saw.*

I said, "But why do you refuse medication? I don't under—"

He yelled at me. "Look! I had three items. One was Vitamin B12, and it was the only one I recognized. The other two, I threw in the trash can!"

Lee was terribly upset. He was shaking.

"I thought today was going to be a happy day," he said softly. "I do want to get off the street, but I'm not going to take any medications I do not understand. Let's just stop trying to change Lee, okay? You're at peace, you have two kids. Lee is a mess-up. He'll die someday, and it'll be wonderful."

"I want you to be happy, Lee."

"It's not going to happen. Not in this lifetime. And I'm sure I don't want to play sixty questions and answers. I love you to death, but you have raised up some memories that I had buried, things I'll have to deal with again—nightmares."

We sat for a moment and watched the cars again. The line of mulch had been reduced to a hint of red fibers.

"Today is a day we leave Lee alone," he said. "You're too young, too inexperienced. I'm not trying to insult you, I'm just telling you it's a fact. You can't talk to people this way. When I came over here, I wasn't stressed, I wasn't depressed. I was just going to miss you. I've had a very long, stressful week. And you bring up memories and people I don't want nothing to do with. You wanted a nice memory: we shared a meal, watched a sunset—a nice ending to the book, isn't it?"

He pulled out his silver Zippo and put a cigarette in his mouth. He flicked the lighter, but no flame came out. “Come on!” he yelled. “What a piece of junk. Worst Zippo I ever had.” He tossed it in his cart and crossed his legs, one knee over the other, showing his yellow socks. Green rimmed his fingernails like tarnished silver.

Just then two men walked up to the bus stop. One of the men waved the other to go ahead, and he stopped. He was wearing new shoes, a sleeveless green shirt, and he had red hair. When he opened his mouth, it appeared that he had only one tooth on his upper jaw. He was carrying a beer bottle. I recognized him as the man Roger had talked to just outside of the homeless camp earlier in the week—Tracy, the guy who had said he wasn’t homeless anymore.

He offered a cigarette to Lee without saying anything, and Lee accepted. Then Tracy lit the cigarette for him. Lee mumbled something like, “Thanks,” and put his head in his hands, leaning forward, exhausted.

Tracy said, “Hey, do you go to that church over there?”

I said I did.

“Well, I’m looking for a church.”

It was the last thing I had expected him to say. It was an incredible coincidence, I thought, that this man, who was homeless until recently, should, at this very bench, inquire about the church while I was here, sitting by Lee Sandspur.

“I mean, my life is going up, man,” he said, and he shot his hand up in the air. “I’ve got an apartment now, and I’ve got a job and everything. I feel like I need to thank someone, so I figure I should thank God.”

I told him church had just ended for the day, but that I could send two missionaries to meet with him and teach him all about it. He accepted the invitation, and I flipped to a new page in my notebook to jot down his name and address. Tracy thanked me, and then left to follow the other man into the Shell station behind us.

I was shocked. I thought back to my experience as a missionary myself, and how rarely in my life someone had approached me and asked, without any prompting, to learn about my church. I was in great spirits.

“Con artist,” Lee said, squinting. He lifted his head up and took a drag. “I gotta deal with him every day.”

PART V

It is sometimes easy to deliver an unhappy man from his present distress,
but it is difficult to set him free from his past affliction.

—“The Love of God and Affliction,” Simone Weil

A delay in my flight caused me to miss my connection back to my home in Marquette, and the airline instead paid for a three-hour taxi ride at about eleven p.m. As I waited at the curb with my luggage, I checked my voice mail and found a message from Kevin Heilmann, one of Lee's old Navy friends. He was a businessman in the San Diego area, and I had tracked him down through his company's Web site and e-mailed him. After I loaded my suitcase into the back of the taxi, I called him back and pulled out my laptop to take notes. Kevin was articulate and sounded educated.

"I haven't heard from Lee in almost eight years," he said.

Kevin Heilmann

In the spring of 1973, Kevin was transferred to San Diego, where he developed software for the Navy. A young man named Lee Sandspur asked him if he wanted to be his roommate, and Kevin agreed.

Lee kept the apartment spotless, and he was always washing and waxing his brand new, green Pinto hatchback. He didn't have much furniture, so he slept in a sleeping bag on a mattress on the floor of his room. He worked as a part-time police officer. They often sat up talking about the life of a sailor, and Kevin told him stories about what it was like in Vietnam.

They went scuba diving together, and often came back with a lobster. Then they'd take it to a friend's house and barbecue that evening. They smoked marijuana and had a few beers.

Lee liked to go diving at night. One night, Kevin said he didn't feel like going, and Lee went alone, which shocked Kevin. Lee knew better—diving alone wasn't safe, let alone at night. Fortunately, nothing bad happened to him.

After he got married to Kathy, Lee came to Kevin in the early 1980s looking for a job. Kevin hired him as programmer, and Lee worked for him for about eighteen months. Then one day, he didn't show up for work. Kevin called his wife, but she didn't answer, either. He called Kathy's mother, and she was worried. Eventually, he called the highway patrol and learned that Lee had been in a terrible accident. He had run off the road, and he and Kathy were in the naval hospital.

Kevin drove out to retrieve Lee's possessions from the car at the junkyard, and he was amazed that, given the condition of the car, both had survived. It had been crushed. He went to Lee's house to pick up more of Lee's belongings, and he noticed quite a few beer bottles on the dining room table. They must have been drinking that night, he thought.

Lee went back to work for Kevin after he recovered, and then moved to D.C. They spoke on the phone occasionally, but then they lost touch. A few months later, Lee's sister called Kevin to ask if he'd heard from Lee.

Sometime later, Lee called him from Florida, where he was living with his father. The conversations were odd and uncomfortable. I don't even know this guy anymore, Kevin thought. Lee said he was having a hard time dealing with his father, who was in the early stages of Alzheimer's.

In 1999, Lee called for the last time.

Kevin, I have cancer, Lee said. It's spreading. The doctors are going to have to amputate my arms and my legs.

Lee said all this in such a matter-of-fact way that Kevin didn't know what to make of it. Kevin thought, That's ridiculous. I don't think anyone would amputate his arms and legs. Lee asked Kevin for five hundred dollars for a plane ticket, and Kevin sent the money, but Lee never arrived.

"Until I got your e-mail, I hadn't heard anything about him," Kevin said.

I imagined Lee scuba diving alone at night in the Pacific Ocean in the 1970s. Was he imagining at that point that he was a Navy Seal? Was his decision to dive alone a foreshadowing of his self-destructive actions that I had seen in Florida thirty years later?

Kevin did not believe Lee had been a Navy Seal. When he had known him in the Navy, Kevin said, Lee showed no signs of telling wild tales or being delusional in any way.

"We both had security clearances, so they do a complete background check including every place you've lived. If there was anything in his early years, he wouldn't have gotten clearance. So whatever changed him must have been working below the surface."

Kevin asked me if Lee's father was still alive, and I said he was, but that Lee had originally told me Raymond was dead. Then I told him about the letter Lee had received in the mail.

"I could see his father doing that—stamping 'Deceased,'" Kevin said. "He really wanted Lee home before his mother died, and he was very angry that Lee was purposely avoiding contact. I could see his father stamping it that way. He was losing it."

Had I been too hard on Lee? When Lee had told me about the stamp, I assumed it was one more convenient excuse to cover up for his lies. I had concluded that he had simply "closed the door" on his father, as Kathy had implied was his modus operandi. But Kevin Heilmann believed Lee's explanation.

I sat quietly in the taxi. Country roads cut through midnight forests, and for miles and miles, from crossroads to lonely crossroads, the only source of light beyond the dim headlights was the moon. I had hoped that the interviews I had sought during my trip to Florida would help me to figure out who Lee Sandspur was. Rather than decoding him for me, though, it seemed that every new person I spoke to about him proved that it was impossible to decipher a human being.

About a week later, at the end of July 2007, I was at my desk in my basement when I received a return phone call from Cheryl, Lee's cousin.

“At first I didn't trust you,” she said. “I pictured maybe Lee had put you up to something, which I knew could be very possible. I don't hate Lee, but I don't want anything to do with him anymore. I feel like I've done my part. I wish someone could get him help. I think it's going to have to be an outsider that helps him and not someone from his family. Just don't let Lee sucker you into anything.”

While he was living with his father in the late 1990s, Lee began telling his family that he had only six months to live. Cheryl felt so sorry for him that she called for a family reunion in Lee's honor.

Cheryl Feller

Fifty people showed up, and Cheryl's central Florida house was hopping. People were in and out of the house, at the dining room table, on the porch—everywhere—waiting for the meal to begin.

Cheryl was never one for asking the blessing on the food in a large crowd, but she made up her mind that day to do it. She had it all planned out: express gratitude for everyone coming and thank the Lord for the love that was in their family. And a special prayer for Lee, just that God would watch over him, and if He could perform a miracle, everyone would like that, to keep him pain free, if his time wasn't up. She meant every word of it.

Lee pulled Cheryl aside afterward and said he had some things that he wanted to give her as a keepsake. When he brought her the bag, though, she was puzzled. It contained a couple of crazy T-shirts that meant absolutely nothing to her. He also had a pair of binoculars that she was supposed to give to her young granddaughter.

These are from when I was a Navy Seal, he told Cheryl. The Real McCoy. She has to take good care of them. I would use these going through the swamps in Vietnam. We had to be so, so quiet.

But when Cheryl looked at the binoculars—it was nothing you couldn't have bought at the five and dime. They were small, black binoculars with cheap-looking dials. She thought, Something is wrong with his mind or something.

He was somber during the party, and he said he wasn't going back to Orlando to live with his father. Instead, he went home with his aunt, Madeline Lawrence.

“And that's when they started to see even more problems,” Cheryl said. “Him sneaking out at night . . .”

But even when she learned that Lee hadn't been telling the truth about his medical condition, Cheryl wasn't angry with him. Her generosity was refreshing. It seemed that she

could have been justified in harboring ill will against Lee after being duped in such a way. But she told me that didn't she have any regrets, because she felt she was doing the right thing given the information she had.

"I just felt sad for him," She said. "He has just missed out on so much quality of life. I love life. I love to laugh, and here he is, just lie after lie after lie, wasting his life. It's sad that anybody ends up homeless, but I guess if that's what you choose, that's your choice. It's really hard to help somebody that doesn't even want to help themselves."

Again, here was the question about the role of choice in homelessness. Did Lee really prefer the streets to the stress of making a living? What stresses did he experience as a working man above and beyond what I did, or above what anybody else did?

Cheryl went on to say that Lee must have been in an unusual state of mind to lead everyone to believe he was dying.

"I don't know if it's a genetic mental problem or just lying," she said. "Nothing makes sense about Lee—or his father."

As a young man, Raymond Sandspur moved out away from home as soon as he could, and joined the Navy, which became something of a surrogate parent for him. He was out at sea for most of his adult life, a military lifer.

When he retired to Orlando, he didn't know what to do with himself. He was so used to the rules and regulations and structured days that he exploded when other people broke the rules. One day in Pizza Hut, years before smoking was banned in the restaurant, he became irate when he saw someone smoking at a table across the dining room. He marched around the room and collected all the ash trays, and said, No one is going to smoke when I'm here.

After his wife, Hazel, passed away, he left Florida and moved into the Veterans home at Walter Reed. They kicked him out because he couldn't get along with the staff.

He moved to an apartment in Daytona Beach and hired a "personal assistant," named Stephanie, to take care of his bills. She called a nurse at Walter Reed and learned that Mr. Sandspur might be suffering from a mental illness. He refused to acknowledge it, and Stephanie suspected he considered mental illness a weakness or merely an imagined condition.

She learned, though, that Raymond never lied to her. If he told her something, either it was the truth, or it was his perception of the truth.

"He was a very fine boy until . . ." Raymond Sandspur began, but stopped.

I had been back home in Michigan for weeks before I had finally been able to speak with him on the phone. I'd left messages for him, and had first gone through his personal assistant before he had returned my call. At 79 years old, his voice was unsteady and slightly high-pitched. He was apprehensive about contacting me, he said, because Lee had scammed him in the past, and he was afraid I was being used as just another scam to get money from him.

He said, "When Lee went to the University of Texas, he didn't even finish the first year. He claimed he never saw the professor. They always had a substitute teacher, and it just didn't please him. He loved the Navy ROTC, but he just couldn't hack the college part, and he went on active duty."

Raymond Sandspur

Lee made the drill team, and he would sling that rifle around with a bayonet on it. He was good at that. After he finished boot camp, he became a computer programmer in the Navy. Then he got in with a pretty girl, and she suckered him into following her to England, where they got married.

When they broke up, she threatened him. If you cut into any of my retirement, she said, I'll just quit the Navy.

They moved to Washington, D.C., and she kept telling him to make more money, and he had to make the house payment out of what he earned. She was a con artist.

Near San Diego, they got into a car accident, and he was busted up real bad. He got pins in his back, and a full body cast. He couldn't even pull his pants down or get them up.

He used to call home and talk to his mother collect. He'd always ask her for money. Raymond was working at the post

office at night, and he was never home when Lee called. The phone bill was terribly high.

When Lee was in his early 40s, after he'd been married ten years, his wife got orders to go Italy. Lee stayed behind in their big house, with twelve hundred dollar mortgage payments. Lee had complications selling it, and Raymond sent him four thousand dollars to keep him from losing everything. He never got a dime of it back.

Everyone lost track of him for a while.

Finally, some lady up in D.C. recognized Lee and got him on the phone with Raymond, who immediately drove up to Fairfax, Virginia, to pick him up. He found him working at a parts place for minimum wage and staying in a little abandoned service station. He was embarrassed and drunk. Raymond brought him home.

Lee was a pretty good boy for a little while. He cooked, cleaned house, washed the dishes, kept himself a little busy, shined the car three times a week.

But he always wanted five dollars. He got in with some little guy nearby, and they locked themselves in the master bedroom and rang up a twelve-hundred-dollar phone bill calling sex numbers. Raymond had to put a block on his phone so nobody could call a 900 number.

On one credit card bill, he found a two-thousand dollar plane ticket to Colombia.

Do you know anything about this? Raymond asked Lee.

I don't, he said. Maybe I did. I can't remember.

Lee started to say that he had lung cancer, and that the doctors said he was losing his short term memory. He said he had to make trips to the VA hospital for chemotherapy.

Raymond noticed that Lee was looking physically ill.

A neighbor of Raymond's said he found some of his wife's jewelry at a pawn shop. Then one day, Raymond found that his military uniform was missing. He confronted Lee and said, I want to be buried in that uniform. You get it back.

One day, he found it again in his closet hanging up as if it had never left.

Raymond went to see a psychiatrist at the hospital himself, and Lee started telling relatives that Raymond was suffering from incontinence and needed to be in a retirement home. Lee was supposed to inherit Raymond's house. He threw Lee out of the house and had an expensive alarm system installed with new locks.

Raymond thought, I never should have gone to get him.

"I never should have." Raymond started to cry over the phone as he continued.

Raymond's psychiatrist counseled him to kick Lee out, and he did. But Lee ended up in a run-down motel, and Raymond felt too sorry for him to keep him away. He let him move back in. One day, he noticed all of his late wife's fine jewelry was gone. Then the antique sewing machine.

Raymond was crying harder on the phone. "I'm in a position right now, I'm going to have to stop with this."

I reflected back to when I had first proposed this project to Lee. I'll write about his life. We'll split any money that comes of it. Maybe I can help him. If I spend enough time with him and get to know him, maybe we can become genuine friends. Maybe, when Cortez Road seems to be conspiring against him, he'll give me a call, and we'll have him over for tacos and remind him that life does not have to be a battle to death.

It seemed so simple at the time. It hadn't occurred to me how many people with much stronger ties had already tried with him, and failed.

Raymond said angrily to me, "He's caused me so much *miser*y, he's told so many lies, stole from me, cheated. He's a real disappointment. I'd rather not dwell on it. I'd rather you write a book of *my* life."

PART VI

...and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain,
and turn him out to perish... For behold, are we not all beggars?

—Mosiah 4:16, 19

“I don’t know what else I can tell you.”

Gloria Beatrice, I think, was tired of me. But she reluctantly agreed to let me come and see her.

It was Thursday, June 19, 2008, and I had just finished a one-week job on the Atlantic coast of Florida, a few hours from Bradenton. I felt that I had to at least make the attempt to find Lee. This time, though, I had a big problem: I had no way of telling him that I was coming. Gloria wasn’t much help, because she hadn’t seen him in some time. And that didn’t bother her. She was tired of him, too. But still, my first stop when I arrived in Bradenton was once again Gloria’s apartment. She opened the door, and I entered and sat in a plastic chair in the corner. She sat on the couch, surrounded by stacks of papers, magazines, and mail. Gloria had white hair and black eyebrows—the same short, small woman with no curves.

She hadn’t seen Lee since last November, she said, but she’d heard that he sometimes spent time at a convenience store called S & S on 9th Street West and 30th Avenue. The people who lived across the street from that store had helped Lee. She also told me she hadn’t seen Roger in about a month. He had gotten into some trouble with a drug dealer, and his girlfriend had told the police.

The television was on in the room, and the sounds of Family Feud mingled with Gloria’s comments: “Name something Santa Claus would hate. . . . To discover that the tree was missing!”

Gloria said Roger had been earning money working for a roofer. Roger deposited the money and spent it before the bank informed him that all the checks were bad. The roofer had swindled him. She said, “It cost me a thousand dollars.”

“But why did *you* have to pay?” I said.

“My name is on the account. If I don’t, it hurts my credit.”

“So you helped him open the account.”

“That’s right.”

I wasn’t sure whether to question Gloria’s sanity or to praise her for being so generous.

She looked at me, but didn’t say anything. She looked tired and in a daze.

I said, “You’ve helped Lee over and over, and given him all kinds of money, and the same thing with Roger. Doesn’t that make you think twice before you give them more money?”

She shook her head. “I know it’s horrible to be sick, even if the name of that sickness is alcoholism. Lee’s had a rough life. He was messed up in an auto accident. He forced his wife to divorce him. He used to go on special ops—basically like suicide missions—and he knew he was only going to drag his wife down in the Navy. So he forced her to divorce him so she could move up in rank. His wife finally agreed. He has been shot or blown up sixteen times over his career.”

I didn’t say anything. Should I correct her? Do I know enough to do so? Will it affect her willingness to help Lee? Does it matter whether Lee was a Navy Seal?

In the background I heard Family Feud: “What are the things people say when they’re invited to a party?”

Gloria left the room and came back with her laundry bag. Inside, she retrieved a wallet, which she said was Lee’s. Evidently, the police had found it and delivered it to her, since he had used her address on his ID.

It was a black leather wallet, and it smelled strongly of laundry detergent. Inside, I found his driver's license, which was issued in 2002. In the picture, he had a bloody sore that looked almost like a bullet hole in the center of his forehead. Scabs covered his nose and lip. His hair was neatly parted, and he'd grown a gray, spotty beard. His empty eyes stared at the camera.

Also in his wallet was a piece of paper folded up into a small, thick square. I unfolded it, and found it was a calendar for March 2008. The first seventeen days of the month had been crossed off, and there was a check mark on the day daylight savings went into effect. At the bottom of the page, Lee had written several names in large black letters, with no indication of who they were or what connection they had to each other, other than WILLIE-MAC BUS BENCH. Besides the names PHIL, WENDY and LEN, I also saw MCMILLAN; BRIAN, HAILEY, JACKSON, GRANT.

"Roger told him I had his wallet," Gloria said. "He knows it's here, but he hasn't come by to do his laundry for months. Not since about last Thanksgiving."

Roger, she said, had left the trailer where I had found him, and when she last saw him a month ago, he had said he was staying in an apartment somewhere between the crematorium and the Laundromat on Cortez Road.

I thanked Gloria and went out to search for Lee and Roger. First I drove up to 9th Street and 30th Ave. There was no S & S convenience store, but I did see a liquor store called K & S nearby, so I parked my brand new Dodge Caliber rental car in between two junker cars and stopped in to ask the worker there if he had ever seen a homeless man named Lee. I mimed Lee's walk, thinking that might be the best way to recognize him at a glance. I

hunched my shoulders and leaned forward slightly. With a stiff back, I waddled, using short, slow steps, my hands out in front of me, resting on a pretend grocery cart. No luck.

I follow Gloria's directions and knocked on the house across the street. It was a small house with a tiny front yard enclosed with a chain link fence and a sign: Beware of Dog. An older man wearing a white tank top answered the door and told me in a thick accent that no, he hadn't ever seen Lee, but there was a homeless family that lived behind the tire store across the street. They might know.

It was hot and humid outside—above 90 degrees. I was wearing brown flip flops, and I kept my eyes trained on the pavement and sidewalks in front of me to make sure I didn't step in any fire ant hills.

I had very little time in Bradenton. It was late afternoon on Thursday at this point, and my plane took off for Michigan on Saturday morning. I envisioned spending the evening with Lee tonight, and then hanging out all day on Saturday. Maybe we could even catch a baseball game, since the beach trip had not worked with him a year before. I wanted to get the latest update on him for the book. This was one of the unique challenges with nonfiction—there was always a potential new chapter in the story. Any ending would seem artificial, since Lee was still out there, wandering alone; and yet, any ending that did not end in death would provide hope, a chance for Lee to find peace.

By the time I was across the street, I was sweating heavily, with beads of sweat up and down my arms and hands. I dabbed my forehead with my sleeve. I walked through some tall grass behind the tire shop, and lizards rustled in the grass. Two store owners said they'd never seen anyone who fit my description. I kept walking.

Two blocks south, I entered a TV repair shop full of TVs playing everything from game shows to cartoons and the news. I explained what I was doing, and a skinny woman said she knew of some homeless who slept behind their store. I followed her, and she showed me a pile of bedding—a brown throw pillow, a blanket—in a triangle of grass between the store and the fence. Sometimes they hung around late in the evenings, she said.

I decided instead to hunt for Roger—maybe he knew where Lee was. I parked at Walgreen’s at 26th Street and walked between the crematorium and the Laundromat on the north side of Cortez Road. I knocked on a half dozen doors in all the small apartment buildings I could find, but no one had heard of him. Finally, I drove back to the trailer court on the other side of the street where I had first met him. No one answered my knock on his door. As I was backing out of the narrow alley, I saw two women sitting on their patio, and I asked them if they had seen him.

“He’s in Port Manatee,” one of them told me.

“Is that the jail?” I said.

“Yep, that’s right.”

“What did he do?”

“That I don’t know.”

When I asked if they’d ever heard of Lee Sandspur, they shook their heads and shrugged.

I sighed. Gloria had no clues as to Lee’s whereabouts, and Roger was in jail. How was I ever supposed to find him before I had to leave town? Still, I felt determined. I would drive back and forth, stop and wait in the steamy bus stops, walk the blinding white sidewalks, searching for Lee Sandspur through the cloak and mask of Cortez Road.

Behind Home Depot, rain soaked bundles of flattened cardboard boxes towered over pallets. A field had been flooded by the storm, and, into the new body of water, a white egret waded, then lowered its curved orange beak, hesitated above its reflection, and stabbed.

I still hadn't found Lee. Thursday night had yielded nothing, and it was now noon on Friday, less than twenty-four hours before I had to be at the Tampa Airport. The rains had spoiled my plans of sitting at a bus stop bench and waiting for him to walk by, because during a storm, Lee didn't walk; he always found a way to stay indoors.

As the rain let up, I took courage. I drove through one parking lot after another, checking behind stores, hoping with every stray grocery cart that he would be sitting beneath a nearby tree. I drove over yellow speed bumps and coasted through stop signs. I rolled through the parking lot at Big Lots.

The task was daunting, but with every hour that passed, my desire to find Lee increased. I felt guilty for not having made more of an effort to keep in touch with him, although I didn't know how I could have done it. I prayed for inspiration, and a thought came to me: Get out of your car and walk around.

In the Big Lots parking lot, a teenager was corralling shopping carts, and I asked him about Lee. He said, "I know exactly who you're talking about."

A scent of the trail. A lead.

"I haven't seen him here in at least a couple of weeks," he said.

An older woman who worked there overheard us and asked, "What happened to him?"

I said I didn't know, and I explained that I would only be in town until tomorrow.

“You might try Little Caesar’s,” he said. “Sometimes he sits on a bench outside there, and they bring him pizza.”

Across the parking lot, at Little Caesar’s, the manager said that two months earlier a policeman had come to tell Lee to leave the premises because he had been rude to an employee and had urinated on himself on the bench in front of the store.

Next I tried McDonald’s at 37th Street, where I had once sat with Lee just before I had moved away from Florida. But the manager there hadn’t ever seen him. I walked across the street to the bus stop at the Shell Station, where Lee had first met the missionaries, and where I had last talked to him at length. A plastic bag lay crumpled in the corner, and I recalled that Elder Paul had left food for Lee in the same way. This bag contained only an empty beer can.

Along the west side of the parking lot at the Shell station, a slim, middle-aged woman with dark hair and a name tag climbed into her convertible.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I don’t mean to bother you.”

She turned to face me.

“I’m in town for a couple of days trying to find a homeless man. His name is Lee Sandspur. He’s about this tall, and he kind of hobbles around with a grocery cart like this. Have you seen him?”

“The last time I saw him was at the bus stop at 43rd street. But I’ve seen him as far down as about 66th street.”

“Can you tell me the last time you saw him?”

“Wednesday.”

“You mean two days ago?”

“That’s right. Down at 43rd Street.”

I thanked her and ran through an opening in the hedge next to a pay phone back toward my car. It's going to work, I thought. Somehow, I'll find him. Everyone knows who I'm talking about. Some homeless try to be inconspicuous, try not to *look* homeless, but Lee can't help it with that shopping cart. It was ironic, really, because Lee prided himself on his ability to be invisible.

I drove to Walgreen's near 66th Street West and found the manager, who was stocking water bottles in aisle six. She hadn't seen him. I felt bad pestering more employees, so I tried to find something I could buy. In the toy aisle, I found a Pixar *Cars* paddle ball and Frisbee, which I thought would be perfect gifts for Jackson and Grant. I asked the man at the cash register about Lee, but he didn't recognize my description.

"I know who you're talking about." A woman behind me in line said she had often seen him two lights down.

I thanked her, paid for the toys, jogged to my car and drove to the lot she'd mentioned. Nothing.

I drove to the Drift In, a turquoise bar near Roger's old trailer court. Inside, the ceilings hung low, and a small horseshoe bar was crowded in by shelves of liquor and a few video games in the corner. A petite bartender with curly gray hair knew Lee. He was sweet, she said, always polite, and he'd buy vodka in a half-pint bottle for \$2.34. One day he passed out around the corner, and they had to get an ambulance.

"We had to finally tell him he couldn't come around anymore," she said. "This isn't the type of establishment that it's good to have the hobos around." She hesitated, and then said, "And plus, we didn't feel like we were helping him any to sell booze to him."

She wished me luck and said the last time she'd seen him was at about 43rd; she was the fourth person who had pointed me to that intersection.

I parked behind Stop n Pick, but before I could walk around to the front, I saw a woman in a red apron smoking on a bench behind the store. She worked next door, at Salon 43, and she said she had seen Lee. She called for her manager, a trim older man named Jeremy in a light blue shirt, short gray hair and sunglasses. He said he had called 911 when he saw Lee asleep in the road two weeks before.

Next door, as I was asking the man behind the cash register about Lee, a man overheard me and said Lee usually slept behind the old Curves building. A woman behind him in line said, "Wow. It looks we all know this guy."

Across the street at SunTrust Bank, a petite brunette told me that just two days earlier, someone had seen Lee asleep along the side of the road, and had called 911 there, too. They came, and said he was in good shape, so they didn't take him in.

I knew then that my trail was hot. This was the most recent sighting I had come across, so I planned to stay within a few blocks of this intersection.

Behind Albertson's I found a sports bar, where a young bartender named Kelly swore in disbelief when I told her Lee had once earned a six figure income and was now homeless. She also took down my phone number and said she'd call if she saw him. I told her I met him going to church, and she said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I just said the F word to somebody who goes to church." She said she had just watched a documentary about a homeless man who lived on the banks of a river.

Two teenage girls who were bagging groceries, the worker at the smoothie place, the man in the Albertson's liquor store, a man at an oil lube shop—so many people had seen Lee.

Just about everyone I talked to had seen him. He was the man who hobbled around with the grocery cart. He wore a thin gray beard and always helped to clean up the parking lot, a clean homeless man. Yeah, we know who he is.

I was proud that everyone seemed to have a good opinion of him.

A tall, awkward teenager, covered with freckles, told me he'd seen Lee at four p.m. yesterday.

The trail was even hotter.

I walked through the parking lot at Albertson's, and the pavement seemed to hiss at me because of the heat. The air was so humid that it seemed to be condensing on my skin and running down my forehead alongside the sweat. But every step I took seemed to give me more energy. I felt that the discomfort and fatigue that had set in were redemptive. While Lee had been out here day after day fighting off heat exhaustion, I had been in my basement for the previous year writing the book, and it was somehow just and good that I would now, even if just for a couple of days, be struggling in my search of him once again. By searching for him in this way, after having written his story already, I was proving to myself that my interest lay in him as a lost friend, and not merely as he had become in my previous trip to Florida—a research subject.

I had arranged to eat dinner with friends, and so I headed back to my car, stopping in a few more stores along the way quickly, just in case. During dinner, I received a phone call.

“Brian? This is Kelly, from the Fanatics Sports Bar? I have Lee here.”

“Really? You saw him?”

“He's right here. Do you want to talk to him?”

The phone went scratchy, and I checked to make sure I had enough reception in the restaurant. I could hear some fumbling, and I thought I heard Lee talking in the distance. After several seconds, he said something directly into the phone that might have been “Brian.” Then the call was lost.

“No!” I said. I tried to call the number back, but there was no answer. A minute later, Kelly called again.

“Sorry. My cell phone’s dying and my charger is a piece of garbage. Where should I tell him to meet you?”

“I don’t know—you tell me. Where does he want to meet? I could just come there to Albertson’s maybe, or go to the old Ale House by Applebee’s.”

But the call had been dropped again. Had she heard what I said?

She called again.

“Sorry. My phone’s dying.”

“So at the Ale House?”

“Okay, I’ll tell him.”

After dinner, I drove to the same parking lot where I had driven and walked several times earlier in the day. The sky was completely dark except for the lights from the street and the stores surrounding us. I saw a figure on the bench in the shadows cast by the pillars at the Ale House.

As I shut off the car, he said, “Is that you, Brian? I can’t see you with those street lights behind you.”

I grinned. It was Lee. He sat next to a blue duffel bag and was holding a Gatorade bottle about a quarter full of beer. He wore a bright yellow windbreaker, jeans, dark brown

work boots, and a T-shirt. And the smell. The familiar, stale smell of a man who had not taken care of himself. It was distinct—not easily recognizable as the smell of urine or feces, but it was a good possibility that they were among the ingredients.

I was conflicted. Although I was disappointed that his physical condition hadn't improved since the last time I'd seen him—he had seemingly not changed at all—somehow I was so relieved to have found him, and pleased that my search had been successful, that I accepted who he was at this moment of his life.

My tape recorder was in my backpack in the seat behind me. In the passenger seat, my laptop was sleeping. I thought about all the people I had spoken to during the last few years: Elder Paul, Gloria Beatrice, Roger Kitchens, Kathy Scott, Rebecca Lynn, and others—contradictions and discrepancies abounded. What was I hoping to accomplish on this night? To find the “truth” about those contradictions?

Ever since I had first proposed writing a book about him, I had questioned him about his past—I had interviewed him, rather than simply talk to him. I had been too interested in Lee the emotionally abused child, or Lee the delusional Navy Seal, or Lee the lying ex-husband of Kathy, and not interested enough in Lee Sandspur, the homeless man on Cortez Road.

On the other hand, I had often trusted my own memory as factual, writing as though my version of the events was somehow official. When I had recorded the conversations on tape, I knew I was accurately reflecting the words that were spoken, but other times, like the morning when I had first seen him drunk and followed him around on Cortez Road, I had not recorded it, but written about it many hours later. Was that any more reliable than Lee's memory of what Kathy might have said to him?

During the time I had spent doing research for the book—discovering the story of his life, and maybe what his life as a homeless man could mean—I had hoped not only to become an access point for him, a portal to civilization, a human being he could rely on—but also to gain access myself to a fascinating wealth of material to write about.

Maybe that had happened.

But a byproduct of the book was that our relationship was—despite the sweat, the stench, the meals, the handshakes, the secrets—ultimately sterile. It was not an intimate communion, a brotherhood beyond the page. Rather than an avenue, the book had in fact been a barrier: we were perpetually separated by this old tape recorder standing between the seats.

Maybe I should have skipped the project altogether. I shouldn't have needed an excuse to be his friend.

I left my tape recorder and laptop in the car.

Maybe I would write about this later, maybe not. But I was going to acknowledge that it was imperfect: it was one man's memory, one man's version of the details. It seemed only fair.

Brian McMillan

At midnight, Lee emerged from the Laundromat restroom wearing the spare clothes Brian had given him earlier in the evening: jeans, a red T-shirt with a baseball on the front, cotton socks.

They were about the same height, same build. Lee was the age of Brian's father.

Why couldn't Lee live the "normal" life? Why could Brian?

Ignoring the night traffic, they spoke quietly about the universe. A bright light, a planet, shone near the moon overhead. They marveled at the forces that enabled them to perceive such a distant body: light, generated by the power of the sun, which was directly behind them at this moment in the earth's rotation, traversed the galaxy to bathe that planet. It then reflected off the spherical surface, and, at a rate of 700 million miles per hour, scattered in all directions. Countless particles of that light penetrated the atmosphere of the earth directly above a wooden bench outside the Laundromat on Cortez Road, and struck the rods in their eyes.

Lee said, When I was recovering in the Navy hospital, a nurse asked if I would be willing to visit the children burn victims. She said most people didn't like to go because the children were sometimes scarred so badly and were disfigured, and people didn't like to look at them, but they liked to have stories read to them. So I went. I sat on a hospital bed and held these children and read to them. They just wanted someone to hold them.

He paused, and began weeping. He said, They just wanted to play. Can you imagine, being in such bad shape that nobody even wanted to sit with you and play with you?

Lee sat quietly for a moment and wiped his eyes. He said, What do you want for your boys?

Brian repeated the question and thought for a moment, before he said, I guess I want my boys to feel good about who they become. And when they stray from the path, I hope they repent.

They talked for some time. The hours passed by, and it approached five in the morning. Soon, Brian would have to drive to Tampa to catch his plane.

Brian said, Remember how we made the deal a long time ago that we would split the money from this book?

Lee nodded.

Suppose I contact you somehow in a couple of years, and I have ten thousand dollars to give you.

He had no reaction.

Brian said, It might be a hundred bucks, it might be a million. Could be nothing. But suppose it's ten thousand dollars. What would you do with it?

He thought for a minute, then said, I'd get some change, take the bus down to Wal-Mart and get a couple of pairs of clothes. Not many, just a couple. And then I'd go down the street and find the missionaries, and give the rest to them. "Here, give this to the church. Give this to the burn victims. They need this a lot more than I do."

Really?

Lee nodded. Yep. That's what I'd do with it.

And that's it? You just walk away? And go sleep on the street?

I don't deserve the money. I want to help those poor children.

Lee stared down Cortez, but he wasn't looking at anything in particular. It was like he was being hypnotized by the blurred lights of distant cars.

Brian asked him where he had slept the night before. Maybe I can drop you off before I go?

They sat in silence.

Finally he said, I don't remember.

Brian placed Lee's duffel bag in the back seat and helped him into the front seat, and they left the Laundromat. Lee rolled up his window, saying the breeze was too cold. They pulled around the opposite side of Albertson's, where Kelly had found Lee and put him on the phone. Brian removed the duffel bag and put it on the bench under an overhang. A light shone in front of the bench, and on the cement sidewalk, the ground crawled with insects. They were mostly gnats, but in the middle a large black beetle had claimed territory. Lee sat down on the bench beside Brian, and they each said a prayer aloud for the other. Bless Lee that he'll be safe and protected. Bless Brian and his beautiful family.

He asked Brian to help him move his duffel bag farther down the bench, away from the cone of light, which was spotlighting the insects on the cement. He scooted down and sat next to the bag in the dark.

Thanks for helping me with the book, Brian said. And for spending time with me tonight.

He nodded, his head hanging low. He looked as if he might cry. He said, I don't think you realize how hard and how often I pray for you and your family.

Brian thanked him again and got into the car. As he drove, he looked in his rearview mirror. Lee stood up from the bench and hobbled away, shrinking, smaller and smaller in the mirror, until Brian turned the corner, and he was gone.

POSTSCRIPT

The following are excerpts from Separation Documents and Personnel Records for SANDSPUR, Lee Eric.

27 April 72: School Guarantee Enlistee

Enlisted this date in the U.S. Navy for FOUR (4) years.
Recruited 9 Nov 71. Meets required visual acuity and special physical standards.

SEAMAN category

Guaranteed assignment to the DATA PROCESSING
TECHNICIAN "A" School.

27 Apr 76: Administrative Remarks

Extended enlistment for a period of 24 months. Petty Officer Sandspur desires to sell unused leave.

07 Jan 78: Performance Evaluation Report

DP2 Sandspur has been assigned as mid shift computer operator. As an operator he is responsible for producing maintenance reports, IMMS and other miscellaneous programs. While deployed to Japan, DP2 Sandspur has had a collateral duty as a shore patrolman.

DP2 Sandspur is a very diligent and meticulous worker. As an operator he can be relied upon to complete his runs in a timely and accurate manner. Ratee's knowledge of IMMS is unsurpassed and he freely devotes his spare time to helping others learn this operational area. DP2 Sandspur has a quiet, easy going personality that enables him to work well with his

juniors and seniors. Ratee supports equal opportunity and while deployed has acted in a manner to promote a good name for the U.S. He has an excellent command of the English language. DP2 Sandspur is recommended for advancement.

DP2 Sandspur's behavior is evidence of great pride in himself and his country. Besides his military responsibilities, he also assumes great civic responsibilities in that he is a volunteer auxiliary police officer. DP2 Sandspur always maintains the highest level of appearance whether in uniform or civilian attire.

26 Apr 78: Performance Evaluation Report

DP2 Sandspur has been assigned as mid shift supervisor and computer operator. He is responsible for the timely processing of the repair maintenance production and other miscellaneous programs and jobs. He is required to train all new operators in the 3M processing areas.

Petty Officer Sandspur is an extremely dependable person. He possesses the ability to work well on his own and produce excellent and expedient results. He has upon numerous occasions detected and corrected errors submitted by the users of ADP Services in time to eliminate costly rerun time. Sandspur actively seeks out work. He is constantly seeking methods to improve production and customer relations.

DP2 Sandspur has a well-organized, imaginative and inquisitive mind. Sandspur's vast knowledge of the Intermediate Maintenance Management Systems (IMMS II) operations is highly recognized not only by his peers, but also his supervisors. He acts as the primary point of contact when problems arise. Petty Officer Sandspur's quiet and easy going

personality earned him great respect by everyone and contributed greatly to the high morale within the division. These same traits won him respect with all he came in contact with while serving as shore patrol aboard Yokosuka Naval Base. Petty Officer's military appearance and deportment are very impressive and set an example which his peers and subordinates can emulate. Sandspur is highly respected for his integrity and can be counted upon to maintain a balanced viewpoint in matters of personal behavior, especially those involving racial relations. DP2 Sandspur's command of the English language, both written and oral, is excellent. He is highly recommended for retention and advancement.

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APPENDIX A

June 5, 2007

TO: Brian McMillan
English

FROM: Cynthia A. Prosen, Ph.D.
Dean of Graduate Studies & Research

RE: Human Subjects Proposal #HS07-111
"Cortez Road: A Nonfiction Narrative"

The Human Subjects Research Review Committee has reviewed your proposal and has given it final approval. To maintain permission from the Federal government to use human subjects in research, certain reporting processes are required. As the principal investigator, you are required to:

- A. Include the statement "Approved by HSRRC: Project # (listed above) on all research materials you distribute, as well as on any correspondence concerning this project.
- B. Provide the Human Subjects Research Committee letters from the agency(ies) where the research will take place within 14 days of the receipt of this letter. Letters from agencies should be submitted if the research is being done in (a) a hospital, in which case you will need a letter from the hospital administrator; (b) a school district, in which case you will need a letter from the superintendent, as well as the principal of the school where the research will be done; or (c) a facility that has its own Institutional Review Board, in which case you will need a letter from the chair of that board.
- C. Report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee any deviations from the methods and procedures outlined in your original protocol. If you find that modifications of methods or procedures are necessary, please report these to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee before proceeding with data collection.
- D. Submit progress reports on your project every 12 months. You should report how many subjects have participated in the project and verify that you are following the methods and procedures outlined in your approved protocol.
- E. Report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee that your project has been completed. You are required to provide a short progress report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee in which you provide information about your subjects, procedures to ensure confidentiality/anonymity of subjects, and the final disposition of records obtained as part of the research (see Section II.C.7.c).
- F. Submit renewal of your project to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee if the project extends beyond three years from the date of approval.

It is your responsibility to seek renewal if you wish to continue with a three-year permit. At that time, you will complete (D) or (E), depending on the status of your project.

kjm