

## *Baptism*

By Lawrence Reid Bechtel

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My mother argued that baptism by sprinkling was sufficient; my father held with immersion. Their disagreement on this point worried me as a child, but by the time I graduated high school I had dismissed not only baptism but every other tenet of their Christianity as mere superstition and dogma. My father, ever hopeful, urged me to apply to his alma mater, Rock of Ages, in Chicago, and at least consider the ministry as a vocation, promising in exchange to pay my tuition for the first year. Surprised by his generosity and eager to prove that I was immune to his pleas, I accepted. The following September I set off for Rock of Ages with a suitcase full of clothes and a shoulder satchel into which I had loaded two notebooks, a half-dozen ballpoint pens, and Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. My mother gave me a Bible with concordance, and my father, taking me by the shoulders said, "I don't know how you lost your faith, son, but God has not lost His faith in you."

On the bus ride north I studied the map of Chicago minutely, but discovered when I arrived that the city was vastly larger and more complicated than the map indicated and so did not arrive on campus until after dark, and only after having been twice propositioned by men offering to put me up for the night. Due to some mix-up, my dormitory room was already taken, and I was obliged to sleep in a study lounge, and the next day was taken by a kindly administrator to an off-campus apartment just west of LaSalle Street usually reserved for upperclassmen. In the evening, I walked all the way to the lakefront, where the brilliant lights of the city ended abruptly in a great expanse of dark water.

Rock of Ages touted itself as a "Christ-centered liberal arts college," and required students and faculty to sign a pledge of abstinence from alcohol, dancing, movies, and membership in secret societies. But neither this pledge nor the curvilinear wall around campus could prevent cultural shifts from seeping in, along with weed, mushrooms, rock music, *Siddhartha*. A tall freshman with wavy hair who hailed from California casually remarked that the world was "absurd," as though this were self-evident, and then laughed, which made me feel embarrassingly naïve and strangely liberated. Searching for antecedents in the library I found Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. His bold overturning of conventional Christianity in poetic aphorisms illustrated with unusual colored drawings so thrilled me I bought a copy and kept it always with me. The professors to my chagrin proved to be surprisingly good, especially the amiable gentleman with wispy hair who taught Romantic Lit. and dwelt glowingly on Tolkien's use of *myth*, enunciating the word as if it contained a magic power. One day as I stood up at the end of class, my *Marriage* slipped out from among my other books and slapped to the floor. Heather, a girl with long blond hair whom I had frequently admired, stooped down gracefully and picked it up, saying as she handed it back, "*if the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.*" She spoke this like a password, and then invited me to go outside, where we sat on a small stone bench under a ginkgo tree and

talked Blake for an hour. She knew more about him than I did, had toiled through some of his prophetic writings, and had even seen some of his etched copper plates at the Tate in London. I was smitten! As she stood up to go she said, “would you like to come with us to church this Sunday?” My answer was supposed to have been no, of course not, but in the light of her smile I unhesitatingly accepted.

The “us” she spoke of were, besides herself, six other Rock of Ages students—Raymond, who might have been her boyfriend, Jenny, Thomas, Rupert, Cline, and India, or “Indie.” The “church” she spoke of took place in a basement room below the campus chapel. When the group of us arrived, some forty people sat quietly with bowed heads in semi-circular rows of folding chairs. We took our seats in silence. Heather beside me knit her hands together in her lap. I didn’t know what to do with my hands and was against bowing my head, so sat straight and waited uncomfortably for something to begin. Finally, a man whom Heather later identified as Pastor Shepherd stood up, and with a Bible draped over one hand, began to speak. I had often listened to my father preach and came grudgingly to appreciate the care with which he prepared and delivered a sermon, quite often reading portions aloud to be sure it came off word perfect. But this Pastor Shepherd, often with eyes closed, spoke haltingly, as if he did not know what he would say next. He was like a blind man tapping his way along a winding path for the first time. His listeners remained perfectly still, and I could feel their attentiveness, as if they, too, were on that winding path just behind him and would fall off if they did not keep exactly in step. A thought came suddenly into my mind: *this man is a false prophet, do not be deceived!* The thought dismayed me, for it seemed not to be my own, but my father’s. In reaction, I willed myself to accept Pastor Shepherd’s peculiar, uncertain delivery without criticism. Listening in this way, I felt myself yielding to a sense of imminent discovery of knowledge long hidden or knowingly covered up. Then, abruptly, the service ended. Shaken that I should be so susceptible, I stood up slowly. Heather asked if I was alright and I nodded, then followed her out of the building. I went to church with her and the others again the following Sunday and then regularly on both Sunday and Wednesday evenings. I was baptized in the Spirit with the laying on of hands, without any water at all, an action I could hardly explain to myself and would never have dared admit to my father. Church became the axle upon which my life turned.

In the spring, I received an unexpected letter from Matthew, my best friend from high school, who after our junior year had moved with his parents back to Polestar in South Georgia, where his father took over the family’s lumber business. Ever since childhood Matt had aspired to become a builder, and he hoped his family connections in Polestar would ensure his success. These connections proved to be a millstone, he wrote. But he was not giving up his aspirations: “Did Frank Lloyd Wright surrender to his critics? Hell no! He wrote his manifesto, *The Future of Architecture*, as I shall write mine one day.” Matthew’s conclusion was jolting: “Since my odds of success are far better in a city of three million than in this enclave of rednecks numbering no more than thirteen thousand, I am coming to Chicago with a full kit of tools. Look for me in five days.”

Rock of Ages had strict rules about overnight guests of either sex, even in off-campus housing. I did not want to lose my apartment, nor share it with his “full kit of tools.” I had no

idea how he had gotten my address, and hoped, with some shame, that he wouldn't be able to find me. But he did, and not five days later but four, on an otherwise beautiful day in late April, just as my landlady's rose bush beside the front step had come into bloom. Coming home from class in the afternoon, I saw a pale-yellow VW bus parked at the curb. I walked slowly around the back end of this vehicle, noting how low it sat over the back tires, and found Matthew casually at ease on my apartment doorstep, sporting a mustache which I might have derided as understated, and with bits of sawdust caught in his curly hair. To one side of him like a faithful dog was his worm-drive circular saw, of which he was inordinately proud, and on the other side a toolbelt and hammer. When he saw me, he stood up, leaned insolently against the porch post, took a long drag from his unfiltered Camel cigarette and with an expression which was a mixture of compliment and derision, said, "You're *feckless*."

"I am well into reading *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust," I said. "Nothing like it has ever been written in the whole of the twentieth century. I hope to begin work on something as prodigious once I finish my studies here."

He barely cracked a smile, dropped his cigarette on my doorstep and stubbed it out with his boot. "I don't merely hope," he said, "I *act*." He pointed to his bus. "Trojan and I have been out seeking opportunities in your windy city. As of one o'clock this afternoon, I am officially a sub-contractor for Imperial Construction Company, hired by the owner of the company himself, Franco Donatelli. He does renovation jobs all over the South Side." He paused. "I need a hand. Are you in?"

Of course I was not in, I told him, nor intended to be, couldn't he see I was in school? My deeper objection was church. Matthew was by nature tone deaf to anything which smacked of religion; Sunday School had been for him a simple waste of time. He observed no day of rest, whether ordained by God or not. "Once I have become a millionaire," he liked to say, "then maybe I shall rest." He would have stared at me with blank incomprehension and then open derision if I had tried to explain that I could not work his schedule because I was a member of a body of believers all of whom felt compelled to be present at each and every service for the continued revealing of the Word in our midst through Pastor Shepherd. Even to myself at this distance in time these words seem preposterous. Not then! Nor just to ourselves: rumors of our church had so disturbed Rock of Ages administrators that we had been forced to meet off campus. We even heard that faculty wives had initiated prayer circles in which they spoke our names aloud and petitioned God to save us from the devil. These rumors and prayers only strengthened the bonds among us. Pastor Shepherd no longer spoke with a Bible draped over his hand. He didn't need to: we were living its history and promise, or so we believed. We did not read of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we were that people in the wilderness; we did not worship Jesus of Nazareth as the Word made Flesh, we ourselves had become that Word. We did not look to Christ upon the cross for our redemption, we ourselves hung upon that cross with Him. Service after service, week and week, we hung there together, longing for eventual Resurrection. Though painful to bear, the Word was as fruit to our lips; a spiritual reality impossible—impermissible—to explain to anyone else, especially someone like Matthew.

So that first afternoon I distracted him with a tour of campus, during which he noted with approval the slate roofs, copper guttering, and leaded glass of the chapel windows. I fed him a scholar's supper of bread and soup, and he collapsed on the couch and shortly went to asleep. He was up and gone before I left for class the next morning and he did not return until nearly nightfall. This pattern continued to the end of the school year. I had decided by then to stay on at Rock of Ages, much to my father's delight, though of course I said nothing about church. I took a part time job mopping floors in the school cafeteria and prepared to enroll in summer school. But one afternoon I came home from my job to find a scratched and dented Toyota Camry parked where the VW bus ought to have been, and Matthew slumped on the front porch.

"You're home early," I said. "Where's Trojan?"

"Broke down," he said, stubbing out his cigarette. "On the Eisenhower Expressway. Had to be towed. The dude that runs the shop gave me that loaner to drive." He nodded toward the Toyota.

"Some loaner. He must like you."

Matthew barely acknowledged this. "*Mr. Donatelli!*" he burst out. "With his gold necklace and bracelet. What a crook! Probably belongs to the mafia." He complained bitterly that for all his work, job after job, he took home "damn pennies." So he had started on his own job, one the "jackleg carpenter" he had working with him had told him about, a job that Imperial Construction was supposed to have signed a contract on but hadn't as yet.

"Let me get this straight," I said, "you cut in on a job that belonged to a mafia guy?"

Matthew insisted there'd been no contract on the job, it had been anybody's to take, except that *Mr. Donatelli* showed up and threatened a lawsuit. Matthew had packed up his tools in Trojan and driven off. "Hell!" he said, stomping with his boot on the porch step, "he was just ripping off black people. I don't want to work for a son-of-bitch like that!" He lit another cigarette and took a long drag. "I'm broke. I got to go home to Polestar, I guess. Damn it!"

I'd never seen him so low and didn't know what to say so just sat down beside him. After a while, he sighed and drew himself to his feet. "C'mon," he said, "Let's you and me take a ride and see if that dude has got Trojan fixed."

I had to jiggle the handle to get the passenger door of the Toyota open, and once seated inside found that I could not roll the window down, and it was a hot, humid afternoon. "Nice rig you got here."

"It's got pep, though," he said, as we merged onto the Dan Ryan Expressway, "watch." I forgot all about the heat and braced my feet against the floorboard as Matthew shifted sharply into fifth and went dodging through the heavy traffic, frequently honking the horn. We merged again onto the Eisenhower Expressway going west but thankfully only went as far as Ashland, where we got off and continued west on Van Buren. Shortly, we passed Malcolm X College, which proclaimed itself in huge, black letters.

I looked at Matthew. "Where is this place?"

He grinned at me. “*Feckless*, are we?” He drove on for another six blocks, past weary-looking brick buildings in various stages of disrepair. A scattering of black men along the way stood talking, or smoking, or leaning on cars. Finally, Matthew coasted through the traffic light at Leverage Street and came to a stop.

“You coming?” he asked, and without waiting for an answer got out. I jimmied with my door handle again, this time without success, so I slid out Matthew’s door. Immediately, I felt weighed down by the noise, heat, humidity and utter grimness of this place. From the Eisenhower, running in a trough immediately beside Van Buren but below street level, issued a constant roar of sound, an ugly, tuneless drone, a river of noise, whose wind stirred in the weeds and scrubby trees clinging to life along a chain-link fence caught with plastic bags and paper debris; cans and other trash were scattered along the curb. Heat radiated with suffocating intensity from the dirty streets, sidewalks, and buildings. Shards of flaming sunlight glared from the cracked windshields, damaged fenders, dented hubcaps of dilapidated cars parked tightly along the curb. All was harsh, coarse, grating, dirty.

Matthew, apparently impervious to these impressions, strode boldly up the broad, oil-spotted concrete apron toward an L-shaped building emblazoned with the words, “Rubio Auto Repair.” Even the lunge of two German Shepherd guard dogs, barking madly and straining at their heavy chains, did not distract him. He approached a half-circle of black men flanked by more crummy cars and piles of tires. At the center point of this half circle stood another man, trim, swarthy, with glistening black hair and beard. He was shorter than the other men but stood taller in his presence and bearing. His feet were solidly planted a shoulder’s width apart, and his big hands were loose and ready at his sides. There was an impressive alertness in his stance, and a certain immovability, too. His posture seemed to say: *I own this ground upon which I stand.*

Matthew walked directly up to this man and the two of them began earnestly talking, sometimes pointing at Trojan, parked to one side, or toward the building. I was distracted from watching them by a slender black boy on a banana seat bicycle who performed a wheelie just by the traffic light at Leverage and Van Buren, while two men standing at the doorway of the corner building lifted their pool cues in approval.

Finally, Matthew turned around and came back toward me. Two steps away he hopped in the air on one foot. “Hot damn!” he exclaimed as he came down. He grinned broadly. Shading his eyes with one hand, he gestured with his other toward Rubio Auto Repair and its assemblage of dented cars, piled tires, and guard dogs chained to their jeep. “That *whole* building,” he announced, shouting over the noise of the Eisenhower at our backs, “is going to be razed to the ground. Urban renewal.” Then he turned and gestured toward the brick building across Leverage street, where I’d just watched the boy perform his wheelie. “Rubio needs *somebody* to move his whole operation into *that* building. Shop and all.” He lit a cigarette and grinned again. “*We* are that somebody.”

I objected that I already had a job mopping floors.

Matthew only laughed, and I did feel ridiculous. “Not anymore. I told Rubio you were my electrician!”

Matthew had taught me to wire outlets, lights, and single-pole switches one summer when I helped him build his uncle's cabin, but wire an auto shop? I was speechless.

He held up a set of keys, jangling them. "I told Rubio about the Toyota, so he gave me something else to drive." Then he strode around the side of the building as if he'd been working there for weeks, where, under a withered shade tree, I saw a dusty, turquoise Cadillac convertible, with white interior. We folded back the ripped top and got in. Matthew had to pump the accelerator several times but finally the car roared to life. Once on the expressway, he gunned it. The Caddy stuttered a moment and then leaped forward, as if suddenly recovering its days of glory, and we promptly dubbed it "The Emperor." Matt howled to the hot sky for all he was worth, and I howled, too.

Two days later we returned to Rubio's, and with Trojan back in running order drove to a lumber yard and bought materials to begin work. I resigned my job mopping floors. Our task was absurdly beyond my experience and even Matthew's, but his confidence was boundless, and we worked together like brothers in harness. Emptying Rubio's old shop was a mammoth undertaking in itself: there were five bays chock full of a chaotic hodge podge of tools, tires, clothes, broken equipment, and oddities of all sorts which had been accumulating for decades. Emptying out a room full of tires we discovered eight motorcycles and assorted motorcycle parts buried underneath. Sweaty and dirty, we collapsed in laughter.

To expedite the work, Rubio offered to let Matthew live rent-free in one of his houses, 324 Leverage, which in its day must have been a handsome residence and was still stout, and only five doors down the street from the corner building we were renovating into a new shop. I soon moved in with Matthew. Most of the houses on both sides of the block belonged to Rubio. Outsiders would have called him a slumlord, but for that neighborhood he was the *padrone*, the godfather. He said to us, "if anybody gives you trouble, you tell them you are my sons," and we understood from his intonation and the steadiness of his gaze that he had unnamed allies and both could and would call them to our defense if need be. I couldn't picture my own father saying such a thing to me, and with such force, and I warmed to Rubio. We never did have any trouble, either, not so much as one word in anger raised against us. The locus of activity was his shop; everybody came there to do business, air complaints, beg money, hang out. It was a wonder Rubio got any auto repair work done at all, and I sometimes puzzled over where he got his money, for he always had a thick wad of bills in his pocket. Often a bread truck would stop by in the morning, Rubio would buy an enormous bag of day-old French bread and then walk down the street handing out loaves.

Meanwhile, demolition crews and equipment, notably an impressive crane with a heavy wrecking ball, had rumbled into the neighborhood, and beginning at Adams Street had begun working their way south along the west side of Leverage, reducing the houses to a field of rubble picked over by brick collectors. With the ever-present noise and dust of this destruction as pressure, and because we were still months away from completion of Rubio's new shop and emptying out his old one, I withdrew from Rock of Ages well before the end of the summer, which greatly disappointed my father.

I didn't think he would understand that I had not discontinued my education. For life on Leverage Street was not simply harsh, coarse, grating, and grim, as I had at first supposed, but rich with an arresting vitality. Every day, a cavalcade of colorful characters came by the shop. There were the cops, each one a half-size larger than an ordinary man and who always came in pairs, and there were the vendors of stolen merchandise, who showed up as frequently as the cops though at different times, carefully displaying their wares on the hoods or in the trunks of their cars. There was Sonny, a mysterious boulder of a man who hauled cast iron tubs with a rope down the steep staircases from soon-to-be demolished houses and sold the iron for scrap. There was Aaron, voluble and animated, who was shot in the head, but showed up soon afterwards, his skull wrapped in bandages but otherwise as voluble and animated as ever. There was Bone, and his backup, Pee Wee, who with his height and build could have passed for an NBA forward. Bone dressed in a blue silk suit with broad-brimmed hat to match and was allegedly pimping his own sister. He looked me square in the face one day and said, "don't you never trust nobody, especially *me*." Matthew and I immersed ourselves in the life of this exotic place and dressed to fit, with headscarves and gold studs in our ears, like Rubio. I even went so far as to get a Chicago tattoo on my arm from Raven Clift.

What suffered was my association with church. I tried to continue attending, but could not sit long without dozing off, no matter how urgent the Word. Once I fell so completely asleep that Heather had to wake me. How could I sleep through our crucifixion? My embarrassment turned to shame, and I hesitated to return lest it happen again. Going intermittently was worse than not going at all, so I quit altogether, and my guilt accumulated. I was a reprobate, a traitor, as weak and faithless as Pilgrim fallen into the Slough of Despond. I only hoped that church members, especially Heather, would remember me no more. To myself, though, I argued that I was not merely faithless! The difference between my experience of church and my experience there on Leverage Street yawned like a chasm; I could not reconcile the two modes of being, bridge the difference between dwelling in a spiritual realm outside of time and place, and experiencing the irreducible if gritty actuality of our days at Rubio's. His corner was life at the pith, pungent and incorrigible, purged of unseen principalities and powers.

Yet the chasm did close, and the difference collapsed, through a young man named Willie G. Dark, handsome, with brushed hair and blessed with an athletic grace of movement, Willie G took boundless pleasure in simply being himself. He could hardly keep from smiling, and what a smile! His lips would part, his cheeks would bulge, his even, lustrous, gleaming teeth would appear, until as if he could no longer restrain himself, his mouth would burst open and sparkling laughter bubble out. I had been sullen at his age, with much less reason, yet Willie G, who ought to have been as brooding as Raskolnikov given his blighted circumstances, revealed not a trace of moroseness in his character. He would do a quick little two-step on the sidewalk, bob and weave for a moment like a boxer, then stand still and smile. A dozen or more children would flock around him, pulling on his arms until at last, with mock resignation, he would agree to be chased. Quick and agile, he kept just a hands breadth out of the children's reach, dodging this way and that, doubling back, spinning around and backpedaling, grinning broadly and clapping his hands, as the children rushed after him, screaming with delight.

Eighteen at the time, Willie G didn't seem to be in school or have a job. But he was curious about Matthew and I and often came down to the shop to watch us work, not because he was interested in what we were doing, but because he wanted to know about us and where we came from--where we had grown up, what our parents were like and our schools, and did we have friends and what were they like, and what did we do for fun. No one else in that neighborhood asked any such questions of us. They took time to answer, and the pace of our work sometimes suffered for it. One time, Matthew said to him, thumping a heavy timber with the little sledge for emphasis, "You can be *anything* if you put your mind to it!" Willie G watched him intensely as he said this and then shortly left. We didn't see him for a while, but heard he'd gotten a job as a bellhop at the Drake Hotel on Michigan Avenue.

Then one afternoon he showed up again, in an outfit purchased with his tip money: a broad-brimmed black hat—broader than Bone's—with a silver band; trim, black pants, with silver studs down the seams of both legs; a waist-length black jacket to match, with a row of silver stars across the back of the shoulders; a cardinal-red silken shirt open low down his chest, and a bright, yellow neck scarf. His black shoes, polished to a mirror finish, looked like a dancer's, with their thin soles and small heels.

"You look like a bullfighter!" exclaimed Matthew. "Where's your cape?"

Willie G smiled broadly, a smile which dazzled like the sun. "Nah!" he said. "I don't need no cape. All I got to do is *look* at that big 'ol bull, and he *lay* right down." He illustrated with his hands, which he held out in front of him, palms down, and allowed to slowly descend. Then he clapped and laughed.

Winter was cold that year. Lake Michigan froze, as did the piles of dirty snow along Van Buren Street and up Leverage. Our tools were cold, too. The gas-fired heater made the shop hot when it kicked on but left us feeling even colder when it shut off. We bundled up in heavy clothes, which made all our movements slow. One frigid day, mournful C.L., a one-time assistant of Rubio's who had long since become a drunk, stared out the dirty window of the bay door and said, "bitter place to end up." Our work slowed to a tedious crawl. Willie G never came down to the shop to visit. Even the demolition crews ceased work; only the brick collectors persisted.

There were no flowers in that neighborhood to usher in spring, but returning warmth was enough. We shed our heavy coats and gloves and began to make real progress again, as the demolition crews and their wrecking ball rumbled closer, destroying one house after another.

One day in early June, fourteen months after Matthew and I had begun working at Rubio's, I received a letter from Heather. She said she missed my company, talked about church, and then invited me out to a 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic at her family's property in Bolingbrook. "An old quarry pond is there, a magic spot," she wrote. "Bring your swimsuit!" Below her note was a carefully drawn map and directions leading to an oval shape with little waves drawn inside it. I studied her drawing carefully, touching the lines with my finger. She had missed my company! I desperately wanted to go to her picnic. But how? I had no vehicle, Matthew was possessive of Trojan, and I couldn't simply drive off in one Rubio's old cars without some explanation. I kept my longing secret and counted down the days.

By July, we were at last finishing up Rubio's new auto repair shop. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, we powered up the electric panel, tested the hydraulic lift and air compressor, finished up the bathroom plumbing, and installed two deadbolts on the front door. In celebration, Rubio went to visit his lady friend in Hyde Park for two nights. Late in the morning on Independence Day, we removed from the old shop Rubio's phone with the ten-foot cord, his podium with the address book on top, and the sawed-off shotgun he kept hidden in the wall. This trinity of virtually sacred objects we then installed in the new shop, between the overhead doors and with a clear view of the street. Matthew and I stood together without speaking and gazed across Leverage at the old shop, once Rubio's bastion and now empty and desolate, with two bay doors gone, the letters "Rubio Auto Repair" taken off the wall, and the wrecking ball on its crane dangling ominously over the roof. I felt as though an age had gone by since that hour when I had stood sweltering by the dented Toyota, as Matthew strode boldly toward Rubio standing so trim and alert in that half circle of black men. Now we had arrived at the ending of that beginning. I felt both accomplished and empty.

Matthew pulled out a cigarette and began to smoke. "Well," he said at last, "what now?"

I looked at him a moment, considering. "How about a picnic!" I blurted out with mingled reluctance and anticipation. Then, slowly, I told him about Heather, and her letter, all except the part about church.

I saw with satisfaction that he was impressed. His wry smile did not conclude with a pronouncement that I was *feckless*. "Hell, yes!" he exclaimed, slapping his trouser leg, "let's go to your picnic."

I was swept up in his enthusiasm.

"We'll lock up the dogs and go," he said. This was always the last piece of business on any working day: locking up Pharoah and Caesar in the shop, with a couple of cans of dogfood for them to tear open. Just as Matthew pulled the door closed, he grabbed a set of keys off the keyboard and jingled them at me. "We're taking the Emperor."

Rushing back to our house, we cleaned up and changed clothes, and raced back to where the Emperor sat under its withered tree. One last time we folded the top back and settled into the swank white leather seats. The old turquoise Caddy fired right up, as if knowing it was going on an adventure. What an entrance we would make at Heather's picnic, I thought, feeling a little cocky at the prospect. Just as Matthew was backing the Emperor over the curb and into the street, I saw Willie G coming easy down the street toward us in his bull fighter's garb: black suit, red shirt, yellow tie, broad hat, gleaming shoes. He did look fine

I grabbed the windshield and stood up. "Willie G!" I called out, waving, "come on to a picnic with us!"

Matthew stopped the Emperor and I got out, folding the front seat forward and holding the door open. "Get in!"

Willie G came up to the car, his smile nearly as broad as his hat. "Say, picnic?"

“Out in the country!” I said. “To swim.”

His smile faded. “I don’t have no *swimsuit*.”

Matthew and I both laughed. “Neither do we!” I said and shrugged.

As lithe as a gymnast Willie G hopped over the side of the car and into the middle of the back seat all in one motion. “Well,” he said, “we goin’ or stayin’?”

So off we went, and I already pictured us arriving, Heather running up, excited to see me but a little shocked by the funky old Cadillac convertible with a cool dude from the ghetto in the back seat. I’d nonchalantly take off my shirt hoping she’d admire my Chicago tattoo and appreciate that even though I was maybe a heretic, I was now a guy of broad and maybe dangerous experience.

“How far is this picnic?” Willie G shouted, as we got onto the Eisenhower going east. He was hard to hear, with all the traffic.

“Thirty miles!” I shouted back. The distance did not seem that far to me.

“*Thirty?*” he echoed in astonishment, as if we were on a journey to some foreign country.

“It’ll be beautiful out there,” I said, turning in my seat to face him as he leaned forward. “No buildings, no streets, no traffic, just *nature!*”

He said nothing and fell back against the seat with a stone-faced expression I’d never seen before. He squinted his eyes against the wind, his yellow scarf pulling at his neck, the tails streaming out behind him. His broad hat he clutched to his chest like a child. I began to think it had been a terrible idea to ask him to come along to this picnic. Terrible to be going with Matthew, too, given his total indifference to anything religious and my having told him nothing about church. Terrible to arrive in this beat-up old car with its rusted-out muffler. I nearly told Matthew to turn back, but he had lit himself a cigarette and turned up the radio, such as it was.

Following Heather’s directions, we turned south on the Dan Ryan, travelled southwest on the Stevenson Expressway to Bollingbrook, exited north on a two lane Route 53, and finally bumped down off the asphalt onto a dirt road which passed by a marsh, went through a stand of oak trees, came around a long bend, and ended at a copse of sumac. Two other cars were parked nearby. We followed a winding footpath to the top of a slight rise and stopped. There below us lay the quarry pond, glittering in the sun, the water a beautiful blue green. On the far side, a deep field of long grasses rippled beguilingly in a gentle, shifting wind.

It didn’t matter that we had no swimsuits. Jenny bobbed in the water, her breasts showing. Raymond, deeply tanned except for his white buttocks, bent down to touch the water, and then jumped in. And Heather, shapely Heather, ascended to a high rock, pointed her hands in the air and dove, disappearing into the water as smoothly as a dolphin.

I cannot recall walking down to the pond, or undressing, or getting in. Instead, as though I had been transported through the air, clothes evaporating off my body as I flew, I found myself splashing around in that bright, chilly, blue green water with my church friends as though we

were children in an enormous baptismal font. I felt cleansed of guilt; I was the lost sheep gathered back into the fold! Matthew, his characteristic sneer gone, splashed right along with us. We were all of us together as if reborn, naked in a world made new. When Heather popped out of the water near me like a mermaid, saying “hello, stranger!” and slicking back her long blond hair, I was foolishly happy.

She took my hand and drew me out into deeper water where we caught hold of a long, slippery log and tried to get on. Soon the whole group had paddled out and was also trying. The log spun this way and that, frustrating our efforts and prompting our laughter. Somehow, we got ourselves organized and paired up on either side and on a count of three boosted ourselves up onto the log at the same time. Heather, at the front of the log and opposite from me, sprang straight up out of the water with graceful strength, and with the poise of a dancer, flung her leg out and over the log, firmly straddling it. I clambered up behind her. Pearls of water slid glistening down her strong back. We all cheered our success as Matthew, sitting stern-most, called out a cadence, and we scooped at the water in unison as though crewing, slowly propelling our log boat toward the further shore as if making for the promised land. In that moment, that one rapturous moment, I felt the life of church and life at Rubio’s come together; seamlessly they became one; the world as it is and the world yet to be were joined in marriage, one flesh, wholly present to each other, infinitely in all directions.

Then I saw Willie G, sitting motionless in the tall, wind-swept grasses as we approached, and my rapture was shattered. He was fully clothed, his face half hidden under the broad hat. His legs were drawn up, his arms were folded over his knees, and his chin was resting on his hands. My eyes met his and I felt as though I were seeing him for the first time but at a great distance. With alarming clarity, I saw what he was seeing: young, beautiful, nude white women, paddling toward him through the blue green water under the bright sun like nymphs from some Greek myth come to life. A realm from which he was shut out. A sight which in another day and time would have gotten him lynched.

The three of us left the picnic early and drove back to the city in silence. I tried awkwardly to apologize but Willie G sat with head bowed or looked out the window, so I gave up and repented the afternoon in private and hoped that would suffice.

But I was mistaken. Two days later Willie G knocked on the door of our house. I was packing my suitcase; I’d called for a cab to take me to the airport. Matthew was down at the new shop loading up Trojan with his tools and things.

Willie G wanted to know who the woman was that sat on the front of the log.

“Heather,” I said, looking at my watch.

He repeated her name, said she was beautiful, asked if I could set up a date for him with her.

I was shocked at his audacity. Did he really suppose that I could ask her such a thing on his behalf? *Would* ask such a thing? What would Heather think? What would she think of me? No, I said, I don’t think that would be possible.

Yet he persisted. Could I at least set it up for him to talk with her, he wanted to know. Or did I have her phone number so he could call her. Could I at least tell him where she lived, so he could walk there? If he wrote her a note, would I see that she got it? If not Heather, what about one of those other pretty girls on the log? He seemed to think I was some kind of authorized doorkeeper, with power to let him back into the realm he had witnessed, if only he could persuade me to open up the door for him again, even a crack.

I told him no, again and again, as politely as I could, in every way I could think of, until finally I said look the cab is going to be here any minute, I can't miss my plane. Then I shut the door on him. When I heard the cab honk from the street, I peeked out the window to see if Willie G was still around, then hustled out the door, down the steps and into cab, pulling my suitcase in after me. I had the cabbie stop at the shop, where Matthew and I shook hands and agreed to stay in touch. Such a hasty end to a year and more of momentous experience!

In the years that followed, I made a point of visiting Rubio when I had business in the Chicago area. We developed a ritual: he would bring out two long, crooked, strong-tasting Italian cigars, we would light them together from an acetylene torch and then smoke and talk. I would ask about Willie G. The news was always bad: on that first visit Rubio told me that he had quit his job as a bellhop. A year or two later, that he'd taken to drinking, cheap stuff. The next time that he'd become a dopehead and couldn't be trusted around the shop because he stole anything he could get his hands on. A couple more years after that how he'd been arrested for breaking into a grocery store. Nearly five years went by before I visited Rubio again. Willie G was in the hospital with "high sugar," by then, and the doctors had amputated one foot, and then his other leg. It was terrible to think of Willie G in that condition! A little more than one year after that, he died, mercifully.

Some months later, Rubio was shot by an intruder, survived, but succumbed to the eighteen surgeries which followed, fighting death to the last breath. Matthew passed away, too, in a car wreck, and before he had either written his manifesto or become a millionaire. Heather moved to San Francisco and I lost track of her; whether she married Raymond or not I don't know.

The last time I saw my father he was on hospice. My mother, still his caregiver, had gone into the next room to take a nap. I sat close to his bed and told him, haltingly, the whole story of Willie G. "He bears upon my conscience," I said when I had finished. "What should I do?"

He inspected me with his watery eyes. "At this late stage you ask my advice?" he whispered in his thin voice.

I shrugged, an embarrassing admission.

"Did I not tell you, son, that God had not lost faith in you?"

"Not lost faith in me for what?" I said, exasperated that I should be having a conversation like this as he lay on his deathbed.

He caught the peevish note in my voice and closed his eyes a moment as if to ward it off, then opened them again. “You *remember*. You have *faithfully* remembered. All these years. What God laid upon your heart you have remembered.” He smiled at me, as if I were a little child. “I am proud of you, son.”

It annoyed me that he had to bring God into it, but I told myself that this was no time for argument and only nodded.

“So now you must go out into the world and share your story.”

His words uncomfortably reminded me of Christ’s great commission, written out in golden letters just below the steeple of the church of my childhood: *go ye into all the world and preach the gospel*. But I was not prepared to fulfill such a commission. “I have already shared it with you,” I said, uneasily. “Isn’t that enough?”

He ignored my question and simply searched my face with his pale eyes. “No one else can tell your story,” he said after a moment. “*No one.*”

The emphasis he applied to the words *no one* was like a small hammer shattering a barrier between us. I became suddenly aware of my father’s sense of abandonment. For here he had patiently listened as I recalled in detail and with twinges of conscience the story of this young man Willie G, whom I had scarcely known and mainly remembered for a single afternoon’s experience nearly thirty years earlier. Had I ever once considered any portion of my own father’s life with half as much attention or conscience? I felt suddenly that I had greatly wronged him, which he knew and yet had never reproved me for, and now he had come to the end of his days. I took up his thin, weakened hand, in my own. “I will at least write it,” I said. “It won’t be Proust, but I will write it, as well as I am able, and let people decide for themselves whether to read it or not.”

My father squeezed my hand with surprising firmness, and I gently squeezed back.

As I stood up to go, in my mind’s eye I saw Willie G, dressed in his bullfighter’s garb. He danced a neat two-step on the sidewalk, bobbed and weaved for a moment like a boxer, then stood still and smiled. Children swarmed around him, and he, laughing, dodged and twisted away as he led them, joyful and screaming, down the street and around the corner out of sight.

