

TURNED UP
(*a true suburban survival story*)

Intro

Flying high on acid and beer, with my long blonde hair dancing in the summer morning air, I floored the gas pedal of my dad's brand new '75 Dodge Dart. The bright speedometer needle climbed in prompt response—70—80—90 miles per hour. As we zoomed up out of the dip near the south end of 112th Street, my psychedelic perception was fixed on one goal—getting that arrow up to the 100 mark. Everything was vivid colored motion and adrenalin.

“Whoa Ed!” came a plea over the roar of wind and engine.

I looked up in time to discover that the road was about to end. Slamming on the brake and cutting the steering wheel to the left, I brought our red and white chariot screeching sideways onto 72nd Avenue. The motor had cut out in the skid, so the world was suddenly quiet and still. The dawn chirping of small winged creatures came in through the open windows and sunroof. The sparkling atmosphere was once again pierced by the laughing voice, which burst forth from the bushy, wild-eyed head of my fellow passenger.

“You crazy bastard!” shouted Mike, now fully awake.

And here the memory clouds. I guess I revved up the engine again and rolled through the local suburbs to find a comfortable nest in which to ride out the remaining hours of the all-night-high.

This is where I found myself in the middle of my seventeenth year of life in the mid-seventies, on the outskirts of a Canadian city; on the outskirts of social norms; on the outskirts of what little sanity remained in my possession.

I say found myself—I wish. That, of course, was my hopeless hope; the evasive treasure that kept me breathing: to know who I was and how I could bath my heart in the soothing light of the all-pervading Love and Joy—and ultimately, to share That with the world. But every weekend seemed to take me deeper and deeper into an all-consuming darkness. I was falling fast and there was still a long way to go.

This is a true story.

Chapter 1

Born Under the Influence

The West Coast rain poured down outside into a colorless city street as a new soul burst optimistically into the world within the warm brick walls of the Vancouver General Hospital. It was four-o-five on the third day of February 1958, and from somewhere out in space, beyond the pains of mortality, a full moon lent its subtle powers to this child on the first morning of its journey. Or was the journey really just beginning? If only the celestial bodies could recount to us the strivings of our distant past. Would we perhaps be amazed to discover that we are in fact approaching the long awaited climax of our adventure?

I don't know what I was expecting, if anything, when I showed up this time around, but the tarmac had fallen into desperate disrepair by the time my little wheels touched down. My hand luggage, a heart full of universal dreams, was swinging lightly within me and I was ready to shine! All I needed was a stable setting where my qualities could unfold. How was I to know that Elvis was king, and the kingdom I was entering was locked into frivolous party-mode, with the state of hangover being an accepted daily social norm? Apparently they were still celebrating care-freedom after defeating, and keeping in check, all the evil empires on Earth. Whatever was going on down here in the Western World, I'm sure that I was contented to cuddle with my new Mommy in our black '46 Ford on my way home, oblivious to the fact that the legal wife of my illegitimate father was pregnant on the other side of town, ready to give birth to a younger brother that I may never meet.

As well as a twelve-year-old car, it turned out that Mommy owned a house in New Westminster. It was in that house that I was to join my old Finnish grandma, Nana; a five-year-old half-brother, Ricky; half-sisters Cheryl-Lynn, seven, and Darlene, nine; and, for the time being, my Daddy, also quite new there.

I don't remember ever meeting the estranged father of my elder siblings. I just know that he was a jazz-pianist and that he and my Mommy and their high-school friends used to hang out at the local hip radio station before my time. I do recall our visits to his mother's house out in Haney. She had a fine crack in her living-room ceiling. I was convinced that it was caused by the heavy foot-steps of Mr. Thorsen, the almost-famous upstairs resident who had designed the cartoon characters Bugs Bunny and Hiawatha, and sold them to the Warner brothers, whoever they were.

I later learned other cool stuff about our family, like the fact that Nana had single-handedly raised all her younger brothers and sisters under harsh conditions in Finland. During World War One they would listen for a falling bomb that didn't whistle, but made a sucking sound, meaning it was coming down towards their house. I guess it never came because she gave birth to Mommy and raised her in Golden, a British Columbian mountain village. Grandpa spent most of his time walking the railroad line, a job that he enjoyed for decades, even beyond his scheduled year of retirement. He was a good-hearted, simple soul.

My father's father was a steamship pilot on Canada's west coast, who entered the 'Great War' as a captain. He married a hotel owner's daughter in Cornwall and they raised my Daddy and two other children in Vancouver (actually, he died of a curable illness when my dad was just five). Their eldest son disappeared from the radar screen in flight to the next World War. I never met the male members of my father's family, the most famous of whom, my great-grand-father Reverend Christian, brought a host of settlers from Minnesota in the late eighteen-hundreds to start a new life in a coastal native village called Bella Coola. Mount Saugstad stands in honour of our family heritage there.

Of course, I was still unaware of my family's history on that wintry day when I entered 817 number 10 Street in a freshly redecorated light-blue bassinet, adding a spark of newness into the domestic routine there. And what was the daily norm of that apparently average, nineteen-fifties Canadian suburban family? What is that indefinable darkness that pervades my earliest feeling-memories? On which cracked and crumbling stairs was I to take my first steps? These are questions that rise for many late in life, long

after the painful damages are done; but rise they must if golden beams of enlightenment are to penetrate and heal. I remember, and slowly, very slowly, I learn to love myself.

The new arrival, Eddie, was looked after largely by Nana who had moved in with her daughter and grandchildren when her second husband passed suddenly away. Cheryl-Lynn and Darlene had to change schools the following year when Mommy was forced to sell the house. Her boy friend (Daddy) was too distracted to earn a living, so everyone shifted to a rented place on Third Avenue in Kitsilano. Glenn came into the world there. It was around this time that our parents married, and Glenn and I became 'legitimate'. Nana eventually returned to Grandpa, the father of my mom, for a relationship of convenience; he bought a little house out in the valley where they could grow old.

Our domestic stability continued to deteriorate. Mommy and Daddy drank every day. She would get angry when he came home with a tipsy head start. To catch up, she would down some hard-stuff and they would then usually end up going out to party. Her challenges at home, with so many demands on her handicapped attention, were intensified by the fact that I suffered from an acute colic condition, which kept me irritable (that being of little wonder with the amount of poison that had already passed through my delicate system). From the time I could speak I became a nuisance by screaming for the cookies that could ease my discomfort. And I always got my cookie.

My first memories are from that suburban house near the ocean, although, strangely, I carry no recollections of the salty sea that I later came to love as a dear friend. I was stumbling over the pile of coal in our basement to get a peek out the back door to the lane. And again, downstairs—certainly the most adventurous place for a two-year-old—I played with some antique toys of wood in my big sisters' bedroom, next to the furnace room. And then again, I find myself in black dust as I bathed in the ashes of the living room fireplace while my mother slept, passed out on the chesterfield. I recall a subsequent spanking and a wet scrub! A sunnier moment finds me outside trying to throw fallen fruit from the tree at big brother's window on the second story—at least it seemed like the second story from my vantage point.

I am introduced to the fear of heights and abandonment by sister, as she perches me on top of a local retaining wall and threatens to leave me there; and again, on the way to her friend's house along an alley, when she pushes me into a garage and runs to hide. I cry. On the chaotic battlefield of my new life, I was already learning to barricade my heart against foreign attack. But I proved to be a slow learner, an optimist, destined to be put to the test. And I had precious little time to prepare my defenses against the onslaught of mounting terror that would fill me in my formative years. Even the formidable sword and shield of love are sometimes not enough to fend off all the subtle inner foes. Emotional insecurity is a ghost that haunts the heart—not easy to find and fight.

Our living room chesterfield had a rough, blood red surface. I attained a new depth of phobic stimulation when I one day accidentally plunged to the floor from its high prickly back in response to a push from big brother. The fall smashed my delicate elbow out of its tiny socket, and landed me in a state of screaming shock in the hospital. This resulted in an inability, due to an irrational and disproportionate fear of being upside-down, to do somersaults in physical education classes during my first six or seven school years—an endless source of dread for an introverted child.

The next scene that emerges from the thick haze is Eddie sitting in a hospital crib enjoying a picture book. It presented a colorful series of pages depicting a train with animal passengers. Out of the caboose protruded a long giraffe's neck and head. This must have been about a year after my accident. I was now being hospitalized for quite a different reason, of which I must have been temporarily quite unaware. I was about to have half of the mutant double-thumb on my right hand (a birth defect) cut away. The painful awareness of this comes back to me as the thought of being dragged to the doctor later for check-ups, resembling falling down a dark hole. I guess it hurt.

It was about that time that we, as a family, embarked on a new adventure. It consisted simultaneously of finding a new baby arrive amongst us (number six) and being evicted from our home, which had been declared a fire hazard due to the faulty coal furnace. Apparently, shortly after the

Vancouver Fire Department had declared the extreme danger of our living situation (“you should all be dead by now!”) our stingy millionaire landlord showed up with a bag of old tools to try repairing the source of our peril. In any case, we migrated south over the Fraser River to Lulu Island, to start our new but almost identical life in the municipality of Richmond.

We rented a split-level house with white stucco and light-green wood siding on Williams Road, near No. 4 Road. Behind the backyard fence was another one of those fragrant tarred service lanes. The wooden gate marked the threshold to the Great Beyond that beckoned to a three-year-old’s imagination.

Three of my birthdays were celebrated there. Birthdays and Christmases were the best times with the wondrous decorations and presents and togetherness, but my average weekday found me very much in my own mind. Glenn was sometimes a good pal, but David was still too small to be of much fun. It was always nice when the ‘big kids’ came home from school. They often looked after us ‘little kids’ when Mommy was not physically, or even, while lost in drunkenness, symbolically present. I remember slipping away at times with Glenn to sample left over beer from the bottles in the basement. My favorite was ‘Old Style’, probably less because of the stale taste than the colorful labels, which showed cartoons of old-fashioned social scenes. The crawl-space down there was also good for games of hide-and-seek. I once hunted Glenn down and caught him hiding behind an old trunk there when he tried skipping his afternoon nap. Boy, did he get in trouble! It’s always so joyful when someone else is at the receiving end of the authority’s wrath. I learned that early.

Another moment that crawls up to mind (as opposed to springing) is the night in the early sixties when the Lower Mainland was struck by a serious hurricane. As I lay in bed thinking that the house was going to be torn to pieces, I over-heard someone in the other room exclaim that the shingles were being blown off the roof. To this day, I have the embedded mental image of countless white birds (seagulls=shingles) standing on our roof and getting tragically whisked away into the turbulent darkness, not knowing that shingles are actually the tar tiles that protect a roof!

That night and its haunting shadows passed, but a deeper emotional storm was rising. The part of Daddy that we still sometimes had, that is, the physical part, finally left us completely at some point. The end was heart-rending as it climaxed in drunken shouting matches between the two towers of life and stability that matter most to a tiny human soul. When Mommy and Daddy violently accused each other of ‘having no guts to live!’ in what seemed endless arguments at the bottle-covered kitchen table, one could easily imagine that the end of the world was just over the brink. As I passed their bedroom after one such incident, Daddy asked me from the darkness within to go get a cigarette for him from Mommy in the kitchen. She wildly refused. Then he was gone. The void would have been livable, but the situation slid closer to the edge as he was replaced by a hard, dark figure called Brian.

Now, I’ll give Brian credit by presuming that he must have had a heart buried somewhere within his aggressive, inebriated exterior—after all, he actually lived and breathed—but no matter what my horoscope tells me, I will never really understand the need for that suffocating influence to have settled darkly into my life. Was he an avoidable accident on the road of my evolution? It seems that my mother’s vices took us on a roller coaster trip. It’s no wonder that I hated roller coasters.

One chilly winter morning I decided to go out to the backyard to play. I managed to get my jacket on, myself, but couldn’t zip it up. As the big kids had all left for school, I had no choice but to disturb Mommy who was still in bed. I pushed her door open and was greeted with a shocking bark from Brian who lay naked on my mother. Pulling the door closed I burst with the sorrow that only a rejected child can know. I cried my way outside where no one but the icy air waited to greet me. And I hated cold.

Glenn and I developed a comforting technique against our emotional troubles. It was at some point dubbed bouncing, and consisted of either rolling back and forth on one’s side in bed; rocking forwards and backwards on the knees and hands in bed; or bouncing ones back against the vertical cushion while seated on the chesterfield (sofa). This was usually accompanied by a droning chant that went on and on: *Mo-mmy, I love you, Mo-o-mmy; Mo-mmy, I love you, Mo-o-mmy; Mo-mmy, I love you, Mo-o-mmy....* David, who lived his tender beginnings through our rockiest domestic ride, also took up

this neurotic habit and continued to roll in his bed right into adulthood when he changed his name, declared his homosexuality to the world, then died of AIDS.

Mommy, who looked like Marilyn Monroe, was beautiful and big-hearted and had a lovely, professional singing voice. She loved children and regretted being an only child. She married at the end of high school and surrounded herself with her own sweet little loved ones, all as blonde and charming as her. (I was the only one to permanently retain the light blondeness). But, like so many of her generation, and subsequent generations, fun was at the top of the list of priorities and sometimes kids got in the way of that. We used to get dropped off at Sunday school once a week so Mommy and her boyfriend could go drinking. Other times they'd take us little kids to the sand dunes at the mouth of the Fraser River so they could park and drink. That was pretty fun. The most boring moments in the history of the world were when we had to sit in the backseat of our musty old black car for what seemed like hours while the grownups went into a bar for some drinks. A routine was developed for portions of the summer holidays, which found the big kids deposited at summer camp in Ocean Park, and Eddie left out at Nana and Grandpa's place near the mountains in Port Coquitlam. Glenn and baby David would remain as the minimized burden on Mommy's leisure activities, which sometimes included long drunken drives to the Okanagen along the hazardous old roads of British Columbia's interior. (Much later, in sober days, she declared amazement at the hard work that our guardian angels must have undertaken to keep us all alive!)

My times spent at Nana's were marked by a simplicity and peacefulness. There was little distraction, so I lived in my creative mind, enjoying the few toys, as well as the beautiful natural surroundings. The only things separating the large living room window from majestic Burke Mountain, full of wild animals, was a vast field of cows, the fragrant forest, and the Coquitlam River running clean and vibrant. I sometimes wonder if it was just my imagination, or if that mountain was really a mighty friend standing there day and night to guard me.

Grandpa would sometimes take me out for walks to the river, or over to the Super-Value grocery store. He never talked much, but he always had a kindly glint in his eyes as he whistled along—a simple soul, who Mother Earth bore with love. Nana was strict and often grumpy, but she cooked wonderful pancakes.

I reached my first light switch, learned to tie my shoelaces, and was introduced to the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show in their little Finnish household on Kelly Avenue. Despite the many pleasantries I may have enjoyed, I was only truly joyful there when we, the whole family, were there together, especially for Christmas, Easter or Thanksgiving dinner!

Apart from being pushed onto the pavement by young strangers (resulting in a permanent imprint of my two front baby-teeth below my lower lip) and being chased back from the corner-store by my big friend, the neighbor boy, wielding a menacing pocket knife, the only occasional traces of agony that overcame me during my childhood sojourns at Nana's, were caused by the separation from Mommy and the others. One time I awoke from my afternoon nap to hear her voice and the sound of my siblings at play. Believing that I was not allowed to get up and that they would leave before I could see them, I rocked miserably, sobbing and chanting until someone eventually overheard me. Actually, they had come for the sole purpose of picking me up! I was transported with infinite happiness.

It wasn't long before the curtain came down on the stage that was our rented home on Williams Avenue. The landlord was selling, so Mommy secured us another modest hovel with her meager welfare income. In the winter of my sixth year we packed off our eight-headed household to a house half the size, just four blocks around the corner on Swinton Crescent. In the springtime of 1964 I recognized that the noisy machine that sucked dirt from the floor was a Hoover, and that I enjoyed the cottage cheese with canned pineapple chunks (not to mention the yummy Kraft dinner and wieners!) that Mommy would sometimes serve for dinner. Remarkable were also the huge caterpillar nests in the trees of our new backyard.

We had fun playing hide-and-seek in the tall grass of the field that used to separate our then dead-end road from the Steveston Highway on the horizon. But the sweet, carefree melodies of childhood continued to be distorted by the effects of alcohol. One morning I was assigned to look after five-year-old Glenn as we played in the neighbor's sandbox, while Brian and Mommy amused themselves at home. When I returned without him for a desperately needed drink of water, I was smacked, shouted at and sent back. I would have to go thirsty.

It turned out to be the hardest year in my brief introduction to life. By the time summer rolled around we were forced to uproot again, hardly unpacked from the previous move. We landed on Murchison Road, near the big River Road dike that kept the Middle Arm of the Fraser from spilling into the northwest corner of Richmond. Across the salty outlet was the airport on Sea Island. It was pleasant enough in that quiet neighborhood. I made a friend in a house kitty-corner over the road. I was so enamored by his toy Tyrannosaurus Rex, that I secretly stole it and took it home. I soon learned to feel guilty about this and other stains on my conscience.

Just when life started to feel comfortable in my new environment, something happened to darken my skies for a long time to come.

One fun summer afternoon, as I raced my tricycle against my friend along our short road, I made the fateful mistake of turning my handlebars too sharply in an effort to cut him off. Glenn, who was riding on the back, and I were thrown backwards onto the asphalt surface. I came down with all my weight on the same elbow that was broken when I was as a toddler. The blow wrenched my forearm out of its socket so that it stuck out sideways above the elbow. I ran shrieking with pain into our house where I was met by Nana, who almost passed out at the sight. My mother was not there to comfort me. It turned out that she, at that moment, was living her own nightmare in a mental hospital in New Westminster, where she was going through detoxification symptoms from alcohol addiction. I was rushed to the St. Paul's Hospital in downtown Vancouver. There, another injured child was wheeled out of the emergency operating room so that the doctors could attempt to save my arm, which had sustained serious damage, including severed nerves.

The darkness that I found myself in at that time can be best described by the terrifying dream that woke me in the night, alone in a strange place. I dreamt that I was in a city at night, and that ghosts flew around between the tall, shadowed buildings. My bed was near a window. I could see them and I knew that they were coming to get me. After coming to, I made a valiant attempt at climbing out of my high, metal-barred bed with a new cast on my right arm, in complete darkness. I succeeded, and proceeded to the door where I peeked out to see two nurses talking at a counter far down the wide hallway. One of them saw me and came to my rescue.

I was out of the frying pan and straight into the fire when I started school a couple of weeks later, nervous and half bandaged like a mummy. Just in case my emotional stability needed more testing, the night before my first exposure to public school we watched a horror/science-fiction movie about giant ants, which kill and eat people in a rural community. The bizarre twist came the following morning, when a frightened looking, mousey-faced girl in my class resembled identically the child in the movie whose parents had been eaten by the monsters. These are all things that an imaginative child innocently accepts as proceedings of normal life.

I somehow survived my few weeks there at the James Thompson Elementary School, with its new sights, sounds and smells. The rubber rain jackets had their own special odor, and a common one what with the frequent seaside drizzle. Sometimes the wetness even served as a source of entertainment. One day, out in the schoolyard I witnessed a bit of magic when a fellow classmate, showing off, drank from a mud puddle. I was deeply impressed, but too apprehensive to try the trick myself.

When they removed my cast, it was discovered that a fault in design had caused it to rub into the back of my wrist, leaving a wide wound that would become a permanent scar. I forgot about the ongoing pain—just another one of those accepted proceedings. Harder to endure was Brian's short temper. I was forever being spanked, shouted at and made to stand in dark corners, like the time I was caught kicking over our garbage cans at the end of the driveway—as if people shouldn't be allowed to vent their

frustration now and then. I would have to contain my misery, searching within for that Moon River melancholy friend, whom Mr. Andy Williams was so often moaning about.

My birthday present in the New Year came as not much of a surprise: further domestic upheaval. Another landlord was selling, giving us the boot. This is probably when I started having nightmares of returning home from school and finding that my family had forgotten me, leaving me behind. I couldn't feel too sorry for myself, though. I was only shifting to my second school. My elder siblings were already up to their fifth change of friends and learning environment, with yet another soon on its way.

Raymond Avenue was destined to house us and provide the base for all our adventures for the next one-and-a-half years, until the landlady would find out that her house was packed full of—heaven forbid—children! The enlightened age of tenants rights had not yet dawned, so we were promptly evicted, but not before I had a chance to squeeze through my challenging seventh and half of my eighth years.

Suddenly finding myself dropped into the midst of a group of strangers, well established in their routine and familiar with each other, left me at a considerable emotional disadvantage. If only I could avoid drawing attention to myself. Show-and-tell was torture. It was bad enough having countless eyes digging into my soul, but I had no way of hiding my embarrassment, as my fair face turned pink at the slightest pretense. My bright blue eyes, in direct contrast to my flaming cheeks, must have broadcasted the anguish of fear that possessed me. I had been launched into a life-long struggle between my Aquarian love of humanity, and my wretched inability to enjoy and communicate with others. My desire to resolve this burning inner issue was already so strong, that I used every opportunity that came my way to draw good fortune to my aid. Every time I blew out my birthday candles, or pulled a chicken wishbone, or said a prayer, I asked for my shyness to end.

Our neighborhood was quite cozy as far as suburban neighborhoods go. Richmond was more of a rural setting in those days, not the endless shopping malls and half-a-million dollar homes that it is today. The pedestrian entrance to the Alfred B. Dixon Elementary School grounds was practically across the street, and fresh sea breezes could always be felt from the Strait of Georgia, stretching endless blue or gray, just three blocks away. We once heard on the radio that a cougar, which had floated down river on a log-boom, had been last spotted in our Seafair area. Glenn and I headed out, with our freckle-faced friend Donald from across the road, to hunt down the wild lion. We did find a large patch of flattened grass over in the meadow near the seawall, where the creature must have slept. We were probably lucky to have returned home with all our limbs intact! Another adventure took us to the sewage treatment facility in the same location. Not hard to believe, one of us ended up falling in and going miserably home to a less than cordial reception.

Our peaceful avenue was also ideally suited for bike riding. I was too scared to try out my first two-wheeler until, a few months later, Glenn mastered it before me. That was enough to motivate me to overcome my anxiety. Little brothers come in quite handy sometimes, like another time when Glenn secretly rushed to warn me on my way home from school, that Brian was beating Mommy with a belt. We hid around the side of the house till we heard him thunder down the back steps and roar away in the car. Sneaking inside, we heard Mommy crying in her room. We went quietly to play. There was nothing we could do for her.

The best thing about getting old enough to go to school is that you don't have to take afternoon naps anymore. Glenn came of age in September of 1965. That's when I rose to the rank of grade-2er. My first morning in grade two was a disaster. Mommy drove us the block-and-a-half to school, where we asked the principal what we should do. He told me to go outside to where everyone was assembling, and wait for him there. Taking his instructions literally, I stood by myself, watching as everyone else, including Glenn, got sorted into their new classes. If anyone called me over, I nervously replied that the principal had told me to wait for him there. I waited—and I waited—until every pupil and teacher had gone inside, then I ran around the school to the parking lot where Mommy was just about to drive away. Needless to say, she was shocked to find me crying and calling for her after leaving me in such professional care. We returned to the principal who was probably amused to hear about the

misunderstanding. Mommy then brought me directly to my new teacher who introduced me in front of my class. There was some lighthearted exchange at the disappointment of my being another boy, as there were already so many, after which I settled in as best I could.

My shyness kept me in a world of my own. I used to patrol the playground at lunchtime, pretending I was a detective watching what was going on. I also had a heartfelt urge to act as counselor and philosopher, no doubt an expression of my Sagittarius ascendant, which would often be called upon by others later in life. One day during recess, I noticed Glenn picking on a classmate with some older children. I had him sit down with me on the grass so I could explain the wrongness of treating others poorly. I, myself, tended to befriend the naughty, outspoken youngsters, whether as a means of breaking out of my own limits of self-expression, or possibly to quench my thirst for exploring outside of given boundaries. But I would never lose my sense of conscience. On one particular weekend morning, after a friend and I had stolen candy from the grocery store at the corner of Francis and No. 1 Road, I remarked to him that God would probably make Mommy change her plans of going to the beach that day, because I had done something bad. Sure enough, as fate would have it, the family outing turned out to be cancelled (but no one found out about my early life of crime!).

My deepest childhood experience of spiritual introspection came early in my eighth year after my oldest sister told me that God could hear our thoughts. This was a revelation that caused me to often question the motives of my desires and deeds. It probably did not quite lift me to the profound state of thoughtless awareness treasured by great seers and saints, but the notion had me monitoring my thoughts for moral content, an achievement little Eddie could have been proud of, had he the self-esteem to do so.

Apparently it is always darkest before the dawn. I must have known, or at least hoped, somewhere inside me, that life could not always go on with us the way it had. I survived the measles and chickenpox in my first one-and-a-half school years. I endured the brutish brunt of Brian's ill temper, which included forcing me to sit and watch hockey games with him on our fuzzy old black-and-white TV when I misbehaved. (And—no wonder—I hated hockey.) The situation, so filled with frustration as it was, badly needed an explosive change. (I actually found a stick of dynamite under the basement stairs one day, left behind by a former tenant! I did not follow the advice of cartoons and ignite it.) Santa Claus was no longer a hopeful ally—it became tragically clear to me that he was a lie when I caught Mommy eating his cookies and milk the previous Christmas Eve. Yet, against all the odds, there was still a simple hope. So I prayed to the angels, and waited.

Chapter 2 The Breath Before the Plunge

~The Move to Paradise~

There are invisible doors in life that people sometimes pass through, changing their lives forever. Our family crossed one of those thresholds of good fortune just before Christmas, near the end of my seventh year.

They say that fathers are essential in the development of a child's personality, embodying all the outward expressions and connections to the world at large. Well, my personality (and many other things in me) got a joyous boost when suddenly Daddy was back home—and neither he nor Mommy was drinking! It was the best Christmas present there could ever be. The crumbling foundations were mysteriously fortified with fresh emotional bricks and mortar. Life was beginning again.

The ensuing harmony and prosperity that we enjoyed can be directly accredited to the pure-hearted good will and hard work of my parents. But in my long quest for the deeper answers to the meaning and purpose of life, I would eventually chance upon a whole new explanation of the sudden miraculous change that lifted us onto our stable path of existence. It is a story filled with divine coincidence and light, which was unfolding at the same time in the distant East. A story of a direct relative who stumbled, or was led, into circumstances so beautiful and fateful, that their transforming power invisibly spilt into all of our lives. That story would come.

For now, we were bumping along our new sunny road. Unfortunately, I didn't get to know Daddy very intimately at first as he was always working to support us. I did know that he was a good-natured salesman. He could sell anything to anyone and make that person feel good about his or her purchase. Actually, Mommy and Daddy were a perfect pair. They were both people people. Their offspring were also destined to be popular as a result of their inherited humor and caring hearts.

My mind's-eye developed an image of the yearly cycle in the form of a ring, viewed from slightly above, giving it an oval shape. The point of view was in front on the winter side near the beginning of the year. From there the successive months went to the right, or counterclockwise. The winter months were dark except for a bright spot at the bottom of December where Christmas would be. At the extreme right it brightened where it curved to the left into summer holidays. At the extreme left the light slowly faded where school and autumn began. After that wonderful bright spot of Christmas when our new life started, it was a short hop, skip and a jump through winter and spring to a warm, glowing summertime.

The inevitable had us filling boxes and bags and pushing off to great new horizons—this time, a grand total of about sixteen blocks away. It was probably a practical move—a chance to leave some old ghosts behind.

We ended up in what was to be our last dwelling on the river island of Richmond, as well as our last rented accommodation, about half way between Williams Road and Steveston Highway on No. 2 Road. It was a tall, sturdy and old-fashioned looking place with dark red and beige stucco, high front steps and a high hedge along the driveway. The house was surrounded mostly by fields. Across the rural road was one of those gaping, deep ditches that used to crisscross the municipality. (That's where we got most of our rock aiming practice, trying to pick off the frogs.)

Ironically, the landlord was an old active alcoholic named Mel who lived in the basement. The first morning after our arrival, Glenn and I feasted on orange sherbet ice cream that he offered us from the kitchen freezer as he vacated the main and second floors. We had been raised on powdered-milk, white bread with margarine, and the like, so ice cream for breakfast was definitely an upgrade. It was a great way to start a new adventure, though luckily we didn't get sick, considering that the treat had probably been stored there for months!

The proximity of our new home to the schools was ideal. The big kids attended Steveston High School less than a block down the road, where Darlene would graduate the following year, while Glenn and I walked two blocks down the adjacent side road to James McKinney Elementary. I often contemplated the big white letters painted on the middle of Wallace Road. It seemed odd to me that SCHOOL should be spelt with an H. (It wasn't until I grew up, married and moved to Austria, that I realized it came from the German, Schule.)

Grade three had its ups and downs. Despite my secret desire to be fearless, I was still cursed with the introversion that would limit my well-intended expression. One morning, during assembly, we were told that something had been stolen and that we would all be punished if the culprit did not owe up to his or her crime. I was so moved by the thought that my fellow-pupils would suffer such unjust consequences, that I ardently wished I could take the blame. (Although I could never summon such courage, my virtuous intention was to be redeemed decades later by my six-year-old son who, hearing that all his classmates would lose one week's pocket-money if the perpetrator of a very dirty joke did not come forward, unflinchingly gave a false admission of his guilt, thereby drawing all the punishment onto himself. Somehow, due to a communication gap, his innocence was never revealed at his school!)

My benevolent heart, sometimes confused in its restrictions, searched for any means of expression. So it was that I—throwing all caution to the wind—one day declared my love for Nancy, the grade-four girl next door, by carving our initials on the big tree in our backyard. (That took me ages to live down!) It somehow seemed normal at the time, as when I offered her my hand to cross a hole in a field, at which Glenn giggled, again embarrassing me. This marked the beginning of a long and painful process in my life, in which I would invest all my heart's assets on a single, non-reciprocating target, and then struggle at a distance to draw fulfillment from my stagnating infatuation. It is how I eventually learned to lock my heart against emotional pain—a sorry step in the wrong direction on my journey to share universal compassion.

Next to Nancy's was the farmhouse where Jim lived. That was Cheryl's boy friend. They probably didn't know it then, but they would eventually marry and have three children. (Even more unlikely, is that they could have imagined the fact that late in life, after their children grew up, Cheryl would divorce Jim so she could pursue a new life as a lesbian.) It was a sorry place, full of kids whose mother, resembling a witch, would eventually slide into insanity. I once tried to do some difficult homework on their front porch and almost threw-up. The atmosphere was that thick.

Jim had a younger brother named Billy—not very bright. He was the neighborhood bully. I used to be terrified by the possibility of running into him and his buddies. That bubble popped one day when a couple of us set a trap for him out in their barn. What started out as a harmless practical joke ended up sending Billy running to his mom in tears, when the metal bucket that was supposed to pour hay on him from the loft came crashing down onto his head instead!

That was not the only time that I ended up running away from their property. I once got stuck up a tree when the bull came unexpectedly in from the pasture and I couldn't get back over the fence in time. After a long wait up in my perch I was somehow able to make it back home, unscarred, but not un-scared.

I don't think I was really aware of the fact, but Mommy was resting a lot because of complications with her seventh pregnancy that involved early bleeding. Apparently her doctor forbade her from undertaking any strenuous activities whatsoever—an order which she simply could not comply with, with six children to look after. And we weren't the tamest band of scallywags you could ask for! One occasion of temporary freedom found my younger brothers and I creating a pirate scene in the living room. This involved ripping our cloths, scattering some of Uncle Mel's booze bottles around, and—if I had had my way—cutting our faces. (Luckily, after a thorough search of the bathroom, I could find no razor blades!) During another of Mommy's afternoon naps, we climbed up into the labyrinth that was our attic, almost losing David up there, and what's worse, almost falling through the high plaster ceiling! We made up for our mischief on Mother's Day, when we all presented Mommy with a wooden plague, printed with white

roses and Hannah Moor's soothing couplet, 'In all the world there is no other, who claims our love as you do Mother.' Mommy cried with joy.

We didn't have much luck with our first dog, there on No. 2 Road. Gigi was a big white Standard Poodle, who loved to chase cars. She chased one too many. On the other hand, old Sam, our Siamese cat, was a faithful family mascot with plenty of lives. He was famous for beating up dogs and peeing into the toilet! He actually disappeared shortly before our move from Raymond, but was later found wailing and waiting for food on the old back-porch, on a return visit.

Us little kids also had a menagerie of favorite stuffed pets. One was a big, dirty elephant named Ooly. Another, a puppy with long, floppy ears, was something of a mystery. One morning, after a violent lightning storm, we found him standing on the floor with both ears sticking up above his head. Try as we might, we could not reconstruct his fall from the bed that would cause his ears to stick up like that—like a real frightened dog!

As the summer of '67 drew near, the birds were singing, the flowers were smiling, and rock-n-roll was frequently blaring from a neighbor's house where a would-be rock band did there practicing. I was also involved in music for my first, but by no means last, time. In preparation for an end of term concert, I was learning such great Canadian (?) golden oldies as 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary' and 'Valerie, Valera' in our impromptu choir, to commemorate Canada's one-hundredth year of confederation. I'm not sure why we celebrated by singing British World War One marching hymns. There were probably no Canadian native warpath chants catchy enough.

When school was finally out, we found ourselves embarking on an unforgettable excursion. It involved packing everyone into the old station wagon and zooming off to a rented cottage near the beach in White Rock, near the U.S. border, back then a quiet summer get-away spot. On the way we stopped at western Canada's first McDonald's restaurant a couple of miles from our home. We even sang along with the jingle when it came up on the car radio: 'McDonald's is our kind of place, a Happ-happ-happ-happy place, McDonald's is our kind of place!'

Our cottage was on Maple Street, two or three doors up from Marine Drive. From there it was a few minute walk down the hill to the sandy shore of Boundary Bay. We found an old, grey haunted house with an adjacent Indian graveyard down there. Cheryl was my favorite sister because she was always good for an exploring adventure. She led Glenn and I through the old ruins, discovering evidence of long forgotten residents. The very strange thing about the place was that my young memory recalled a picture of it as it had been some years before, when Mommy had brought us to play at a nearby playground. It was then an orphanage, and I remembered playing with one of its wards in the adjacent forest that still grew there. The house had been bright white. It seemed like a dream.

One exciting day we took a trip over the border to visit the massive volcano, Mount Baker, which slept to the south. We journeyed for hours up the winding road, sometimes passing empty logging trucks that lumbered lazily along, or waved to the drivers of fully laden trucks that roared around the curves on their way to the bottom. The most enduring signature of that journey was the taste of the sparkling clear, sweet mountain water that trickled down as waterfalls here and there. It sustained us on the long, hot, crowded drive.

The park at the top was like another planet—a green plateau and a gigantic crater with a lake at the bottom, all high above the rest of the world. I unwittingly set straight to work, testing the reliability of my guardian angel. Making a beeline for the nearest cliff top, I sat on the grass near the edge of a small slope to kick gravel, which slid over a patch of snow and down over the edge into the abyss. As I reached too far down with my little legs, I started sliding on the fine stones. A little further and I would have slipped over the bit of ice and hundreds of feet downwards onto the jagged lava floor. I somehow scrambled back up, and Mommy, who had been looking around for me, almost had a heart attack when she saw my blonde head poke up on the rim of the crater! (To this day, I can easily sound impressive by honestly declaring that I almost died, falling into a volcano.)

Back from the holiday-trip within our holiday-trip, we very much enjoyed our remaining days on the seashore. Simple things left deep impressions, like the taste of boiled egg with strawberry jam on toast that I had for the first time there. For no rational reason, I still love the sensation of those combined flavors.

But the highest moment for me came one peaceful sunrise when I set out alone during low tide, over the silent wonderland of wet sand. Something happened to my heart that warm, carefree morning. I could feel it expanding to welcome in the whole of Mother Earth and Sea and Sky, and all Her inhabitants. I longed to befriend the white birds, and I spread my arms to show my friendship. My heart soared up over the world as I sang the closing song of Mary Poppins:

“Let’s go fly a kite! Up to the highest height! Let’s go fly a kite, and send—it—soa-ring! Up through the atmosphere! Up where the air is clear! Let’s all go—fly a kite!”

Ages later, when I was a man who had traveled the world and reached great depths and heights of spiritual fulfillment, I returned to that peaceful beach at the end of a busy day. Leaving my shoes behind, I walked out and remembered Eddie and his love for the Mother and Her Creation. The sweet, cooling grace that I had so often felt pouring through my being and through other beloved fellow-beings in my latter years, overwhelmed me now. My limited cup overflowed with the nectar of infinite joy, becoming unlimited. The seemingly steady illusion of time dissolved like a child’s sandcastle under that wave of benevolent reality. The bittersweet tide of understanding brimmed as saltwater in my eyes and ran down unhindered. For a moment, I wondered if I was riding that wave of joy of Eddie the child; or if, in fact, it was the other way around. Could that child, so longing to know himself and his purpose in the universe, have felt the compassion and the enlightened awareness of his grown self, engulfing him in love on that spot, on that summer morning in 1967? . . .

The White Rock expedition proved not to be the ultimate family experience that summer. Life was suddenly full of happy surprises, and the next one launched us into a whole new phase of material well-being. Before we knew it, we were packing again, but this time to move to our own house, and a completely different setting.

We were not only moving up symbolically. Our last migration as a family would take us up out of the delta flat lands onto a beautiful, forested plateau, called North Delta. When approached eastward along the freeway from Richmond, North Delta appeared as a ridge of evergreen wilderness rising from Burns Bog—an island-like community that stretched from the Mud Bay basin in the south to the Fraser River, within view of old New Westminster over on the north bank. It was up on that stage that I was destined to pass through all the remaining twists and turns of my youth. Unlike the rambling, sparsely inhabited wasteland of North Surrey further east, North Delta had an almost village-like atmosphere in those days. Because of its three natural boundaries, and the imaginary north-south border called Scott Road that divided it from its eastern neighbor, it was a capsule floating somewhere between country-life and city-life.

Most of this I came to realize much later. The initial flood of impressions that poured into me came from our big, unique house and yard and the wonderful woods that stretched out behind, all the way to Cougar Canyon. The house had been designed and built by the previous owner who also had a whole bunch of boys to raise. It was (and indeed, still is) situated at the top of 72nd Avenue, less than three blocks from Scott Road, where the terrain begins its downward slope to the west. I was struck by its unusual, rustic appearance, with its steep roof and wide chimney rising up from the driveway, and the small balcony over the eating-room window, all facing the road on the north side. The entrance in the middle was flanked by stone siding and brown stained wood. It looked like a West Coast holiday resort, nestled amongst the cedar trees that towered around it. The back yard, spread out on a double lot, was all green and a little hilly, featuring a massive rock garden around the ancient cedars in the center. Directly behind the house, up a few steps at the back of the property, was a small cottage with electricity. In the far corner was an old stable, which would undergo many renovations as our ‘fort’.

On the main floor, the entrance opened into a large dining room to be furnished, like the adjacent living room, in expensive colonial oak. A wall-to-wall window revealed the back patio and the cottage. The living room was also a luxurious setting with its many high windows, solid maple wood siding, and wide, elevated slate-hearth and brick fireplace. The kitchen to the right, west of the dining room, was large and well lit, with its own eating-nook. At the back door was a small laundry room. The stairs to the three bedrooms and upstairs bathroom ascended from that corner of the kitchen. But the best feature of the whole house was the exclusive porch and stairs that joined our (the little kids') huge bedroom on the second floor to the natural adventure-land outside. It was like living in our own tree house! The high-ceiling room, situated at the southeast corner, overlooking the patio on one side and the park-like yard on the other, was a happy change from the many cramped quarters I had grown accustomed to. It was furnished with the two sets of narrow, black metal army bunks that we had been using for a couple of years, and an old, oversized oak office desk that a school had given away.

We all settled in nicely, all except Darlene that is, who had flown the coup. Cheryl and Rick were still at home. Glenn and I still had a few opportunities to go exploring with Cheryl before she followed big sister to the University of British Columbia the following year. Rick was into the Air Cadets, which occupied much of his spare time. He went on to get his pilot's license when he was eighteen. He was also a master of making things. The year after our big move, he created an intricate, antique-style desk as a high school woodworking project, which took two years to complete. And thanks to him, we had the best outdoor Christmas decorations in the neighborhood, including colorful, life-size reindeer and a Santa who was pulled in and out of the chimney, with the help of Rudolf (and a hidden motor). Like his straight 'A' sisters before him, he would also graduate from UBC.

(to be continued)