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Chapter Three  
**NOTHING WAS SAFE**

I moved back to Chicago into a small, run-down, three-bedroom apartment along with eight other children; hers, his and "I thought he was with you?" With 11 damaged people living in such small quarters, things quickly turned ugly. Finishing eighth grade at James G. Blaine Elementary School on Chicago's North side, I was accepted into Lane Technical High School. At that time Lane was all male and required testing for entrance. I tested out at a high percentile and was placed on a college prep track. Finishing all my work I asked teachers for something more to do. That worked well until I was so far ahead of the rest of the group, they stopped giving me additional work. Today they have opportunities for such children but, in 1962, it was far too progressive a thought. I got bored. My grades placed me in the top ten percent of a 1,200 member, freshman class but I started looking for better things to do with my time. You know where this story is going. George Carlin said, "I had a plan for my life that school wasn't helping." At least he had a plan.

The second floor apartment was above an abandoned storefront next to King's Tavern for Men. You couldn't get away with that title or idea now but then, nobody cared. On the corner of Southport and Waveland, four blocks from Wrigley Field, its rooftop provided an oasis on summer

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nights. With music filtering up from the bar we escaped the concrete oven, hidden from the world. Our cousins, Mike and John Sullivan, lived two blocks away. Randy and I, along with our cousins and friends, claimed that neighborhood as ours. From Western Avenue on the west to Lake Michigan on the east; from Irving Park on the north to Belmont Avenue on the south, we claimed it as ours. We felt we owned those streets until the streets reabsorbed the two Rons.

Ron Nelson was Randy's best friend and, like him, was possessed of the same, violent temperament. Together, they were too dangerous for most of us. The Chicago police were looking for Ron when "officer Ric" saw him in the parking lot of Franksville, a hot dog joint across the street from Wrigley Field. When he saw them rolling into the parking lot, Ron took off running. Richard N. jumped from the passenger side of the squad car, drew his revolver, dropped to one knee, took careful aim and shot him in the base of the spine. Walking over to the writhing body, one of Chicago's finest pushed him with his foot and said, "Look, I shot the punk in the ass." Randy was there. Ron died and the officer was later convicted of murder. If the State of Illinois hadn't taken care of it, someone in our group would have.

Ron Burns stood in front of the same restaurant, putting his face on the glass and "mugging" as if to annoy people eating inside. He was simply getting their attention for what was to follow. In one, smooth move he pulled a pistol from his jacket and fired a single bullet into his own brain while the customers watched.

This was a world in which nothing was safe. If we wanted alcohol we broke into the local liquor store and took it. If we wanted amphetamines or barbiturates we broke into the drug store and took them. If we wanted a basketball we broke into the school and took it. If we needed transportation we broke into car lots and took the keys. If we wanted money the first person walking by found it wiser to be accommodating. When we later needed microphones for our band we broke into a local church and took the sound system marked for use with the hearing impaired. That neighborhood has since been "gentrified" with the rents to prove it and our entire block of buildings was upgraded into a parking lot. But from 1963 through 1966, it all belonged to us. South of us were the Aristocrats and Latin Eagles. North of us were the Bishops and Del

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Mar Rangers. West of us were the Young Lords. But this was ours and as long as people stayed in their own areas, there was a strange kind of feudal peace. Repeating Gilbert's pattern I stopped going to school after the ninth grade. I was fifteen years old.

We seldom saw Gilbert or Florence during the week. Their respective work schedules seemed to keep them away all the time. Florence's family lived on the Lac du Flambeau Chippewa Indian Reservation in upper Wisconsin, a permanent settlement of the Lake Superior Chippewa. Summer found us traveling there, bringing back a quarter of venison taken by the tribe. The venison stayed on top of the stove for days and provided our only food while they were at work. "Cut off a piece and eat it when you're hungry." With both parents working all the time we still had nothing. We stole the clothes we wore. Home became a source of drudgery and humiliation and most of our friends came from homes that were little better. As dangerous as it was, the street still was the place to be.

Neighborhoods in Chicago feature small parks on corner lots where large trees, benches and playground equipment provide value for most. We were into the sandboxes. Literally. Large, with sides that prevented us from being seen from the street, they provided a safe place to lay our heads when needed. As an added benefit, an amenity if you will, the sand held the warmth of the day. No wonder people pay big money to go lay on sand. Randy and I had early morning paper routes delivering the Chicago Tribune and Sun Times and our daily nourishment was "glommed" from Bakery and Dairy trucks foolishly parked along our routes. A few years later we discovered Belmont Harbor. Surrounded by parks running the length of Chicago's Lake Michigan waterfront, it became a source of revenue. People didn't lock their boats. That and the rather odious event known as "jack rollin' queers" [sorry] made the area a cash magnet. The Effeminatti used the park near the Harbor for late night trysts. With lapping water, moored boats and the downtown skyline it proved a romantic location. Until we arrived. We weren't room service.

A few of my friends were trying to put a small band together. They needed a place to practice and, without asking anyone, I let them set up their stuff in the small living room of the apartment. Sunday morning we

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got up, started banging around on the instruments and there was a knock at the front door. Opening to a stranger, he announced, "My name is Ray Foster. I was walking by, heard the music and thought I'd see what was going on." That's Chicago. As it happened Ray knew Wayne, the bass player and Wayne invited him in. Ray was ten years older and became my musical mentor, picking up my musical education where Villa Park left off.

Learning to play guitar and drums proved fairly simple, given my prior knowledge of music. Within 18 months we were recording at Chess Records on Michigan Avenue's famed " Music Row " as *The Treez*. We were part of that innumerable troop of young men in the early to mid 1960's who picked up musical instruments for the pure joy of it. That and the chicks, of course. We were a bar band doing covers of other people's music as well as writing original material. Our drummer, Val Fuentes, moved to California and became drummer for a few of those San Francisco groups including *New Riders of the Purple Sage* and *It's A Beautiful Day*, recording six albums with the two. The band began to develop its own identity and following among our rowdy friends. It seemed like everywhere we played, a fight broke out. Go figure. I wonder if the "downers," Seconal and Tuinol, had anything to do with that? They numbed all pain and increased my indifference for personal safety or consequences for my choices. I willingly plunged into a deep haze.

Even as there are key events in our lives, events that bring us to "fork in the road" kinds of choices, so there are key people, people whose involvement can change everything. For good or ill, some individuals can impact generations. That's why it's important to surround ourselves with people who heal rather than people who wound. But, when you're fifteen and trapped between a bicycle and a driver's license, such things make no sense. When you're fifteen and have no foundations, such things are lunacy. " I am in control of me. Nobody tells me what to do." That's what Superman said just before the Kryptonite arrived.

It was October 1962. Little more than a year had passed since leaving the foster home. Several of us, including my girlfriend and future wife Sandy, were hangin' on the corner when we noticed someone coming up the sidewalk toward us. He was hard to miss. A disagreeable tree had torn off his right leg during a car accident as a teenager. Using

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Canadian crutches he walked purposefully toward us, stopping as if he had an appointment. He proved to be a street worker for the Teen Challenge Center on South Ashland Avenue. Teen Challenge was an organization whose sole focus was the redemption of street people. Started by David Wilkerson among the Latino and Afro-American gangs of deep city, New York, they now had centers in several, major metropolitan areas. Handing each of us one of Dave's "Chicken" tracts he introduced himself. His name was Larry.

A slightly built country boy with big city aspirations, he flirted with drugs and frequented the jazz clubs in mid '50's New York before he found Christ as his savior in his early twenties. His father, Charlie, was a veteran of World War II and eventually smoked himself to death at the V.A. Hospital outside Brecksville, Ohio. The local, door-to-door, Amway salesman, Charlie also processed honey from bees raised in his back yard. Larry's mom, Thelma, was a rather rotund and gentle woman who found escape in the Pentecostal experiences provided by the Assemblies of God. She was into holiness. Her husband was an abuser.

Charlie's real love was the bar at Jewel's Dance Hall and the members-only bar at the local VFW. Stumbling home he unfurled his banner from the bulwark of the overstuffed chair bivouacked directly in front of the television. This home was *his* kingdom and there was no mistaking that. Striking up the first of an endless chain of cigarettes, "Bring me a beer woman," was about the only thing he had to say to anybody. And his family was just as happy for it. Raised on miracles and a heavy-handed father, there was an insistence about Larry.

With a gruff, gravelly voice ala Joe Cocker, he talked to me about my soul, about a Father and family who care and about a home prepared where I fit right in. Major chords for a lost boy. In later years he would position himself to me as the Apostle Paul was related to Timothy: a spiritual father. Memories of two unbelievable decades find their root in that moment. The direction of lives yet unborn was being formulated right there in Wrigleyville. Moments can be powerful things. Adding to the mix two elements from my stay in the foster home came into play. First, I was exposed to a cultural respect for religion that included modified conduct in the presence of clergy. Second, I was taught manners. When someone is speaking to you directly, laughing in his or

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her face is considered rude. That's what the others in the group did. They fell up against the wall, laughing. I started out playing straight man for their laughs but I was listening.

He invited me to say "the sinner's prayer" and I bowed my head and accepted Christ as my Savior. It was just that simple. It seemed a natural and inevitable extension of what I'd learned of God in Villa Park. I wonder what my life would be today had I laughed instead of prayed. The fact is, Larry came along and touched my spirit at the precise moment in time I was discovering I had a spirit. Teen Challenge sent a van for me so I could attend services. The entire family, and Sandy, began to go. Revival broke out in the Markko household. I traveled with Larry giving my testimony at churches in New York, Detroit and the Chicago area and was on the platform with David Wilkerson for the launching ceremony of the Detroit Teen Challenge. We attended Central Assembly of God near Damon and North Avenues in Chicago as well as Bible studies at Teen Challenge during the week.

I grew to like Larry. I'd never known anyone with a cause. Neither had I ever met anyone who said, "The Lord spoke to me," as if it were a commonly accepted thing. I had yet to learn that everyone in Pentecost says that. Though his "hipness" seemed a bit forced and I had a difficult time picturing him as the bad man he professed to once being, there was a genuineness about his motives that impressed me. Possessed of a forceful persona, he took command of your attention when speaking. Additional energy was provided by humanity's natural affinity for a severely disabled person behaving courageously. Such things tend toward fondness. Larry believed people needed three things: salvation, the baptism in the Holy Ghost and somebody to tell about it. Everything else in life was inconsequential. Everything, except holiness. Holiness is a biblical term that provided the foundation for his understanding of being rightly related to deity. Religions have been founded, wars have been fought and relationships have ended because the other party wasn't holy enough. Driving the evangelical church for hundreds of years, holiness deserves contextual clarification.

For the uninitiated, this is a big deal. In the Judeo-Christian construct, holiness is both requirement and by-product of living blameless in the pure, white light of God's presence. It means you are "set aside" from

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common use. More than that, it describes the only road available in the concerted effort to be like Him. As much as the limitations of flesh may accommodate, the faithful declare such a thing possible. It's not a Baptist thing, a Catholic thing or a Pentecostal thing. It's not even an exclusively Christian thing. Proponents declare it *God's* thing and those who would know Him intimately must rejoice in its inevitable austerity. Holiness is the reason people conform every compartment of their life to the scriptures: they want to be holy, "even as He is holy." As much as humanly possible, they want to be like Him.

Consequently, Larry's faith was rigid and his idea of a right walk with God mandated abstention from things like movies, card playing, make-up or anything else associated with "the world." The Constitution and by-laws of the Church he would later build read, "No member shall use tobacco in any form, be a habitual user of drugs or alcoholic beverages, attend theaters or moving pictures or indulge in any gambling activities or card games as such. Christians shall dress as those professing godliness *and shall sweetly obey those that have the rule over them.*" In fairness, many Pentecostal churches of the day used similar verbiage. More than guidelines, they dictate conscience. Proponents were later labeled, "clothesline preachers" because they seemed so hung up on what people wore but, from what I could see, Larry practiced what he preached. I'd never known anyone who could say no so easily. His wife, Carol, became the unfortunate template for Larry's idea of holiness in women. Though more intelligent and possessed of a quicker wit than her husband, she followed the biblical admonition for submission to her man. Meeting him in 1955 when he was a traveling magazine salesman, I'm not certain he would have gotten anywhere without her as his partner. She made him credible. As far as he was concerned, that was just part of her job description.

Within six months, Larry left Teen Challenge under less than desirable circumstances. The best I've been able to understand is that he and Grady Fanin, the Director, just didn't agree about the way things should be done or who was in charge. Sounds like Larry. Whatever it was, he moved back to Ohio, moving in with his mother in Austinburg before settling into an old Victorian home on Creek Road just outside Jefferson. He preached as an evangelist and attended church primarily among the

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black congregations of the area; the varied offshoots of the Church of God in Christ as well as the Apostolic Faith churches.

Following his departure, the Markko family took a distinct plunge when a thoroughly dysfunctional father attempted to translate religious fervor into disciplinary zeal at the end of a bullwhip: a real one. My newest vice got his attention. Within six months I was "huffing" glue until I passed out. With the entire apartment filling with its unmistakable odor, Gilbert tracked down the smell and kicked open the locked, bedroom door. A *much* different person from that little boy he used to beat up jerked the bullwhip from his hand and a new arrangement was effected. Fantasizing that I'd taken control, the antithesis was more nearly correct: I was completely *out* of control. Like the word "home," the word "tomorrow" meant nothing to me. Exhausting all efforts to keep myself, "comfortably numb," it didn't matter if another one arrived or not.

As I pushed myself deeper into the hole, pulling the dirt over my face, Gilbert was clawing his way out. The clumsiness of his unenlightened efforts betrayed the clear fact that he was trying to become a better man and father. Christianity agreed with him. In time, religious eccentricities became part of his character but no one could deny he was intent on becoming a better human being. And he deserved the opportunity. Each of us is greater than our worst mistake. As if that isn't wonderful enough, we're also capable of beneficial change. Even Ebenezer Scrooge, when awakened from his epiphany, cried out in anguish, "I'm not the man I was, I'm not the man I was." That's why those we love who seem fixed on mining oblivion from the dark side of their imaginations have the capacity to bring us such ongoing grief. History should record Gilbert as a fallible man who modified his behaviors to be more consistent with the standard of goodness around which he rallied his life. His experience bears testimony to the holy truth that says, "Ignorance can be fixed but stupid is forever." His later years were spent in quiet reflection, nurturing a soul grown gentle, giving credence to the words of Thomas Jefferson: "Tranquility is an old man's milk."

What would you do with a child like me? Someone or something will eventually control out-of-control children. In my case, it was the State of Illinois. They didn't find our antics amusing. After several lockups, Florence contacted Grady Fanin at Teen Challenge. He came to my

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court hearing and suggested to the judge that I be sent to the Teen Challenge Farm in Rehrersburg, Pennsylvania instead of reform school. The judge asked what I thought he should do with me. "It doesn't matter what I think, you're going to do whatever you're going to do," was my sneering response. What an obnoxious pain in the butt. In spite of my stony arrogance he sent me to Rehrersburg instead of the Illinois State Training School for Boys at St. Charles, Illinois. At fifteen I was a recidivist, a repeat offender and smart money knew I would offend again. ISTSB would be blessed with my presence soon enough. For now, there were cows to tend.

Turning 16 in Rehrersburg I became "head vaquero," working with the Holsteins in Brother Graybill's barn. Carrying five-gallon milk pails back up that long hill at the end of every day, I put on weight and grew stronger, at least physically. Spiritually, I did what I've always done around spiritual people; I got spiritual. Nicky Cruz visited several times and I saw my first, Christian "Dog and Pony Show." Emperor Convert at Teen Challenge, everybody got right when Nicky was around. The leader of a ferocious, Latino gang in New York, he was the subject of books and movies promoted and used by the Assemblies of God. I was doing my own dog and pony show. I wasn't there for a spiritual revolution. I was there as a preferable alternative to jail. Omnimorphant, I simply became whatever I needed to be. In consequence there was insufficient change in my thinking to enable a change in direction once I returned to Chicago six months later.

Within a very short period of time I was arrested again, this time for possession of barbiturates and auto theft. Amazingly, the same scenario played out in the courtroom and I wound up back at Teen Challenge the first of January, 1965. It was the last, futile attempt to save me from myself but nothing was the same. The Director, Brother Reynolds, was gone and a much less personable Brother Turk took his place. Brother Graybill was no longer connected with the operation and everything seemed more clinical. But I wasn't the same either. I'd changed incredibly in one year. I wasn't even willing to try. I stayed one month and took off in the middle of a cold, February night. Let's add this up: no transportation, no money, only "the clothes on my back" [I was hoping I might get to use that somewhere], 500 miles to travel, it's the dead of

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winter and I'm 16 years old. How drunk does the average person need to be before *that* sounds like a good idea? But I made it.

With no place to go I slept in the back seat of unlocked cars, apartment hallways or open coal chutes off an alley. It was bad. Begging "spare change" from people at local hangouts, I stole money from "Blind Bob the Sidewalk Tester" working at the local newsstand. It was a cold, cold Chicago winter. "The Hawk" was flying high that year and officers from the District 13 Police Station were looking for me. Since I was sent to Rehrersburg as a legal action of the Juvenile Court, my unannounced, unauthorized departure brought me back under their jurisdiction. It's not like they didn't know who I was.

To make a short story longer, Randy and I were finally arrested, together, at a party in the territory of the Aristocrats, an offshoot gang of the Latin Eagles. Loud fights broke out and the Police arrived to find alcohol, drugs, weapons and people vomiting in the kitchen sink because the commode was being similarly abused. Naked people dancing to blaring Righteous Brothers music in the bedroom didn't help the situation but it certainly satisfied our God-given definition of a party. "It ain't a vacation til someone's in handcuffs and it ain't a party til somethin' gets broken." Possessions, people, whatever. With weapons confiscated, we walked handcuffed to the street where it looked like a circus was passing through town. A dozen squad cars and several "Paddy wagons" made the neighbors feel safe, encouraging them to voice their opinions as we walked a gauntlet. Defiant to the end we stopped short and challenged them, "What planet are you from, fool? We know where you live." It was our last declaration before being slammed, face first, onto the floor in the back of the wagon.