
Chapter Twelve
THE HOUSE OF PAIN

There are two realities of life continually at odds with one another. The first is this: people without a plan for their lives, no matter how informal, loosely held or distantly focused, embrace a policy of nonchalance that will generally get them what they've aimed for. The second reality is this: life is what happens to us while we're making other plans. Our lives and our plans may forever change direction in the dull thud of a single heartbeat. One thud, your life is one thing. The next it's something altogether different.

May 9, 1973 arrived like any other late-spring day on the shores of Lake Erie, overcast with a light mist blowing in from the water. It was four days before my 25th birthday and I was working construction for a small company that specialized in the prevention of soil erosion for lakefront properties. We built breakwalls along the shore using pre-cast concrete parts and reinforced steel sheets driven 12 feet into the beach by pneumatic hammer. I took the Block Truck to the area where the concrete materials were stockpiled and began loading. These pre-cast parts were a series of convex cones and concave wedges that fit into each other, forming a solid wall of cement six feet high and four feet thick. Due to their collective weight they had to be loaded on the truck in a manner designed to prevent tipping of the vehicle. If the weight

traveled out too far on the 25-foot boom, the results could be “career-threatening.”

Across the road, the village of North Madison was in the process of building a water filtration plant for their community. Cleveland Electric and Illuminating ran new lines of 27,000 volts of electricity into the Plant. The mist became drizzle and the ground became soft. I spent a few minutes searching for ground solid enough to deploy the truck's stabilizing pontoons. This necessity prevented the truck from tipping as the weighty materials inched their way on board. In order to load the parts properly, I had to manipulate the boom of the truck between the high-tension lines. Paying attention to the stability of the load I momentarily lost sight of the end of the boom. At 24 years of age my life was one heartbeat away from irreversible change. Using "remote controls" on the end of a 25-foot cable “for safety's sake,” the boom snapped the high-tension line. The broken cable wrapped around the boom and the electrical current did what electricity does, it traveled. The surge of current flowed through the electrical system of the truck looking for the most natural ground. It found a human being holding the controls in both hands, standing on damp earth. Twenty seven thousand volts of electricity arced to the metal buttons on my Levi jacket. As electricity travels through the human body, it burns everything it touches. Time element: one heartbeat.

One of the workers from the water filtration plant was an eyewitness. He said, “I heard a noise, loud like a shotgun. I looked up and saw what looked like a blue flame in the sky.” Running over to see what happened he saw my feet sticking up out of the grass and ran to the nearest house to call an emergency vehicle. While he was gone a voice in my head began to repeat, “Get up and keep walking. Get up and keep walking.” Whether this was the voice of supernatural deity or a natural instinct of survival I cannot now say. I do know this: specialists at Cleveland's Metro General Hospital speculated the only thing that kept my heart beating after such a massive shock was the fact my body stayed in motion. The eyewitness returned to find me, after being electrocuted with 27,000 volts of electricity, standing in the middle of the road as if waiting for someone. Skin was hanging from my neck, both hands were already turned black and the smoke of burning flesh escaped through

the top of my shirt. The emergency vehicle arrived and I got in under my own power. The voice stopped.

I was taken to the emergency room at the hospital in Painesville, Ohio where they needed only remove my shirt to uncover the extent of the devastation. Realizing their hospital was unequipped to deal with this massive injury they loaded me back into the ambulance and sent me to Cleveland's Metro General Hospital. The first thing I actually remember was a bright light and another voice speaking in my left ear. I could tell the person was very close. It turned out to be Doctor Richard Fratianne, head of the Burn Unit at the Hospital. "Joe, you've been hurt very badly. I'm going to have to remove your right hand and probably your left one as well, but I will try to save the left one." He might as well have been talking to me about the price of tomatoes. The state of shock is a severe mercy. Within one hour and 45 minutes I was under the Surgeon's knife and the door to nine months of horror was thrown wide open.

"Limbs are tied to the anatomist's table
What is removed drops horribly in a pail." ⁱ

~ Whitman

Fifty-five percent of my body suffered third degree burns. The right hand was gone. They were able to save three fingers on the left hand but those digits would serve no purpose as all the nerves and tendons had been blown from my wrist. There was no skin on my back. My breastbone, chest muscles and rib cage literally exploded from my chest. The first surgery left the severed bones of my rib cage protruding from the raw and bleeding meat leaving a hole the size of a small dinner plate. The pericardium, the sack that surrounds the heart, was plainly visible. You could watch my heart beating, one anguished thud after another. It looked as if Ridley Scott's Alien had freed itself from the prison of my body. After a few days they noticed my pillow covered with hair. In addition to the back of my knees, arms and chest the electricity exited my body through the back of my head, burning through the skull, destroying everything it touched. The electrical current skimmed the outside of my brain leaving scars that left me subject to epileptic seizures for years. I'd been cooked. Some of the medical staff prophesied four days of life. I was unconscious or semi-conscious for about six weeks.

They couldn't turn me on my chest for obvious reasons. Every night, my body fluids seeped from my skinless back causing me to stick to the sheets. Every morning Hell Raiser was turned loose to tear at my flesh. It's known by the innocuous word, debriding. It begins with a gentle roll to one side and that's where the mercy stops. They ripped the sheet from my back like a bandage from a troublesome wound. Screams. Screams. Screams. Bowel and bladder control are lost only adding to the degradation. So much for the introduction.

Rewrapping me in a clean sheet I was taken to the debriding room, the House of Pain, to be lowered into a whirlpool bath. Doctors and nurses gathered round with tweezers, scissors and no anesthetic cutting away any and all dead meat or tissue. They cut until they hit live tissue, until fresh blood is visible turning the water red. This was the prerequisite to prepare the body for skin grafting. It happened every day. I finally stopped counting at 30 operations. The fun starts to go out of the numbers after awhile. To this day I don't know how many operations I actually endured. They shifted body parts making a thumb from a toe and moved a large flap of skin from the left side of my abdomen to cover the gaping hole in my chest. They removed a piece of my hipbone and ground it into a paste in an effort to fill the hole in my skull. This was followed by 8 surgical attempts to get skin to stick to the exposed cranial bone.

Because the skin was singed from my body, every nerve ending lay fully exposed and any movement brought unspeakable pain. When Sandy brought Shannon to visit she would pull one of the small, children's chairs to the side of my bed where my daughter stood guard. Shannon sat there with her little, New Testament opened upside-down, running her six-year-old finger under the lines, pretending to read. When anyone entered the room she stood to her tiny feet and positioned herself between the visitor and my bed. "Please don't bump my Daddy's bed," she would say, "it hurts him." Jesse was now four, Jonathon was almost three. My young family was active in my healing. The hospital allowed Sandy to cook meals for me on a hot-pad in the hospital room in an effort to get me to gain weight. She practically lived there, watching over me, caring for me, trying to get me to eat. She was six months pregnant when I was hurt and slept in a chair next to my hospital bed. One night in August, while she slept in that chair, our darling daughter Sarah

decided it was time to visit the planet Earth. Sandy couldn't come as often because she now had four small children to care for and no income other than that provided by Worker's Compensation. She ought to write her own book.

Altogether I spent nine months in the hospital. The permanent, deforming scars on the outside of my body were but a poor reflection of the actual damage done. In many ways I never, fully recovered and my opinion of myself is forever damaged. I know those statements are incongruent with the "positive confession" plague that's infected the Church with its Covenants of Self Centeredness. This theology recognizes "negative" statements as symptomatic of anemic and deficient faith. The intensity of their idealism is directly proportionate to their distance from the problem. Let me set them on fire and see if it works for them. Should the gospel of gain ever again become a gospel of pain they will quit Him by the thousands. I was transformed from a 185-pound construction worker, convinced the entire world was waiting to hear what I had to say, to 120 pounds of raw meat with the bones sticking out the ends. Something like that can flat-out wreck your day. Confessing away honest feelings of loss that linger like a permanent shadow on your heart does nothing to eliminate the feelings of loss.

Seven months had passed since my brother's death. While in the hospital Larry "borrowed" \$10,000 from Cookie's meager insurance settlement following Randy's death for new band equipment. He never paid it back. During my hospitalization, Cookie and her children left the farm. Following Randy's death and my accident, she was made to live under deplorable conditions in the house up the road. She was in Ohio because of her husband and, when there was no one to look after her welfare, she was treated shamefully. Her relatives came from Chicago to get her, taking her and the children in the middle of the night to reduce the potential for any ugly scenes. No one told me she had left. They "didn't want to upset" me. The news didn't reach me until I came home from the hospital. I'm still saddened that I wasn't there for her and the children. It took 25 years to sort out my own life before I could find my way to them.

ⁱ Whitmann, *Leaves of Grass*