

Summer 1964

The depression was running deeply, a contrast to the tranquil beach scene all around me as I walked the sands of the Southern California shoreline that early foggy morning. The hour was early enough to guarantee my complete privacy that July day as I trudged the sands, going I knew not where. As per usual, I was plagued by questions that shouldn't even have been able to find a place in the mind of a young man who should have been too busy with school, with romance, with preparing for life to brood over anything, least of all himself.'

Why was I so alone, I wondered. How had I gotten myself so lost? I might not have been able to come up with answers but there was one thing of which I was certain – I needed a change. A change of direction, a change in my thought process, something.

College had not given me anything worth developing or even hanging on to. School had been a disaster; I had abandoned all my classes, simply walking away from the whole education scene.

I found the continuous rhythm of the waves caressing the shore comforting. It was steady, calm, useful, the antithesis of everything I felt myself to be. As my attention became focused on the sweet rumble and hiss of water against sand, it became a meditation, almost a Zen moment.

The morning continued on its way, bathers, sunbathers, and surfers began to arrive as the sun climbed higher in the sky. This was my cue for departure as I wasn't up to facing the bronzed beach boy-glamorous sand bunny crowd.

Driving back to Inglewood, I didn't even turn on the ever-present car radio. I didn't feel like music. I reached the Big Donut drive-in around ten o'clock and busied myself with hot coffee and a glazed doughnut, continental breakfast U.S.A.

Now what would I do? I didn't really have anywhere to go and certainly no personal or professional engagements, pressing or otherwise. I wound up cruising Manchester Avenue, going nowhere in particular. The streets were filled with people working, running errands, shopping, doing all the ordinary things normal people do. Although I perhaps should have been envious of the supposedly normal people, those without waking dreams of other worlds, I actually felt disgust, at them, at myself, at the seeming uselessness of life on this planet.

All those people busy with this and that, what good was it all, ultimately? Taken up with thoughts of the superfluity and tragic hopelessness of everyday existence, I wasn't really fully aware of where I was directing the car. My subconscious was obviously very alert to where we were going, the old family Baptist church on Grevillea Avenue. The center of whatever spiritual life I had in my younger days, it too had lost its sheen with the passage of years.

I walked up to the front door, one of those acts you do in a state of semi-alertness, not expecting them to be open. This was a Monday, after all, and as a rule churches are closed on Monday, with Sunday being a workday. The doors were open, however, and I went into the sanctuary.

It was a bright morning and the sunlight was split up upon entrance through the stained glass windows, the shards of multicolored light reassembling themselves wherever they fell, the piano, the carpet, a pew. I made my way down to the choir loft at the front of the sanctuary. The entire church had the air of a ghost town populated solely by memories, my memories, of events frozen in time.

Every spot on which I rested my eyes seemed to hold its own recollections. I sat on the old piano bench to reflect on an endless catalogue of personal memories. Despite the panoply of circumstances passing by me for review, some of them of extreme emotional content, I felt virtually nothing. It struck me that I really hadn't felt anything of note for years, as though my emotional nature had become thickly overgrown with a hedge of numbness. I believed at that moment I could have taken a Bowie knife to one of my limbs, watched the blood flow as though I were a disinterested onlooker, and feel nothing but mild curiosity.

Came another one of my endless Whys...Why was I so dead inside?

I lifted the cover of the keyboard. The two-tone keyboard smiled up at me as an old friend. Ordinarily I would have returned the greeting and renewed the friendship by playing a piece, but this day even my passion for music seemed to have been deposited in the morgue. I closed the cover.

I remained seated, dwelling on the very real possibility that I might not get through the summer without doing something drastic and perhaps irrevocable to myself. And this was far from the first time I had considered bringing my life to a close by my own hand.

At some point I would have to inform my parents that I had quit school, but I hadn't yet had a moment when I felt up to facing the emotional histrionics that would be directed towards me. It would just take its place in the long line of skirmishes we were having over my future. I could appreciate the fact that, from their parental perspective, they were on the side of the angels; I was doing nothing, not surprising as I cared about nothing. I had been lying to them for years and the time had come for me to face it. The problem was double-edged as I not only had no answers to their questions that would make any sense but I also had no urge to discuss anything with my parents.

I was interested to note my reaction to my own thoughts. My normal response to such commiserations would have been a flood of tears; today I felt not one pang of pain, guilt, fear, nor any other identifiable emotion. I was personifying the old Graham Greene title, *A Burnt Out Case*.

I rose to leave, knowing as I did this would be the last time I would ever be within the sacred precincts of this church. Upon reaching the back door, I turned and faced the empty sanctuary

one final time. I was as empty as the room, but at least a few teardrops had appeared when I closed the door behind me and returned to my car. I knew I was leaving behind a life I may not have loved but at least knew. My last church-related thought was of Bonnie and how much I missed her in my life.

I took a long drive down the coast to Palos Verdes Estates, toying with the idea of continuing even further south to leave the morning as far behind me as possible. Now I felt like music. I turned the black radio knob this way and that, from one end of the selector to another, searching for music suitable for my mood. The local classical music station was playing *Le Mer* (“The Sea”) by Claude Debussy, a piece he had composed in honor of his father. This musical portrait of the sea was just what I needed and I relished the interchange of the voices of nature, wind and surf, as they spoke of things only the soul understands.

For the first time in days I was actually feeling something, that special magic that can only be produced by the things of the sea. Once more the tears began to well up, tears of joy this time, as I felt the music and the vibrations of nature releasing me from the cage of self-centeredness and self-deprecation and allowing emotion once more to rise up and make itself known.

I ate lunch at a burger place in Torrance, a city north of Palos Verdes Estates and, at that time, a quiet, small town overflowing with families that had taken advantage of the post-war housing boom. The food was good but the atmosphere was wrecked by the overly loud rock and roll belching forth from the jukebox. I finished as soon as possible, refilled my coffee, and headed for the car. While walking across the parking lot, a sight on the other side of the street caught my eye and piqued my interest. It was an Army base adjacent to the Torrance airport.

What began as a pilgrimage to check the place out turned out to be the potential answer to my problems. I could join the army. After all, this was the summer of 1964 and phrases such as “Gulf of Tonkin” and “Tet offensive” and “escalation” were not yet part of the language. At that time, most Americans couldn’t have located Vietnam on a map if they had to.

I was a prime candidate, Captain Dunn was a silver-tongued devil of a recruiter, and within minutes I had sworn to defend the Constitution of the United States and the State of California against all enemies, foreign and domestic and to obey the orders of the President of the United States, and all the rest, so help me God! It was one of those spur-of-the-moment events one cannot plan even if they want to, that turn out to be defining points in the course of a lifetime.

I was already envisioning my first combat assignment: telling my parents I had joined the army. It didn’t have to be right away; Captain Dunn had told me it would take a few months for my orders to be cut and until I had to report to Fort Ord in northern California for basic training. In the meantime, I would have semi-monthly reserve meetings and time to acquaint myself with military life and procedures. Following basic training, in late Fall or early winter, I would be stationed at Fort Jackson in South Carolina where I would be attending radio school.

I'd had vague notions that joining the service required nothing more than passing a physical examination and signing on the dotted line. As it turned out, the enlistment paperwork consumed the better part of an afternoon. This made me late getting home and I found myself stuck in the infamous quagmire of Southern California traffic.

The lengthy trip home gave me time to mull over what I would tell my parents. It looked like a good change to kill two birds with one stone, so I settled on a compromise of truth and lies. I would tell them I had been in school the past year but hadn't yet registered for the new semester. That firm decision lasted until I decided to chuck the part about school and merely tell them I was going to fulfill my patriotic duty to my country and so forth.

Not since I had graduated high school did I feel my life had some sort of direction, a purposeful plan that, for good or ill, contained definite sign posts along a clearly defined road. The fact that said direction would lead away from home and parents was icing on the cake. I knew I was facing a rite of passage, crossing the stream from adolescence to adulthood and come what might, I would finally be on my own and responsible for my own life.

It felt good.