

A BUM DEAL

A Memoir



BUMFIGHT

*An UNLIKELY JOURNEY
from HOPELESS to HUMANITARIAN*

RUPUS HANNAH & BARRY M. SOPER

A B U M D E A L

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the authors' present recollections of their experiences. Some names and events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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Dedication

Rufus Hannah dedicates this book to all the men, women, and children who are homeless.

“May you find your way home safely.”

Barry Soper dedicates this book to Ed Bradley, a great journalist, who said that Rufus’s story must be told and that he was the one to write it. “When I told him that I wasn’t sure I could do this, he turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and said, ‘Oh yes, you really can.’”

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And, of course, great thanks to Barry Soper, for so many reasons.

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you finish it; my parents in heaven, who taught my brother Robert and I by example to always help the less fortunate; my cousin Barry Plotkin, for being part of the adventure; my sons Blair and Josh and daughter, Jill, for their love and support in making a difference in a person's life.

And, of course, many thanks to Rufus Hannah, the most courageous person I have ever had the privilege to know.

Authors' Note

Barry Soper: In 2006, shortly before his death, Ed Bradley of *60 Minutes* interviewed Rufus Hannah and Donnie Brennan regarding their roles in the infamous *Bumfights* videos in particular, and about violence against homeless people in general. When I spoke to Mr. Bradley afterward, he acknowledged my part in helping Rufus and Donnie “escape” from the young filmmakers who had taken advantage of them for years and in guiding them through the legal process to make sure their voices were heard. Mr. Bradley suggested that I write a book about my experiences. I told him that I hadn't thought about writing a book, but it seemed like a great idea.

Rufus Hannah: I didn't trust Barry—I hardly ever trusted anyone back then—when he was helping us out after we were done with *Bumfights*. But after I began my recovery from forty years of alcoholism—Barry helped me through that too—I came to realize that this man had a huge heart. I began to open up, telling him not only what had happened during the time we were making the *Bumfights* videos, but also about my life all the way back to a small town in Georgia. I told him things that I never told another soul, and it felt good to get it all out.

Barry Soper: Hearing Rufus's life story stunned me. It made his “comeback” even more amazing and inspiring. I decided that just telling the *Bumfights* part of his life was not enough, so with his permission I wrote it all down. *A Bum Deal: An Unlikely Journey From Hopeless to Humanitarian* is presented in Rufus Hannah's voice—as it should be.

Introduction

January 7, 2008

Heavy rains and wind had clobbered the capital city of Sacramento for the past week. And if that wasn't bad enough, I was late—really late. I looked away from the flashing lights tracking the elevator's progress and checked my watch. I glanced back up at the floor numbers and in doing so got a look at my reflection in the fancy mirror overhead. For a moment, I hardly recognized the neatly groomed guy named Rufus Hannah looking back at me. I offered a little prayer to God, asking for the strength to use my voice to speak for so many others who didn't have one—and, of course, for guiding me out of the darkness and back into the light.

The elevator arrived at the right floor and I got out. As I rushed down the hall toward the main ballroom of the Embassy Suites, I couldn't help but notice how hard the rain pounded against the windows overlooking the city. I felt real lucky to be inside on a rain-soaked, chilly day like this instead of out on the streets, trying like mad to find shelter from the harsh weather. Back when I was homeless, these days were the worst. It was bad enough already, crawling like a rat through Dumpsters, trying to find food or anything that resembled it. But when the weather was awful, life was unbearable and full of despair on every street corner. Nowhere to hide, no way to ever really feel warm, fed, or rested. All you could do was keep walking, keep moving, and hope that things got better.

I stepped away from the hotel windows, approached the entrance of the ballroom, and looked in. Hundreds of well-dressed people milled around, shaking hands and talking among themselves. Someone pointed me in the direction of my table near the front of the large, elegantly decorated room. As I made my way through the crowd, some people rushed forward to shake my hand and congratulate me on my “remarkable achievement.” They thanked me for wanting to speak on behalf of those who had no voice. Didn't they know how I used to be one of those same people? They kind of forgot that looking at me now, all cleaned up.

“Rufus, thank God. What are you trying to do, give us a heart attack?” one of my friends exclaimed. Brian Levin, a Stanford Law School alumnus and national expert on homelessness, motioned for me to sit down. He looked frantic that I was late. I suddenly felt bad about my lifelong habit of always getting into trouble and setting people off, even though most of the time I didn't mean it.

I sat in my seat, picked up the event program, and started reading it. There I was, on the prestigious list of civil rights award recipients: *Rufus Hannah*. The program talked about how I “overcame embarrassment, unemployment, alcoholism, and disabilities to turn his life around and in the process help others.” Was this me? Heck, I felt like I was reading about someone else.

I picked up a pen and started jotting down some notes on the back of the program. I was supposed to give a speech when I got the award, but I had no idea what to say. Given what my life had been like in recent years, I felt as if this were some kind of bad dream. How do you sum up a whole life in a couple of minutes—especially one that started in such a distant place from where it was now? I thought about being born in a small Southern town, beginning my life by drinking beer from a baby bottle, getting kicked out of school, the whole army disaster, the crazy van trip out West, train jumping—and then, all those years I spent as a homeless drunk.

And, of course, the *Bumfights* videos—when I risked life and limb for booze while some kid filmed the whole damn thing. Looking at all this on paper, I wondered how any man could have survived. I wondered how my body *did* survive, especially with all the alcohol I drank.

I flipped the program over to see if there were any hints about what I was supposed to say. I mentioned things about the history of the civil rights award they'd be giving me. When I saw the words *civil rights* I instantly thought of great men like Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy—certainly not me.

As I continued reading through the program, marveling over the impressive list of recipients and their accomplishments—wondering how in the heck I was even in the same room with them, let alone on the same list—I noticed my hands. They were cracked and calloused from my work as a painter and handyman, but that wasn't what I was looking at. Even after a number of painful and expensive laser treatments, the letters were still there, tattooed across my knuckles: B-U-M-F-I-G-H-T. I thought about the damage these hands had done—to me and, even worse, to my best friend...

February 2001

Crack! My tattooed, bloodied, filthy knuckles slammed viciously into Donnie's jaw, showing no mercy. The attack was a blind side, pure and simple, and Donnie immediately fell to the ground, instinctively throwing his hands up in the air in an attempt to protect himself. I continued to pummel my best friend, even kicking him while he was down. I vaguely heard the sound of bones cracking, one of Donnie's ankles from the force of my kicks. I caught glimpses of the black-and-blue bruises I was causing and the blood oozing from Donnie's wounds as the blows tore through swollen skin. But I continued the savage attack, too damned drunk to even realize what I was doing.

Next to us, the teenagers filming the attack whooped and hollered in triumph. This was exactly the result they had been hoping for. I swayed drunkenly, barely noticing that Donnie now cowered on the ground, whimpering, crying out in agony, and begging—*begging*—for someone to call 911. I stopped swinging and stared blankly at my now-crippled best friend, writhing on the ground in pain, and I saw what I had done. Some tears fell down my cheek.

“You know, Ryan, I don't think Rufus is MAN enough to throw the first punch!” Zachary Bubeck

one of the filmmakers, had called out. It had only been a few minutes earlier when the idea of beating the crap out of Donnie, which the kids had suggested, had sounded like the dumbest idea in the world.

“Yeah, I think he’s afraid Donnie will whip his ass!” Ryan McPherson, the kingpin of the group, had replied.

We’d all gathered in a dirt lot behind a former Taco Bell restaurant in La Mesa, California, a nice suburb of San Diego. The kids were shouting excitedly at us—two middle-aged homeless dudes who were so drunk that remaining upright was a challenge. Two homeless guys: me, Rufus Hannah, age forty-eight, and Donnie Brennan, age fifty-three, my best friend of about ten years. Both veterans, we met and became friends while homeless.

I was just a little guy, and I had an overgrown gray beard that seemed to be an extension of a unruly mop of tangled grayish black hair that flew around my face. Donnie was taller than me, a chatty guy with lots of charisma who had straight, long gray hair flattened under a trucker’s cap. And I couldn’t understand why they thought we would fight each other.

When I was drunk, like now, people could barely understand what the heck I was saying. And when they did, my thick Southern drawl complicated things even more. “Whaddya guys want from me? Why’re ya doin’ this?” I remember slurring at them.

“I don’t think Donnie’s playing along,” Ryan said. “He’s not a team player, and I think he’s going to ruin the project for all of us, and you’re not going to make your share of the money, Rufus.”

“What do I care about the money?” I snapped.

Bubeck laughed. “No money, no beer.”

The monster inside my gut that needed alcohol like a fish needed water roared at me. It warned me that these punks were right—I *needed* the beer that they were taunting me with, holding over my head. I needed it *bad*. I’d already downed many more like it so far today, but I knew that those would eventually wear off and my body would hurt like hell from withdrawal if I didn’t have another one.

The kids continued to goad me, trying to get me to throw the first punch so they could capture it on camera.

“Donnie isn’t one of us like you are, Rufus,” Ryan carried on, trying to get me to further humiliate Donnie. “He’s messing up the film. He’s not cool like us.”

But I didn’t care about any of that. All I saw in my mind were the painful sweats, tremors, and muscle aches I would experience within hours if I didn’t get that goddamned beer.

So I turned my mind off and laid into Donnie, landing punch after drunken punch—hard. I beat the holy hell out of the closest friend I had ever known. I punched, kicked, and slapped the one guy who had never let me down.

When the dust cleared, Donnie’s leg was shattered. He would need a stainless steel rod implanted just to hold his ankle and leg together. This one thing, started by others but carried out by me, would permanently disable Donnie and eat away at my soul one teardrop at a time for years to come.

Both of us wound up bloody, bruised, and beaten—only shells of the men we once were. As an ambulance took Donnie away, I realized that we had become animals, trained to humiliate ourselves and self-destruct on the command, “Action!” just like that Pavlov guy’s dog. I vaguely recalled some of the things I had done that brought me to this time and place. But it all seemed to happen so fast like an out-of-control car speeding toward a cliff. Trouble was, when I fished around for the brake pedal, I realized that I was sitting in the backseat.

January 7, 2008

I shook my head thinking back on that day and so many others like it. *Bumfights*, the damn *Bumfights*...But it was hardly the start of my troubles. No, that began with the drinking, and continued with estrangement from a loving family...which finally led to homelessness.

Part 1

BORN ON *THE* BOTTLE

Chapter

THE SUNNY SIDE OF LIFE

Some kids are born with silver spoons in their mouths. I was born with a beer bottle in mine.

Hometown: tiny Swainsboro, Georgia. Date of birth: November 27, 1954. Rufus Jr. is what they called me, and I joined my parents, Lucille and Rufus Sr., an older sister, Jenny, and eventually a younger brother, Billy, in a mostly normal, cheerful tale of a family growing up in the Old South. My family tale included sprawling country houses and tire swings, along with more compact suburban homes. Born and raised Baptist, I have few recollections of going to church on a regular basis. When we did attend, I got stuck wearing Sunday pants, a white shirt, and a bow tie. I always felt relieved that my folks were not regular churchgoers.

True to the era, we kids spent more time outside causing mischief than cramped inside, glued to technology. The tale was complete with a 1956 bronze and white Buick and a dog named Rex. That was the sunny side of life as I grew up.

Unfortunately, there are two sides to every story.

“Dang, Lu, don’t this kid ever stop his wailin’?” my dad would say as my mom struggled with me, a fussy infant.

Mom would reach for the half-consumed bottle of beer that stood on a coffee table. “Don’t fret, I got an idea,” she would say and then unscrew the cap of my baby bottle.

My parents, both alcoholics, would add beer to my baby bottle to keep me quiet. I found that out from my mother many years later. But even before then, when I was still in my mother’s womb, the alcohol-induced damage was already in progress. However, this was not evident until the moment I was born. After the final push, Mom looked at the nurse’s face and knew something was wrong. My cry was weak, and the doctor kept his eyes down as he clamped and cut the cord.

“What is it? Is he okay?” Mom demanded anxiously.

“Your son is premature and jaundiced,” the doctor said as he placed the wrapped bundle on her stomach.

Although the new mom barely knew what these words meant, she did know this: the miniature, sickly baby with greenish, yellow-tinted skin staring up helplessly at her was not the perfect new life that all mothers envision when they first find out they are pregnant. This precious new baby—the one they had waited so long for was not only imperfect, his life was also in grave danger.

“Hush, little one. Now you hush,” Lucille Hannah whispered to me.

But as she leaned down to plant a gentle kiss on my forehead, the nurse took me away from her. Mom started to weep. "Please don't take him!" she begged.

"I'm sorry, but we need to start working on him," the nurse explained quickly, placing me in the bassinet and wheeling it out of the room.

"I did this to my baby!" my mom cried. "I damaged him. He's weak and he's gonna die because of me! How can I live with that?"

I had been born flawed, and it would take some work to fix me. I'd need two blood transfusions just to survive. As the fresh, clean blood flowed into me, an oxygen mask covering most of my tiny face, my folks stood silently by my side, praying.

"Please God, don't take our boy," my dad intoned. "Don't take 'im."

Day after day, night after night they watched, wept, and prayed. Much to their relief, I survived. So you had to wonder why they would soon be putting booze in my baby bottle.

Naturally, I wouldn't be aware of my dramatic entrance into the world, and the fact that addiction was literally in my blood, till years later. The first hints would show up as a teenager, when I felt a powerful urge to start drinking out of a whole new kind of bottle and couldn't stop.

In addition to such somber childhood firsts, I also experienced more typical chronological landmarks and rented ones. My family moved a lot. I later learned that many of the moves had to do with my dad finding work, mostly as a mechanic in various industries. But as a little kid, the frequent moves confused me. My folks, Mom's sister Dorothy, Dad's brother Melvin, me, Jenny, and Bill moved as a group from street to street, neighborhood to neighborhood, town to town, and state to state, like a traveling family circus.

"Yep, we're movin' again," I would have to tell one or another short-lived friend. "Dunno when this time. My pa got a new job."

Those homes in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and even Ohio for a spell served as anchor points for my childhood memories. I remembered most of them in great detail, the pictures leaping off the pages of a long-misplaced photo album.

There was this first house, where I lived as a toddler and young boy, a small wooden house within the town limits. In Swainsboro you lived in or outside the town limits, determining the proximity to other neighbors, businesses, and life in general. My fondest memory attached to this home was of my grandmother living across the street.

Our next home was in Wadesboro, North Carolina. I was nine years old in 1963, the year of segregation battles and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech in Washington. None of us knew much about things like that. Sure, there were "coloreds" in Wadesboro, but I didn't think much about that either.

The first I heard of any historical event happening outside my nice world was one day in school. In the middle of a real boring grammar lesson, Mrs. Ratliffe was summoned into the hallway by the principal. When she came back, she told my class, “Children, I have some bad news. President Kennedy has just been killed.”

“Who the hell is that?” I whispered to a classmate.

“Damned if I know,” the kid whispered back.

Across the aisle, another kid laughed. “‘Bout time someone shot the Yankee!” he yelled, setting off lots of relieved laughter from others in the class who apparently knew who the hell this Kennedy fellow was.

“Why? What’d he do?” I asked.

“He’s a nigger lover,” the kid said.

Home in Wadesboro, where a country boy like me lived when city-boy Kennedy was shot, was a towering white house next to a four-lane highway. Up until then, my mom had been a homemaker. But now we were a two-income household. My dad worked as a mechanic at a cotton mill, repairing and maintaining the weaving machines. Mom worked part-time at the same mill, sewing T-shirts.

Cotton was a big deal to our family back then. When I was two or maybe three, my hair was so white that people called me “Cotton.” Around the same time, my pa worked as a cotton sharecropper.

Our family home back then was another old wooden house where water was drawn from a well in the front yard. I remember my dad taking me out to the cotton field, where I would see my grandpa and the “colored” workers toiling side by side. I would lie down on the fluffy sheets of cotton, nature’s most luxurious bed, for afternoon naps. I’d stuff a pillowcase with cotton that my grandma had dropped on the ground, and I’d let the warm rays of sunshine cover me up, just like a blanket.

While kids in other American homes may have been gathered around a television with their families, watching events like the Kennedy assassination, the March on Washington, and King’s speech with fear, confusion, and proper awe, my siblings and I were more likely to be found outside playing. When I was nine, my outdoor activities were a bit more mischievous than lazy afternoon naps in the cotton. I would usually be dressed in blue jeans, short-sleeved, button-down checkered cotton shirts, and scuffed tennis shoes. My hair was short, not quite military, although my dad had a habit of nearly shaving Bill’s and my heads in the summertime. I couldn’t get my clothes worn and dirty fast enough.

I liked hunting, fishing, playing on the tire swings, climbing trees, and fixing and riding bicycles. Usually I didn’t get along with Bill. He was a tattletale—always getting me in trouble. But it was really exciting when we finally got our own bikes. I was eleven then, and we had freedom.

We soon decided to take that freedom to the next level. When I was around thirteen, Bill and I took up another, less innocent hobby: smoking. Our house stood near a path that cut through a pine thicket. We built a makeshift hut out of pine limbs and straw and then sneaked out to our secret camp and

smoked cigarettes.

One unfortunate day our pa followed us and discovered the secret smoking hut. Rather than busting us right away, he bided his time, crouching outside the pine-and-straw hut, silently spying on us, not saying a word.

That night at supper, he confronted us. "Have you boys been smoking?" he demanded.

"No, Dad," Bill said, kicking me under the table just in case.

"No," I agreed.

But he already knew. Pa made it very clear that the whipping we received that night was for lying about not smoking. I learned a valuable lesson that day.

Another good ol' Southern family virtue that my dad eventually passed on to me was that a solid work ethic is an essential foundation for a productive life. From a laundry list of daily chores to joining our parents at working at our own jobs when required, we Hannah kids learned to pull our own weight at an early age. At one point Jenny worked full-time alongside our mom, sewing T-shirts at the cotton mill. Whenever something needed to be done, we were expected to help. Ours was a family that worked together, played together, and stuck together, no matter what.

My siblings and I also had another grandmother of sorts: a "colored" woman who was the family's closest neighbor, about half a mile down the road. Bill and I would visit to play basketball with her grandsons.

She was the matriarch of her family, but that's not how she was best known. This grandma was into black magic. She had a black kettle, which she used to make soap and lye, that sat in the middle of a fire pit.

"Uh-uh, she ain't making soap here," I used to tell my siblings. "Heck, this looks more like the kind of pot used by witches to brew up magical potions!"

"Rufus, you've been watching too many scary movies," Jenny chided.

Even so, I frequently visited with the fascinating old woman. I never quite knew what to expect or what she might say.

"Rufus, if you puts a live black cat in de steaming black kettle and de cat's bones come to de top, de devil will appear," she would tell me.

I would just stare up at her, thanking God that I wasn't a black cat. "Then what happens?" I would whisper.

"Den you can make any wish, and it will come true, but de devil will own your soul in exchange."

I decided right then and there to make sure never to visit this lady on Halloween.

I would experience many more homes, mostly in the same or nearby towns, before I turned eighteen and finally left home for good. While living in one of those homes, I experienced the first tough story

of my childhood. When I was around thirteen, our family lived way out in the country in a place called Deep Creek. This home was a big plantation-style house on a farm loaded with fig, pear, and plum trees. I had recently inherited a German shepherd puppy from Aunt Dorothy, which I named Rex.

Rex and I would regularly go hunting in the woods, just like millions of other boys and their dogs. But Rex only seemed to show love and loyalty to me, not allowing anyone else to feed him.

Mom considered Rex a danger. It soon got to the point where I had to keep Rex chained up whenever we weren't together. Local kids would throw rocks at Rex, and he tried to bite them in return.

"Stupid dog!" one kid yelled.

"Why don't you act like a normal dog?" another one cried out, aiming a stone at Rex's mouth and shut him up.

When I saw the drama unfolding from my bedroom window, I ran out, toting my shotgun.

"Get outta here before I make you get outta here!" I yelled as they scattered.

"Aw, yer as crazy as that mutt!" one of them called over his shoulder.

Standing there on the front lawn with the kids sprinting down the dirt road and Rex still barking and pawing wildly, I knew it was time to make a decision.

As heartbreaking as it was, one day I took Rex off his chain to go hunting. As usual, I let him run free through the woods, frolicking and chasing after squirrels.

"Good-bye, pal," I murmured as the dog disappeared beyond a thicket. "I can't take you home no more." I wiped a tear and hurried off.

Mom was just finishing up dinner as I came in through the screen door, the gun slung over my shoulder. I had nearly made it through the kitchen before she said, "You left him?"

"Yeah."

One word was all I could choke out.

That wasn't my last hunting story without a happy ending. I wasn't actually involved in the next one, but my life would be forever changed because of it.

I went hunting a lot with my dad, using a 20-gauge pump shotgun that Pa had given me. One day when I was a young teen, I was supposed to go hunting with my dad. But when the day came, I felt more like hanging out with my girlfriend instead and told my dad I'd decided not to go with him. So my dad took Bill and a neighborhood kid named Chris, whose father was a minister. Bill brought his .410 shotgun and Pa his .22 Springfield rifle. I loaned Chris my shotgun for the trip.

"You'll take good care of her, right?" I told Chris earlier as the group packed up their gear.

"Sure thing," Chris said.

"Kill one for me," I told Bill before heading out.

"Yeah, we'll make sure we do that," Bill replied.

Later that day, while I was at my girlfriend's house, I watched curiously as my uncle pulled up

outside. My uncle grabbed me and shoved me into the backseat of the car. His face was as white as a sheet.

“What’s going on? Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“We’ll meet him at home later on,” my uncle said.

His expression made me stop wanting to ask questions. I went cold inside but didn’t know why. My uncle finally revealed the disturbing details of the hunting trip turned tragedy.

“Your pa, he...he accidentally shot young Chris,” he managed to gasp out. “He drove the boy to the hospital, but...Chris was dead when they got there!”

Now I went pale. My mind was still trying to sort through what my uncle had just said, but everything felt like it was in slow motion, so my brain wasn’t working right.

“Your dad’s at home. He ain’t doing so well,” my uncle added.

I continued to stare at the man in disbelief as we pulled into the driveway. Bill appeared at the front door. He seemed surprised to see us all there.

“Billy, what happened?” I asked like an idiot, as if the story would change.

It was almost as if Bill hadn’t heard me. “I gotta go talk to Chris’s parents,” he said, looking through me like I was a ghost.

“Want me to go with you?” I asked.

I didn’t really know why I asked that; it just sort of came out. This didn’t seem to be the kind of news anyone should have to deliver alone, especially with what Bill had already been through that day. Bill nodded, and we walked next door together.

The horrible task of telling Chris’s parents that their fourteen-year-old son had just been shot and his death was left squarely on our shoulders. It was one of the most difficult things that Bill and I ever had to do.

The minister and his wife smiled at first when they saw us. But that changed quickly when they saw the looks on our faces.

“What is it, boys?” Chris’s mother asked. “Where’s Chris?”

“Chris is...uh, he...” Bill stammered.

“Dear God, what happened?” the minister exclaimed.

Bill looked like he was going to be sick, so I finished what he was going to say. Chris’s mother screamed and nearly fell, but her husband caught her and, sobbing himself, helped her to the couch. Bill ran outside. I stood frozen, not knowing what to do or whom to help.

Chris was buried in Atlanta three days later, on Bill’s birthday. After that day, we saw a permanent change in our dad. Rufus Hannah Sr. never went hunting again. Or at least if he did, he made sure nobody else knew about it.

Dad was never charged in the accidental shooting, but the verdict he charged himself with was far worse than anything the law could have handed out. Dad’s punishment was to hit the bottle more than

ever, drinking so heavily that the man who had raised Jenny, Bill, and me essentially died that day with young Chris on the hunting trip.

“Pa? Pa? Are you okay?” I would often call from the doorway of the living room when I saw my father passed out on the couch, his hand clutching the neck of a bourbon bottle. I always made sure that Pa was still breathing as I pried the bottle from his fingers.

As for me, I have felt guilty about the incident all my life, even though I wasn't there and even though I technically had nothing to do with it. In my mind, if I had been there with my dad, the incident never would have happened and my life might have turned out differently. That day, the sunny side of my life started to slowly go dark. The real turning point, however, would be the next step in a pattern that had begun with a baby bottle. That same baby bottle—or the beer in it, anyway—would begin to haunt me a year later, at the ripe old age of fourteen.

Chapter 2

DRINKING, DROPPING OUT, AND I DO'

I had been a loner for some time now and much preferred the company of older people to kids my own age. This led me to the local fuel-and-food stop and the loyal group who would gather round the outdoor table.

I figured this out for the first time on a typical Georgia summer night. I was sitting on the curb outside the store, smoking a cigarette and pretending to casually observe the goings-on. If it were a movie, I could've been a slightly smaller version of James Dean, watching the world go by and checking out the action. But I was just me, a fourteen-year-old kid sitting on a curb in the shade, staying cool while waiting for someone who was old enough to drink to show up.

After about an hour of waiting and smoking half a pack, I watched as an old Chevy with a couple of guys in their seventies pulled up slowly in front of me. Another guy would later join them on foot since he lived nearby. They went inside, chatting casually about the recent heat wave and how it affected cotton prices. I watched through the window as the men bought some bourbon, whiskey, and beer. They walked by me and then around the corner of the store, carrying their paper bags, still chatting, and not paying any attention to the kid who followed them.

Behind the convenience store, on a concrete platform lit by the store lights and some kerosene lamps, the old guys settled comfortably around the rusted table, scraping the chairs on the concrete as they sat.

One man pulled out a deck of cards and started to shuffle as the others passed the bottles of liquor around the circle. "I think we're being watched," he said without looking up.

Another man glanced over and saw me leaning against the back wall of the store, staring at them real quietlike. "Son, either come over here and join us or get back home to your mama," he said, studying his cards.

I obeyed, shuffling over to the table and sitting. The first man started to deal me into the game, but one of his buddies stopped him.

"He's too young for cards. Leave him be," he said.

So the game continued as I sat quietly, listening to the tales of the town, local gossip, weather reports, and some pretty colorful language. Finally, a half hour later, the old geezers took pity on me, this silent kid at their table. One of them handed me a bottle of bourbon under the table. I took a big swig. Dang, it felt good. I thought it was funny that they believed me to be too young for cards but not

too young to drink.

The game and the drinking continued that night and beyond. The men continued to pass bottles to me, first under the table like it was some kind of secret, and then, chucking the charade, in full view. They approached it like a kindly old neighbor lady taking pity on a stray cat and setting out a dish of milk. The men never said anything about it, and hell, I didn't either; I barely said anything to beg off with. Our enjoyment of the booze and one another's company somehow shrank the generation gap.

My new favorite pastime would unfortunately stay with me long past those leisurely days of rusted old patio furniture and colorful stories. I would take my drinking habit to school with me, later to work, and also into my marriages.

My pa was the only high school graduate in the Hannah family, by way of night school and a GED diploma. Although I was never personally motivated to finish school, I did feel a sense of responsibility to my family. When I did buckle down and go to class, I worked hard and mostly enjoyed the experience, earning a lot of As and Bs on my report cards. But for me, the biggest challenge was avoiding trouble outside the classroom rather than inside.

The first time I dropped out of high school was in the ninth grade, when I was fifteen. My family lived in North Carolina. A couple of friends and I were playing cards for money on the bus on our way to school one day. There was no bourbon at this game, but I had picked up some useful card-playing tricks just from watching the old geezers behind the convenience store. A paper bag on my lap jingling with the winnings was proof that I had learned well. I grinned when I laid down another straight. One of my buddies swore under his breath. Another made a lame attempt to end the game.

"The driver's been checking us out in the rearview mirror," he whispered. "Maybe we'd better stop for today."

"Nice try, loser," I said, shuffling the deck.

Unfortunately my buddy turned out to be right. When the bus pulled up in front of the high school and we walked to the front, the driver slammed the doors shut in our faces.

"Not so fast, boys," he snapped.

I looked out the window, and my stomach sank when I saw the principal striding angrily toward the bus. "Damn!" I said to nobody in particular.

"I'll be sure and mention that too. That'll mean more paddling, I'm sure," the bus driver said as he opened the doors to let the principal in.

In the face of a paddling as punishment, I decided I'd much rather quit school and go home. Yeah, I made a rash decision, just like I'd done in the past—and just like I would do a lot of times in the future to screw up my life.

"Leave me the hell alone," I told the principal, and then I stormed off.

When I told my folks what happened, Pa's response was simple: "Find yourself a damn job!"

So I did, working with my father until they decided to move back to Swainsboro. Since I was no longer seventeen, I decided to stay in North Carolina and work, calling my folks once a week. But the tradition of family togetherness soon weighed heavily on me as Christmas approached, and I went back to Georgia, living with my grandmother at first and then with my parents again. In addition to coming home, I also went back to school at their urging.

It took a little time for me to get in hot water all over again. This time it was a windy day, and outside, in the school's designated smoking area, I found it hard to have a decent smoke with the wind blowing in my face. Some friends and I found temporary shelter around the corner. The side of the building shielded us from the wind, and we continued puffing away.

I suddenly threw my cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. "You've *got* to be kidding me!" I yelled.

My pals continued smoking, bewildered at my behavior. "What is it?" one of them asked.

The school principal—another damn little Napoleon type like the one who'd been on my case before—had found us once again. He yanked the butts out of the other kids' mouths and crushed them on the ground with my smoldering smoke.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he exclaimed.

"We're only a couple of feet from the smoking area! What's the big deal?" I asked.

"The big deal is that you're making a mockery of the rules, and you need to be made an example of!" the principal snapped.

He led us back to the school. We gathered in his office to learn our punishment. I sat near the door, having decided it was time to leave again, no matter what.

"What is it going to take, boys? What do I need to do to straighten you out?" the principal said, his hands folded tightly in front of him.

The other guys stared in different directions. I could see that the thin older man with a receding hairline was getting hot under the collar. He said that he took little pleasure in this, but at the same time I knew how much the weasel wanted to humiliate us.

"Fine!" He slammed his fists onto his desk. "Fine! That's fine! I hope you boys are in the mood for some fresh air and exercise, because for the next hour you will run laps around the front of the schoolyard."

"Just because all the classroom windows face out there, right?" I said like a smart aleck, laughing in disbelief. Humiliation—just like I'd figured.

"That's right, Hannah. I know how much you in particular like all the attention," the principal said.

"And that's what it is? For smoking a couple of feet away from where we could smoke?" one of my buddies asked.

"That's what it is." The principal grinned and leaned back in his chair.

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