

## CHAPTER ONE: FRANKIE

Rising from the rocks that pepper the Connecticut landscape, New Haven sits along a craggy coastline, an hour and a half by rail from bustling New York City, economic engine of North America. It is neither a consequential New England metropolis, nor is it a jewel of natural beauty, like the hills and forests a few short miles away, up through Massachusetts and on to Maine. Embraced by soot covered structures, an entanglement of electrified wiring and a proliferation of switching lights and levers, the rail lines remain a petrified remnant of America's industrial past. Until 1967, the A.C. Gilbert Company, home of the Erector Set and American Flyer electric trains, sat proudly on Peck Street along the lines that ran behind the factory and under the Blatchley Avenue bridge, perhaps the fitting inspiration for Erector Sets, to join other rail lines snaking their way to markets beyond. Circular windows, a nod to modernity, perforated the corrugated stainless facade displaying company products, most notably an American Flyer train set that puffed from window to window and back again. Standing on the sidewalk, it was a brief stop on a young boy's dream towards Christmas fulfillment, cementing naïve optimism with an admiration for American industrial engineering as the path to the future.

From the turn of the twentieth century European immigrants, particularly Italian and Irish among others, landing at Ellis Island under the watchful eye of that great French Lady gifted to America as the symbol of welcoming freedom to foreign strangers, have migrated from their initial home in the city to settle in the aptly named New Haven. In fact, the city is divided into many smaller "havens" but it seems that Italian and Irish Immigrants concentrated themselves in one particular segment, Fair Haven, which sits as an island between the Mill River on the industrial west side and the Quinnipiac River on the east, both flowing into the East Shore Bay. St. Donato's Catholic Church, the house of worship to the Italian population of Fair Haven marks the Northern border of this pedestrian friendly neighborhood while St. Francis of Assisi at the intersection of Clay and Ferry, frequented largely by the Irish, marks the east.

Environmentalism took its time discovering New Haven. Throughout the late sixties, the smell of burning trash permeated Fair Haven on any given day forming an indelible association for its residents, identifying it as home. City buses spewed a noxious mix of fumes that triggered another nostalgic memory, like an intoxicating perfume, promising access to activities available within a city of this size. Grand Avenue is the main bus route intersecting the community as it travels west into downtown New Haven. Everything anyone could ever need could

be found on Grand Avenue. From the pharmacy to the Five and Dime, to the furniture store, to the bakery, it was all there. Before reaching East Street, Grand traversed two shallow metal drawbridges over the Mill River with a brief but equally noxious smell of human waste and rotting garbage. Hold your nose. It's over in seconds, and on into the bay. Gone. Next stop, downtown.

Italian American and Irish American immigrants had reached saturation levels long before and now a new generation of immigrants came flooding in from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti seeking the benefits of America's welfare state, adding to the financial burden of New Haven's declining industrial tax base while creating friction with the working class who looked around and challenged the rightfulness of this added responsibility. After all, they had raised large Catholic families without food stamps and title eight housing, by respecting family and marriage as the foundation for a thriving community. The news of this paradise of privilege quickly resounded back home to the Caribbean, accelerating the flood of dependency on a failing community.

Evident among these new neighbors were many single mothers with several small children born of revolving boyfriends. The food stamps they brandished in the Magdelene's Food Fair bore bitter evidence of the increasing cost of charity at the expense of the neighborhood's decline, the disappearance of a former culture. In the 1970's unsupervised street kids made a game of shattering the thick red and black Italian glass front of the store with a baseball bat, leaving large bare openings that ultimately were just painted with the missing color. It was the final insult from a community of free-loaders to the very people that supported them. As drugs moved in, so did other crime and violence. Car break-ins were common as these new residents sought funding for their drug habit. Properties were in decline and there was a pervasive attitude of fear on the streets. Eventually, the old school Italians, the social fabric of the neighborhood moved away. Older family moved to the suburbs to live with their children, or just retired to Florida. The younger generation settled in areas where employment opportunities were greater and neighborhoods were safer.

Amid all this, Franco Magdelene faced an existential challenge of his own. The purchasing power of a larger entity allows that business to sell products at a lower cost and still make good margins. His Food Fair was a small family business compared to the giant Pagnataro's grocery that opened three blocks away in 1970. To the former Food Fair customers who survived in an economic decline and the many new immigrants living on food stamps, cost was everything. Franco did not have to look far to realize what his future held.

After sixty years in the same community, Franco and his wife Rosa had raised four children, Franco Jr, Anthony, Marie and Anne, who in turn bore them sixteen grandchildren, the first of which continued the family name as Franco III, better known as Frankie, while his father was simply known as Big Frank.

For most of his life Frankie lived with his parents in the apartment with the entry door between the grocery and the liquor stores. It was an upper-level apartment adjacent to a narrow alley of a mere two and a half feet that separated it from the Magdelene residence above the liquor store. The kitchen windows of the households faced each other across the alley and it was the practice of Rosa and her daughter-in-law, Sophia, to communicate with each other by tapping on the window with a dust mop to attract the other's attention. In those days of rotary phones every household was on a party line and communications, far from being totally private, were also shackled with long wait times while other conversing parties occupied the line. There was something charming about this way of conversing across the alley and the nearness of each to the other created a special bond rendering the telephone a cold and useless device.

Ever since he was a small child, Frankie was visited by his namesake grandfather each day for breakfast. While Franco had already eaten breakfast with Rosa, he enjoyed slipping away to have a coffee at Sophia's while he sat with Frankie as he ate. Much to Sophia's dismay, Franco would often rip a piece of the crust of Italian bread and drag it across the brick of salted butter in the butter dish at the center of the table, leaving irregular scratchy tracks like tree bark on the upper surface. The congenial old man had been scolded many times for this practice, but it was too late to change him now. It was an informal ritual, an economic expression of comfort in company. Mealtime etiquette was an important factor in properly raising a child. Adding to his mischief, Sophia had warned Franco many times that Frankie was too young to drink coffee but Franco's charm and twinkling eyes brought him a great deal of sway in the application of her rules and so it was that another tradition was established. Franco drank his coffee very sweet and with cream. After serving himself a standard cup of her Maxwell House, he would pour a small amount off the top of each cup into the saucer that he shared with Frankie to enjoy.

From the time he was six, young Frankie volunteered to work in the store. It began when Frankie endeared himself to one of the two cashiers, Mary Agnolfi. After school he would hang out near her register where she freely lavished attention on him. He felt very special and was keenly motivated with a strong

desire for acceptance. Thus, it was that eventually this precocious little boy began bagging groceries and assisting customers by carrying their bags. Small grocery stores must make use of their space in seemingly illogical ways, space being at a premium. The aisle nearest to the cash registers was stocked with laundry detergent and at the end of that aisle sat the coffee grinder that permitted customers to grind coffee beans into whatever fine grind they required for proper brewing. The peculiar blend of these two aromas over time established an olfactory sensibility in Frankie that forever transported him squarely to his grandfather's store. This and the many other smells of the city were a part of his identity, future triggers for loving mind trips into his past.

By the time he was twelve, Frankie's role at the store had grown in responsibility. He was now a stockclerk. Every Wednesday as the eighteen wheeler delivery truck pulled up out back, Frankie would join the other stock clerks to assemble the roller wheel track that would move the boxes from the truck, over the spiked fence separating the store's alley from the sidewalk, up the ramp through the back door and in a series of rapid S-turns lead to the straightaway through the butcher shop, past the frozen meat locker and down the hall leading to the belted escalator that would carry the boxes of canned goods into the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor storage attic. Every few feet along the path, stock clerks would assist the parade of boxes with a stiff push to keep the line moving. Once stored, boxes of canned goods would be opened with a box cutter and the bare metal tops would be stamped with a self-inking price tool featuring small dial-in rubber belts of changing numbers to print the appropriate price on the can tops before being carried to the store's shelves for sale. The device operated on a cam that spun the set of numbers upward to move against the inking pad and then reversed itself downward to print the stamped price. The clickity clack of rapid price stamping was magically mesmerizing. Frankie was learning the most important premise of physical work, that working is fun! At the end of the day, he could kick back and take pride in his accomplishment with a simple overview of the results. This was no intellectual abstraction, no philosophical ponderance, but the evidence of meaningful activity towards a noble purpose, supporting community, an expression of love. Frankie was hooked.

This should not have come to him as a surprise, since he was surrounded by familial love. Every day was an example of giving, a lesson in joyful life. It was understood that neighbors looked out for one another as their children freely moved between their houses to play ball on the dirt lots behind them, or to gather on the sidewalks for a game of hopscotch or tag. By age four, Frankie had made a best friend, Jimmy. Together they would paint the shingled lower wall of the

Magdelene home with old paintbrushes and a can of water, making every effort to apply the water with urgency before it dried where they had started. They didn't know it then, but they were chasing time. All life is a process of racing to finish what is undertaken before losing what was present at the beginning. The secret is to carry it within. Like the smells of the city or the interior of the store, they will remain forever, touchstones of the unseen, a view to the beginning

Like Franco, Rosa too was the product of a large Catholic family. Although half the size, it was equally dynamic, both fluid and assertive. As time passed and generations changed, each understood their place in the flow. One might have thought that after raising four children of her own, the diminutive Rosa might have been utterly exhausted and ready for a deserved rest, but nothing could be farther from the truth. She welcomed the birth of young Frankie into her family with such fervor that it might easily have been interpreted that she regarded it as the very virgin birth itself, an unparalleled event. Soon she was parading the baby up and down Blatchley Avenue in the special baby carriage she had acquired "for Sophia."

"Oh, what a lovely baby," the neighbor ladies would say as she strolled under the shade of the elms on her way to nowhere in particular.

Stopping to allow maximum adoration, she replied, "Frankie. That's his name. He's the third."

"You must be so proud. He does so look like his grandfather, doesn't he?" The ladies would say after the prompt.

Rosa smiled. That was all that was needed and Rosa would move on.

By the time Frankie was five, Rosa would accompany him along the same route to the nearby public school where Sophia had enrolled him in kindergarten. Like all young children, his first day began with terrible separation anxiety on the steps of the school. Sophia gathered her courage and brought him into the class where a dozen or so children of the same age were already engaged with crayons and building blocks. While all new parents fought back tears delivering their children into the hands of strangers, Sophia instinctively understood that Frankie required socialization beyond the effusive compliments laid at the feet of the ruling neighborhood matron on Blatchley Avenue. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but Sophia knew even then, that growth does not come without pain. To be fair, Rosa understood that too, but it seemed to hurt her more than Sophia to

watch young Frankie cry each day as he entered the classroom. Rosa felt it her duty to make an extra effort to make Frankie comfortable. It began with a bribe.

In 1953 Patti Page released the song “How much is that doggie in the Window?” It quickly rose to become the number one hit on the Billboard chart, selling over two million copies. The forty-five of the song that Rosa bought for Frankie had been worn practically thin with play, and Frankie knew each word of the song by heart. So, when advertisers began hawking a battery operated “Doggie in the Window” on the morning children’s shows, Rosa knew it was a must have for Frankie. That first day of school, she made a promise to Frankie that she would be waiting outside the school for him with a surprise. Even then, Frankie understood the promise of a reward for the completion of good work, but Sophia knew better. It was a bribe she was fine with.

Born in 1949, Frankie was one of the first to be known as a “boomer,” a nickname applied to those children born in the immediate aftermath of World War II. His grandfather had fashioned a comfortable life with his family derived from the work he applied himself to in his grocery store. He built the business through friendship and compassion, as much as through good hard business sense. Financially, in this neighborhood, he had become something of an exception, so much so that he and Rosa had installed that most modern of inventions, a television, into their home in 1951. Sitting each day on the carpet cross-legged, a few feet away, Frankie had become transfixed by the light of the “tube.” Cowboys had become the central part of his viewing ritual—Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, The Cisco Kid, but equally important were Shari Lewis, Captain Kangaroo, The Mickey Mouse Club and Rudy Kazootie. Rosa had already bought Frankie a Hopalong Cassidy outfit—a black flannel-lined set of pants and shirt and a two-holstered gun belt with ivory handled cap-guns bearing Hoppy’s signature. Cowboy boots were acquired separately and immediately became the indispensable element to every wardrobe ensemble Sophia chose for him to wear. In the heat of summer as she shifted Frankie to wearing shorts, he could not be separated from his cowboy boots.

It was hard for the neighbors to see Frankie as spoiled. All regarded children as a blessing and each would have just as easily lavished the full capacity of their ability on their own grandchild, were their situation the same. If Frankie was special at all, it was because he was the poster boy of the coming generations, the focus of familial attention, the fulfillment of the promise of a better life.

But no one could have predicted what was soon to unfold.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE DARK WOOD

In the early years after World War I a new optimism swept the nation. For many it was a time of rejoicing, in song and dance, nightclubs and speakeasies. “The roaring twenties” had taken hold. On his return from military service Franco had assessed his opportunities and chose to start a business, his very own stake in the society that had so warmly accepted his family. From a small street stand he sold vegetables and farm fresh eggs, that in just a few short years he managed to turn into a full-fledged grocery store specializing in Italian-American offerings. Rosa’s family was situated nearby. They lived on the same block. Her parents were the ones who had made the lonely ocean voyage before the turn of the century, leaving the familiar for the possible. They came separately about a year apart, confident that they would be reunited and eventually married. Over time Franco learned to speak English. Oddly, this strengthened his relationship to the community because like so many others transplanted alongside him, only a dependency on each other could withstand the barrier of language.

Franco’s family had also settled in Fair Haven, save for one brother, Tito, who had moved to Detroit. Factory work was easily obtained for the skilled, but for most, it was learned on the job. The manufacture of firearms seems to have been centered in this area. Not the only gun manufacturing plant nearby, the original Winchester factory was a major employer easily accessed from Fair Haven and several of the brothers had found work there. The youngest Magdelene brother, Joseph, was just a child at the time and freely roamed the streets unsupervised, inevitably finding mischief wherever he could. Somehow, he always managed to have a little change in his pocket. Very small for his age, he was nevertheless feared by the other children, even those bigger than he. Perhaps that accounted for the continuation of his meager financial worth. Joseph had something to prove and it manifested itself as a volatile personality and a mean streak that was easily aroused. He never walked away from a fight and he rarely, if ever, lost. No matter how badly bloodied, he never quit. To say he was tenacious would be to overlook his obstinacy. His illicitly acquired wealth was soon gone as each day he would wander across the island formed by the intersections of Blatchley, Clay and Monroe to reward himself with an Italian lemon ice served in a pleated paper cup from the corner vendor. It was ritual. Sitting on the stoop, his scraped knees bore testament to his victory that day, as he watched the neighborhood come to life. The baker’s van would be offloading warm, paper-wrapped Italian bread into the Food Fair, while the iceman made his deliveries of

blocks of ice to the liquor store to be added to the cedar lined cooler that housed the beer. In the distance a lone voice could be heard over the sounds of the city. Growing louder as he drew near, Joseph watched his neighbors respond to the man's calls, delivering kitchen knives and dull scissors for sharpening on the grindstone wheel of his pull-along cart in the middle of the street.

Decades later, not much had changed, except for the iceman. The large pincers that were used to transport the blocks of ice were now a curiosity hanging on the wall of the liquor store amid cardboard displays promoting brands of hard liquor. Uncle Stevie had installed an electric cooler out front to house the beer and over the many years it had shielded Stevie from the small arms fire directed towards him as he ducked behind it during attempted robberies. Over time, several small bullet holes had penetrated the glass front, but Stevie had chosen to leave them, perhaps as evidence of his valor in defending his store. From his position on the floor, he wielded a German Luger, a functioning souvenir of his participation in the big war. A precision weapon in the hands of an experienced soldier drove assailants out the door, but not without losses. Stevie knew by the trail of blood they would not be returning. Like his nephew, Joseph, he was fearless when angered.

Stevie loved having company behind the counter and as Frankie became older, he would run straight to the Liquor store after school to hang out with his favorite uncle and listen to his stories. Stevie kept a coffee can filled with Indian head pennies on the shelf behind the counter. He and his sister Rosa shared the same weakness when it came to fawning over family. That can was there just for Frankie. Each day they would withdraw a few pennies and Frankie would make the quick trip across the triangular island for an Italian ice, frequenting the same corner vendor that had so attracted Joseph years ago. Every so often, Frankie would encounter that very same old man pulling the very same cart down Clay Street. His inevitable departure would soon mark the end of an era, as new efficiencies like electric can openers and knife sharpeners and novelties like electric carving knives wooed the hearts of these women who yearned to be American. Modernity flooded their kitchens in the form of Tupperware, Pyrex baking dishes and unbreakable Corelle dinner plates. Dustmops were still in use, but every home had a Hoover or an Electrolux vacuum cleaner. The Electrolux was a particular oddity, native to the period. It's bullet-shaped design emulated an Art Deco locomotive but it glided over floors on rails like a winter sled. It was a fitting metaphor birthed as an anachronism in this intersection of changing cultures.

Rosa's kitchen was the center of the family universe. Each day she rose at six and began her kitchen duties. Franco would soon join her in the kitchen taking his place in the gliding rocker by the window. As she prepared breakfast, he would wrap his feet in Ace bandages and lace up his high-top ankle boots in preparation for a long day on his feet. After he left, the parade of breakfast participants began. First, the butchers, stock clerks and cashiers and then later in the day family who came into town from the suburbs for their groceries. Early in the day they would stop for breakfast before shopping, but later in the day they would come for lunch after meeting their needs in the store. The flow was never ending and Rosa delighted in the activity. Soup was always on. The warm smell of fresh Italian bread permeated the kitchen. Cold cuts and table cheese were always available in the fridge and when Frankie visited her kitchen, she was always sure to have prepared a big bowl of roasted red peppers in olive oil and garlic. It was his favorite. If there was a lull in activity, she would ask Frankie to watch the kitchen as she made a quick trip down to the store and returned with bags of spoiling fruit, usually unsaleable pears, nectarines, plums, bananas, apples and peaches, which she would carefully trim, saving the good flesh as a fruit offering or for a salad with the meal. Nothing was wasted.

As they entered the sixties. A wave of dull color overcame the sterile white environment of kitchen appliances, namely refrigerators. Now as a reflection of a growing youth movement, advertisers and manufacturers floundered in their attempts to cash in on the colorful generation of peace and love, Carnaby Street fashion and the Beatles. The popular TV show, "Laugh in" was a prominent example of this new sensibility wafting the media. But in due time the kitchen revolution of avocado green, and harvest gold would come to be regarded as unappealing, dull and depressing, at best "campy." Rosa never submitted.

Frankie was now a teen and the scope of his world had expanded beyond the boundaries of Fair Haven. A brotherhood of acceptance existed with other teens of the period. Music and fashion had metamorphosized into a movement best recognized by long hair and colorful fashion trends expressive of their freedoms. Teens easily identified friend from foe in their quest for identity to the degree that making new friends was effortless under any condition. When Frankie disappeared for several days, it was a cause for concern to the entire family. Rosa failed to understand why Frankie did not come up for breakfast. It was summer and he was not in school, but none of that had ever changed his breakfast ritual. Summers, it was common for Frankie to ride along with his grandfather on his morning rounds in the old ford station wagon used for deliveries, another source for a significant olfactory trigger, brought on by the unique mix of decaying smells

created by delivered groceries. But these early morning trips were not deliveries, but pick-ups. On Mondays they frequented the fresh produce markets and on Wednesdays they procured slabs of beef and pork from the meat packers by the rail yard. Frankie never missed a day during the summers and the aging Franco had come to rely on the vigor of Frankie's youth to help move the heavy slabs of meat in and out of the station wagon. His absence was omnipresent.

Big Frank stayed in Connecticut after World War II and assessed his future possibilities before deciding to come into his father's business as a butcher. Each evening Rosa would collect the cash from the registers and she and her husband and their eldest son, Big Frank, would assemble around the kitchen table and balance the cash with the register receipts before Franco would make the night deposit at their local bank. It was typical that Frankie would join in the process when he could. He loved counting the change because many older, rare coins that were out of circulation would magically find their way into the cash drawer. From there, they were donated by Rosa to his coin collection, which had been growing in scope. Besides silver dollars from the late 1800's, buffalo nickels, mercury dimes and Indian head pennies were still very common. However, quite often a rarity would surface, such as a half-dime, or a two-penny piece, and once, even an oversized copper penny from 1793. This night Frankie was conspicuous by his absence and no one could explain it.

"Where's Frankie?" Rosa queried.

"I don't know I haven't seen him in days," replied Big Frank

"And you don't see that as unusual?"

"Not really. He stays here with you so often, his mother and I just assume you have him when he doesn't come home."

"Aht-so! I'm his grandmother, not his jailer. I'm too old to be chasing down a young kid who doesn't come home. He's a good boy. Can't you do something?"

"I dun'no. I dun'no," ... after a long pause, "I suppose."

"He's probably staying at a friend's house," chimes in Franco.

“But don’t you think he would call home and let us know?” countered Big Frank

“Oh my God! I hope he’s not hurt. He could be in the hospital. Maybe he was in an accident,” added Rosa, “lying in pieces in a ditch!”

Franco reached across the table to his son, “You need to go out and find him.”

“Now?”

“God forbid you can sleep not knowing where your son is tonight. Pray he’s not in the sweet arms of the baby Jesus and is all in one piece,” an angry Rosa shouted.

After hours in the car hopping from house to house, driving to various homes of Frankie’s known friends, it was getting late, but Big Frank felt he finally had a solid lead. He had learned that some hippie friends of Frankie’s were camped out at the edge of a wood on the North end of Hamden. He was on his way.

As Big Frank trudged through the high grass of the open field leading to the woods, the cool fresh air was invigorating. City life had denied him this experience. Fireflies danced in the infinite space before him as he reached the barbed wire fence that separated one farmer’s field from another. He paused to touch the wire reflecting on a moment from his time in the big war, too many open fields with hedgerows and German fortified barbed wire. No cover. He turned and viewed the nearby woods with the same trepidation as he had that terrible night in the sharp winter cold. In that dark foreboding mass of melding shapes was held the answer to his prayers or the totality of his fears. Was Frankie there? He began to doubt himself.

Cautiously he breached the wire, slipping between the rows, nevertheless snagging a small tear in the sleeve of his shirt.

“Fuck!” That was his favorite shirt.

The scratch on his arm irritated him, but not as much as the damage to the sleeve of his shirt. Anger was rational but not productive. He took a minute to compose himself, let the anger subside before moving on. Slowly he approached the woods looking for signs of life, a fire, campers, the sounds of a party. But as

the threat he imagined might exist would only be obscured by those woods, he came to realize the woods posed an unreasonable fear. He needed a positive outcome. Why did he feel this way? Then he remembered the machine-gun fire that rained down on his platoon thirty years ago from those dark woods and a wave of survivor's remorse overcame him. He had to stop and sit for a while, conjuring up the faces of the men he had left in the field. He had not expected this. Nor had he anticipated the gentle wind now caressing his sensibilities. Engulfed by the smells of a rural world, in that brief moment he flashed on the distinct odor of burning cordite and Sulphur that permeated the air during the German barrage. He had felt some very real and deeper peace in nature, before it was shattered that night by that urgent reality, one that required action. He understood. He needed to regain that peace tonight. He had to bring Frankie home.

At last, he was at the tree-line. Penetrating the woods, he thought he recognized a narrow path through the undergrowth. It was difficult to see under the dark canopy of leaves above, but it was there. Or did he just want it to be? Was that jolt in the field now summoning delusions? He had to wonder if he was indeed in the right place and considered going back, but he felt he had no choice except to complete the mission before moving on. Is that what this was, a mission? Rosa's mission? Hold that thought. Now, he felt he heard a faint whisper in the distance. He stopped walking. His footsteps on the dry leaves made it hard to hear anything else.

"I think somebody's out there." It sounded like a distant whisper.

"Anybody out there?" he replied. "Frankie it's Dad."

A voice came back from a shadow, "He's in here."

The path opened to a small clearing where a few tents were pitched and the dying embers of a campfire softly illuminated someone who appeared to be moving toward him.

"In where?" Big Frank asked.

"That tent over there," came the reply. "Can you see where you are going?"

"I'll make it."

The shadow peeled back a tent flap creating an opening for Big Frank who stooped to enter the tent. There on the ground before him lay his son, shivering in a cold sweat. Holding his hand was a young lady and another on her knees mopping his brow with her bandana. Big Frank had seen that look before. It was the look of shell shock.

‘What happened to him?’

Oh, he’ll be alright,” came a soft voice calmly. As she rubbed his hand, she kissed his cheek. “He’s good people and he just needs to know he’s with good people who care for him and will protect him.”

“He was doing so well,” said the other. “That is until...”

“Until what?” Demanded Big Frank.

“Until he freaked out.”

“Freaked out? What is that?”

“He’s having a bad trip.”

“A bad trip? Please explain?” Big Frank became impatient.

“Oh, I guess you don’t know. Frankie dropped acid.”

“Acid?”

“LSD”

“WHAT!!?”

“I don’t think he knows where he is right now. We lost him when he fell asleep and I think he must have had a dream that became too real and he got real paranoid. He woke up somewhere else, or at least he thought he did, but he wasn’t really awake, you see.”

“No, I don’t see.”

“He wasn’t making any sense, so we had to wake him up. After that, we’ve been trying to assure him that he’s OK, but he knows he’s not.”

“OK or not, we got’ta get him out’ta here where we can get him some help. Help me move him.”

“I’m not sure he trusts us enough to let us move him.”

“Well, we can’t just let him lay there. Help me move him. Let’s get him up.”

For the first time since returning from the war, Big Frank realized he was out of his depth. He had failed to understand the attraction of a growing youth movement and the ease with which these kids trusted strangers who they identified with. A brotherhood of hair and paisley, fringe and beads, flower power, Black power, peace and love had been formed. In 1968, the brotherhood was ratified by the emergence of the Broadway play, “Hair” and the Age of Aquarius was proclaimed. Frankie sported ample visual evidence of his alignment, hair over his ears and the faint signs of facial hair left untrimmed, but Sophia had advised Big Frank that all this was just a “phase.” Well anyway, that’s what she had learned from Doctor Spock and he had been right about so many other things. But Spock offered nothing that helped them understand how these children of former War Heroes could have turned against their own government. It was unthinkable.

Timothy Leary may have introduced LSD to the world at large, but it was the Beatles acceptance of this mind-altering drug, providing the example that fostered the promise of mind expansion and untold creativity, that allowed it to take root. In 1967 the “Summer of Love” had foretold of a different way to experience life. It happened in Haight Ashbury, San Francisco, Timothy Leary’s home. LSD was not yet illegal. Transcendental meditation was popular among many of the “New Age” devotees who made the pilgrimage to San Francisco that summer and logically, LSD burrowed itself in to its rightful place in the procession to free thought and spirituality. From there young hippie pilgrims carried the sacrament home to all corners of the nation. Bill Hummel was one of those kids.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE CRASH PAD

At age fifteen, Frankie purchased a small motorbike with his earnings from the store. It was most useful in expanding the reach of his romantic attempts but what he really needed was a car. Breaking the gravitational pull of indoctrinated religion required more than a motorcycle. Getting a young girl alone, away from her family to jointly explore what lay beyond puberty was no easy task. As the city was still expanding, undeveloped rural areas provided off road trails, dirt roads and picnic areas that became known as “lovers lanes.” A car was required.

One day in the fall of 1967, after Frankie had acquired his driver’s license, he was making deliveries in the store’s Ford wagon when he saw a hitchhiker going in his direction. His long hair, flowered shirt and bell bottoms was all Frankie had to see to stop and give him a lift.

“Hey, hop in. Where you headed?”

“I’m going downtown to the campus area.”

“Sure, I can drop you there.”

“Hey, thanks. My names Bill. Bill Hummel.”

“Frankie Magdelene, pleased to meet you.”

“You live around here?”

“My family’s in Fair Haven. My grandfather has a store there, it’s a family business. I’m making deliveries for him right now.

Bill chuckles, “Yeh, I can smell it.”

There was something warm and inviting about Bill’s cherub face, like an impish leprechaun. Seemingly, he was very comfortable with himself and his place in the world. Bill rolled down the car window. The stream of wind accentuated his long unruly hair. Sliding down into the car’s seat, he struggled to reach into the pocket of his jeans, producing what was left of a half-smoked roach.

“Want some?”

“Nah. I’m driving.”

“Do you mind?”

“Nah, go ahead. Just don’t get seen. The cops around here are Nazis and they’ll put us both away.”

Frankie turned to watch as Bill lit the joint. “You must be new here.”

“Yeh, why is that?”

“You don’t seem too worried about getting busted.”

“Yeh, I get it. Things are different. I came here with this chick I met in the Haight. I’m living with her and her friends in a crash pad near the University. It’s a lot like Frisco. You should come around some time.”

“Sounds like fun. Maybe I will.”

“Great.” He points to an old Victorian.

“That’s the place up there on the corner. You can drop me here. Thanks.”

A few days later, Frankie found himself knocking on the door. It was a fall evening but still warm enough that he had made the trip on his motorcycle. For all his efforts to get a driver’s license, it had become an exercise in futility. The only vehicle available to Frankie for romantic adventures was the store’s Fairlane wagon and aside from the favorable geometry it afforded, it lacked dignity. The smell of decaying vegetables and laundry detergent was hardly an aphrodisiac.

The first thing he noticed was her long straight blonde hair. It was as natural as the freckles it framed permeating her countenance. For sure, she was no “Yalie,” maybe a drop out. Makeup would have been a vain disservice in the quest for beauty had it been applied to that innocent face, dull veneer on a tender flower. There was something there that no university could extract. She was as surprised to see Frankie as he to her, and she stood there momentarily taking him in, speechless, her lithe form betrayed by the simple diaphanous blouse that hinted at her small but inviting breasts, unwitting participants in the suspension of time. He was entranced, almost too dumbfounded to speak. She opened the door a little more and a small gust of wind pressed the sheer fabric of her blouse gently against

her torso. Frankie couldn't help but notice but he feigned disinterest, breaking the silence with his only solid opening move.

"Hi, Bill told me he lives here." That seemed rather vapid.

"Yeh that's right. You wan'na come in?"

"Sure thing."

"Bill's upstairs. You want me to get him, or do you want to follow me up?"

"Yeh, I can follow you, if that's alright," trying not to let on.

There wasn't much by the way of furniture in the house, a bean-bag chair and some worn throw pillows, apple-crates with record albums, several Chianti bottles dripping melted wax candles, and a jungle of houseplants, many in hanging pots suspended in macramé. A weathered Harmony acoustic guitar sat looking neglected in the corner. On the floor was the prized centerpiece of the house, a proper Indian hookah. Lavishly decorated, shiny and wonderfully crafted, it remained at odds with the Spartan furnishings in the surrounding room. Only the plants seemed to be getting regular care. The walls of the living room had been hand-painted with decorative vines and flowers highlighting lyrics from Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" recorded on Judy Collin's 1967 "Wildflowers" album:

*"I've looked at life from both sides now, from win and lose and still somehow, It's life's illusions I recall. I really don't know life at all."*

He trailed her up the creaky stairs, following the serpentine path of entwined vines and flowers that accompanied Joni's introspective lyrics, arriving at what appeared to be Bill's room.

Bill was still in bed, nothing more than a stained mattress on the floor. An overflowing ashtray and a few abused paperback books were all that remained to give testimony to his free-wheeling lifestyle. The ascent to the room had Joni getting in his head already. Frankie had to wonder, "Was this an illusion or was this life?" He had never been too philosophical, and never this close to someone so free of rules, so unphased by approval, not wanting or needing anything and yet visibly so in need of everything required to survive. So, standing there, he

immediately understood it was the beginning of a journey that he did not understand or control. Was he to be all in, or should he run? He needed to know.

Bill pushed up from the mattress and kicked aside the scant covers.

“Hey Blossom, why don’t you entertain my friend for a few minutes while I get myself together.

She understood what Bill meant. To Frankie’s surprise she took his hand and led him down the hall to another room. It was then that he realized he was all in.

“My girlfriend won’t mind. She’s not here right now.”

“You share this room with her?”

“Well, yeh. We share everything.”

“Oh, kind ‘a like family?”

“Not exactly.”

“So, I guess Bill’s your boyfriend?”

“Wrong. He’s just a friend I met in Haight Ashbury. You seem nervous. Why don’t you just relax and lay with me while Bill gets himself together.”

She falls to the mattress and pulls him with her.

“Silly, we need to get you out of these clothes.”

Frankie fully comprehended the sacramental significance of what was about to be undertaken. He was still a virgin. He had never even kissed a girl, except that one time when he was twelve and that cute girl who was in town for the summer took a liking for him. On the day she was to head home with her family, she pulled him aside to say goodbye. Away from her parents eyes, she took his head in her hands and gave him a soft wet kiss, full on the mouth, one that still lingers when he thinks her name, Shelley. He had long been ready for this, but never prepared.

An hour later, Bill was at the door of her room.

“I see you two are getting along famously.”

He walked over and sat down on the mattress with them. This signaled Blossom to get up. She knew Bill had an agenda.

“I’m going to the kitchen. Anybody need anything?”

“We’re fine,” came Bill’s answer. He turned his attention to Frankie.

“So how long you lived here?”

“All my life.”

“So, you must know a lot of people.” It was really a question not a statement.

“Yeh, I got friends.”

“So... what, you guys are smoking pot?”

“Some. It’s pretty easy to get.”

“When we were out in San Francisco, we were turned on to LSD.”

“So that’s where you met Blossom?”

“No, we met on the road. We were both hitchhiking and I got picked up by the same van she was riding in, along with the two other hippie girls from Minnesota who had the van. They were hip to LSD and had friends in Frisco that could get them some. We were all eager to turn on.”

“I heard about it in the news. ‘Tune in. Turn on. Drop out.’”

“That’s right. Timothy Leary.”

“I heard the Beatles were doing it.”

“How do you think they came up with ‘Sargent Pepper’s’?”

That seemed to make sense to Frankie. After all, the appearance of “Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” in February of 1967 was an aberration that blindsided the music industry. It was not Rock and Roll as it was commonly understood. At first it made no sense but in short order it made all the sense in the world. It was the turning point on which an entire culture pivoted from “silly love songs” as John Lennon put it, to deeply reflective, anti-establishment messaging and non-sensical lyrics. Revolutionary ideas were floated on a bed of cross-pollinated musical forms created with experimental recording techniques to suggest a deeper, elusive reality. It was just too brilliant to have happened without the influence of LSD.

“So, what happened?”

“It was fucking great! This shit is not illegal, so nobody could fucking touch us, and the fuzz were clueless. It’s maybe 100 times more powerful than grass. Nah, that’s not right. It’s not the same. Can’t really be compared.”

“Right on.”

“It opens your mind. It makes you more creative. It taps your imagination to use the other 90% of your brain. You do know that you only use 10% of your brain?”

“I didn’t know that. So, what’s the other 90% for?”

“Nobody knows. That’s the point. But on Acid you can figure it out. You can think like the Beatles, see like the Beatles, maybe even be the Beatles.”

“No?”

“Yeh!”

“So look, I brought some tabs back with me and I’ve got some free samples if you’d like to try it.”

“Maybe, but I heard it can be dangerous. Some people have gone insane.”

“You mean a bad trip.”

“Yeh, that’s what I heard, even suicides.”

“Look, those people were crazy before they dropped Acid. It’s no big deal. I’ve had bad trips before, but the cure for a bad trip is just to take another one right away. It sort of just fixes itself. This weekend me and the girls are meeting up with some friends for a camp out in the woods. If you wan’na come, you can try it then. It’ll be safe. No one’ll know we are there, so we can’t get busted. If you decide you like it, then maybe you can turn on your friends. This shit is so easy to get we could start a great little business. A dose is just a tiny drop on a postage-stamp size piece of paper, so like a hundred doses can be shipped from San Francisco in a regular envelope for the cost of a first class stamp. It’s perfect!”

“It sounds pretty groovy, but just the same I need to think about it.

“Look, I’m not the only one. I’ve probably done at least thirty trips, and the girls too. We’ll all be there with you to see that you’re safe.”

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t pussy out on us, OK?”

