

Excerpt from *JET* by Ron David Ray. Copyright 2011.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The Mack truck was Jonah's whale, painted with maroon gloss and detailed with diamond-tuck interior. We were hoisted into its belly by Tom, the driver. He pulled Mother up by her soft right hand, her left hand gripping my eight month-old sister.

The gearshift had a chrome knob, the steering wheel a perforated leather guard. The cabin smelled of menthol cigarettes, which Tom partook of as soon as we ventured into traffic (it felt like we *were* traffic). It seemed we were a ridiculous height above the road, and the horizon shot out before us, pastoral and epic.

Tom had a handsome broad face and dark mustache, longish hair parted on the side. He wore sunglasses and a faded denim jacket. He blew minted smoke from his mouth in little O's. I immediately admired him.

As we entered storm clouds barreling in from the west, we left behind a year's worth of junk furniture, my action figures, and the tattered and stained photo album that was my father.

Tom knew a thing or two. He'd been doing long-haul for five years, unmarried, nothing tying him down. He was a driver of a truck, he said, but a passenger on Earth. He watched the world go by and viewed it as a free sociology lesson. While listening to my mother's story, his face was filled with amusement. *You're two-hundred miles from that now*, he laughed.

Behind a beaded curtain was a private bedding area with a foam mattress, photographs of Tom's parents and various girlfriends, a few eight-track tapes and a gatefold magazine image of the rolling hills of the Midwest. The Midwest was Tom's Shangri-La: a vista of royal gold and blue, unencumbered by mountain, township or power line.

At a truck stop Tom bought me candy in a clear plastic tube. Halloween was only a few weeks away and the tube was topped with a red plastic devil-head that one had to unscrew to get to the assorted treats. When the candy was gone, I had an Old Nick wand to wave around. I whispered edicts,

made commands to the world around me that were destined to come to pass, seconded by that noble face, curling thin mustache, and eyes of polyurethane, glinting with exultant mischief.

Tom went as far as Santa Fe, and I cried when he pulled off the highway to deliver his trailer full of frozen turkeys. He hugged me goodbye, leaving me fatherless once again. My mother apologized for not having gas money. Tom kissed her hand and said it had been a rare pleasure. I like to think he belonged within the realm of glamour bestowed upon truckers and convoys in the mid-seventies. Perhaps he was one of those rugged, charismatic men driving in one of those silver strands of diesels across the U.S. when C.W. McColl's *Convoy* made top-40 radio.

Mother didn't say much when I reminisced about Tom during the next leg of our journey, but she proved to have both a nostalgia and open zeal for long-haul men that eclipsed my own. Occasionally I'd wake up from a nap to the engine idling. My mother would have her head in the driver's lap. Was she napping too? We ate well and my mother never paid for gas.

Tina and Carla were two mavericks from Pensacola who'd felt the exotic wind of Haight-Ashbury three years too late and were on a pilgrimage to the Golden Gate of free love, be-ins and good vibrations. Tina was a wasp-waisted beauty with Vaseline lips and glitter-sprinkled skin. Carla was doughy with wiry Italian hair and dark circles under her eyes.

At a rest stop Carla had overheard my mother on a collect call to Aunt Ruth. My grandfather was being sent to a maximum-security mental hospital for two years. Carol Jr. had told the police everything before running away. Ulysses had moved into some unknown studio apartment. Ruth had plans to stow away in her brother's secret location.

My aunt was being courted by a small-time draftsman, a deck-builder named Roland. Rollie was already talking marriage. *Honestly*, Ruth said, *we don't have any money or the time to wire it to you.*

Carla watched my mother hang up the phone, herd up her two kids and amble back toward the

freeway. My sister and I were grumbling, unwilling to face the unknown with tight bellies.

Tina had already lined up a ride. As the double-trailer chugged onto the highway toward Mother and me, Carla made the driver pull over. Before he reluctantly opened the hissing door, certain commitments were made, noisy promises my mother kept me away from. I sensed them, though, as I sat in random diners, drinking milkshakes, pushing my infantile erections down with a clumsy palm.

In the presence of two wild girls, my mother loosened up. She affected their boisterous laugh, the way they whined, *Aw c'mon* at every innuendo the driver put forth. He was a sleazy man, to be sure, but I have no recollection of what he looked like; I was rapt in the ambrosia of Tina.

She had her shoes off, her toenails painted lavender. She crossed and uncrossed her legs and put her feet on the dashboard. She put her feet on the driver's lap. Her hair was like straw, swept away from her face with a rubber band. One of her canine teeth lay on top of the other; she touched it often with her tongue.

*Tina?* I would say, and she'd look at me, but I'd have no conversation planned. Her name was enough, just to have her look at me expectantly.

*I think he's sweet on you,* my mother laughed.

*Aw c'mon,* Tina whined. My face blushed as crimson as my devil-wand.

We traveled with the two girls for a couple of days. My mother sewed up the holes in their pants. They bought us donuts and orange juice.

At a weighing station outside of Lake Tahoe, just across the California border, a muscular trucker named Mickey set off my mother's warning lights. He had crude tattoos and a way of chewing toothpicks. A large knife was clipped to his belt and he claimed to have several others in his canopy. He pushed me hard when I reached for the leather sheath. He made open sexual remarks to Carla, and Carla, basking in the limelight for once, insisted we ride with him. My mother opted out, even though he was headed for San Francisco. She said she'd decided to check out the northern coast instead.

Tina and Carla pretended to play tug-of-war with my arms, each vehemently asserting I was her

boyfriend. I was in a singular state of heaven I've tried to duplicate many times since.

They left us with two butter-horns and a bottle of Coca-Cola, and roared away with a possible murderer. We had no addresses or phone numbers to exchange. All we could say was goodbye, and leave it at that.

The flatbed truck that stopped for us was full of bearded men. Their faces were caked with several days' worth of desert dust. We had been waiting for hours listening to angry cicadas and resting fitfully on crunchy gravel. I could see my mother vacillating between the options of going nowhere fast or going anywhere at all. Getting in a truck full of feral hobos ran diametrical to her maternal instinct. A grimy palm reached out and waited, monkey-like.

*These are my children*, Mother said, as dark hands raised us up. It was more a plea than an introduction.

*Praise the Lord*, one of the men said. Nothing else was spoken for several hours. Somehow in the shuffle my devil-wand disappeared. I peered around for it, but it was gone and I was too afraid to inquire.

I was too small to stand in the moving vehicle. A forest of denim legs pressed in on all sides. I smelled the pungency of earth and musk, and I looked into eyes like those of wild horses.

The scenery moved away from us rapidly, gnarled Jeffery pines, dead oaks, animated power lines crisscrossing overhead, freeway signs to pointless destinations.

At a filling station in central California, my mother hustled my sister and I into a photo booth. She used the last of her pocket change on two sets of pictures. The three of our faces popped out of the machine, hair disheveled, mouths agape. We looked sorry to be alive. Mother took one of the strips and put it in her purse. The other she left behind with the description of the truck and the direction we were heading written on the back.

The truck's occupants remained stoic and polite. They spoke little and ate nothing. Our

stomachs growled like lion cubs, but the steady roar of the wind drowned it out as we propelled westward, our hair whipping around like blond electricity. It was deafening and you just had to hunch low and wait it out. When the truck finally stopped, the roar didn't; we were at the Pacific Ocean.

It was now that the men's countenances brightened and they laughed. Their desert pilgrimage and ten days of fasting were over.

Lighthouse Bluff was a series of cabins nestled along oceanic cliffs outside Eureka. Towering above it all was a white cement lighthouse manned by old fishermen and naval veterans.

Women came to meet the truck, and led my family into a wooden structure like an Indian longhouse. Inside were oak benches and picnic tables. While the men showered and donned clean clothes, the women brought us bread they had baked and scrambled eggs laid by their chickens. A warm meal made my mother a good listener. Soon the men filed in and my mother listened some more. Within the hour she acknowledged she was a wanderer with no destiny, a shipped tossed about with no anchor or pier, a sinner with no hope, a daughter with no father. She wept and told of being molested, of being promiscuous—feelings of guilt she'd swallowed daily like large pills. My sister and I climbed into a plywood bunk, under a hand-woven quilt, with a mother who'd just received Jesus into her heart, and who knew at last she was home.

In the weeks that followed, the community enveloped us. They sustained us, and themselves, by selling farm goods and pastries. They also handcrafted leather belts, purses and wallets, and delivered the tri-county newspaper. Breakfast was oatmeal or grits, lunch was sandwiches or vegetable soup, dinner was chicken stew or bulk pasta. Conversation was limited to the Holy Bible (King James Version) and the interpretations thereof.

My mother began to absorb a specific personality. She developed a perpetual smile and gentle optimistic eyes. She began to season every sentence with *Praise God*, or *Thank you, Jesus*. In time her exchanges were consumed with an entirely new language. When she washed her hair, she no longer styled it. She dressed for comfort. She hugged us constantly. I heard the word *love* more than I ever had

before. I sensed we'd emerged from a drought and had entered a reservoir of love. Someone was always holding me or stroking my hair. I felt insulated and magnificent.

My sister was still an infant: salvation was not a requirement for her; God still recognized her as an innocent babe. But I was old enough to say *No*, and to demonstrate the rebelliousness that is born into every man. I was old enough to have a soul that cried out for (but couldn't reach) God. I needed a liaison in the form of God Made Flesh, who had been nailed, bloody and battered, to a tree that he might be sacrificed for my transgressions, sins that began when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, and whose sins had been reborn in all of us like a hereditary virus. The antidote was Jesus. When he died, our sins died with him, but we had to acknowledge it.

I was told that three days after they buried Jesus, he conquered death and resurrected, not like a zombie, but alive and with no stench of decomposition. We had the rare and free opportunity to experience this resurrection, to be born again and washed clean of our sins, the past ones and the new ones we might commit. I was repeatedly asked if I understood these tenets and I replied *Yes* every time. But it wasn't that I understood extreme violence as allegory; it was that my mother had this joy and I never wanted to be separated from my mother. The Christian concepts of being loved, nurtured and unified were not lost on me, and I too invited Jesus into my heart.

Gifts were bestowed upon us as new believers: clothes, linens and soap. My mother was given her own King James Bible with handsome leather cover and laces along the binding to tie it closed. Inside the book were engravings of specific Bible stories for illustration and edification. Through these detailed drawings, I became enchanted by the supernatural. A ladder extended from Jacob's head into the clouds; it teemed with swirling angels. A chariot and horses of flame poured from the sky, whisking Elijah away to a world hydrogen-hot. The eerie scientific vision of Ezekiel depicted wheels within wheels, turning opposite directions, full of eyes and humanoid figures glowing like embers.

The Bible was a gift from a curly-haired man named Steve who'd changed his name to Levi. He spent an unusual amount of time trying to tutor my mother in matters of the Spirit. He also heard the

story of my father and our cross-country trek, and managed to work up some tears. *Oh, the children*, he said and clutched us awkwardly to his breast.

Another man, Aaron, gave my mother a prayer pillow to kneel on. He had stitched and stuffed it himself. It had the sun embroidered on one side for morning devotions, and the moon on its other side for evening. He also gave me a pewter necklace with a crucifix pendant. Jesus hung by his hands with his head bowed.

*To remind you of his sacrifice*, Aaron said.

Later in the day Levi saw the necklace and motioned me over. After I told him who'd given it to me, he smiled and shook his head. *Jesus isn't on the cross anymore; He is risen*.

He took out a pocketknife, pried Jesus from his perch and tossed him into the bushes. Aaron saw me later and quizzed me glumly about the identity of the vandal. He implored me to rummage through the bushes with him for the figurine.

When I pushed a few branches aside, I saw a small disc of soil open and close. Perhaps this was the cave where my little tarnished Jesus would rise from the dead! I rolled away the dirt, revealing a dark narrow hole. I put my finger inside it. Suddenly I felt a sharp and excruciating pain; a trapdoor spider had bitten me. My screams brought the whole camp running. Within the hour my hand had swollen to the size of a catcher's mitt. As ice and disinfectant were applied to my wound, Levi and Aaron got into a fistfight. The silver Jesus was never found.

The incident led to the two brothers-in-Christ being sent into the desert to fast again. It also led to my mother being asked to counsel with the community leader of Lighthouse Bluff. He was an excitable gentleman in his late-fifties, a former Jew with a white goatee, and a penchant for calling everyone *Dearheart*. His name was Isaac Blomberg. Only his closest companions, the elders of the church, knew him as Gary Kemp, a former drug addict, who'd killed his girlfriend in Chicago before fleeing to San Francisco in 1968. What we *did* know, because he'd warbled the information at some point to every new convert (all the while gazing heavenward), was that he had done psychedelics, had

engaged in group sex, had listened to the Devil's acid rock, and had heard the Devil tell him to rob pharmacies and beat up strangers.

Finally, he was literally lying in a San Francisco gutter, amid fast food wrappers, when it began to rain. A torrential downpour blasted over his body, but he was on heroin and hadn't the strength to lift himself. The water grew higher around his opiated head and he knew he was going to drown, not like drowning at sea which still had an air of dignity to it, but choking instead on cigarette stubs, motor oil and urban dross, all the excess and decay of our empty lives. Right then and there he called out for God.

*Lord, he cried. Save me. Save a drowning man.*

When he awoke he was in a hospital. He asked the nurses how he'd gotten there. *A man brought you*, they replied. They said the man claimed to be a friend of his father's and had prepaid the hospital bill.

At this point in his story, Isaac would look out at any misty-eyed man, woman or child and say it was then he knew. *What did he know, Dearhearts?* That every question in the world could be answered in two words: *Jesus saves*. All we had to do was take these two words and say them to every other man, woman and child on the planet. When he told this story in Sunday chapel, or at Wednesday night prayer meeting, or after mealtime, a murmur of *amen* would ripple around the room. We would begin to sing Bible verses adapted to Hebrew chord arrangements. Tambourines would shake and my mother would lift her hands and close her eyes. Sometimes we would form a large circle and dance around the room. Sometimes the songs would dissolve into one note, voices and chins lifted like the beasts of the field, as all creation groaned for its Creator.

My mother had never been to Pastor Blomberg's office. She held my hand tightly, and it became difficult to tell which of us was child or guardian. His office was at the back of the church, which had been hand-built to resemble a Hebrew tabernacle. A rectangular woodstove warmed the foyer. The sanctuary followed, with unvarnished I-beams and dusty exposed rafters. At the rear of the vaulted hall,

a creaky dais and podium were surrounded by a single row of aluminum folding chairs where the elders flanked the pastor. Beyond this, a prayer room had been constructed for the anointed to kneel and take communion. This was a place of private entreaty where one could whisper in tongues and speak one's innermost desires and turmoil. My mother stopped and prayed. She thanked God for bringing her into this Promised Land and for feeding her *manna*. She asked that all she had left behind stay behind. Then she kissed me on the forehead.

A tapestry hung in the center of the far wall, embroidered with purple, blue and gold thread. It depicted the cherubim awakening their psaltery and harp. The tapestry served as a door to the general office where accounting and community planning took place.

Isaac's inner sanctum was the final station of the tabernacle, separated by two frayed carpets brought back from Jerusalem. Modeled after the Holy of Holies, as detailed in the final chapters of Exodus, the walls were of acacia wood, the desk and chair made to resemble the altar and mercy seat. The shelves were lined with concordances and artifacts from the Holy Land, brass incense pots, scabbards inlaid with amethyst and filigree. The room evoked something exotic and fearful, the presence of Yahweh. In this room Isaac Blomberg (nee Gary Kemp) slept, supplicated and received divine inspiration. As my mother entered, she gripped my hand and repeated, *Hallelujah*.

*Janet*, Isaac said and gracefully closed his book of study. He pointed to a folding chair. *Please come in, Dearheart*.

It had come to his attention that certain areas of my mother's life were out of balance. God was not angry with her; she was not in trouble, but members of the flock from time to time could grow bewildered and wander away from the greenest pastures. It was up to the shepherd to guide them, to gently steer them back to the valley. He spoke of the commandment, *Honor thy father and mother*. She had been avoiding this necessity. Also separation from her husband was a sin, even if her husband was a malevolent and slothful man, as my father undeniably was. In 1 Peter 3:1 it stated: *Wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that even if any of them are disobedient to the Word, they may be won*

*by the behavior of their wives as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.* Salvation was all that mattered in this life, not our personal affairs.

Isaac spelled out my mother's various disharmonies and set his rotary phone in front of her like a clunky piece of black licorice. He waited, smiling, his hands folded. It was a long-distance call, he said, but it was okay.

She had prayed a different prayer, but God moved in mysterious ways. Mother fished a folded scrap of paper from her purse and let her fingers make whirring circles, dialing us out of Canaan.

My father stumbled onto the Bluff twelve days later. Over the phone he'd made guarantees and declarations of sobriety. In person he was emaciated, with a matted beard, fingernails yolky with nicotine. He wore a frayed wool shirt and a cowboy hat blotchy with rain and sweat. His bottom set of false teeth was missing. His face was battered from having made a detour through Nevada where anonymity was an incubus on his chest and it was open season on redneck country boys. He stank of budget liquor. I hid from him.

The denizens of the Bluff soon developed an entirely new perspective toward my mother in both her resilience and her determination to leave my father. He voraciously devoured their food, but resisted their sermons. More than once he punched a talkative proselytizer. He heckled and cajoled and stole money for whiskey. The people were tired. It had been Pastor Blomberg's idea to summon my father from the pit of hell, and my father's presence was causing severe dissension among the flock.

The prospect of reconciliation with my mother had no effect on my father's lawlessness, he just became more agitated and impossible, shouting outside the sanctuary windows for the good folk to send her out, threatening to kill them if they kept two people in love apart. We were mortified, my mother and I (it was negligible to my baby sister who only slept or screamed for pieces of carob).

One night my father shattered the window of the ladies' cabin. Isaac leaped from his bed and, in a rare fit of rage, beat my father unconscious with a rake handle. The people carried my father into the

men's cabin and tied him down to a bunk bed. Everyone went back to sleep exhausted, except three elders who stood watch, praying against the dark spirits that possessed him. For the next three days my father shrieked and buckled, withdrawing from alcohol. Delirium tremens wracked his body; he spat and swore and shit the bed. The elders pleaded the Blood of Jesus over him and gave him water. Many believed he needed a genuine exorcism, and my mother, discovering the joys of being a martyr, basked in the residual attention.

As my father related to me later, it was in the middle of the night on the fifth day that he awakened from a fitful sleep to see a narrow shaft of light shining down on the sheets at the foot of his bed. He suspected one of the elders was checking up on him and he craned his neck to see who it was. He had come to recognize them. They had untied his feet and hands; he was too decimated with toxins to fight anymore. He had grown accustomed to them now, and was begrudgingly grateful toward their gentle voices, and the soups and breads they brought him.

Looking into the darkness of the room he saw no one, only a luminous white ray exposing satellites of dust. The light crept up his weak legs, to his belly, to his chest. Where was it coming from? He was on the bottom bunk!

A wave of intense fear swept over my father like a blanket of ants. He managed to whisper, *Help me.*

No one answered. No one came. There was only the name of the Lord to call upon, which my father, being a coward, didn't hesitate to do. The light, molten and unnatural, abruptly shifted to my father's face and blinded him.

He claimed it was his first restful night sleep since he'd been a child. In the morning he wanted to embrace everyone, which he did.

I was last and most reluctant.