

A BLACK COUNTRY BOY

I was born in the midlands town of Walsall in the United Kingdom in the year 1958. I almost didn't survive the first few days being apparently somewhat earlier than expected and weighing nothing more than 3lb 14oz, or certainly no more than that. I am told that I was immediately whisked off to another hospital in the West Bromwich area where they had incubators, and I spent quite some time lying around in one. At least a month I am given to understand. In those days women giving birth were dealt with somewhat differently to the modern ways and my mother had to remain in the hospital for at least two weeks. She stayed in Walsall whilst her first-born was around five or six miles away.

My mother didn't get to see me for at least two weeks, and I have often wondered if that may be the reason why she didn't seem to like me very much. It was not her death towards the end of 2017 that I found out the reason why I had always felt a distance between us. It seems that I was in a disappointment to her. In conversation around what was to become her deathbed I learned from an older relative that my mother had always wanted to have a little girl. I didn't know that. She had never said anything to give any clue that such a thing might be the case, quite the opposite in fact, as she had so often expressed clear preference for male grand children. I also didn't know that she had in fact given birth to a baby girl around twenty months or so before I was born, but that the actions of a less than competent midwife had led to the child being still born and lost to them. As my dying mother lay in a state of semi consciousness I began to understand why it was that she kept on urgently and aggressively repeating the words, "come on, hurry up," as if in a state of high anxiety. All these years of struggling to understand why I felt in some way less than wanted and consequently had found great difficulty in getting along with my mother were drawn to a conclusion in a matter of a few sentences.

Why, oh why, do we keep secrets that lead to consequences when we could share our hurts for the betterment of all concerned? I would have liked to know that I had a sister who didn't live. I would have liked to be able to visit her grave with my parents and mourn her loss.

We lived in the Pleck area of Walsall, where my parents ran a grocery shop, which unknown to me was a stones throw from the graveyard in which my big sister lies buried. My father had always wanted to be his own boss, so I'm told, and running a shop was his opportunity to do it.

As it happens, I remember very little about Walsall. There are some who might consider that to be a blessing. You see, Walsall is not exactly the sort of place you would choose to spend your holidays, and it is definitely not the sort of place you would go to if you wanted to recover from any form of lung disease. Dirty. Dull. Uninteresting. Bereft. These are of course just my opinions of Walsall and I am confident that a local councillor or similar dignitary will no doubt tell me that it is indeed an increasingly popular tourist destination these days. As you wish. My point is that I remember very little from those days, although, not surprisingly, I do have quite clear memories of two incidents, either one of which could have ended a young life.

It is not my wish to denounce my parent's for any lack of child care skills, but it would be reasonable to suggest that a little more care and attention may have been warranted. I can think of two things that you maybe don't want to do if you have a three year old boy (me) and his eighteen month old brother (my younger and only living sibling). Firstly, you may not want to tie their bedroom door from the outside so that it cannot be opened and then leave the house empty in order to go to the wholesale warehouse to buy stock for your shop. Secondly, you may not want to leave brightly coloured medication lying around in easy reach of said three year old. This is especially so where that medication is formed in the size and shape of a small sweet. That's candy if you are American ... think M&M's without the peanuts.

In the first instance, what might happen is that your older child (me) might wake up and try to leave the room to go look for his mother. When he cannot open the door he might shout for his mother thus

waking up his little brother. Both children might then become somewhat upset and start to panic because there doesn't seem to be anyone in the house. Because there isn't anyone in the house. Just two little children.

Your older child, who is not entirely stupid, might then take it upon himself to open the bedroom window. Yes, it is unlikely that a small child would open a wooden sash chord window, but it's evidently not impossible. Having done so it is then feasible that the said child might climb out of the window onto the adjacent sloping glass veranda roof and might slide down it. If he is very fortunate, the glass might not break, and when he reaches the end he might grab a hold of the guttering and hang from it until his arms begin to hurt and he has to let go, thus dropping himself from a height of around 6 feet. That's two metres if you are a European or someone who is not familiar with twentieth century British imperial measurements. When landing on the concrete floor below, he might be lucky enough to escape with nothing more serious than a few cuts and bruises to his elbows and knees. What might then happen is that his younger brother, who is of course much smaller and barely a toddler at all, might well follow his older brother and he also might climb out of the window. He also might slide down the glass roof because he saw his older brother do it and doesn't want to be left on his own. This younger boy is far less likely to be able to hang onto the guttering and might simply pretty much fall straight off the sloping glass. Luckily for him, his older brother may well be there to break his fall thus ensuring that he also escapes with nothing more than a few cuts and bruises.

Having done this, these two little boys may well choose to go to the nearest house with which they are familiar, and if this happens to be on the opposite side of the road, which happens to be a main arterial route into the town centre, then you really want to hope that they are not hit by any traffic or anything. You see, they weren't old enough to have been taught how to cross the roads yet.

I can remember the look of horror on the face of the woman who opened the door of the house opposite. It would have been no later than 8am, and perhaps a little sooner than that. I don't think that she

expected to see two little boys standing there in pyjamas with drops of blood hanging from them and looking very frightened as they asked if their mother was in the house.

In the second instance, which couldn't have been long after the first instance, what might happen is that your inquisitive older child might locate the medication as he goes looking for all sorts of interesting things in the unlocked cupboard. Having found it, he might then take the view that what he is now in possession of is a packet of sweets (candy) with its contents looking both delicious and irresistible. Every now and again he gets a treat from the grocery store that his daddy runs, so he knows that these things are nice and tasty. Most young children are not selfish by nature. It is a trait they most likely acquire as they get older. Therefore it is no surprise that this young boy chooses to share his new found bounty with his younger brother, who delights of the opportunity.

I can remember being in the hospital for quite some time. I don't know how long that was. It may have been a week at least, or perhaps longer. I remember that the nurses used to bring bedpans for us smaller children to use if we were too unwell to leave our beds. I don't remember knowing the reason why I was in the hospital, but I do remember that my little brother was in the next cot and he was more poorly than I was. I remember our parents coming to visit us, and being particularly fussy over him, but less so over me. I didn't know that whilst I had been very ill, my younger brother had almost died. I didn't know that my parents had been told that he almost certainly would not survive through the night.

I also didn't know that this was somehow my fault. Equally, I didn't know that the bedroom window escape was somehow my fault. The responsibility you get to have as a three year old can be quite overwhelming sometimes.

That is more or less all I can remember from those early days in Walsall. More or less. I do however also remember that my uncle broke into our home and stole a lot of stuff and we came home just as he was doing it. That would be my mother's brother. Nice guy! The

other thing that sticks in my mind is the memory of driving past our own shop because there was a man there who had come to collect money that he wasn't going to get.

Sadly for him, my father's business didn't work out and I must have been about four years of age when we left and moved to the Wednesfield area of Wolverhampton to live with my father's parents, in the absence of anywhere else to go. Frankly, looking back on it all, I think I did pretty well to reach four years of age. In previous generations I would not have survived the premature birth.

To all intents and purposes we were a homeless family as we settled in at my grandparents humble three bedroom council house over there in Wolverhampton, which is also not a place you would immediately consider for any kind of vacation. An industrial area of the Black Country is what it was though there are those who might argue that some parts of that area fall outside of the Black Country, which incidentally is not defined to everyone's satisfaction.

I rather liked living at my grand mother's house. While my grand father smoked his pipe and took very little notice of us children she made a special fuss of me, which I adored and adored her for. What I didn't know at the time was the reason for it. That information came some twenty-five years later from a blessed aunt who explained very clearly that my grand mother was trying to compensate for the painful favouritism that was shown by my mother towards my younger brother. I suppose I can understand that up to a point. Apparently it used to deeply upset my older female relatives, but I guess she had almost lost him in the medication incident so perhaps that explains it. A note to parents. Never, and I mean never, have favourites. It simply isn't correct on so many levels, though I suppose you could argue that it is scriptural in the sense that Jacob, for instance favoured Joseph and Benjamin. Well, he was mistaken too, and he had to learn the hard way.

As I grew older and moved on through infant and junior school we moved into a local authority two bedroom flat (in other parts of the world this would be called an apartment) for a few years and then, as I

reached the age of ten years, we were fortunate enough to be blessed with a three bedroom house, again rented from the local authority. This just happened to be directly opposite from my grandparents with whom we had so recently stayed.

While we were living in the flat, which was on the second floor of an eight-storey block close to the centre of Wednesfield, there was an incident that I remember very well and which almost certainly had an impact upon me. Let me be clear and honest here. As a young lad between the ages of seven and ten years I was not exactly angelic. I suppose because we lived in a flat there was good reason to get out and about an awful lot. Mother didn't especially want to have us under her feet any longer than was entirely necessary, and we didn't want to be cooped up in an apartment, so as long as it wasn't raining heavily, my brother and I would be out. Hanging around with other kids our age, of course, meant getting into mischief and doing things we ought not to have done. Like others I experimented with smoking but didn't think much of it, at least not until teenage years. Like others I ran around and broke asbestos roofing, and currently await the later life health problems that must surely be coming. We got into all sorts of things, as kids do, but were mischievous rather than bad.

One particular day I was sitting with three or four other lads in a field near to our homes. We were doing nothing more exciting than talking. Trying to decide what to do if I remember rightly. Think the vulture sketch from the Jungle Book movie and you know what I mean. We were approached by a man who I recognised as the owner of the corner shop that was just across the street. It was the local shop for our estate. He asked what we were doing. We replied with honesty and without any disrespect that we weren't doing much of anything. Without so much as a moment of hesitation, this man, who would have been in his forties or early fifties at the time, stepped forward, and without saying another word, he violently slapped the nearest kid. That would be me. I can't remember whether it was two or three good, hard smacks that were applied to the side of my head, but I do remember the shock and the blood that began pouring from my ear.

As soon as he had done that, he returned to his shop. We had done nothing to him. I was hurt, shocked, and overwhelmed at the injustice of what had just happened to me. Why would a grown man beat a young boy like that when it's not even his own child? Why would he do it anyway? I was ashamed to let out tears in front of my young mates, but I couldn't keep them in as we crossed the road to go to tell my parents. I was glad that my mates were coming with me. That way I knew that my parents would be more likely to believe me when they were told what had happened.

Entering our home I was pleased to see that my father was still in. He hadn't gone out to work yet. We told my parents what had happened. Mother was angry. She insisted that my father should go across to that shop right now and deal with him. As we walked across the grounds of our estate in the direction of the shop, my father leading the way, with me to his side holding a cloth over my ear (which was still bleeding) and my mates following up behind, I felt in some way proud and strong. My dad was going to sort this man out and would leave him in no doubt that he ought never to do that to me again. We entered the shop. There were a few customers inside. In those days a corner shop was a place where people would gather and chat for a while. The man was behind the shop counter with a woman, who I presumed was his wife. Everyone looked around as we entered. My father spoke very clearly to him. "Did you slap my son, this boy here, and cause his ear to bleed?" The man looked rather sheepish. "No," he replied. "I haven't seen him before." What? How can he say that? "He's lying dad," I blurted out, but only slightly ahead of my mates who exclaimed exactly the same thing as if they were one voice. The customers looked around. I think they knew that we boys were telling the truth. "Are you sure you didn't hit him?" asked my father. "No, I bloody didn't," replied the shopkeeper. I expected my father to reach across and to grab this liar by his tie and thump him. Surely that is what he was going to do. A brief pause, and then my father said three words that struck me to silence. "Oh. Alright then." He turned and headed out of the shop telling us boys to go with him.

As we walked back across the grounds towards our home my friends drifted away. If they were disappointed, as they surely were, I was

devastated. My father knew that I was telling the truth. He knew that we were all telling the truth. He also knew that the shopkeeper was telling lies and that he had indeed assaulted me to the extent that my ear was still bleeding. I couldn't say anything to him. I really could not believe that he had failed to stand up for me. That he had chosen to believe the word of this liar rather than accept the obvious truth from his son and a group of witnesses.

In that instance I determined that my father was a coward. I think I may have said as much to my mother after he had gone off to work later that day and I began to recover, but I can't be sure. I was terribly disappointed in him. I had seen first hand that the man who's job it was to look out for me would not do it when the opportunity arose. I have often wondered how our relationship might have been different if he had stood up for me that day. I think that from that moment on, any respect I had for my father was diluted, not to mention my respect for adult males and shopkeepers. From that day, he was much less of a father to me as far as I was concerned, and we were never especially close again. We make choices. The choices have consequences. Always.

As we settled into our new home, I moved into the final year of junior school. In those days, such children in England were required to take an educational examination. It was called the 'eleven plus' exam, and its purpose was to measure your intelligence in order to allocate you to an appropriate secondary school (I think this would be high school in the USA). If you passed your 'eleven plus' exam, you were sent to a grammar school. If you failed, you had to go to a comprehensive (non grammar) school. That's where most of the kids went from our area. My parents insisted that I prepared for the exam. I did as I was told, completing homework for the first time in my life.

It would have been a couple of months later before the results came through to us kids. In those days results came through the post and you were told of the outcome of your exam and the identity of the senior school to which you would be going. I passed. They were sending me to a grammar school. My father was delighted and I remember that. I also recall not being especially interested in his

delight. How very sad it all seems when viewed through the mists of time.

Off I went to grammar school, which required a fair amount of travelling every day. This was a culture that was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Most of the other kids were certainly not from my part of town. Most of them were from other parts of town that I had never heard of. They were the children of doctors, lawyers, businessmen, magistrates and the like. What had I to do with these people? They came from families that owned large houses, big cars, and had plenty of money. They spoke without an accent. Posh kids, to put it another way. I had nothing in common with them.

The grammar school system still retained a bullying culture, and those of us who were the newbies, were given the esteemed title of 'fags' and were subject to immediate bullying from day one. I wasn't having that. Nobody would ever smack me without due cause again and I certainly wasn't going to be messed around by any posh kids. I gathered together with a small group of lads from similar backgrounds to myself. It was easy enough to recognise one another. We hit back. Anyone who tried to kick us around received a little more than they may have expected. They left us alone, and it wasn't very long before the bullied became the bullies.

I lashed out in order to survive, but I also had not much time or interest in this middle class education. I often regret that no one was able to come alongside me and mentor me through it. As a parent myself I hope I tried to do that for my children, but there was no one to do it for me. I got rather lost, and became rebellious. My behaviour deteriorated and it wasn't long before I was in the headmaster's office. That became a regular occurrence.

One day, as a thirteen year old, myself and another lad discovered that there was a cellar located underneath the school music room, which doubled as our form room where we gathered each morning and afternoon for registration. It was also the room in which we had the much loathed music lessons, which tended to consist of being made to sing embarrassing French songs. I have always had a very poor singing

voice. I mean really poor. Such lessons were humiliating and tortuous for me. These people who tell you that anyone can sing are repeating something that just isn't true as far as I'm concerned. Forty-seven years later I still can't sing, but God gives gifts to whom He will I guess. Anyhow, my buddy and I decided to access the cellar below the music room, just before one of our music lessons, and set fire to the large stock of books and papers that were located there. It must have been an area that was used for archiving records or something. The cellar was full of paper and would have extended below several other adjacent classrooms. Our thinking was that there would be a fire that would put a hasty end to the music lesson that afternoon. It didn't occur to me that a fire might be started which would place at risk the lives of hundreds of young people and their teachers, and would, if it took a hold, almost certainly bring to ruin a large building and everything in it. They didn't have fire prevention systems in those days, and a fire alarm would have consisted of someone ringing a hand bell and shouting 'fire, fire' whilst getting out of the way.

We sneaked into the classroom during the lunch break about fifteen minutes before our lesson was due to start, armed with a box of matches but no brains. We lifted the hatch in the floor and climbed down the conveniently located ladder into the cellar. I then lit a fire, and we returned back from whence we came.

As the lesson commenced a few minutes later it was not long before we could smell smoke within the room in which over thirty of us were sat. "Sir, I can smell smoke," exclaimed one of the other kids who was sitting closer to the cellar hatch than I was. The teacher sniffed around and agreed that he also could smell smoke but decided to continue with the lesson as long as it didn't get any worse. Looking back on it, I'm not so sure that the music teacher had any more brains than me, and I guess that both of our lives would have been very different if that fire had taken a proper hold. As it happened, for some reason, it didn't, and I had to sit through another music lesson. Some time later I read about a boy who had started a fire in a school. People had been burned to death, and he had been sentenced to confinement at her majesty's pleasure, meaning for a very long time and possibly for good. That was the moment that I realised that I could have been in very serious

trouble for what I did. I often wonder why that fire did not take a hold. It really should have done.

It was not an easy matter to be a working class kid at a grammar school, especially as our family never seemed to have any money. Much later in life, I learned that this was because my father was paying weekly maintenance towards the life of his daughter of whom I knew nothing and was never told. Many times as a child and as an adult I asked who was the little girl in the family photograph collection? A few humble black and white photographs from the early 1960's. I was always told that it was 'nobody', or 'just somebody you used to play with when you were little'. That seemed somewhat strange to me. I had no memory of this person, and if she was 'nobody' why were photographs kept of just her and nobody else. I was fifty-seven years of age before learning that I have a half sister. All that time I knew that they were lying to me. I knew it, but what could I do? Who can you trust in this world?

Around the time when I was trying to burn down the school my father entered a very strange phase, which I never have understood. For reasons only known to him he began to tell me that I was 'thick', that I was 'stupid'. I mean, he didn't just tell me, but rather he drove it home to me by shouting those words at me in response to any perceived mishap or act of negligence. "You're bloody thick you are". "He's thick he is. Stupid. Thick as two short planks." Often he didn't shout the words so much as he bawled them at me. I didn't have any idea what to do. Obviously I had displeased him in some way and continued to do it regularly, but I could not begin to understand exactly what it was that I was doing so badly. Sure, I was a dozy so and so sometimes. Who isn't when they are that age? But goodness me dad, what was all that about? It was always verbal and never physical but one particular day he laid into me more so than usual, so much so that I asked my mother why does he keep on doing this, and why only to me? She had no answer, nor as far as I know did she do much about it though she may have. Life brings with it all manner of experiences does it not? We have no alternative other than to learn from them. My father who would not stand up to the shop keeper a few years earlier had no difficulty at all laying into me time after time, and I learned that this

was no way to develop confidence in anyone, or to establish a close and loving relationship. In reality, from that time onwards, I had as little to do with my father as I reasonably could and we were not at all close. I wonder who missed out the most?

My behaviour, as I recall, began to deteriorate. Thankfully, I didn't make any further attempts to start any indoor fires, though I smashed plenty of windows, got involved in petty shoplifting on a fairly regular basis, took money off weaker kids at school, bullied many others, assaulted others, started to get involved in football related violence, and a myriad of other things which I grew to become deeply ashamed of in later years. Whatever the shortcomings in my younger life, the reality is that I chose to do bad things. Lots of bad things. Night on every day. How I didn't get expelled from a grammar school is beyond my understanding. So often I managed to just get out of the way before others were caught. So often I got away with it when others were caught red handed and punished accordingly.

My luck ran out one dark evening as a fourteen year old. Myself and another lad decided to purchase a bottle of beer from the local pub. Now it's not exactly the crime of the century is it, but it was nonetheless a crime to buy alcohol below the age of eighteen years, and we were well below that. All we did was to enter the premises and buy one bottle. We wouldn't have had enough money for two. As we left the building with our bottle in hand who should be walking straight towards us? A local police officer of course. We did what any self-respecting teenager would do. We ran off, scooted behind a building and tried to hide the bottle in some long grass. Obviously, we knew that we had done a wrong thing. The officer followed us with torch in hand, shining it brightly and directly into my face such that I could hardly see where he was. "What have you got there?" came the perhaps not unexpected question. "Nothing," came the stupid answer. I'm thinking that if we had admitted that we did indeed have a bottle of beer and apologised for our silly behaviour then the officer may well have sent us home with a scolding before visiting our parents in a day or two. That would have been enough really. Instead, he arrested us, and we were charged with purchasing alcohol under the age of

eighteen years. He also arrested the pub landlord and the lady who had served us.

One court appearance later with a fine and a juvenile criminal record, and I was officially cast in the role of the 'black sheep' of the family (no offence intended to anyone ... in 2020 it is difficult to be non offensive, but I am just using a cultural term which was common in those days), a family which included my uncle who was a senior officer in the police force elsewhere in the country and who's son was married to the daughter of the Chief Superintendent. Any plans I may have had to join the police force were suddenly vanquished. On the plus side, my mother showed some mettle as we left the court building at the same time as the police officer who had arrested me. She hit him with her handbag a couple of times and told him off for arresting us when he could have given us a clip around the ear. The poor officer was a little shocked to say the very least, but he took to his heels. My mother could be a fearsome creature. For my part, I wondered how it was that I was an idiot for buying a bottle of beer but it was ok for my mother to wallop a police officer? But at least she stuck up for me that day. Many years later I learned that I wasn't the first member of the family to have a criminal record. Was I mum?

I must confess that I did not enjoy the court appearance in the slightest. My father made me wear my school uniform which had the affect of humiliating me in front of my co-accused, who was dressed in his street clothes. That was the worst part. That and the fact that my pocket money was going to be used up for quite some time to pay the fine. I resolved to keep out of trouble, which in reality meant a resolution not to get caught again rather than any sense of repentance or any change in my ways.

I continued through school pretty much as I was before though I had learned to be more careful. My ability to know exactly when to get out of the way seemed to be much sharper than was previously the case, and I got away with just about everything I did. I was, in my opinion, a quite loathsome teenager, and a lonely one. There didn't seem to be anyone to guide me through those years, and I was left pretty much to my own devices. My father had made some efforts to spend time with

me after the court appearance but really it was very much a case of 'too little being too late'.

As the age of sixteen years approached I began to realise that very soon I would have to leave the relative safety and security of the school environment and go to work. This I did not want. The only way to avoid it, I determined, would be to remain at school for two additional years to study for 'A' level exams (advanced level). In order to do that I had to do well enough at my coming 'O' level (ordinary level) exams, and frankly, having done the bare minimum for the previous four and a half years in senior school I was up against it somewhat. I resolved to actually do some work. My small collection of friends thought it was a hilarious sight as I endeavoured to listen to teaching staff, to do homework, and then to work towards passing some exams. It wasn't easy, but I did just enough to qualify, by the skin of my teeth. I can remember the deputy headmaster calling me into his office, having heard that it was my desire to remain at the school until the age of eighteen years. He explained that it was indeed an honourable desire and to be encouraged. I was pleased to hear that. However, he proceeded to express the view that this sentiment did not extend itself to me and that he would be doing all that he could to ensure that I did not have the opportunity to continue to be a nuisance. He doubted both my sincerity and my motivation. He was quite correct of course, but he must have relented because I was allowed to remain within the education system for a further two years.

It was a strange day as we gathered to commence that extra two year period. All of the kids that I had been running with for the previous five years had gone, and the ones left were the kids to whom I had mostly been vile throughout that period. The sons and daughters of doctors, lawyers, accountants and the like were now my companions. Over time we grew to accept one another and though my work ethic was not much better I did enough over the period to achieve some 'A' level passes.

It was during this time that I learned something that has stayed with me ever since. I was studying English literature. Sadly, it just wasn't my thing as I struggled to accept that the works of Shakespeare were

especially great, and I wouldn't accept that something was good simply because someone else told me that it was. To me, it was pretty much rubbish and I wasn't interested in hearing otherwise. On one occasion our English teacher, one Mr Tim Phillips, stopped the lesson and decided that we would debate a particular point instead. He said that all of this literature stuff was not the thing that mattered, but that if just one of us, just one member of this group, learned to think for themselves, then he would consider that his job was done and done well. Consider it done Mr Phillips. Those words rang through my ears and I connected with them. Later in my life they would bear much fruit. I thank you.

As we neared the end of our extended stay in the education system most of my new colleagues were preparing to enter one university or another, assuming that they were able to achieve the results they required. This was not an option for me, and it was never going to be. My parents made it very clear indeed that there would not be the resources needed to support me in that way. I wasn't bothered about that. I hated the exam system. I still do. What an unfair way it is to test the abilities of a young person. How very wrong it is that we emphasise academic ability and reward those who can remember facts, figures, and data rather than those who have practical skills and abilities. One thing I do know is that I would much prefer to be in the company of a farmer than in the company of an academic if the world ever grinds to a halt such that we have to start doing things for ourselves. The education system is simply wrong, and that is especially the case in the modern day exam factory that it has become. Young people should never be put under pressure to pass exams. They need to live!

No university for me then. It was time to go to work. Now, I had a small problem with that. I didn't want to! I figured that if I had to be working until the age of sixty-five then there was no need to rush into it. As it happened, there was not much in the way of choice as my time of leaving school coincided with a period of great upheaval in that industrial part of the United Kingdom. Factories were closing down on a daily basis and thousands of people were losing their jobs with little

or no hope of getting another. With unemployment levels rising at previously unheard of rates there was going to be no job for me.

My father insisted that I should seek work, and I did make some lame attempts so that he would at least think that I was trying. I was happy enough drawing my weekly welfare benefit money. It gave me enough to give my parents some cash for my keep, and the rest was beer money. What else could I want? I trundled along quite happily through the remainder of that wonderful summer of 1976, the like of which has never since been seen in this part of the world, and then on into the autumn. Things were about to change and I knew it not.

One day, in mid October, my father returned from work. He had completed his shift from 6am until 2pm and came home, as usual, at around 2.45pm. "Get yourself a shirt and tie on", he said to me, "there is a job going at my work and it's yours. All you have to do is come for an interview this afternoon, and not come across as a complete idiot". What? How does a bone idle eighteen year old respond to that? A little bit of notice would have been nice wouldn't it. That way I could have feigned an illness, or some other distraction, but here I was very much on the spot. The best I could come up with was a feeble, "oh, it's ok thanks dad". He looked at me with a face that declared non-negotiation. "You don't understand. Either you get yourself ready to go for an interview in ten minutes from now or you can start to think about where you are going to live. There is a job waiting for you, and you are not going to carry on living under my roof as long as you do nothing." I was definitely short of options, nowhere to run, and absolutely nowhere to hide.

I can say that there had been many times where my father could have done more. He had really missed an opportunity to stand up for me when I was a wounded child. He hadn't sorted me out when I became unruly. He hadn't gotten alongside as a mentor when I needed one. He was mostly a good man, but not a strong one. However, if there was one occasion when he did step up to the plate this was it. Over forty years later I am grateful for his strong stance on that particular day. It was the beginning of my working life, and I needed to do that. I almost certainly would have drifted otherwise, and goodness knows to where.

I began to work and was mostly good at it. I found myself to be diligent, and quite a bit sharper than most of the folk around me. I hope that doesn't come across as arrogance. It's just the way it was. I did ok at work, and picked up a couple of promotions before moving to a different company where, at the age of no more than twenty one years, I found myself as assistant to the sales director and placed in charge of a packing and despatch department in a busy little manufacturing company. I was good at it. I hated it. Day after day whizzing around busily making money for other people. I didn't mind that so much. I liked to be busy. What I hated was the culture of the commercial world, telling lies to customers each and every single day, often lying to one customer to explain a late delivery while there were others waiting on the line for their turn to be lied to. You see, we used to take orders knowing perfectly well that we wouldn't be able to complete them in time. We knew that once the order was placed the customer would find it difficult to get their stock from anywhere else at a later date, so we played the game. We also used to send them more than they had ordered, and would pretend that it was a mistake and negotiate a slightly cheaper price for the extra stock we had sent. Lies, lies, lies and more lies. It stuck in my throat. Please do not misunderstand me. I had no problem with the general idea of telling lies. After all, I had been doing it for years and had become something of an expert. No, my difficulty was with the concept of telling lies on behalf of other people in order to put money into their bank accounts. Lying for my own benefit would be fine, but here I was doing it for others.

I lived a double life. At work I was productive in dishonesty, albeit also very good at organising things and being a general hard worker. Outside of work I was probably best described as a hooligan. After leaving the school-based network of people that I knew, most of whom were now distributed around the country in various universities, I had developed a group of buddies within the local pub. These days this network would be known as a 'gang', for thus it was. We were a hard drinking criminally behaved gang of about fourteen young men who had developed quite a reputation.

I look back on that period and wonder how on earth I managed to stay out of the adult criminal justice system and out of prison. Most of our group didn't manage to do that and with the exception of two of us, were found guilty of some offence or another and duly dealt with by the courts. I was one of the two lucky ones, my ability to know just when to get out of the way had remained with me and was often uncanny. One time we had just carried out a street robbery and kicked a few people around when I strangely slipped into an alleyway literally a couple of seconds before police flew around the corner and arrested everyone who was there. My departure was so timely that the other guys were convinced that I knew that the police were coming, which of course I didn't. Something led me away right there and then.

We were never involved in anything related to drugs. We considered that to be the realm of hippies and soft kids. We were of a harder mind than that, no drugs for us, but just about anything else was fair game. There were too many incidents of wicked behaviour for me to recall them here, but there were two particular occasions, that were, in hindsight, of pivotal significance.

One dark autumn Friday evening after a full night of drinking we headed home. We had been sharing street humour with an older man, perhaps in his early fifties who was somewhat worse for the effects of alcohol. He thought we were being friendly. No sir. We were softening you up. Going slightly ahead of him and having found out that he had a further two miles or so to walk home, I positioned myself at the entrance to an alleyway. As he strolled past I called out "hey mate ... there's a taxi here for you if you want it." He was grateful and as expected, decided to avail himself of the opportunity to get home a little easier. "It's just here," I said as he approached our group of five or six. The poor guy. It must have dawned upon him that there was no taxi but that would have been too late. As we fled the scene with his bulging wage packet grasped firmly in my hands I looked back to see him lying on the floor, presumably unconscious. I had hit him directly on top of the head and he had gone to ground immediately. We ran away, laughing to one another, but as we left the scene further behind it struck me that maybe this man was hurt. Or maybe worse than that. It also struck me that I was wearing a very visible jacket. It was the

type of jacket that would stand out from a crowd and which would be very noticeable from quite some distance. What if he was hurt, or worse, and there had been witnesses. After all, it was a residential area. People would have seen us with him, and more significantly they would have seen my jacket. The jacket came off as we ran. Having cleared roughly a kilometre from the scene we slowed down, but I was alerted to the sound of sirens and they were most certainly heading in our direction. Both the police station and the hospital were close. We split up very quickly and myself and another lad took refuge in the passageway between two terraced houses. Strangely, some ten years later I would be the owner of one of those houses. We hid in the shadows as two police cars and an ambulance passed us by at speed. They were heading in the direction of our handiwork. My handiwork.

For the whole weekend we all kept a very low profile. Nobody ventured out. My parents could not understand why I was not going out as usual, and were told that I wasn't feeling well. To some extent this was true. I was terrified that there would be a knock on the door with a police car parked at the front of the house. Each time the door was knocked, which was far too often for my liking, I figured that the police were here. They never came. Presumably the gentleman wasn't seriously hurt, and presumably the police took the view that he was a drunk rather than the victim of a nasty crime, but for me, there was the reality that I could have been facing a substantial prison sentence for that one. I still had his wage packet.

The dust settled, and we got away with it, though I never again wore that jacket. Just in case.

The second incident was shortly afterwards. Perhaps a month or two had passed by. It was again a Friday evening as I sat in the pub drinking with a couple of our crew. They had decided that they were going out to rob from a jewellery shop that night. One of them had just got hold of a car, so why not? They asked me to go along with them, but I declined. To be honest, I have never seen the appeal of jewellery but the reason for my decline had less to do with that and more to do with the fact that I had already swilled more pints of bitter than could possibly be good for me and I knew that my senses would be impaired.

“Oh, come on,” they said, “there needs to be three of us”. They both did what they could to encourage me to go along, but really, I knew that I had already taken in too much drink to be doing anything like that. I also had what can only be described as a ‘bad feeling’ about the whole thing and I said so. I suggested that maybe they should leave this one. I knew they had ‘done’ a few newsagents recently and were in the swing of it, but sometimes you have to know when to stop. They didn’t. They went. I didn’t. They got caught. They were charged with that offence and several others. One of them was given a seven year sentence, and the other one was given five years. These lads both missed their early twenties. I saw one of them around five years later. He reminded me that I didn’t go with them, and wished that he had stayed with me. A little decision here or there can and will affect every moment of the rest of your life.

How easily I could have found myself in prison. How easily. I began to realise that whatever road I was travelling on, it was not a very good road. Not at all.

I began to question just what was I doing? A job that I hated with a passion, even though I was good at it. A life of waste and waywardness. What was it all for? I mean, why?

Slowly but surely I stepped away from the crowd I had been running with. It wasn’t too difficult with a few of them in prison, and a couple of the others distracted by the acquisition of a girlfriend. I began to mingle with a better crowd. These guys were still young people and doing the things that young people did, but they weren’t of a criminal mind. Instead of going out to fight and steal and whatever else, this group would sit and share discussion about all manner of things. Almost a debating society. I began to raise questions which led to all night and late night discourse along the lines of “who am I?” and “why am I here?” The untimely death of two of our young friends in a car accident, in which nobody was driving beyond the speed limit, sharpened our senses as we faced up to real grief. It still hurts to think of them. She in particular was a very beautiful young woman with a full life ahead of her, or so we thought. How easily this thing called life

can be brought to an end with no warning or opportunity for preparation. They had not even a moment to get ready.

We discussed long and hard the meaning of this life. I even tried to go to church one Sunday morning in the hope that they would have some answers. Two of us decided that we would go, so we did. Nervously, we entered the local Anglican church just after the service had started. As we entered the congregation seemed to turn their heads as one, and I saw the look of horror on most of their faces. They must have been thinking, "what on earth are these two doing here?" I can't blame them for that really. People would cross the street to get away from the likes of me in those days, and they weren't to know that a corner had been turned. We span around on our heels and went straight on out of there. Wherever the answer lay, I wasn't going to find it in a church.

We tried to find some meaning but none was forthcoming. I only knew that this life that I was leading was not as it should be. There was more to life than this. There had to be much more than this. Something was pulling me away and it wouldn't let up.

Three of us seemed to arrive at the same conclusion at the same time. We determined that whatever there is which would be considered to be the purpose of our lives, it wasn't here, and therefore we needed to go and look elsewhere. We would pack our bags and go and keep on going until we found whatever it was. We made our plans to depart in the month of June 1980. We saved up some money from our wages, and began to prepare. I had a book entitled the 'Hitch Hikers Guide to Europe' and I devoured it. Europe was going to be our first destination and I had much to learn. We all did.

As the time approached, with around four weeks to go before we left, one member of our trio changed his mind. He had decided that giving up his job and his life here wasn't quite the thing for him. Fair enough. The three musketeers were now two. That lasted for a further two weeks until my other companion, who was my best buddy at the time, hesitatingly let me know that he also wasn't coming. Having arrived at the point of giving notice to quit his job he just couldn't face the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen next. Well, what

should I do? I thought about it and considered doing as they had done. I really did not entirely like the idea of doing this thing alone. Maybe it would be better to stick with things as they were. After all, it wasn't so bad, was it? There's an old saying in those parts, and most likely elsewhere. It simply says, "better the devil you know." I lingered on that saying. I had a problem with it. The devil I know? Better than what I didn't know? What devil? Without any understanding of what it was, I felt strangely compelled to do this thing. Almost called to do it. To just go. The thought of staying put and continuing just as I was felt so absolutely not right. So I went.

In late June 1980 I walked off with a heavy backpack containing a tent, a sleeping bag, pots and pans, clothing, bits of medication, water, snacks, a notebook, a pen, a toilet roll, and the Hitch Hikers Guide to Europe. Oh, and there was one other thing that I slipped into this heavy bag at the last minute. I knew not why, but I placed in the bottom pocket a small bible, of the type that they gave us at school. That's where it came from. It had never been touched, and I had no idea what I wanted it for, but something wouldn't let me go without it, even though I was trying to keep down the weight of this heavy pack.

My father thought I was a complete lunatic to give up what he saw as a 'good job'. In his world, getting a 'good job' was everything. I had prospects. One day I would be the sales director. What was the matter with me? Sorry Dad, but I couldn't be like you. I had to know what I was doing here. He had no idea how close I had come to getting caught up in a permanent life of crime, and it seemed to me that he had even less idea when it came down to really knowing the answer to any of those big questions that I had. I don't think he had ever asked them, or if he did, he chose to stay within the limits of what he knew.

I must have presented as a considerable sight as I crossed London on the underground surrounded by commuters on a busy Monday morning. I was already well away from my comfort zone and heading rapidly towards Dover. I caught a ferry to Calais. I remember that the only people on it seemed to be a bunch of school kids out on a school trip and a few couples heading across to France to do a bit of sightseeing. Here I was, on my way, but not knowing where I would go

or when I would get there or how long it might take. I didn't even know where I was going to go once I was off the boat. North? East? South? I hadn't decided. Now that was an unusual feeling indeed.

South! That's where I went. For no particular reason other than that it felt like the right way to go. Mostly walking and hitch hiking, with an occasional small train journey where the weather was really bad, I slowly but surely made my way through France from the top to the bottom. I wandered into the Pyrenees and came across the small country of Andorra, which of course, I had never heard of until I got there. The journey contained many memorable moments and experiences. Some were a little worrying. I accepted a ride one day from a man who I quickly realised was not someone you want to be alone in a car with as a young bloke. When I stepped from his car I had the distinct feeling that he was letting me go, and glad I was to be well away from him.

As I travelled, I changed. My view of life changed. I gave a name to this thing that I knew I was searching for. I called it 'peace of mind'. That's what I was looking for. 'Peace of mind'. Something that I could not recall having experienced before. I would keep on wandering until I found it.

After a few months of mostly rough sleeping I drifted down into northern Spain. The area I aimlessly wandered into is what I now know to be the Cadi Moixero Natural Park. The map I had with me at the time wasn't exactly what you might think of as the Ordnance Survey variety. It was more the free gift in the supermarket variety. It, shall we say, lacked detail. I probably should have picked up a better map.

It was a delightfully beautiful area. I have no idea how it is now, but back then it was well away from any tourist trail that I could see. It was like being in Scotland but without the cold and the rain. I loved it, and was quite happy to hike through the area picking up supplies as I went along. Now there lay the weakness in my plan. I was, of course, carrying food and water in my cumbersome full-length backpack. Food consisted mostly of bits of bread, cheese, tins of sardines, and a few

eggs to boil up on my somewhat basic stove. Water was the heavy item. In order to minimise the weight in my pack I tended to carry no more than small two bottles at any one time, and thus far that had not been a problem. There had always been somewhere to pick up a couple of bottles or to refill the ones I had.

As I strayed through this area, taking myself further and further away from civilisation with no real idea of where I was or what lay ahead of me, I began to run out of water. It was hot, and my pack was heavy. I thought I knew where I was heading but there seemed to be rather less road signage than I was used to. The roads themselves became less significant, and more rural, until they resembled more of a track than a road. I figured that I would have enough to keep me going for a couple of days and that during that time I would be bound to come across a town or village of some sort. I didn't. A couple of days later I had to admit that I was terribly lost. The track was still there and I reasoned that it had to be going somewhere. I ran out of water. I couldn't find any. I looked for a pond or a pool or something but the area was dry. As a town boy I had no survival skills of any kind. Water came out of a tap didn't it? If I had known where and how to look I would no doubt have located something, but I had no clue. Just keep walking. There will be something somewhere ahead. I considered the idea of turning back and attempting to retrace my steps, but as I hadn't seen a building for a few days that didn't seem to be the best idea. Just keep going. There will be something soon.

Day one without water passed me by. I walked slowly to conserve energy and to hopefully reduce the amount of sweating that I would do in the Spanish summer sun. The scenery that I had previously found so enticing suddenly didn't seem to be quite so endearing any more. Day two without water was a little more difficult. I could really feel it now. Thirst was all consuming. Every corner that came had to have something just around it, but it didn't. I thought about leaving the track and trying to cross the hills, but I had no idea what, if anything at all, was in that direction. No. The track was my best hope of coming across a settlement of some kind. I didn't get very far on day two. I'm certain of that. I rested far more often and for much longer periods, trying to stay in the shade as much as possible. As the third day

approached I had slept out in the open. Normally I would have put up my one-man tent but I hadn't the energy to do that. It wasn't cold anyway, and it certainly wasn't wet. As this day developed I began to feel ill. I rested much more than I walked, and probably did not cover more than a few kilometres. Nothing! I had not come across any place from which I could get water, neither natural nor man-made. I knew that I was in trouble. I knew that we humans could not go for long periods without water, although I did not know how long that period was. Common sense told me, quite correctly, that it would depend upon the temperature and the conditions around me. By the time I reached the evening it was most likely three and a half days since I had taken in water. This was not good.

As the day began to draw to a close I lay down in a grassed area, close to the track and near to a forest of trees. I was exhausted. By now I had no food, but I wasn't bothered about that. How easily we take water for granted, but how precious it is, and how poor we are without it. I lay on my back watching the sky above me. I must have been semi-conscious but I do remember that my lips were stuck together, that I felt incredibly weak, and that as dusk came near I was surrounded by huge flying beetles around three inches long. I really do not know if they were actually there or not. I was frightened to close my eyes properly for fear that they would never open again, but I had not the strength to stay awake and drifted off into sleep, or whatever it was.

Slowly, I became aware that it was daylight. I opened my eyes, which wasn't easy to do. I hadn't moved at all. I looked around and tried to make up my mind whether or not I was still alive, or whether this was an after life. Involvement with the Ouija board a year or two earlier had suggested to me that this world is not the final destination, so I was quite prepared to accept that there could be another place. But if there was, I wasn't in it. I was exactly where I had been on the previous evening, and my lips were still pretty much stuck together.

I picked myself up from the dry ground and made my way back onto the track. It seemed that there was not much point really because it soon became obvious to me that I was going nowhere with this pack, nor without it. I was too weak to do anything more than stumble. It

was probably around eight o'clock in the morning, and I knew that I would be staying where I was. I stood or leaned by the side of the track. That was all I could manage to do now. For how long, I don't know. No more than an hour I think. I could hear a voice. The voice was calling, or it seemed to be. I looked up and saw a young man with dark hair and a black beard. He was standing maybe twenty or thirty metres from me and seemed to be beckoning to me. Hallucination time was here. At least that was my thought. I took no notice. He persisted, and when I made no attempt to respond, he came across to me. Was this guy real? He looked real? I could tell that he was asking questions, but my miserable knowledge of the Spanish language was no help. I pointed to my lips. He seemed to understand. He called out and another guy came into view. They spoke to one another and the other guy went away. Not long after he returned with a car. My guess is that they had camped up overnight slightly further back along the way. They put me and my backpack into the car, and started to drive away. I kept drifting away into semi consciousness but the guy with the beard would not stop talking to me. I wondered why he was doing that. I have no idea at all where I was taken, but these lads took me somewhere and I began to revive. It's all a blur to me. I most likely should have gone to hospital or something, but maybe there wasn't one. It's just as well. I had no travel insurance or anything intelligent like that. What a mess that would have been!

It may have only been a day or so before I began to fully revive. I truly do not know. I remember them giving me water and coffee and something to eat but I really wasn't with it, and probably not the best company. As my senses and some strength began to return I must have said something about Barcelona. I knew two Spanish cities (Madrid being the other one) and I knew that Barcelona was somewhere in the vicinity. They took me to a railway station. I think the place was called Manresa. They put me on a train to Barcelona, and though still well short of being myself, I was a whole lot better than I had been. Now these two guys, whoever they were, saved a life when they took me into their care that day. They could so easily have passed by. I must have looked and smelled like the kind of object that you wouldn't want to be anywhere near. But they didn't pass by. Like the good Samaritan in that bible parable, they helped a complete stranger

and saved his life. Another day in that field would have been one too many.

I have no recollection of finding my way across Barcelona, but one way or another I took a room with a family in a pension near to the Ramblas, that famous area of the old city. I needed to rest up and to get indoors for a while. After maybe two or three days of rest and recovery I began to regain more strength. I was still slightly dazed I suppose, but very much aware of how close I had come to an early demise, and how grateful I was for the intervention of those two young men. Whatever life was about, I had learned once again that it balances precariously and is easily lost, even if it is your own stupid fault.

I had a good look around Barcelona itself, and in particular the central area. It was interesting of course, but I began to feel like a tourist. My feet began to itch as I felt the need to head off once again, but I sensibly, for once, decided that a further two or three days would be advisable.

All of a sudden I began to feel rather lonely. I had not enjoyed a good conversation with anyone since leaving England. If only I had listened during those five years of French language studies that were available to me at the grammar school, then perhaps I would have felt differently. I was stuck by the need for a conversation with somebody. Anybody would do. I leafed through the pages of my Hitch Hikers Guide and it promised me that in Barcelona there existed a place called Montjuic, and here all manner of young people would meet to come together. Surely there would be English speakers there and maybe I could connect with them. I went off in search of Montjuic, which apparently was a big hill that you couldn't miss. Well, maybe the Hitch Hikers Guide couldn't miss it, but I sure could. For the life of me I could not find this place, even though the city is surrounded by hills and it had to be one of them didn't it. Standing on a slope overlooking the city and leaning dejectedly on a fence I finally gave up looking for Montjuic. Instead, I did something that I had not expected to do. I prayed. I simply said, "God, if you exist, would you please give me somebody to talk to? Please". That was it. Ordinary loneliness had become desperate loneliness, and it's a strange thing. When loneliness

hits you it comes quickly and with force. You may not realise that you are lonely and then without any noticeable warning you are consumed and overwhelmed by it. Realising that you are truly lonely and being unable to do anything about it is gut wrenching and soul destroying. Here I was in a city of almost two million people, which it was at that time, and yet I was desperately alone. I had not thought about this or expected it. No surprise there then.

I ambled back down the hill and through the streets until I came to a busy thoroughfare. My aim was to locate an underground station and find my way back to Ramblas. It was busy in the street, with an awful lot of people coming and going. I felt like I was just in the way. I most likely was. When you are trying to get somewhere in a hurry what is more annoying than somebody who is dribbling their way along at a snail's pace? I got bumped and pushed a few times but wasn't especially bothered. Amongst a cacophony of urban noise, I heard a voice. The voice said, "excuse me, do you speak English?" I looked to my right and there stood a young man, perhaps in his late twenties. He was about my height and with fair hair. I thought it unlikely that he was Spanish. "Are you speaking to me?" I asked. "Yes," he said, "you speak English?" "I don't speak anything else mate," came my ill thought reply. It was the truth however. "Can I ask you a question?" he enquired. Well, I wanted someone to talk to and to my absolute surprise here was someone to talk to. "Sure you can. Ask any question you like, but most of my answers will probably be 'I don't know.'" He chuckled. "Do you believe in God?" he said. It was a very strange thing, but all of the noise around me didn't seem to be there any more, or I didn't notice it. Very odd. "Errr well, I suppose I do. After the last week or so, I think I do yes." "What do you know about Jesus?" came the next question. I didn't know what to say, but telling the truth came naturally by way of a change. "Nothing. Not a thing, other than that he is in the bible and did lots of miracles and other stuff. I tried to go to church once but wasn't exactly welcome there." "Would you like to know something about him? No pressure. It's up to you. We could get a coffee somewhere and talk if you want." I did want. Something about this was intriguing me, and in any event I wasn't about to ignore the opportunity for a conversation.

We found a local café and got coffee. He then told me who Jesus was, what he did, why he did it, and what it meant. It was all news to me. I got a sense that this Jesus of whom he spoke was not at all dead. Far from it. Why had I never heard any of this before? I mean really. This sounded like it was hugely important stuff. It sounded like it was THE important stuff. What could be more important than this? This guy was talking about eternity. He was talking about life after death, which had recently become somewhat more relevant to me than might ever have previously been the case. He was telling me about my sin. He had no idea how much of it there was. He was telling me that because of my sin I would be heading for a dreadful eternity, and that I could do nothing to save myself from it. He was telling me that Jesus, who had taken on human form, had been crucified, and that in so doing, one without any sin had taken upon himself the sin of everyone else. Being punished for something he didn't do. A smack to the ear a good number of years earlier came to my mind. I knew what that felt like. To be alone and to be punished for something you didn't do. He was telling me that Jesus was killed. I knew about that. He was telling me that Jesus came back to life again. I think I knew about that, but I had never understood that this was a demonstration to show us, to show me, that death was not the end, but that it had been overcome. "He took punishment for what I did? That's not fair is it? Why would anyone choose to do that?" I asked, wanting to understand. "That's easy," said my new friend. "Its because he loves you. He just absolutely loves you. God is love. That's who he is and that's what he is. Did nobody ever tell you that?" No they didn't. Nobody I ever knew ever spoke like that. If they did know then they kept it all to themselves. I prayed with this guy. I chose to believe in Jesus. I chose to believe in God. I chose to accept there and then the gift that had been made available to me; the gift that I now know as salvation. That was it. We parted with an agreement to meet again in about a month when he expected to be in Marbella, which I understood to be further south somewhere, and by the sea. Just keep following the coast and eventually you will get to it.

I returned to my room as a very different person. I no longer felt trapped in this life. I no longer felt as if I could hardly move. I no longer felt the need to fear or to be concerned. In ways that took quite some

time for me to understand, I knew that this day I had found the reason and the purpose for my existence. I reached into my backpack and retrieved the still untouched small bible that I had brought with me.

By the time I stepped back onto the shores of England much later in the year, that bible, and especially the New Testament part of it, had been read, read and read again. The life of Jesus was brought to life for me as I began to see things that I would never have understood. Incredible. Wandering along the beach one day just to the north of Marbella I had looked over my shoulder to see my own footprints in the sand behind me, and at that moment on a calm, sunny afternoon, I knew a peace which I could never lose but could not name. It was a peace that passed my understanding. I had found that peace of mind. It is locked away and is there any time I want it. More than that, I had found salvation. I had found purpose. I had found meaning, and life had some direction after all.