A DOOR LEFT OPEN

RICHARD CRAIG ANDERSON

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This is for the Matthews of this world,
and for Pat and George—"Georgie" to his family

What Others Are Saying About *A Door Left Open*

"Rick Anderson is a true warrior and the finest operator; I trusted him with my life while serving in the Federal Air Marshal Service. His extensive experience and implementation of security for El Al, resulted in Miami International Airport (MIA) becoming an undesirable target after 911."

—Bruno Tom, M.A., Former NCIS Special Agent and Retired Federal Air Marshal

"Anderson courageously speaks the truth about the conflicts within one's self in the career of a first-responder, especially law enforcement. Those that have been there will relate to his words and those that haven't will find them remarkable. Either way, you'll want to read this adventure tale of a small warrior with a big heart."

—Jim "Hondo" Halvorsen, Lieutenant, New York State Police, Retired

"Richard Craig Anderson's new book, *A Door Left Open*, is a tremendous work. He clearly brings back the tumultuous period of the Anne Arundel County Fire Department's transition from volunteers to a career force, including its sharp growing pains. You are right there with the author as he brings real life insight into auto accidents, bloody medical calls and most sadly remembered, a tragic fire on Riverview Road that killed two firefighters. Incredible story—a real page turner."

—Joseph B. Ross Jr., Retired Division Chief,
Anne Arundel County Fire Dept., and Author of Arundel Burning

"Richard Craig Anderson starts and ends this remarkable memoir with an image of a doorway, inviting us in not only to his life, but to the magic of what a life well-lived can signify. From America's East Coast to its West, and out into the Pacific islands of Micronesia, Anderson's adventures give us insight into how love and loss, illness and grace can shape who we think we are, what we notice, and how we believe. Lives can be messy and Anderson's is no exception, yet his sometimes missed opportunities and ill-timed choices are easily outmatched by the joy and friendship he finds in people and four-legged creatures along the way. And when he leaves us at the end with a moment of connection, we realize that lives often come full circle and that what we are seeking might be right in front of us, if only we have the courage to walk through the open doors."

—Teresa Cutler-Broyles, Professor, University of New Mexico
at Albuquerque, and Perugia, Italy

"Rocky nails it again. I couldn't put this book down. He and I worked together as state troopers, and Rocky was always on top of things. *A Door Left Open* is entertaining, admirably frank, and deeply moving."

—Sheriff Mike Lewis, Wicomico County Sheriff's Office

A Door Left Open is a gripping adventure story that I could not put down until I reached its emotionally rewarding end."

—Dr. Scott Simon Fehr, Psychologist, Professor and Best-selling Author

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*Some names and details have been changed to protect identities.

Books By Richard Craig Anderson

Light...Prescious Light (University Editions)

Rivers of Belief (Georgetown Press)

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Prologue

A DOOR LEFT open. A boy walking by. Sixteen. Rebellious. Curious. He glances over his shoulder. Stops. Scowls.

In time he peers past the door, for inside are the dreams, and some of the dreams are his. The boy draws a deep breath, steps through the portal, and emerges a man.

I'VE MADE A lot of mistakes in life, and done some things I'm not proud of. But I also learned a lesson or two. These days some might call me an old man, although I still see a teen in the mirror. Perhaps this is why friends now say, "Rick, you should write down what happened, so others can see what you've discovered." What they mean is that I should show how I converted pain and setbacks into happiness.

For although it's true that I did find happiness, and that I can laugh fluently in seventeen languages, I must also add a caveat, and it is this: while contentment can indeed be pursued and even acquired, it can never be purchased for the simple reason that money and power are fleeting. Another thing: we don't have to be alone, not when we venture out to see what's there, because that's when we discover so many fascinating people. Anyway, even if much of what happened didn't make sense at the time, here's what that boy saw through a door left open.

PART ONE

Alone

CHAPTER ONE

Dealing with Death

August 1971 – A Quiet Sunday in Glen Burnie, Maryland

WITH ONE HAND on the door and the other on the mic, I keyed the transmit button and said beneath the siren's howl, "Ambulance thirty-three's on location." As we drew closer to the accident site, I assessed the dark blue Buick sedan. It's crumpled and jammed against a tractor-trailer's rear bumper, and white steam from its ruptured radiator hisses into a crisp blue sky.

Bob finally stomped on the brakes. I jabbed the seat belt release and hopped out. A wall of summer-infused humidity hit me. Then my nostrils protested the stench of spilled anti-freeze and burned rubber. I grabbed the trauma kit and took off running, my shoes slapping against the pavement, and creating an eerie contrast to the radiator's dying moan as I hustled toward the car.

"Fire department," I barked at a crowd gathered around the car. "Move aside."

I'm only sixteen, but my volunteer firefighter uniform has clout and the crowd parted without protest. But by doing so they reveal a young woman behind the steering wheel. The impact apparently

drove the hood through the windshield, and its leading edge all but cleaved her head from her body, leaving her eyes bulging as if she'd entered a room where her family and friends jumped from hiding places to yell, "Surprise!" Then there was the bright red blood that had spilled from her severed arteries.

I touched my index finger to her carotid artery, turned to Bob, and was shaking my head when I heard a sob. Only, she wasn't the one who sobbed. It came from behind her.

Sprinting to the other side of the car, I found a young boy trapped in the rear seat. He couldn't have been more than five, and the Buick had folded itself firmly around him. Even worse, a chunk of drive shaft had torn through the floorboard and jammed itself against his gut. The force of the collision had also twisted him around so that he faced the rear. It had to be painful, but at least this twist of fate spared him from seeing his blood-drenched mother.

There were no portable radios back then. The only radios were the ones mounted inside each emergency vehicle. I caught Bob's eye and said, "Call for a rescue unit and a helicopter." He acknowledged me just as an unseen siren's yelp announced the arrival of a county police cruiser. I recognized the sound because the county cops used electronic sirens, and the state troopers had mechanical contraptions. As the cop's footsteps grew louder I shouted, "We have one up front and this one here." I purposely avoided adding that the driver was dead, since the boy would've heard.

Then I got busy with the kid. He wasn't bleeding and there were no marks on him but he was done for, his situation no different from that of a railroad worker pinned between two train couplings. Everything's okay so long as the body remains pinched together; the victim talks and might even say he feels fine. However, pull those couplings apart, and the victim does a nosedive over that bottomless cliff.

What's taking the rescue unit so long?

As the boy's sobs turned to a wail, I tried to squeeze into the passenger compartment to be next to him. After all, I was definitely on

the skinny side. But when all I could do was brush his outstretched fingers, I pushed farther and grimaced when a glass shard sliced into my knee. It paid off, though—our fingers finally interlocked just as a stream of tears flowed down his cheeks.

For several seconds that's all there was, until all at once he shouted, "Mommy, mommy, mommy! Where's my mommy?"

I knew abandonment, and sweat streamed down my face as I looked into his eyes and quietly said, "Your mommy hasn't left you. She's in the front seat. But she can't talk to you right now. So you know what? I'm gonna stay here with you."

He stopped his terrified wailing, and after hitching and snuffling he grew quiet and stared at me with a sense of awareness beyond his years. Then as his eyes held mine in an unwavering gaze, he asked in a tiny voice, "Am I going to die?"

I didn't want to tell him what I suspected, but was damned if I would lie. That would be even more obscene than the carnage that had torn his world apart. So I looked directly at him and said simply, "I'm right here, you're not alone, and I'm not gonna leave you."

All this time the sun had been jack hammering the car and turning it into an oven. My clothes clung to me and breathing became a struggle, although of course my discomfort was nothing when compared to the boy's injuries. "What's your name?" I asked.

He responded automatically in a singsong voice with information that his mom must have drilled into him: "My name is Matthew Billings, and I live at 102 Montrose Avenue."

I tightened my hold on his fingers. "Hi, Matthew. My name's Rick, and I'm gonna take care of you. Is that okay?"

He nodded, but his eyelids fluttered. Then while sirens and air horns filled the air around us, I said, "Hold on, Matthew. For God's sake, hold on." Then, quietly and for his ears alone, I sang a few stanzas of Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*.

Matthew watched me in silence the entire time, his face composed yet solemn. Then as if someone had thrown a switch, he said in a weak voice, "I'm…afraid."

I squeezed his hand and whispered. "Of course you are. Even big boys would be scared. You know what, though? You're brave—even braver than many grown men are. Did you know that?"

"Really?" He seemed to be trying that one on for size. Then he opened his mouth to speak, but his voice trailed into nothingness.

"Matthew," I began. "Stay with me. Stay—" I was trying to say more when the diesel roar and the chuff of air brakes of an arriving rescue unit nixed that idea—and that was just for starters. Now the rhythmic *whump whump whump* of a state police medevac helicopter drowned all other sounds as it circled overhead prior to landing.

Maybe it was the noise, because Matthew abruptly cried out, "Mommy! Where's my mommy? Where's my—" Then his eyes rolled wildly as he blurted, "I'll be a good boy! Yes, I will! Mommy will come back if I'm good. She will." His voice began to fade. "Yes she will."

"I'm sure of it," I whispered back.

Although it seemed an eternity, no more than three minutes passed until his eyes closed. His head fell to one side a few seconds later, and then his body went limp. But I couldn't let go. I couldn't. He deserved dignity in death, and there was more—I didn't want his soul to be alone. So I held his hand even as firefighters worked around me to free him. I held it and felt the warmth desert him, first from his fingers, then from his palm and finally from his arm. I held his hand, unable to let go, until the firefighters got him out and the medical examiner took him away.

Matthew's mommy never came back.

Mine never did, either. At least not in spirit. Not after she and my old man split up and she all but tossed me aside, leaving me feeling alone, abandoned and angry.

EARLIER THAT DAY I'd walked out of my house and climbed into the emerald-green '67 Cougar XR-7 that I bought by working small jobs. But when friends and I weren't cruising for girls, I'd spin the wheel and set a new course for the Glen Burnie fire station.

A lot of kids dream of being a firefighter. Some pursue those dreams. Sure, there were altruistic reasons for wanting to safeguard the community. But whether you look at it inside-in or outside-out, the reality is simple—it's downright exciting. After all, where else can a sixteen-year-old kid hang onto the back of a speeding fire engine with the wind in his face while sirens and air horns blare, only to dash inside burning buildings moments later?

And make no mistake about it—teens as young as sixteen were the bulwark of volunteer departments for decades, and my parents never gave a second thought to the idea that I would don an air mask, man a hose line and charge inside the aforementioned fiery structures.

This way of thinking was due in part to the men who built and honed the fire service. They were men of an old breed, with names that harkened back to an earlier time. There were Melvins and Calvins and Clydes (*oh my*). Other first names included a Forrest here and a Buck there, along with an assortment of Mikes and Ikes. If they liked you, they guided you. If not, they'd snarl and shout, "Get outta my way."

Or they might be gruff for a totally different reason—as one of the old breed was when I first stepped foot inside the station with my long hair. "Get a friggin' haircut," he shouted. "Then we might think about letting you join." I tossed my head, and as hair strands carelessly caressed the back of my neck, I nodded.

Training consisted of older hands—perhaps one as old as nineteen—showing rookies the ropes. "This goes here, an' that goes there," they intoned. I got it. Sure. Everything was straightforward and purpose-designed. Even the shape of a fire helmet had a function: the long extension at the rear of the helmet, the duckbill, kept hot water and cinders from dropping down your neck. If you had to advance on a flaming automobile, you turned the helmet around and wore it backward to let the duckbill deflect heat from your face.

Since what would develop into the Day of Matthew involved going to the firehouse, I parked in front and went inside the ultra-modern

building. The county called it "Company 33," and the station housed a mix of volunteer and career firefighters. We called the career people paid men. They referred to us as vollies.

There had always been at least one paid driver on duty in every firehouse, men who worked a rotating schedule of twenty-four hours on, and forty-eight off. These drivers were called enginemen, a term that harkens back to the days when pumpers were powered by steam engines that were pulled by horses (the term also came about long before women were hired as firefighters). Even today, a pumper is an engine, the crew assigned to it is an engine company, and a hook & ladder is always called a ladder truck—or more simply, a truck.

Enginemen drive the apparatus, operate the pumps, and remain with the unit in case firefighters need an extra attack line or a change in water pressure. Ladder trucks are different. The enginemen who drive them do enter burning buildings to perform rescues, raise ladders, ventilate the smoke and heat, and assist in extinguishing the blaze.

But when the number of vollies diminished along with the demise of Small Town America, the county hired more and more paid men. Unfortunately, all growth creates friction and the fire service was not exempt. So while the old guard sought to hold onto their traditions, the county pointed to the realities of growth and the need for consistent fire protection. It sounds logical, but try selling it to diehard volunteers.

As a measure of progress, the county had recently placed a tractor-trailer style ladder truck at Company 33. The spanking-new Seagrave required two drivers, which by default meant two additional paid men per shift. Next, the county assigned career firefighters to 33 after fewer and fewer volunteers were on hand to answer calls at the busiest station around.

The station itself housed two engines. There was a 1965 Ward LaFrance with an open cab and a jump seat equipped with two self-contained breathing devices. Known simply as air masks, firefighters

could don them while en route to an emergency. Those who weren't fast enough to claim a jump seat stood on the tailboard and held on tight while speeds approached eighty miles per hour. Today it's considered unsafe to ride on a tailboard at any speed. At the time though, we saw it as the norm. The other engine, a 1962 GMC, lacked a jump seat. Finally, an ambulance, a brush truck and a foam unit occupied the remaining floor space.

I walked in that day to find the units in their assigned bays, fueled and ready to respond. After greeting Clyde, the tall rawboned engineman, I stood under an open overhead door to embrace the lazy summer afternoon and watch the world go by. In my case however, seeing others moving on with their lives served as a blunt reminder that my world had already taken a pass on me, making me just another lost kid wondering where fate would push him next.

I was lost in just such a reverie when the station's hot line rang.

The county fire department's central alarm facility dispatched fire apparatus by radio. But ambulance calls required a direct phone call, since dispatchers never knew if volunteers were present to respond. So they used the hot lines—red phones that when they rang, sounded like a school bell. The career guys answered them, and if there were no volunteers in the station, the paid men called their homes in search of a crew to man the ambulance.

But on this sweltering day—long before the advent of emergency medical technicians or paramedics—when training consisted solely of Red Cross and CPR training—we had a crew on hand: me and Bob.

So when the hot line rang, I watched Clyde from the corners of my eyes as he grabbed the handset and listened briefly, hung up, and then shuffled drowsily toward us while speaking in his gravelly voice. "Auto accident. Dorsey Road at the overpass. Car hit the back of a truck."

CHAPTER TWO

Margins

IN HER LIFE, my mother made a lot of mistakes. Outsiders might have accused her of harboring malice, but they would have been resoundingly wrong. However, even early on there were indisputable indicators that she suffered from a steadily worsening mental illness. Yet no matter how bizarrely she might act, she at least meant well.

As for my father, he never shied away from hard work or demanding challenges. And while it's true that he did trip over himself quite often, he took ownership of his mistakes later in life and did his *mea culpas*. Unfortunately, Dad never reconciled himself with certain realities.

The greatest reality is that he never should have married Mom. As a son of impoverished Irish Catholics from the wrong side of Washington, D.C.'s Depression-era tracks, Dad shoved bits of newspaper inside his shoes to cover the holes that peppered them. When his sign painting father experienced set-backs and could barely put food on the table, my fifteen-year old father asked his parents to lie about his age so he could enlist in the Marines. The year was 1939 and the old breed Marines didn't suffer fools. But he got three squares a day and shoes without holes, not to mention war in the Pacific two years later.

On the flip side, Mom's parents emigrated from Europe to the United States around 1906 and settled in the nation's capital. One of her father's brothers was Dr. Mario Mollari, and when Uncle Mario wasn't working alongside Dr. Albert Schweitzer, he served as head of the department of microbiology and tropical medicines at Georgetown University.

As for her father, he held a Ph.D. in philosophy from Salzburg, was fluent in seven languages, and could read and write twenty-one others. In the aftermath of WWII, he directed a project that translated captured Japanese records of the gruesome medical experiments that they conducted on Allied POWs. For example, how long does it take to kill a man by boiling him in oil? Or, what if we remove a man's right arm and reattach it to the left side? Will it still work? Hmm. Let's find out.

My maternal grandfather also befriended a hereditary Russian nobleman who fled Russia in the wake of Tsar Nicholas II's assassination. That nobleman was Dr. Basil Peter Toutorsky, and after he opened Washington's prestigious Toutorsky Academy of Music, he taught the piano to my mother. For her debut recital, she played Rachmaninoff on a piano once owned by Franz Liszt while Sergei Rachmaninoff himself sat in the audience, along with celebrated actress Helen Hayes.

While Mom played, Dad marched to the beat of an infantry drummer and ate whatever the Marine mess felt like serving. The reality was that my mother required a mature husband, while he needed a stronger woman for a wife. But it was wartime and he cut a dashing figure in his Marine uniform. She fell in love with him, gave up the piano, and got married.

Enter five kids.

WE GREW UP along a variety of margins. Jim was ten years old, Janice eight, and Bob five by the time I was born in an Army hospital in April of 1955. My younger brother Tom entered the world some two years later. This was in Laurel, Maryland, where we lived in a

shoebox home on a dead end street that was separated from a rambling tuberculosis sanatorium by nothing more than an abrupt road barrier.

Before that however, in 1949 the Army lured Dad away from his beloved Marines by offering to make him an officer and a gentleman. This was heady stuff for an Irish kid from an impoverished childhood, and he seized the opportunity and accepted the commission, only to end up in Korea when hostilities erupted a year later.

He returned with a Bronze Star with a "V" device for valor, and three Purple Hearts. Years later when the Korean war-inspired movie *M*A*S*H* hit the theaters, Dad barely cracked a smile even when the audience was roaring with laughter. He explained on the way home. "The movie was total reality." He paused. "MASH surgeons saved my life that time." He grew quiet, further explanation unnecessary. We all knew. *That* time was when a bullet pierced one side of his neck and made an abrupt exit out the other side. I also understood his appreciation of the movie's arguably awkward chaplain, "Dago Red," because a similar chaplain gave Dad the last rites *that* time.

Aside from his physical injuries, eighteen months of Korean combat also left him shell shocked. We call it PTSD these days, and while shell shock can lead to psychological deficits, it also causes physical harm. This is mostly the result of repeated concussions from incoming artillery, which rattle the brain. Johns Hopkins University found that the brain tissue of combat veterans exhibit a pattern of injury in areas responsible for decision-making, memory and reasoning. In some cases, veterans of long-ago combat can experience mood changes brought on by something as simple as weather-related changes in air pressure.

So when he returned from the war with fresh memories of the suffering he'd seen among so many helpless children, he was ready to be a father—a real father as opposed to the distant figure he had been to my older siblings. My mother on the other hand told him that she'd had enough children. But he wanted a child, and nine

months later he rushed Mom to the military hospital when I started banging for escape.

I apparently started out being contrary by not being in the correct position in the birth canal, and the doctor had to grip my head with forceps to get me squared away. Years later, I opined that the forceps were what created my sharp wit; my sister laughingly countered that they merely left a dull impression on my mind.

Whether dull or sharp, impressions do vary. But nobody could deny that Dad now had a miniature version of himself. Even as a newborn my resemblance to him was clear, and in his zeal for absolute self-replication, he told the doctor not to circumcise me. But the unkindest cut was compulsory in military hospitals, so when the doc denied the request, my father had a word with the hospital's commanding officer, who happened to be an old crony. And so it goes.

Then something even stranger happened: Dad became a dad. He changed my diapers, which he'd been loath to do for the others. He showered me with affection. Wait, what am I saying? He deluged me; he polished that apple of his eye, and on the seventh day he saw what he'd created and called it good.

That hadn't been the case with my siblings. His attitude toward them ranged from indifference to blatant nastiness. But since it was clear that he loved me unconditionally, this led to the hope that his newfound feelings might dampen his previously mean behavior. It was not to be, however. Wartime memories still plagued him, and too many people at the time had no clue of what combat can do to a person.

That could be why my mother didn't seek the counseling that might have helped her understand Dad's problems. Instead, she would take his aberrant behavior personally, then grow sullen before picking one of two possible paths: to withdraw, or to come out swinging. Since none of us kids could predict which road she might take, we learned to duck and cover when her bitter epithets led to Dad's clenched fists. But by the next morning they would have al-

ready made up and I would think, Okay, c*ue the cartoons, 'cause it's time to escape to another kind of craziness.*

When I was four, the Army sent Dad to Kaiserslautern, in what was then West Germany. We lived on-base in an apartment situated on another dead end street, and my playground bordered a massive bomb-crater, courtesy of the Army Air Corps. While we were there, I saw castles on the Rhine and walked across nearby farmlands. Now and then, I also climbed into the station wagon with Mom and my brothers and sister for an abrupt road trip to Luxembourg. These were not pleasure excursions, though. The quick-trips were Army-mandated drills in case the Soviets decided to move on the West, the idea being that the Allies, including our father, would hold them at bay while the civilians escaped.

Each Saturday my father took me to the railroad yards and gave cigarettes to the German workmen. Lucky Strikes. With the bold red center. Unfiltered. Of course. The same as he smoked, usually a pack a day, lighting each one with the Zippo he carried in WWII and Korea. The men tied bandannas around their necks to absorb the dripping sweat, they wore rough shoes and had even rougher hands, and some of those hands might have held rifles they used to shoot at G.I.'s during the war. As my father handed out the Luckies, I watched the men. They took them wordlessly, but showed their gratitude with a dignified nod of the head. This was my first lesson in compassion and he would teach me other lessons through the years, for despite his faults—and they were many—he readily related to the poor and the dispossessed.

Later, after I turned seven and with my sister Janice's help, I hosted a neighborhood carnival to help raise money for muscular dystrophy research—M. D., they called it—and seeing kids my own age relegated to a life in a wheelchair struck me deep inside. So when the hosts of children's TV shows began to tout the carnivals, I wondered, *why not?*

We raised a grand total of fourteen bucks and some change with that carnival. It doesn't seem a lot, but it wasn't all that shabby in

1962 dollars. Over the course of the next few years, I organized three more Muscular Dystrophy Carnivals. Why? Because it seemed the natural thing to do—natural, because I'd seen my father doing things for others.

That was my dad all right, always gregarious, whereas Mom had difficulty making friends. Fortunately, I must have inherited his nature, because I found that showing soft eyes and a bright smile went a long way toward establishing long-lasting friendships—and I had to rely upon friends years later when I faced troubles of my own.

Back to Europe. While living there I assimilated bits of their values and cultures, and at the end of Dad's tour we flew home on a USAF Super Constellation. This beautiful airplane was the last of the propeller-driven airliners, sleek and fast with a dolphin-like fuselage and triple tail. To this day I can vividly recall landing in the Azores to refuel in order to reach New Jersey's McGill Air Force Base. It was during this blessedly long trip that I fell in love with flying, and vowed to one day become a pilot.

We finally reached "the Land of Round Door Knobs" and briefly settled back into the Laurel homestead before moving up the street into a four-bedroom Cape Cod. America back then was still a land of screen doors and one TV per household. Cars had three-on-the-tree manual transmissions, and don't even think about being able to afford a car with a/c and FM radio. Kids wore hand-me-downs, mothers patched torn trouser knees, and on Friday nights our family huddled around a bowl of popcorn and two 6.5 ounce bottles of Coke.

My father meanwhile took to huddling around bottles of a different sort, and to bringing me along when he visited his favorite watering hole. Denny McCahill's Town Tavern was a long narrow wooden building that sat precipitously atop a hill alongside a small river. The customers were mostly working men who came there to either forget or to vent or do both. Some—Dad included—could end up stoking the boiler and building dangerous levels of steam. This usually led to further episodes of parental battling and bickering.

As if the home battles weren't enough, I was a second-grader at

St. Mary's Catholic School when the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted. Nuclear war seemed inevitable, with predictable and completely understandable levels of panic in some households—although most Americans remained calm, this despite the fact that we lived only twenty miles from the nation's capital.

Because my brother Jim had enlisted in the Navy the year before, he was on the cruiser U.S.S. *Canberra* as part of the Cuban Blockade. While Jim was doing his part, my friends and I still walked two miles to school each day, with instructions to duck and cover if we saw a bright light in the sky. Yeah, things were so much simpler in those days.

Meanwhile, the nuns told us to bring two week's worth of food and other provisions to school. I relayed this to my parents. Dad had recently retired, and was awaiting a call-up of the reserves. That left Mom to listen when I mentioned the required supplies, and in response she gave me two cans of Chef Boy-R-Dee spaghetti. When the nuns saw my "provisions," they ranked me out in front of the class but never bothered following up by calling my folks—the concept of PTA talks having not yet taken root within the parochial school system. Although I felt diminished, some primal part of my brain had registered the notion that a nuclear exchange would doom all of us anyway. So I thought to myself, *Why get bent? They're cans of cheap spaghetti. What did it matter?*

When my classmates and I were not practicing our duck-and-cover drills twice daily, we formed lines and practiced dashing into the basement fallout shelter—just in case. The nuns also kept portable radios going inside the classrooms, albeit at a low volume, and took us to church each morning for mass. Parishioners were packing the place, and the grownups were so awfully serious that during the priest's Latin blessing, my irreverent friends and I would whisper: *Dom-in-aay Nabisco, after this we play bingo.*

Years later, we learned that our close proximity to D.C. guaranteed our immolation, with multiple thermonuclear devices turning back-yard fallout shelters into Dutch ovens. In any event, the days passed

in benign ignorance until the other fellow blinked. Once reassured that there would be no bombs bursting in air, national tension waned and we emerged unscathed.

Unfortunately, the end of that crisis did not signal an end to, or even a thawing of, the cold war at home. If anything, things grew more heated. Since I knew how much my father loved me, I came to him to ask, "Why?" Sadly, he was incapable of displaying public affection and he would lapse into silence instead.

Meanwhile, my mother lashed out at husband and children alike, telling us she wished none of us had ever been born, yadda yadda. I knew even then that I didn't want her approval. Not really. So I'd blow air from my cheeks and mutter, "Here we go again." But a moment or an hour or a day later, she would abruptly shift gears and become an endearing mother.

Then the piano lessons began. She had taught the piano to my sister, but my two older brothers scoffed at the idea of learning to play. So there I was, six years old, and perhaps she saw in me her final chance at the musical career she never had by living it vicariously through me. In any event she force-fed so many piano lessons into me that at age six I could proficiently play portions of Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King*. But as any boy would, I resented her teaching methods and refused to take any further lessons. Today I can barely play *Chopsticks*.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Dad would drop me off at the Ft. Meade horse stables while he went to the Officers' Club for a quickie, and I quickly evolved into an accomplished horseman. Sometimes my older brother Bob would ride with me, or else my sister Janice might take me riding along with her friends.

Dad would also deposit me at the base swimming pool for lessons, and I took to water like the proverbial fish. But in the lessons' wake when all the other students and the instructors were gone, hours would pass before Dad remembered to pick me up. Still, I was learning things that would help me walk through doors left open later in life.

I was eight when a lone-wolf loser killed JFK, and during the next

four days my friends and I were riveted to the TVs. We saw Ruby shoot Oswald in real-time. Then the following day, when I saw John Junior's famous salute to his father's passing casket, I made a solemn vow to do the same for my dad. Wow, the things that can go through a youngster's head.

The assassination could have helped my mother put things into perspective by yanking her from the micro-world of kids to care for and a husband to deal with, and shaking her into understanding that there are ways to deal with problems. Instead, it appeared to leave her further unhinged. Two months later she filed for divorce and dragged her kids to an apartment on the other side of town. Although I missed my father, I understood that it would be better for the folks to go to their separate corners for awhile—at least until the bell rang anew. As for me, visitation rights had to suffice.

What troubled me further was that my friends were just far enough away, that seeing them was not an option. I had a bike and I could have ridden the four miles, but that still wasn't going to cut it. So I made new friends—and with this fourth move by the eighth year of my life, the motions of making new friends were becoming routine.

Our mother also began neglecting us. Oh, I don't mean that she didn't feed or otherwise care for us. Nor did she stop tucking my younger brother and me into bed and sing lullabies, or drill us in proper manners—and mine were such that even as a child I could have conducted myself properly at a White House dinner (although on the flip-side, Dad showed me how to fit in while eating among stevedores). I also respected my elders, opened doors for ladies and got next to ladies on sidewalks to shield them, in case cars running through puddles sent up geysers of water. No, Mom abandoned her children in other ways.

In truth, even when they were together, neither of my parents monitored our activities; never hovered nearby to ensure completion of homework assignments, nor groomed any of us for our inevitable transitions to adulthood. Nor did they have sit-downs with any of us to discuss college or a career.

No, the folks left us to fend for ourselves, and I ran wild as a result. Going shirtless and shoeless in summer seemed only natural, so that's what I did. Remember, this was back in the days when flip-flops were not yet en vogue, and those that were available were the thin shower shoes that people only used in locker rooms. So I ran barefoot five months out of the year, every year. Or to borrow from Mark Twain's description of Huck Finn—whose life by the way I had readily identified with while reading the book—I was always the first among my friends to shed shoes in the spring, and the last to resume leather in the fall—a lifestyle that endured well into my late teens.

And so it was that at age five I would finish breakfast, tell my mother, "Bye," and troop off on my own to make the rounds of friends' homes. Upon gathering a large enough cohort, we then roamed through fields and woods and shopping centers totally unsupervised until noon, when I came home to eat only to disappear again until the street lights snapped on, when I would show up with dirty and often bee-stung feet with only one thing in mind: "What's for dinner?" In many ways it's why I feel rooted to the earth even today.

But this lack of supervision also meant that I didn't see the need for daily showers or a daily change of clothes. I never developed a sense of grooming either, and didn't learn that brown belts don't go with black shoes. But I did learn to read, and I found refuge in worlds of exploration and adventure. I read a children's version of *Robinson Crusoe*, and while watching the movie *Old Yeller*, I thought it was normal that fourteen-year-old Travis would trap wild pigs and hunt deer to put food on the table while his father was away on a cattle drive—just as my dad was away. As a fifth-grader, when I read Neville Shute's *On The Beach*, I vowed to accomplish two goals: to visit Australia and to become an author.

Watching movies and TV also sparked daydreams of adventure. Like all kids, I wanted to be a firefighter and a cop and a cowboy. But television and movies of that era performed another service in

an age when latchkey kids were emerging from society's fabric: whether it was *The Munsters* or *Father Knows Best* or even *Flipper*, each of these shows and most movies included a morality tale. They also stressed that parents and adults were in charge, and teens did not show contempt for grownups, because guess what? Teens still had more learning and growing up to do.

But despite the solace of books, television and movies, resentment festered deep inside. I began to rail against what was quickly turning into an annual ritual of moving to another city, attending yet another school, and being torn away from close friends again. I also grew to resent getting the brush-off from an overwhelmed mother who had no time for a nine-year-old boy's need for even a few moments of affection, and I grew to hate the manifestation of her devolution, when she would verbally lash out at her children for the slightest offenses.

The offenses included ripping a shirtsleeve while climbing a barbed-wire fence, an act that would result in a seemingly ceaseless tongue-lashing. A dirty collar from too much play also risked her rage. The list of high crimes and misdemeanors ran long and erratic.

Despite her behavior, I didn't acquire a sense of animosity. In the final analysis, I realized even then that she was ill. And so it was that by age ten I hung around my friends' homes until it grew dark—or until their parents diplomatically invited me to leave in an age when the term "street kids" was not yet used. Yet that is what I'd become, for I would rather walk aimlessly through town than return home. At least my sister made the great escape when she got married during the summer of '67.

IN 1968 I turned thirteen, and on carefree barefoot summer evenings I'd casually tell my mom, "I'm gonna sleep at a friend's tonight." This turned into a three-times a week ritual, and she invariably nodded without bothering to call the other parents. Then I'd walk to a girlfriend's house and tap on her bedroom window until she quietly eased it open. And just like that, two naked teens with raging hormones

were twisting and squirming while trying to keep the noises under control—usually by letting the Beatles and Simon & Garfunkel throb in the background, while we throbbed between the sheets.

Once school was back in session, some of us brought girls to an isolated storage room to pass the lunchtime with a form of playtime not envisioned by the principal. What can I say? We were randier than three-balled tomcats, and long before condoms in schools became an issue, we managed to soldier-on—especially since kids couldn't buy condoms. They were kept inside drug store pharmacist counters, the idea of displaying them for shoppers to pick and choose still light years away.

So we did without, and while the temptation to tsk-tsk us for having sex at such a tender age is there, it doesn't change the facts. Nor does it challenge the fact that there were no pregnancies, at least none that I knew of. Besides, for us the idea of getting-it-on usually had its basis in friendships—although I'd be lying if I didn't admit that some of it also amounted to a search for the affection that I wasn't getting at home.

In my self-serving defense, I'll also point out that it was 1968. Free love and Woodstock were in the air, the girls were eager and willing, and the following year Sly and the Family Stone released *Hot Fun in the Summertime*. To this day I can't help but smile whenever I pull out an old 45-rpm version of *Hot Fun* to listen to its upbeat lyrics and buoyant rhythms.

It was also the year that friends and I stood along the railroad tracks to watch the train carrying Bobby Kennedy's body pass by.

In time, my mother returned to my father, which led to three moves within two years until we finally settled into a house in Glen Burnie, a few miles south of Baltimore. Although this marked my eighth move and sixth school by age fourteen, things were looking good and I thought, *Yes, now she'll have time for me*. She didn't, though. Not even when it came to discussing death.