



What if...Had Been My Life

By Enrique Trujillo

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PROLOGUE

Embarking on the journey of crafting this memoir has unveiled a profound sense of well-being that surpassed my wildest imagination. It's a joyous endeavor, resurrecting the extraordinary moments when life unfolded with innocent pleasure, untouched by the expectation of reciprocation. The contrast between these blissful recollections and the potential consequences that might have ensued if succumbing to vices or bad habits is a poignant reminder of the fragility of our paths.

As the experiences of my life unfolds, I reminisce about fully embracing moments, oblivious to the weighty values or consequences that might shape my future. There's a belief that our destiny is preordained from the moment of our birth, an unyielding force guiding us through life's labyrinth. I am a firm believer that this notion is not a mere abstraction but a profound truth.

Injecting a touch of fiction into my narrative, I delicately weave the threads of my experiences, depicting alternate scenarios where the sway of worldly vices would have cast an unfavorable shadow over my life's trajectory. It's a creative exercise that prompts contemplation on the delicate dance between choice and destiny, the unfurling of a tale where virtuous decisions shield me from the potential repercussions of darker paths.

In revisiting these moments, I celebrate the triumph of resilience over temptation, emphasizing the resilience that shields us from the alluring grasp of vice. This memoir is a testament to the beauty of navigating life's labyrinth, choosing the path of virtue over the enticing allure of detrimental habits.

CHAPTER 1

THE BEGINNING

My name is Enrique, a native of the vibrant city of Cali. My childhood unfolded in a lively, popular neighborhood, a backdrop to our enchanting two-story house that embraced us with a sprawling backyard beholding a nice mango tree—a haven where my siblings and I reveled in carefree moments of laughter and play. In those sun-soaked days, my physique mirrored the typical build of boys from that era—average in height, but with a sun-kissed tan earned from countless hours of outdoor escapades. Despite my unassuming stature, I wore a cloak of shyness and quietude. Speaking sparingly, I found solace in listening, a trait that endeared me to my parents, who cherished my calm demeanor and seriousness.

Our home, a sanctuary of warmth, echoed with the joyous laughter of my parents and siblings. Edgar, my eldest brother, and I, guided by an unspoken parental strategy, shared more moments on the streets. Edgar's exuberance found balance in my reserved nature, forming a harmonious duo. Meanwhile, Héctor, the youngest, radiated positivism, always ready for lighthearted moments. Libia Fernanda, the third sibling, adorned the home with her beauty and studious dedication, often finding solace in the pages of a captivating book or the artistry of decorating notebooks with images of beauty queens from national contests.

As time unfolded, Andrés, born a few years later, infused our lives with infectious smiles and spontaneous charm. The once enchanting backyard, adorned with groves of trees, especially that magnificent mango tree, had to witnessed transformations as time passed. Extensions to the house ushered in a larger kitchen, an extra-large bathroom, a functional dining room, and an upgraded laundry room, elevating our comfort. Before these renovations, our blessings were manifold, notably by the majestic mango tree gracing the grove. Climbing its branches, we harvested succulent yellow and green fruits—a simple yet profound joy that etched unforgettable memories in the tapestry of our shared history.

My mother was a woman of grace and beauty, hailed from a tranquil mountain town, her light skin, brown eyes, and hair a testament to her elegance. She was a skilled secretary, often employed by prestigious companies. Her influence transcended the workplace, as she imparted her expertise, teaching not only her children but also our cousins the art of typing and shorthand, invaluable skills in the world of clerical work.

In stark contrast, my father was a tall, athletic man with dark skin and curly hair, hailed from the coastal region. His vocation lay in the telecommunications industry as a surveyor. A man of discipline and precision, he possessed an undying passion for boleros and an unparalleled talent for dancing, a quality that undoubtedly drew my mother to him.

To balance their professional commitments, my parents enlisted the help of Chila, our housekeeper, who maintained the household and kept a watchful eye on us. As long as we informed her of our whereabouts, we had the freedom to explore and engage in adventures both inside and outside the house.

To unleash the beginning of this core narrative, I strongly believe that Soccer has remarkably been recognized as the pinnacle of my adventures. Football soccer is the epitome of pure fun and euphoria that echoes the sentiments of enthusiasts worldwide. For me, it transcends mere recreation; it is a fervent passion woven into the fabric of my earliest memories. From a tender age, my father, a seasoned second-league football player for a renowned local team, would spiritedly escort me to his afternoon training sessions. The allure of the game, the exhilaration of feeling the ball at my feet, and the thrill of dribbling fueled my growing enthusiasm.

In the midst of their training, where two balls orchestrated the rhythm, I eagerly volunteered to retrieve the stray ball, swiftly returning it to ensure the seamless flow of their soccer ballet. Always armed with one of the two balls, I engaged in my own modest ritual—to bonce the ball doing 31 consecutive kicks without letting the round object touch the ground. This ritual became my canvas for perfecting the artistry of ball control, a skill honed through ceaseless practice.

Sunday afternoons unfurled a spectacle of delight as my neighbors and I, a tight-knit group of soccer enthusiasts, converged upon the city soccer stadium. In the realm of the "sparrows," the designated entrance for young aficionados aged 7 to 15, we reveled in the magic of the game without the constraint of an admission ticket. The attractiveness of the stadium, the camaraderie of the crowd, and the exhilarating spectacle kindled an insatiable desire within me — the dream of becoming a soccer player.

My love for the sport, nurtured in the crucible of those Sunday afternoons, endowed me with exceptional skills. The mastery extended beyond conventional bounds; I could artfully bounce the ball with both feet, head, and shoulders, achieving a remarkable feat of 500 consecutive touches—barefoot. In the year 1968, whether owing to a scarcity of shoes or a prevailing custom, I vividly recall traversing my neighborhood streets sans footwear. It was an era where, for young boys like me, shoes were deemed superfluous outside the confines of school or formal settings. A quick dash to the local grocery store, three blocks from home, or running errands was undertaken with the unfettered freedom of bare soles meeting the familiar terrain. The art of running barefoot, a seemingly simple childhood habit, emerged as a silent maestro, orchestrating a symphony of skill enhancement in my soccer journey. Navigating my neighborhood streets without the encumbrance of shoes became more than just a routine—it became an invaluable ally in my pursuit of soccer excellence. In the tapestry of those times, where carefree joy was the prevailing melody, this seemingly ordinary act fostered within myself extraordinary abilities.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, ushering in the velvety embrace of night, our block transformed into a sanctuary of soccer euphoria. From 7 pm until well past 10 pm, my neighbors and I embarked on nightly soccer odysseys—under the warm glow of streetlights, on makeshift fields delineated by two bricks serving as goal lines. The rhythm of our game synchronized with the sporadic passage of motor vehicles, prompting us to shift our impromptu goals with each passing car. Complaints were an alien concept; instead, laughter echoed through those vibrant evenings.

In the midst of this soccer ballet, I wielded the ball with a finesse marked by agile movements and feints, a dance that effortlessly eluded opponents and paved the way for exhilarating sprints toward the goal. It wasn't about self-flattery; it was the manifestation of a shared understanding among my peers. My soccer prowess was a dependable force, a harbinger of victory for our collective endeavors. In the twilight hours of those joyous nights, I became the coveted addition to every team—a testament to the trust placed in the magic woven into my swift footwork and unrivaled passion for the beautiful game.

For me, football was an all-encompassing love. Whether during school recess or after returning home in the early afternoons, it was an unceasing series of matches with neighbors, each one a vibrant story etched in my memory.

Every Saturday unfolded as a chapter of soccer magic in an open field near our residence—a playground where nature and competition coalesced. The field, a harmonious blend of bare earth and verdant grass, became the canvas for our sporting adventures. To mark the goals, we ingeniously erected two bamboo canes, each boasting a diameter of approximately 30 centimeters, creating makeshift arches that stood proudly at either end of our impromptu soccer haven.

With meticulous precision, we dug 30-centimeter holes to anchor the bamboo canes securely. A slender cane stretched from one end to the other, forming the crossbar that bestowed a semblance of officiality upon our cherished field. The goalposts, standing 7 meters apart, and the crossbar, soaring 2.40 meters high, breathed life into our semi-official soccer domain. For these spirited encounters, I laced up my trusty Croydon tennis shoes, ready to navigate the undulating terrain with finesse.

Our opponents, a motley crew of older boys toiling in the bus washing or mechanics' assistant trade, presented a formidable challenge. Despite the rough play they often employed, we, the younger squad, stood unwavering in our commitment to fair competition. Their strategy, an attempt to intimidate us, only fueled our determination to triumph on the field.

Within our ranks, standout players elevated our team to a league of its own. Among them, the towering figure of Javier, our steadfast goalkeeper, commanded attention. A tall, solid brunet with reflexes akin to lightning, Javier fearlessly confronted every challenge, exhibiting remarkable control over the ball even in the face of powerful shots. His presence fortified our team, contributing to our triumphs and creating a legacy of victories etched into the very soil of our cherished Saturday battleground.

In the heart of our soccer tapestry, Jairo stood as our defensive stalwart—a white boy with an unassuming stature that belied the tremendous strength harbored in his thick legs. A guardian of his territory, he wielded firmness and power, a formidable force that thwarted any opposing player attempting to breach our lines.

On the opposite flank, Gustavo, a lad with curly hair and a youthful charm, defied his smaller stature with an insatiable desire to excel on the field. Despite the age gap, Gustavo and I forged a deep friendship, a bond that transcended the soccer pitch. In the midfield, the smiling virtuoso, Luis Gabriel (Gustavo's brother), weaved magic with his long, curly locks. His ability to outmaneuver opponents, coupled with a perpetual grin, made him the orchestrator of strategic plays, deftly passing the ball to the perfect recipient for a potential goal.

On the right wing danced John Jairo, the elder brother of Gustavo and Luis Gabriel, a vision of hair akin to his siblings. Together, they resembled a harmonious musical ensemble, an artistic trio whose appearance mirrored their prowess on the field. John, with his lanky frame and agile moves, effortlessly outpaced opponents and scored goals with flair.

Leading the charge as center forwards were Oscar and myself. The formidable Oscar, a dark-skinned dynamo with straight black hair, possessed a well-built physique and legs that unleashed the ball with unparalleled strength and precision. In the intricate dance of dribbling and passing, Oscar and I formed an unbreakable bond, a strategic wall that deftly navigated through opposing players, ultimately finding the back of the rival net. With infinite confidence in each other's abilities and a seamless synergy in our respective positions, we orchestrated victories that echoed the symphony of our shared triumphs on the hallowed soccer field.

Saturdays stretched endlessly, a canvas painted with the vibrant hues of endless soccer matches that defied the grasp of fatigue. The sun, a faithful spectator, bore witness to our unwavering passion that spilled over the hours. In the heart of those spirited weekends, the concept of weariness became an alien notion.

In the throes of our soccer fervor, there were Saturdays when the rhythm of the game overshadowed the ticking clock, causing us to unwittingly forsake the call for lunch. From 10:00 a.m. to the late afternoon hours of 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., the soccer pitch became our realm, a stage where time bowed to the relentless energy pulsating within us.

We were a cadre of vitality, a collective embodiment of undying enthusiasm. The motivation to conquer games, an inseparable part of our soccer narrative, fueled every kick, every sprint, and every strategic move on the field. Our weekends were not merely a temporal escape; they were a saga of boundless energy, camaraderie, and an unyielding determination to emerge victorious, etching indelible memories into the fabric of our soccer odyssey.

As my teenage years unfolded, I transitioned into playing with the neighborhood team, engaging in spirited clashes against rival neighborhoods in our bustling city. It marked the era when my first pair of soccer boots adorned my feet, becoming a symbolic initiation into a more competitive realm. These boots became an extension of my prowess, propelling me into a realm where scoring three or four goals in every game was not uncommon. Yet, the thrill of the game was often cut short by my coach by taking me out of the game way before it ended, a decision that left me perplexed and, I'll admit, a tad irked. It wasn't until later that I grasped the coach's intention—to safeguard me from potential injuries, recognizing that my goal-scoring prowess made me a target for the opposition's rough tactics. In retrospect, I appreciated the foresight, but in the heat of the moment, my youthful frustration overshadowed that understanding.

Years passed, but my love affair with football remained unwavering. The pitch was my canvas, and the game completed me in ways words couldn't capture. Shyness dissipated on the soccer field, replaced by a dynamic force that fueled my passion for the sport as the years unfolded.

One memorable Saturday night, after an exhilarating bout of street soccer with my friends Gustavo and Jairo, we found ourselves in the midst of a magical encounter. A pair of horses, having escaped their daily toil pulling wheelbarrows, ambled by us with ropes around their necks. In those days, horses were integral to the livelihoods of many families, carrying the weight of wheelbarrows laden with materials to sustain their modest incomes. As the absent-minded horses grazed on fresh grass, we, captivated by the spontaneous magic of the moment, seized the opportunity to mount them.

It was a surreal experience, the second most surprisingly enjoyable activity I had ever encountered, following closely behind the unparalleled joy of soccer. For a couple of hours, we rode these magnificent creatures, heedless of their potential exhaustion, as we reveled in the freedom and camaraderie that transcended the boundaries of our urban landscape. In a city now dominated by concrete jungles, that night became a cherished memory of a bygone era, a time when vacant lots and the spirit of adventure coexisted seamlessly in the tapestry of our youth. The love of horses and soccer became an inseparable part of my life. High school's demands grew, and I contemplated the possibility of pursuing a career in either football or as a cowboy.

That night, sleep eluded me, my mind abuzz with the intoxicating thrill of riding a horse for the very first time. The mere thought of that exhilarating experience made my heart race, rendering dreams an elusive pursuit. Eventually succumbing to fatigue, I welcomed the next night with an unwavering determination—after the spirited game of soccer, my friend Gustavo and I embarked on a quest to relive the magic of horseback riding.

In the enchanting wake of those equine escapades, Gustavo became more than just a friend; he emerged as my kindred spirit in countless adventures. From navigating the exhilarating quest for girlfriends to mastering the nuances of playing pool at the local pool tables place, we became inseparable companions to share experiences.

Our forays into the world of pool playing became a regular affair, a delightful detour from our equestrian pursuits. As a dynamic duo, we formed an unstoppable force on the pool table, outsmarting opponents with a combination of precision and cunning. Gustavo's mastery of the cue ball's spin, deftly maneuvering it into ideal positions for the next shot, became our secret weapon. Victories were a familiar echo in those hallowed halls, a testament to our shared prowess and camaraderie.

Yet, amid the competitive clatter of pool balls and the triumphs they brought, it was the intoxicating love of horseback riding that truly held me captive. The feeling of freedom, the rhythmic dance with those majestic creatures, surpassed any other pursuit. Such was the seduction of those beautiful animals that I found myself skipping classes, venturing into neighboring towns under the guise of a horse buyer. Armed with the excuse that my father entrusted me with the task of selecting the finest steed, I reveled in the clandestine thrill of riding horses, immersing myself in moments of excitement and euphoria that bridged the realms of fantasy and reality. My free time became a harmonious blend of the beautiful game of soccer and the rhythmic poetry of horseback riding—an irresistible symphony of passions that defined the very essence of my youth.

One enchanting Friday afternoon, the lure of a beautiful ripe mango dangling from the top branches of the tree in my backyard proved irresistible for me. I started climbing with a sense of nimble confidence, my brother Edgar's cautious words echoed in the air, urging me to be careful. However, the branch beneath me proved less resilient than anticipated, and I found myself airborne, crashing to the ground with a resounding thud.

As the world spun around me, I witnessed an unexpected scene unfold. A short, elderly man with a crown of gray hair found himself besieged by a pack of wild dogs that, upon closer inspection, resembled more than mere canines—they were wolves! Reacting on pure instinct, I seized a long stick and vigorously fended off the ferocious creatures until they retreated, leaving the man visibly injured on the ground.

With arms and legs bearing the marks of wolf-dog bites, the frail man implored me to lead him to a nearby stream of crystal-clear water. Struggling to articulate in a voice reminiscent of a child's, he instructed me to gather some yellowish mud from the stream's bank and generously apply it to his wounds. Skeptical at first, I now know that nature's healing powers sometimes reside in the most unexpected places.

Dressed in peculiar green attire with a matching top hat now crumpled on the ground, the mysterious man lay beside the stream. As I tended to his wounds, a profound connection seemed to unfold, and I felt a curious joy when his smile returned. In his diminutive voice, he assured me that he would never forget our encounter and promised to be there when I needed him. With a wink and a sense of whimsy, he vanished into the forest, leaving me in a state of wonder.

Suddenly, I snapped back to reality, finding myself on the ground, and my brother was in tears. He believed I had lost consciousness, perhaps even faced the specter of death. Still a bit dazed, I assured him that I was unharmed, struggling to recall the vivid experience that had just transpired. It felt like a surreal encounter, a meeting with a gnome straight out of a fantastical tale, yet as I stood up and quenched my thirst with a gulp of water, the memory lingered, a mysterious blend of reality and dreamlike enchantment. While I may never fully understand that encounter, the love for soccer and the thrill of riding horses remained as vibrant as ever, shaping my journey through life.

CHAPTER 2

IF SOCCER HAD BEEN MY LIFE

In the depths of a profound slumber, I often found myself traversing the corridors of time, a mystical journey that blurred the boundaries between past and present. Yet, amidst these ethereal excursions, the details of my recent experiences eluded my grasp, their ephemeral nature leaving me unable to precisely recollect the vivid encounters that had unfolded.

My exceptional skills on the soccer field caught the attention of a professional team in my hometown. It was a dream come true, a testament to the countless hours of dedication and hard work I had poured into the sport. A chance to play with the pros had finally arrived.

Though the other coach had his reservations, he relented after witnessing my potential during training sessions. My initial role was to train and play alongside the team, adhering to a rigorous diet that honed my physique. I became bulkier, yet retained my lightning speed. But it took three months before I got my chance to shine in a game.

The day finally came, and I played like never before. Positioned as the right forward, I showcased agile ball-handling skills, scored a goal, and orchestrated numerous successful passes. We won the match, and the coach was thoroughly impressed with my performance. It was a pivotal moment, as I realized that my unique style, dribbling past opponents, and unleashing precise shots were not only effective but captivating to watch.

My teammates appreciated my selfless play-style, as I continually set them up for success. The media caught wind of my ascent, and soon, my name was a constant presence on the radio and in the news. I had become a valuable asset to the team, and my fellow players and fans celebrated my contributions.

At the tender age of 19, I had already amassed a legion of friends and enthusiastic fans. People admired my speed, precision, and defensive prowess. The spotlight was now on me, and it brought admirers, especially from the fairer sex. Life was transforming, and popularity was becoming a constant companion.

After a successful period of 15 months, I was offered an opportunity to play for an even more prominent team, with a promise of future riches. Joining the new squad, I quickly established myself as a key player, contributing my skills and flawless passes to ensure our victories. With each triumph, we climbed the league rankings, leading to financial bonuses for all the players.

Post-game celebrations evolved into extravagant parties, replete with dancing, drinking, and adoring fans, especially young women. The euphoria sometimes led to excess, with drugs making sporadic appearances. Concerned friends offered advice, but I dismissed it as jealousy, failing to realize they were genuinely worried about my future.

I was now receiving substantial monthly paychecks, endorsing commercials on TV, and living a lavish lifestyle. Multiple properties, fast cars, and a sprawling farm became my possessions, but their allure was fleeting. I seldom visited the farm, and as time passed, it became more of an investment than a place of enjoyment. Additionally, my thoughts were posted on getting me more possessions as possible as long as I wanted, so to show all my fellow friends and family how much power I had gained.

As I indulged in luxury and excess, my focus on soccer began to blur. I was spiraling into a hedonistic existence, where money and possessions overshadowed my passion for the game. The meaningful connections with family and genuine friends began to wither as I chased a mirage of materialism. I also started to acquire some rather manners as to not wear the same clothing more than once or twice. By this I mean that whenever the day came to an end, I just threw the clothes away into the garbage or I disposed them all completely. I didn’t even give them to some of the needed friends I was supposed to cherish. I did it because I thought I could do so even though some people said otherwise. I didn’t care about their comments. I thought only about my instincts.

One fateful night, after a raucous victory party, I drove my beautiful girlfriend on my fancy vehicle to my opulent apartment. The temptingness of having her under my silk bed sheets was irresistible. Under the influence, I sped through the streets recklessly. Moments later, I found myself lying on the cold pavement, my girlfriend unconscious but unhurt. My injuries were significant, and my world was spinning out of control.

In the midst of confusion, an enigmatic figure emerged. An old man with short gray hair, a face familiar but shrouded in obscurity, extended a hand to help. His voice was gentle, but his words pierced my conscience. He asked me to reflect on the choices I had made, the needless acquisitions, the neglect of family and friends, and the disdain I had shown for the less fortunate.

I admitted to my greed, and he smiled warmly, his arms enveloping me. In that moment, a profound realization washed over me, a reckoning that transcended the pain in my body. It was a chance to reset and find my way back to what truly mattered in life, guided by the wisdom of a mysterious but caring mentor.

CHAPTER 3

IF BECOMING A HORSE RIDER HAD BEEN MY LIFE.

I found myself transported back in time, although the past experiences felt unfamiliar, like distant memories that had slipped through the cracks of my mind. Yet, amidst the haze of forgotten moments, one memory stood out clearly - the first time I rode a horse. The feeling of freedom and power as I galloped through my neighborhood streets was etched in my soul.

I was in the neighborhood. My friends and I were captivated by this newfound passion, making late-night horseback riding a cherished pastime. We would seek out horses in nearby pastures or venture into neighboring neighborhoods where we knew some grazed. My friend Gus and I became adept at capturing these magnificent creatures. And once we grabbed them, pure riding enjoyment took over, often extending late into the night.

Then, one memorable Sunday morning, a friend from school named John and I embarked on a walking journey to a nearby town. Along the way, we encountered a stunning white stallion grazing in an open field. I couldn't resist approaching the majestic horse, and my touch forged an instant connection. We had a short rope since I was certain we would luckily encounter one Riding the horse felt like a dream, and John and I reveled in sharing the experience. But our euphoria was abruptly interrupted.

An unknown man, riding another horse, appeared on the scene. His calm yet commanding voice inquired about our intentions. I explained we were simply enjoying the ride, but his reaction was far from what I expected. In a sudden, shocking turn of events, he produced a large silver pistol and struck me on the head. I fell to the ground, and he proceeded to kick me in the stomach. It was a terrifying ordeal, and before I could grasp the situation. Another fella of similar physique hit and captured my classmate and next, we were forcibly put into a waiting car.

Claiming to be undercover police officers, they accused us of trespassing and attempting horse theft. The supposedly police men drove off and we were unceremoniously hauled off to a local police station for real, where we found ourselves in a grimy, decrepit cell. Hostile inmates in the neighboring cell subjected us to taunts and jeers. We feared the worst. I later found out that the silver pistol bearer was the owner of the stallion and he wanted us to pay for having taking the animal for a ride without his consent. As the hours passed, my desperate attempts to contact my family were denied. It was a bleak Sunday spent in captivity. But then, late that night, a compassionate stranger cleaning the facility heard our plea and made a call to my home. The relief of my mother's arrival the following morning was immeasurable. Her arrival with food and drinks was a lifeline. She bought some cleaning stuff for the location and we were released because of that.

Despite the ordeal, it brought my family closer together. However, my adventures with horses were far from over. My mother understood my passion for such creatures, and to satisfy my love for riding, she arranged for me to ride a horse on a local farm during weekends. I cherished those weekends, enjoying every moment of riding, milking cows, and even learning to make fresh cheese.

But my yearning for the countryside grew. Every weekend, every spare moment was devoted to the serenity and beauty of rural life. I felt at peace and discovered a deep harmony I had been missing.

On one unforgettable Sunday morning, while riding a horse on the farm, I encountered a remarkable man. He was mounted on a magnificent dark brown horse, exuding an air of confidence and grace. The horse, named Alondra, was a vision of equine beauty. The horse was his best step horse competitor.

I stood in awe as the majestic horse glided gracefully down the dusty road, its rider poised perfectly on the sleek black saddle. Envy surged through me, and in that instant, I knew I had to experience the thrill of riding such a magnificent creature. Engaging in conversation, I confessed my love for horses and offered to visit the farm to ride some of his step horses free of charge. With an eager heart, I mustered the courage to ask if I could ride that particular horse, almost begging for the chance. I longed to ride her, and I implored him to allow me the privilege. He denied me the eagerness to ride such splendid horse, but he agreed to maybe let me ride some of his other horses if I was interested in doing so, and I immediately accepted.

My desire to ride this horse was not just about the experience; I believed that by mastering such a noble steed, I could transform myself into someone as remarkable as the owner. It wasn't long before he called, having considered my plea, and agreed to let me ride some of his lesser-known yet equally stunning horses. He mentioned that he would not pay me as much as his riders since I had offered to do it for free, and without hesitation, I accepted, thrilled by the opportunity. I dropped out of school, much to my mother's dismay, choosing the farm life over the classroom.

The man's farm was conveniently close, spanning ten acres of lush green fields and housing about twenty magnificent horses. His grandiose house hinted at a comfortable life, and I couldn't help but yearn for the same. Riding these exceptional horses seemed like my ticket to achieving such prosperity. As I spent more time there, I managed to earn his trust, yet he remained adamant about not letting me ride Alondra, his prized possession. She was only ridden by him or Jimmy, whom I had never met and secretly resented.

Jimmy was a short, wiry man with long brown hair and a mustache, a perpetual scowl etched on his face. His volatile temper had me questioning why he was the sole rider for Alondra, and I was consumed with jealousy. At any chance, I reported Jimmy's mistreatment of the horse to the boss. Jimmy's defense was that he needed to be strict with Alondra from time to time to maintain control, a claim I wasn't fond of.

I hoped that the boss would consider me as an alternative rider for Alondra if Jimmy were ever out of the picture. Months later, my wish was granted when Jimmy's disruptive behavior during a town celebration led to his arrest and a two-day stint in jail. I immediately approached the owner, expressing my concern that Jimmy's actions could tarnish his reputation and disrupt future step horse contests. Faced with this potential backlash, the boss decided to part ways with Jimmy.

Finally, I was granted the privilege of being Alondra's rider, and we began rigorous training for upcoming contests. My slender yet robust physique made me more than capable of mastering the intricate movements needed for a harmonious and uniform ride. I poured my heart and soul into our training, determined not to disappoint. As we entered the fiercely competitive regional contests, Alondra and I had become an inseparable team, perfectly in sync. We clinched victory in a local contest with ease, and our success continued to grow with each subsequent competition

Our remarkable journey of triumph and admiration had elevated Alondra and me to a level of immense prestige. The enchanting horse was now a valuable asset, her worth amplified by the remarkable lineage she would pass on to future generations. In the world of step horse breeding, there was substantial wealth to be had, and I was reaping the benefits both financially and personally. I couldn't have asked for a more enjoyable path, where my passion for horseback riding had turned into a profitable endeavor.

I continued to hone my skills, riding other exceptional horses in contests, and each time I graced the arena, victory was a certainty. Offers began pouring in from people in the industry, willing to pay a premium for my skills, but I couldn't bring myself to betray the first person who had shown faith in me. Besides, I suspected that these new prospects were entangled in illegal activities involving drugs, tarnishing the purity of the step horse-raising tradition.

As my success on the circuit grew, some individuals in the shadows became uneasy with my innate riding abilities, prompting warnings about the consequences of continued triumph. Yet, I remained undaunted, and my boss assured me that he would handle the situation. Their threats didn't disturb my sleep.

One fateful Saturday morning, a mysterious voice seemed to whisper at the edge of my perception, but no one was there when I looked around. It felt as if a little man's voice had reached out to me, but I dismissed it as mere imagination. Little did I know that this eerie foreshadowing was the harbinger of impending chaos.

On the way to a regional step horse contest with my boss and his driver, a dark pickup truck suddenly appeared, cutting us off, and chaos erupted. The former rider of Alondra, now in league with the illegal drug traffickers, with a semi-automatic gun, opened fire upon us, executing a sinister plot they had devised. My boss reached for his registered .38 caliber revolver, but it was a fraction too late, and a bullet fatally pierced his head. The driver was struck by multiple bullets too, and I felt a searing pain in my chest as I realized I had been shot as well.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as I witnessed this horrifying scene unfold before me, feeling the warmth of my own blood seeping from my chest. It was like a scene from a movie, yet chillingly real. Our attackers caught us by surprise, leaving us all grievously wounded and powerless.

Desperately trying to move, I struggled in vain, realizing my strength had abandoned me. As my vision blurred, I experienced an unusual serenity. The last image etched in my mind was that of a short, gray-haired man waving his top hat, his face adorned with a knowing smile. I pleaded for help, and his presence brought a strange calm. In a voice that carried wisdom and a hint of reproach, he spoke of my own selfishness, the envy that had led to my act of reporting the rider, costing him his job, family, and pride. I acknowledged my envy and expressed profound regret. His smile grew, and he touched my wound. As if by his touch, all pain vanished, and I was enveloped in peace.

CHAPTER 4

IF THE ARM FORCES HAD BEEN MY LIFE

I found myself transported back in time, although the memories of my past experiences eluded me, as if they were veiled in the mists of time. I was a student once again.

One ordinary day, after enduring yet another tiresome stint at school, I confided in my mother about my deep-rooted discomfort with my educational environment. The teachers, in particular, often reduced us to degrading nicknames, which left me feeling disconnected. My mother, for her part, remained silent, withholding her response.

While many extol the high school years as the best of one's life, I, on the other hand, failed to find the joy and enthusiasm that should accompany this phase. My interest in learning waned, and I harbored a suspicion that some of my teachers were complicit in shaping my disillusionment. Among them, there was Mr. Parra, my Math teacher – a rotund, short man with wavy blond hair. He fancied himself quite the comedian, relying on our expense for his humor. It was as if he believed himself funnier than a circus clown. To clarify, his idea of humor often involved making unkind comments about our appearances or responses to his questions, all in the name of keeping our attention.

I was reminded of a particular incident that mirrored the cruelty of Pink Floyd's iconic song, "Another Brick in the Wall," where an authoritarian teacher humiliates a well-combed, obedient student in front of the class. This exact scenario played out in my life when Mr. Parra singled me out to solve a math problem on the blackboard. While I didn't find the problem overly challenging, I hesitated momentarily, which provided Mr. Parra with an opportunity to comment on my curly, Afro hairstyle, insinuating that my "pineapple hair" obstructed my ability to think clearly. Predictably, the entire class erupted into laughter, leaving me with no choice but to quickly retreat to my seat.

When the final bell rang, I wasted no time. I collected my backpack and promptly left the school. However, instead of heading home, I rendezvoused with my friend Fernando, a fellow high school student who also worked at a local hardware store. His primary task involved delivering construction materials to customers using a traditional horse-drawn cart. Fernando, a robust, tall young man in his twenties with dark hair, was not only a close friend but, at that time, my closest confidant.

That afternoon, I joined him in delivering bricks, sand, gravel, and other building materials, even getting the chance to take the reins and drive the horse on our way back to the store. The best part was that Fernando was an excellent listener, and I seized the opportunity to unburden myself, sharing my grievances about school and my overwhelming desire to leave it behind. He suggested that I consider enlisting in the army to address my military service obligation, a prerequisite for university admission or employment in our region. His idea seemed to hold merit, as it offered a swift exit from my dreary situation. I had convinced myself that I was enduring the worst circumstances imaginable, and that night, I mulled over this notion, unable to find restful slumber in the throes of my contemplation.

The following morning, I was resolute in my decision to enroll in the army and obtain my military service card, a mandatory obligation in our country. My mother, recognizing my earnest intent, accompanied me to the Air Force headquarters, conveniently situated in our city. This institution held a familiar air for us, as my older brother, Edgar, was already an air force corporal. The general, a figure well-known in our family, graciously received us in his office.

With a touch of formality, my mother humbly requested that I be accepted as a soldier within their ranks. The general, while welcoming my enlistment at any time, inquired about my current level of education. I confessed that I was in the seventh grade. In response, he gently but firmly advised against enlisting at my educational level. He explained that most of the soldiers had, at most, completed fifth grade and had to endure low pay and less than ideal conditions. However, he offered an enticing alternative – to complete my seventh and eighth grade of school before pursuing a career in the Air Force.

The prospect of joining the Air Force as a sergeant, with the promise of a good salary and the opportunity to rise through the ranks, left me enthralled. With unwavering determination, I made a heartfelt promise to my mother that I would persevere in school for one more year to attain the rank of Air Force sergeant.

Regrettably, my frequent absences from school to indulge my passion for horseback riding and my declining academic performance culminated in a failed school year. My attendance record was riddled with gaps, and the weight of this failure weighed heavily on me. I dreaded confronting my mother, the pillar of our family who had always provided unwavering support, as my father's role primarily revolved around financial responsibilities, providing us with essentials like school supplies, clothing, and food.

Summoning my courage, I explained to my mother that my academic shortcomings were not due to a lack of knowledge but a consequence of my declining attendance, disillusionment with the teaching environment, and personal struggles with depression. A few days later, I undertook a comprehensive two-day examination at a prestigious school in the city center, which would determine whether I could advance to the eighth grade. With unwavering resolve, I passed both tests, securing my place in the eighth grade, albeit at a different school.

The new school I had transferred to held a distinct allure compared to my previous one. A significant portion of my classmates were newcomers, having retaken the eighth grade after switching from different schools. What's more, the atmosphere was refreshingly different, with teachers who were notably kinder and more respectful. This positive change in environment had a profound impact on my spirits, and my academic performance saw a notable upswing, especially in the domain of English.

My newfound prowess in English led me to stand out in the class, and I quickly earned the goodwill of my peers as I assisted them with their English assignments and more. My proficiency in the language was such that I was exempt from taking the final exams, a testament to my skills and passion for English. This fervor had been ignited by my first elementary school teacher, who introduced me to English through a captivating song, leaving an indelible impression on me.

Completing the eighth grade marked a pivotal moment in my educational journey. Three weeks later, I chanced upon a television advertisement about the Navy's recruitment for Naval Sub officers. Eagerly, I shared this revelation with my mother, and she offered her support to help me pursue this new path. After fulfilling all the necessary requirements, I was accepted into the naval force, and the prospect of becoming a sailor and navigating the vast oceans filled me with excitement.

Accompanied by 23 other young recruits from our southwestern region, we embarked on a plane journey to the Navy base located on the North Coast of our country. A sense of unity and anticipation permeated the air as we queued to receive our uniforms and gear – that first day, we were clad in blue jeans, white t-shirts, black socks, and sturdy black boots. Our heads were then cleanly shaven, creating an uncanny uniformity among us.

Following these initial formalities, we gathered in the expansive formation square to receive our orientation. I was designated to the Bravo Company, setting the stage for my naval journey. At around 9:00 pm, we were directed to our barracks for the night, and I was granted the top bunk of a three-tiered bed. The elevated position allowed me to experience the soothing coastal breeze that wafted through the room, and from that night onward, my struggle with insomnia ceased, paving the way for restful nights.

Boot camp training, though demanding, was an invaluable phase of our transformation. It neither crushed us nor overwhelmed us but, instead, offered insights into self-discipline and a deep appreciation for the comforts of home. Physical changes were also evident as we grew stronger and gained weight, all thanks to the rigorous training regimen. The highlight was the instruction on handling firearms, including a .45 caliber pistol, an M-30 carbine dating back to World War II, and a Mini Uzi semi-automatic machine gun. Learning to throw grenades added another layer of excitement to our experiences.

Four months later, we took the oath of becoming navy sailors, marking our official induction into the service. Of the 24 recruits who had originally arrived at the naval base from our region, only 12 of us remained. The rest had either deserted or opted for early retirement, unable to adapt to the Navy's strict discipline. The 12 of us who persevered were assigned to a rescue boat, which was conveniently situated near our hometowns, making it a practical choice for our naval journey.

Our new assignment took us to a significant port nestled along the Southwest Coast of the majestic Pacific Ocean. The vessel we were stationed on, christened "The Belalcazar," was a 70-meter-long salvage boat, a relic from the Second World War. While the ship itself may have been aging, it had a remarkable history. It had spent years hermetically sealed in a colossal plastic cocoon, deprived of oxygen, within an American Naval base. Despite its age, it had been preserved impeccably and was in remarkable condition. The three-decked salvage ship even boasted a 4.50 caliber cannon on the first deck, a testament to its history.

The crew's living quarters were situated in the lower aft section of the ship, comprising a total of approximately 70 individuals, including sailors, officers, and soldiers. Due to its primary role in salvage missions, the ship possessed an impressive autonomy, capable of staying months at sea without refueling. Consequently, The Belalcazar was often adrift in the open sea. On these serene days, the captain would drop anchor in tranquil waters, providing us with an opportunity to fish for hours. It was an enchanting experience, with nature generously yielding an abundance of fish to meet our needs. Only the larger catches were retained for the crew's meals, while the smaller fish were released back into the azure depths. On those rare occasions when the sea resembled a mirror, with calm, mirror-like waters, it was difficult to distinguish between sky and sea. Such moments were breathtakingly beautiful and profoundly inspiring.

Periodically, the ship would make port in small coastal towns, where we were greeted as heroes by the townspeople, filling us with pride for our service in the Navy.

However, a significant challenge arose one fateful September day. An earthquake and a devastating tsunami struck a small shore town, inundating and ravaging the entire community. Orders came through for us to embark on a mission to rescue the people of a particular town on the southern coast, nestled beside a river. We loaded the ship with essential supplies, including perishable food and donated materials from across the globe, and embarked on our humanitarian journey. Upon our arrival, it became evident that rebuilding the town in the same location was untenable due to safety concerns. The captain made the crucial decision to relocate and build a new town upstream.

A call for volunteers to stay behind and partake in this noble endeavor was made. I, along with five of my sailor friends, all of us youthful and full of determination, stepped forward. At just 18 years of age, I felt a sense of responsibility and strength. The ship returned to our base on the Southwest port to collect additional supplies, and we embarked on establishing a thriving campsite. The vast, flat terrain would eventually become home to a new community, with sturdy houses elevated on posts and ramps to guard against future flooding.

Each of us led a group of local individuals, who had predominantly darker skin tones. Their admirable work ethic and honesty won my deep respect. My own responsibility was to construct the pier, and I was entrusted with a group of incredibly strong men who shouldered hefty logs to create the ramps and docks, ensuring the safe docking of ships. We toiled tirelessly from sunrise to sunset, inching closer to our goal with each passing day. Unfortunately, I was struck down by illness, possibly malaria, and had to halt work prematurely. However, a course of antibiotics soon restored my health.

Over the following six weeks, we persevered and accomplished our mission – the completion of the pier. We were fatigued, but our spirits remained high. We yearned to see the families take their places in newly erected cabin houses, standing high above the ground on sturdy supports and ramps to shield them from future calamities.

As time went by, a sense of anger began to brew within me towards some of my fellow coworkers. They had taken advantage of the situation, engaging in illicit relationships with the workers' daughters in exchange for supplies. This unscrupulous behavior left me disheartened, and coupled with my mounting exhaustion, I decided it was time to bid farewell to that place. My role in constructing the pier was fulfilled, and after three months in that environment, I had reached my limit. Thankfully, the captain did not object to my return to the ship, while my companions continued their work.

The ship made its way back to the base on December 23rd, granting me the opportunity to head home for the holidays. Though I had yearned for the comfort of a soft bed with clean sheets, I couldn't help but reflect on the profound experience I had lived. I had been part of a group that had played a pivotal role in constructing a new, safe town, enabling its population to return to a normal life.

Upon my return to the ship after the holidays, I was surprised to discover that my friends were still working on the project. Some of the cabins remained unfinished, delaying their return on board by three months. However, our next mission was imminent – sailing to the Caribbean Sea to reinforce our coastal presence, in response to a potential invasion threat to one of our country's islands. My pride in being a part of the Navy remained unwavering.

Before my perspective took a fateful turn, I served as an efficient electrician's helper in the ship's electrical department. While the work was not overly demanding, I found myself stationed on a tourist island in the Caribbean after a two-month watch tour at sea. Unfortunately, duty kept me from joining the rest of the crew at the beach that day, as I wasn't on the permission-to-leave list.

When the ship docked, I set about rectifying a short circuit on the second deck below the main deck. I believed I had disconnected all sources of power for the area. However, a critical oversight led me to accidentally touch a live wire, delivering a jolting 250-volt electrical shock that knocked me off my feet, causing me to tumble to the third deck below. The impact must have rendered me unconscious, and I woke up the following day in the hospital. Despite burns on my left thumb and index fingers, I was grateful for the pain relief medicine that kept me comfortable.

My inquiries about my ship's whereabouts led to the revelation that it had sailed the night I was in the hospital. I was informed that a representative from the Marine's naval base would come to collect me. After three days in the hospital, a first sergeant finally arrived and transported me to the base.

This small Marine base was home to a handful of naval personnel, primarily engaged in administrative duties. It was clear that the Marines held a perception that naval personnel were unaccustomed to strenuous work. I was assigned to the maintenance department until my ship's return, with the requirement of participating in the 8:00 a.m. formation in full uniform.

I didn't protest; instead, I carried out minor repairs throughout the day. In time, I struck up a friendship with another sailor named Manuel, who, in stark contrast to my dark complexion, was fair-skinned and blond. Manuel was shorter than me but incredibly amiable. He served aboard a much larger vessel.

One afternoon, after our work had concluded, we decided to venture to the tourist beach, albeit a considerable distance away on the other side of the island. Lacking funds for a cab, we embarked on a two-hour walk to reach our destination. Once we arrived, we settled on the soft sands, later cooling off with a refreshing swim in the blue waters.

Our paths crossed with a friendly tourist couple, who kindly invited us to join them for some drinks. We shared that we were sailors from the navy, and they hailed us as heroes. As the evening progressed, the free-flowing rum from the tourists had us indulging in more drinks. Eventually, we drifted off to sleep on the beach, only to awaken late and miss the 8:00 a.m. formation back at the base. We got there by 10:00 am. The second-in-command in that battalion was a youthful and slender lieutenant by the name of Frederic. He issued a directive for us to change into our crisp white uniforms. Without hesitation, we complied with his order. However, his next command took us by surprise as he instructed us to circumnavigate running around the main square not once, but a grueling 20 times.

My sailor instincts kicked in, and I couldn't help but protest. I pointed out that such forms of punishment were not customary on the ship. Onboard, our discipline issues were resolved through additional work duties, assigned at the end of our regular shifts. Lieutenant Frederic couldn't help but chuckle at my remark. To remind me of my new surroundings, he playfully delivered a swift kick to my right shin, emphasizing that the ship's rules were no longer in effect, and we were now obligated to follow his orders without question.

He was with a tall, stout, and ugly soldier and this soldier hit me with the back of his rifle on the left leg. They both laughed and murmured that we Navy men were just pussy bitches and no more. The lieutenant was angrier and shouted that he wanted us to run. We began to run around the square and every time I passed by them, the two took turns to hit me on the head calling me a faggot, sissy, gay, or Navy scoundrel. I was very angry at them. After we had finished the 20 laps. The lieutenant pushed me to the ground. He dismissed my other Navy friend and told me to do 20 push-ups. I looked at him with my fits closed. I wanted to hit him. I began to do the push-ups and he put his boot hard over my back saying that my push-ups were not the way a real man would do them. That I had to do them again. He kept on hitting me while I was on the floor. I finished the push-ups and he then wanted 20 more. I started to do them. He kneel down and screamed at me in the ear calling me freak and faggot. How do you like being a Navy sailor now? The marine soldier kicked me again. I was overly irritated. But I thought they were even angrier. I finished the push-ups and stood up faster. The lieutenant's furious tirade seemed unending, each word like a relentless assault on my patience. I reached my breaking point. Nearby, the fellow soldier had casually seated himself on a weathered bench, engrossed in tying the laces of one of his boots, with his rifle propped beside him.

In a moment of desperation, I couldn't endure the relentless yelling any longer. Fueled by anger and the overwhelming stress of the situation, I snapped. A sudden, impulsive fury surged through me, and I delivered a powerful punch to the lieutenant's face. His body crumpled and he hit the ground hard, his head connecting with an unforgiving thud. Without a second thought, I straddled him, raining down blows upon him.

In the midst of this chaotic confrontation, he fumbled for his .45-caliber pistol, drawing it in a desperate bid to regain control. Swiftly, I seized the weapon from his grasp, disarming him before he could react. They say that in moments of heightened stress and mortal peril, people can perform extraordinary feats to ensure their survival. My actions that day were a testament to that fact.

Raging with a unique blend of anger and anxiety, I found myself at a crossroads. There was no hesitation, no time for second thoughts. With a heavy heart, I fired a single shot that pierced the lieutenant's chest, the deafening blast echoing through the tumultuous air. In the heat of the moment, I raised the gun and took a shot, aiming straight for the soldier's abdomen. In that frenetic instant, my reflexes were quicker than his, and my bullet struck true. My heart was racing, and I couldn't help but shout defiantly, "Leave me alone, you imbeciles!"

A sense of urgency swept through the area as the other soldiers on duty hastily rushed to retrieve their firearms. Recognizing the dire need to escape, I made a dash for a nearby three-story building that housed various offices and administrative spaces. All the while, I continued to fire my weapon and unleash curses at the pursuing soldiers who were hell-bent on ending me.

Amid the chaos and my own tears, I ascended to the building's third floor, all the while engaged in a fierce exchange of gunfire with those who were determined to subdue me. From my vantage point, I fired back at the soldiers who were positioning themselves with their rifles. More fearless combat soldiers were there on the third floor and surely I fired the weapon at them eliminating the ones who happen to be confronting me.

However, the inevitable happened. My gun ran out of ammunition just as a soldier aimed his M-14 rifle at me. Fortunately for me, his firearm malfunctioned at that crucial moment. Acting quickly, I leaped over him, and together, we tumbled through a third-floor window, shattering it into a cascade of shards while falling down onto the ground. The impact was severe, and we both sustained significant injuries in the process.

In the aftermath of our harrowing fall from the third-floor window, chaos surrounded us. The soldier who had tumbled with me had sustained a head injury, a gaping wound that left him bloodied and unconscious. My own ordeal had left me with a deep cut on my neck, caused by the shattered glass from the window.

As I lay there, bleeding and disoriented, my gaze fixated on an enigmatic figure. He was a short, gray-haired man, his eyes carrying a profound sadness, as though he sought an explanation for my actions. Strangely, his presence offered me an unexpected sense of comfort.

With a heavy heart, I began to speak, confessing my regret and the desperate need I felt to escape my pursuers. The man, still wearing that mournful expression, imparted a wisdom that touched my soul. He conveyed that, no matter how dire the circumstances, the most virtuous course of action was to release the anger and seek forgiveness. He reminded me that others often acted out of ignorance, not fully comprehending the situation or the emotions that had consumed me.

Overwhelmed with remorse, I acknowledged the truth in his words. I expressed my profound regret for losing control, for succumbing to the blinding force of anger. Moved by my remorse, the little man approached me, his hands gently resting upon my head. The world around me blurred, and I drifted into unconsciousness, my last memory entwined with his touch and his message of forgiveness.

CHAPTER 5

IF NAVIGATING HAD BEEN MY LIFE.

I found myself transported back in time, the memories of my past experiences were muddled and elusive. Once more, I stood on the deck of our naval vessel as it approached our Pacific naval base. The anticipation of returning home for a well-deserved three-day weekend vacation gripped the entire crew. The exhilarating news rippled through the ship, raising the spirits of all on board.

Yet, the disheartening reality was that only a fortunate portion of the crew had the privilege to disembark, as others had incurred disciplinary infractions during our prolonged voyage. The stringent regimen and the constant scrutiny made maintaining perfect discipline for six consecutive months an arduous task. As my duty called me to remain aboard, a sense of isolation and discontent began to fester.

It wasn't long before the truth became painfully evident: the majority of those who had initially departed for their homecomings had no intention of returning. They were united in their decision to prolong their vacation, a deliberate act of defiance against the rigors of military life. Regrettably, a handful of us were compelled to extend our duty, a thankless task that only deepened my yearning for the sea, coupled with a growing disillusionment with the military's rigidness and inequitable punishments.

In the midst of this internal turmoil, one of my close comrades named Harold, confided in me that he had submitted his resignation from the Navy and was in the process of obtaining approval. He assured me that he could also assist in securing my resignation, along with an international navigation license card, leveraging his influential connections within the Naval headquarters in the capital. This proposition offered a glimmer of hope, a potential escape from the confines of the military force and an opportunity to continue my seafaring pursuits with newfound freedom.

As Harold unfolded his plan, he revealed a tantalizing opportunity – one of his uncles worked aboard a Japanese-flagged oil tanker and was more than willing to secure positions for both of us on that colossal vessel. The prospect of traversing the world's seas, delving into myriad cultures, encountering exotic women, and exploring remote places while indulging in the very thing I loved most, was nothing short of a dream come true. What's more, the promise of an enhanced salary only added to the elation that surged through my being, and the prospect of adding more conquests to my list was certainly enticing.

Harold’s connections were not mere conjecture – they were, in fact, two seductive ladies who held influential positions in the department that handled discharge requests for Navy personnel. With their assistance, we embarked on a journey to the capital, where I was introduced to Harold’s friends, being one of them his ex-lover. These captivating women both possessed a magnetic beauty. They graced the office environment in snug-fitting uniforms with miniskirts, which accentuated their curves and showcased their shapely legs.

Over time, our professional relationship evolved into deeper friendships, and after office hours, we would convene at exclusive bars to enjoy a drink or two, and on many occasions, passion sex overcame us, leading to amorous escapades with Harold’s friends. Occasionally, we ventured out with other lady acquaintances we had made at shopping centers, engaging in a thrilling exchange of sex partners that kindled novel sensations. These rendezvous sometimes witnessed Harold and I into entertaining both ladies at once while taking turns to relish our sex encounters.

Our time in the capital spanned two exhilarating months, with Harold’s girlfriend hastening the process of obtaining our discharge papers from the Navy. The women's influence, coupled with their remarkable prowess, expedited our applications for retirement from the Navy and acquisition of the requisite navigation license. This remarkable feat of receiving our discharge papers in just two months was an anomaly, as such processes typically endured for a protracted four to six months. It became abundantly clear that these ladies wielded a potent influence within the institution, ushering in a remarkable turn of events because of our fulfilled and splendid sexual encounters.

I was thrilled with the sexual meetings with this lady friend from the Navy offices and it was a source of immense delight, yet the allure of sailing on the oil tanker continued to beckon me. I was acutely aware that the expanse of international waters would introduce me to a multitude of intriguing women as I work aboard the globally navigating vessel.

However, the grand plan unraveled in the most unexpected way. A profound rupture erupted between my friend Harold and me when it came to light that I had engaged in a clandestine sexual liaison with his girlfriend. He vehemently expressed his disapproval and made it abundantly clear that he no longer wished for my presence in his life.

The genesis of this tumultuous episode was a serendipitous encounter with his girlfriend in the city center. The initial pretext for our rendezvous was to express my gratitude for her invaluable assistance in expediting our retirement procedures. However, beneath the veneer of pleasantries lay a potent undercurrent of desire. Her captivating figure, accentuated by the snug and short uniform she wore, had ignited in me an irresistible spark of attraction. It appeared that our sentiments were mutual, as she did not demur when I extended an invitation to a nearby motel to have sex.

The ensuing feud with Harold held little consequence for me, and I decided to remain in the capital. Unfortunately, the friendship with the ladies was an unfortunate casualty of this incident. Thankfully, a friend from the neighborhood, Fernando, whom I had aided before when he worked at the hardware store before my embarking on my Navy journey, came to my rescue. He had connections with a company owned by one of his relatives that was actively seeking sailors to join the crew of a tourist cruise ship.

The prerequisites for the role were clear – an international navigation license, proficiency in English, and enrollment in an Italian immersion course that was thoughtfully offered at a reasonable fee. This new opportunity held the promise of fresh beginnings and a tantalizing voyage filled with captivating experiences.

I eagerly accepted the opportunity, and two months later, I received a call to visit the US Embassy to secure my transit visa for the commencement of my work aboard the cruise ship.

A week after that phone call, I, along with three of other fellow sailors, found ourselves on a plane bound for New York, the city that never sleeps. As our plane touched down at John F. Kennedy Airport, it was nearly 10:00 p.m., yet the radiant sun was still casting its warm glow. Summer in the United States was a revelation to me, and I marveled at the vastness of the city, the pristine cleanliness, and the sheer beauty that surrounded us.

Eager to make new friends, I had heard tales of North American women who possessed an irresistible allure. Their charming smiles and uncomplicated style of dressing, it was said, could lead to spontaneous outings, even romance, within the span of a single day if the attraction was mutual. Excitedly, we explored New York's renowned 42nd Street and Times Square, venturing to a brothel with Colombian women, which one of my companions had discovered. After bidding a fond farewell to a friend from my city the night before, I couldn't resist another parting encounter before embarking on the ship.

The following morning, we were escorted to the grand vessel that was poised to set sail. Moored in the magnificent New York Harbor, the cruise ship was a sight to behold. With seven decks that soared above the water's surface and three submerged decks, it was a breathtaking sight. The ship's upper decks were reserved for the passengers, while the crew members occupied the last two decks below.

The ship was nothing short of extraordinary, boasting an array of amenities including elegant shops, a spacious gym, indulgent spa rooms, a top-tier beauty salon, four inviting swimming pools, a captivating casino, a movie theater, two lively nightclubs, two sumptuous restaurants, and two grand auditoriums. It was a floating five-star hotel, a dazzling oasis on the sea.

Our voyage was set for a 7-day cruise from the bustling New York City to the enchanting island of Bermuda. The journey began on a Sunday morning and promised to return us to New York by the following Saturday night. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by a seasoned Italian man who seemed to assume that we were already fluent in the Italian language. He barked orders at us in an Italian tongue that left me utterly perplexed. I expected him to speak in English, but he did otherwise.

My fellow workers kindly translated for me, helping me navigate the initial confusion. They handed me my work uniforms, and without further ado, I commenced my duties as a bathroom cleaner and ashtray emptier, accompanied by a jovial young man from the capital.

Onboard the ship, the crew comprised approximately 300 Italian men and 100 Colombian men. The hierarchy was unmistakable; all the superiors were of Italian origin, as the shipping company was proudly Italian.

My working hours spanned from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., and then I had the night shift from 9:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. It was not as grueling as one might think. My work partner, a diminutive and humorous fellow, sported straight, slightly long hair. He possessed a talent for engaging conversations and wasn't afraid to strike up a chat with the passengers. Although his English was far from perfect, he made himself understood.

Working in such close proximity to the ship's passengers allowed us to converse with them, providing an excellent opportunity to practice and refine our English skills. This was a top priority for me, and what made it even better was the chance to interact with some wonderful women on board. We charmed them, made them laugh, and indulged in playful flirting. This laid the groundwork for successfully wooing one or two of these lovely ladies, leading them to our cabin for intimate encounters.

Thanks to my proficiency in the English language, I had the privilege of meeting and getting intimate with numerous female passengers during my time on the ship. Most of my colleagues had limited knowledge of English, which worked to my advantage because the ladies loved when I complimented them nicely when they asked me to translate for them. Finally, the girls ended up in my cabin since they also wanted to be able to exchange conversations .

On September of the same year, the cruise ship was due for maintenance, and consequently, the majority of the crew members were sent back to their homes. The ship was scheduled to be in Newport News, Virginia, for two months. However, I, along with the three other individuals who had journeyed with me, remained on board to assist the maintenance team, having just joined the ship a few months earlier.

Our working hours were from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., with a coffee break at 10:00 a.m. and lunch at 1:00 p.m. We comprised a team of around 12 people and were engaged in a range of tasks, including changing all the carpets on the ship, repairing the upholstery of chairs and sofas, and participating in a thorough interior cleaning.

In the evenings, we would unwind at a nearby bar, where billiards was a favored pastime, and we'd savor a beer or two. The establishment also featured two vivacious and alluring performers who put on captivating pole-dancing displays without their tops, adorning their nipples with dainty artificial flowers. These talented artists enraptured our attention, and we took turns enjoying private dances. In a surprising turn of events, one of them even agreed to spend the night with a friend and me, adding a remarkable chapter to my already adventurous experiences.

We continued to indulge in the thrills of our adventurous trysts, revisiting that tantalizing threesome encounter four more times. During the final two rendezvous, the charismatic woman graciously declined payment, claiming that she had experienced the most exquisite pleasure in years. We wholeheartedly agreed that it had been an unparalleled experience.

As our time on the ship neared its end, this captivating woman, whom we had grown close to, invited us to her apartment. There, she prepared a delightful dinner for us, setting the stage for a memorable evening. In the comfort of her bathtub, we shared passionate intimacy twice that night, a fitting farewell that left an indelible mark. The memory of that last encounter still fills me with excitement whenever I recall it.

Drawing from my proficiency in English, the cruise liner's main manager asked about my preferred work section for the upcoming cruises. I expressed my desire to work in the restaurant, and he readily granted my request. Following the ship's maintenance period, we set sail to the enchanting city of Fort Lauderdale in Florida, where we prepared for an approximately two-month-long cruise for the winter season in the United States. At this time of year, temperatures in the northern regions plummet, prompting shipping companies to launch cruises from Florida. These two-month voyages took us through the picturesque Caribbean islands and allowed us to explore numerous ports in Central America.

Fort Lauderdale, in all its splendor, is a remarkable destination in the United States. The city boasts an ever-present sun and a gentle breeze, offering a warm climate without the extremities that can detract from one's well-being. Its bustling streets teem with cheerful tourists, while its expansive white sand beaches glisten in the sunlight. The city is truly a paradise, beloved by both locals and visitors alike. It's worth noting that I took the opportunity to visit some of the city's brothels before embarking on our two-month cruise. Despite the predominantly elderly and retired passengers, the ship was fully prepared for the extended winter journeys.

Working as busboys in the restaurant, my fellow Colombian colleague and I embraced the demanding but rewarding nature of our roles. The attractiveness of generous tips by the old passengers provided ample motivation for our hard work.

My journey allowed me to forge connections with a diverse array of individuals, honing my English language skills and granting me the privilege of indulging in the most sophisticated culinary delights. While the crew's meals were undeniably delectable, boasting an Italian menu, we often had the chance to savor the diverse and sumptuous dishes from the passenger menu as we were the ones delivering them. The shifts were longer, but the work itself never posed a challenge for me. I diligently labored from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., resumed my duties from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m., and completed my day's work from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. In addition to the tips, the experience allowed us to explore enchanting and exotic destinations.

Our journey led us to charming and exotic islands like Saint Kitts, Saint Marteen, Martinique, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Curacao, Aruba, Saint Tomas, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Barbados. We also made port in stunning locations such as Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Acapulco, Costa Rica, Panama City, and numerous other awe-inspiring places.

As the ship's passenger demographic skewed older, opportunities for romantic encounters on board became scarce. In response, I took it upon myself to maintain my reputation as a lover by engaging in liaisons with local women at each of these exotic destinations. Be it through chance encounters on the beach or, when necessary, with women employed as local prostitutes, my desire for intimacy was frequently sated. The excitement of passion remained an ever-present companion during this enchanting voyage.

Upon the arrival of spring, our cruise route shifted to a 7-day journey from New York City to Bermuda. These shorter cruises brought their own beauty, as we had the pleasure of serving a new set of passengers each week. The passengers were generally younger compared to those of the winter cruises, and most opted to skip the restaurant for breakfast and lunch. However, come dinnertime, our restaurant was bustling with eager guests. The abundance of delectable cuisine and beverages across the ship ensured that no one went hungry or thirsty.

After concluding my dinner shift, a newfound routine saw me visiting the crew members' bar. There, I'd enjoy a couple of Gin and Tonics before turning in for the night or before embarking on an intimate rendezvous with a woman passenger on board, or one of the daughters of passengers I had the pleasure of serving in the restaurant. Each week, I found myself in the company of a different young woman, with my affections directed primarily towards those I knew to be of an appropriate age. The younger passengers, although alluring, preferred to take things slowly and were not inclined to engage in immediate liaisons. Furthermore, instances of fellow crew members being dismissed for involvement with underage passengers served as a cautionary tale, and I was keen to preserve my job.

As a result of my charismatic and hardworking demeanor, coupled with my knack for forging connections with diners at my station, several fathers began to recommend me to their daughters as a promising match. On one memorable occasion, a proud father introduced me to his 18-year-old daughter, a striking young woman with long, blonde hair and a slender figure. I found her to be captivatingly beautiful, and her shy smile betrayed her affections. That night, we exchanged countless glances and smiles, quickly realizing that we were more than just friends. I extended an invitation to my cabin, which she accepted with no hesitation, already aware of the passionate night that awaited us. This enchanting connection flourished throughout the rest of the cruise, and by the journey's end, she confessed her love for me, even hinting at the prospect of marriage.

I explained to her that, for numerous reasons, we couldn't pursue marriage. Despite the geographical distance that separated us, we maintained our connection by exchanging love letters filled with stories of our sexual encounters and tantalizing erotic fantasies for future rendezvous. These letters featured passionate nude photographs of her in various sensual poses, heightening the desire that simmered between us.

To bridge the gap of physical distance, I called her whenever we docked in port, particularly in New York. These calls allowed her to describe her intimate caresses, narrating them in explicit detail, while I listened, consumed by desire. This combination of emails and sexual phone conversations became our lifeline, ensuring our relationship thrived despite the ocean that separated us.

As time passed, a sense of urgency crept in, and I hinted that we could no longer bear the agony of separation. The need to feel her naked body and shower her with endless kisses had become overwhelming. I confessed that I had already become involved with other girls, which was partly true, as my interactions with different women on a weekly basis had begun to eclipse my feelings for her.

One particularly intriguing episode transpired when I served as a busboy at the table of a newlywed couple who were ostensibly on their honeymoon. The groom, who appeared to be around 30 years of age, exhibited an air of instability. He constantly muttered disapproving remarks to correct his wife, reflecting possessiveness and insecurity. He was noticeably jealous and protective of her.

His bride, on the other hand, was a captivating young woman in her early twenties, of modest stature yet gracefully slender, with proportions that were astonishingly symmetrical in her bust, waist, and hips. She possessed striking features, including big, captivating green eyes, long brown hair, and a beguiling smile framed by plump, tempting lips. She consistently wore form-fitting clothing that accentuated her enchanting and harmonious figure.

I couldn't resist stealing glances at her, and she quickly noticed. To my delight, she welcomed my advances with ease. The sensation of accidentally brushing against her hand or other parts of her body, however fleetingly, was exhilarating. Her temptingness was irresistible, and while I had been intimate with married women on the ship before, it was an entirely different experience to be involved with a married woman whose husband was also on board.

Remarkably, she agreed and reciprocated, indulging in playful and enticing gestures and expressions. We exchanged secret messages on small slips of paper, relishing the thrill of these covert and sensual encounters. These moments of discreet caresses filled with longing were an exquisite and electrifying secret shared only between us.

One evening, while I savored my second Gin and Tonic on the secluded aft deck reserved for the crew members, she approached me with a captivating attractiveness. Dressed sensually in a sheer silk blouse and jean shorts, she exuded an ethereal beauty that left me breathless. Our eyes met, and I took her hand, guiding her to a dimly lit corner of the deck where the moon's gentle glow added an air of enchantment to the moment.

She confided in me, her words tinged with vulnerability, about her husband's cruel and abusive behavior. Tears welled up in her eyes as she recounted the instances when he had struck her, leaving both physical and emotional scars. Her voice quivered as she revealed the turmoil within her, her longing for freedom, and her fear of the potential consequences of leaving him.

With unwavering sincerity, I assured her of my firm support and offered to stand by her side whenever she needed me. Her gratitude was palpable, and with a heavy sigh of relief, she shared her desire to escape the torment she endured by finding solace in my embrace. She expressed her intention to divorce her husband once they returned to their hometown, yearning for the day when she could cast off the shackles of this oppressive relationship and begin a new.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and I instinctively drew her into a comforting embrace again. Our bodies pressed together, and her enchanting fragrance filled my senses, extending my desire. Gently, I traced my right hand through her wavy hair until my fingertips brushed her delicate neck. With tenderness, I placed a subtle kiss on her cheek, a mere prelude to the deeper passions that stirred between us. She responded with an invitation, offering her voluptuous, crimson lips in a suggestive display of desire.

Her words conveyed an ardent longing, a fervor matched only by my own ungoverned hungriness. In a hushed whisper, I expressed my eagerness to make her mine that very night, to quench the fiery thirst that had ignited between us. I alluded to the potential salve of our union—a respite from her husband's abuse, and for me, the profound fulfillment of claiming her as my own.

Our kisses burned with an intensity that defied restraint, and with deft fingers, I undid the buttons of her sheer silk blouse to reveal her pert, rosy nipples. My lips posed on their perky nipples, dancing with fervor and devotion as she elicited soft moans of ecstasy. Beneath the veil of her jean shorts, I discovered she was not wearing undies and felt the intoxicating warmth of her arousal lower lips, already moist with anticipation. Slowly, I peeled away her shorts, my tongue exploring her fiery organ, savoring her intoxicating essence. Her soft moans increased, as my own fervor to a fever pitch did too.

Moments later, I picked her up by her wiggly, shapely legs and sat her on my lap to gently penetrate her connected into a harmonious rhythm. The act of love was a long-awaited symphony, a dance of desire and connection, with our movements perfectly synchronized. We remained joined as one, the world slipping away in passion, and no words were needed to convey the intensity of our shared experience.

Minutes later, we returned to land after that powerful sexual encounter. Finally, I confessed the truth—my longing for her had been ignited from the very moment I had laid eyes on her.

The next night, she came again. She was splendidly dressed in a low-cut black dress that showed off her curvy and outlined body. She wasn't wearing underwear again since I had recommended it to her and she wanted to make me feel excited just by knowing it. That eagerly increased a passionate anticipation in both of us. Having had three gin and tonics, my head was spinning as we ventured to the same secluded corner where our passion had ignited the night before.

We resumed our game of caresses and kisses, exploring each other's familiar desires. After several tantalizing moments, she fervently expressed her desire to provide oral pleasure, an invitation I welcomed with eagerness. After a few minutes, I rewarded her in the same way and we subtly engaged in our sexual encounter until we mutually reached climax. After we finished having sex, we kissed and then walked holding hands.

Yet, in the midst of our reverie, I thought I glimpsed the short, gray-haired man at the edge of the deck. Suddenly, an electrical shock coursed through my head because an agonizing impact with a wooden stick strongly hit me, and then, I was propelled overboard by the furious husband which his jealousy and desperation drove him to madness. As I was flying out of the boat, I could see he knocked her out too.

As soon as I plunged into the icy embrace of the Atlantic Ocean, fear and helplessness enveloped me. My desperate cries for aid echoed in vain as the majestic ship continued its unhurried journey, utterly indifferent to my plight. The gnome reappeared, a whimsical specter beside me, and he posed a question that cut to the core. He inquired about the lessons I had gleaned from this awful turn of events, and in my disoriented state, I confessed ignorance, unsure of my transgressions.

With an enigmatic smile, the gnome enlightened me. He pointed out that I had shown a lack of respect for women, that my unrestrained lust had dominated my priorities, overshadowing other facets of human connection. The gravity of my actions washed over me, and I offered my heartfelt apologies and remorse about my carnal desires. But the inexorable pull of the dark waters overwhelmed me, and as consciousness part me away, the gnome extended a hand, grabbed me with a smile upon his lips.

CHAPTER 6

IF A TECHNICAL CAREER HAD BEEN MY LIFE.

Transported through time, I found myself at a crossroads where past experiences blurred, yet the prospect of a new chapter beckoned. Having spent two years aboard a ship, I faced a pivotal decision as winter cruises approached. The idea of continuing maritime adventures waned, and a different journey unfolded.

My compass pointed to Miami, the starting line for my voyage to New York City. There, amidst the towering skyline, I reunited with my cousin Julio and his wife Noira, plus Diego and his sister with her boyfriend all of whom offer me refuge. Their abode, a tiny cozy studio apartment on Delancey Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, brimmed with warmth and the hum of ambition.

Within those modest walls, Diego, studying medicine, and Diana, delving into psychology at New York City College, crafted their destinies. Meanwhile, J, Diana's boyfriend and a student at La Guardia Community College, added his unique chord to the symphony of aspirations. Diego, the sage of the household, advocated for higher education, urging me to seize the academic mantle. But my soul yearned for a respite, a pause before the next chapter unfolded. As nightfall painted the city in hues of neon, I retraced my path to the snug studio apartment. A space so intimate that we all found solace on the floor because of the lack space since six people were now inhabiting it. Even though we were constantly sharing dreams, laughter, and the promise of tomorrow, encapsulated in the embrace of a city that never ceased to captivate, After some persuasion days, J and I ventured into the bustling tapestry of Queens, where we uncovered a spacious basement residence in Jackson Heights. The sprawling expanse boasted not one but two rooms, a haven for our aspirations. Immersing myself in the pulsating rhythm of the city that never sleeps, I reveled in the diversity of New York City. From the enchanting Greenwich Village to the iconic Broadway Avenue and the riverside streets near the Hudson, each corner whispered tales of a global tapestry. Yet, my penchant for leisure prevailed over pedestrian strides, leading me to embrace the city on the back of a 500 cc motorcycle, traversing the five boroughs with the wind as my companion. For me, the joy of having my motorcycle added a touch of liberation to the tiring walks.

Yet, this shift in lifestyle ushered in a subtle choreography of responsibilities. Washing dishes and maintaining the space became our shared duties, a canvas where the brushstrokes of routine added texture to our days. Admittedly, my enthusiasm for domestic tasks was lacking, and the prospect of toiling over them seemed like an Everest to conquer. So, in a stroke of practicality, I enlisted someone to undertake these chores on my behalf when duty called.

Morning rituals like brewing coffee were left untouched by my hands, for the intricacies of the process eluded my interest. Instead, the vibrant streets of New York became my culinary haven. Ready-made coffee from street vendors, coupled with a smorgasbord of fast-food delights—hamburgers, hot dogs, and the flavors of Chinese cuisine—became my culinary compass.

As months waltzed by in the comfort of our basement sanctuary, the echoes of financial reality reverberated. The cushion of savings from my maritime stint dwindled, prompting a tough decision. The cherished motorcycle, symbolizing freedom on wheels, had to make way for a practical yet begrudging reliance on subway commutes. The idea of trading asphalt for subway platforms wasn't exactly thrilling, but necessity, with its pragmatic whisper, prevailed.

In the heart of Manhattan's vibrant pulse, my journey took an unexpected turn as I stumbled upon waiter job in a charming restaurant of a cozy hotel. This gem of a hotel revealed itself as a sanctuary for both the weary traveler and, surprisingly, for me.

Under the stewardship of a charismatic Frenchman who commanded the restaurant with finesse, my reluctance to embrace the morning hustle found a harmonious compromise. The thought of not rising with the sun became a reality, as I persuaded the French maestro to grant me a role during the leisurely lunch hours and the enchanting evenings offering room service.

As I found my rhythm in the kitchen, orchestrating room service orders with culinary finesse, the perks of the job became apparent. A delightful bonus for someone not inclined to culinary endeavors – free lunches and dinners, courtesy of the hotel's kitchen. Amidst the culinary symphony, I forged unexpected friendships. A spirited bartender from Poland and a genial doorman from Egypt became my companions in this cosmopolitan journey.

The bartender, a literary aficionado, opened a gateway to a new world for me. Introduced to the magic of reading, courtesy of a Stephen King book lent by my newfound friend, I became a literary wanderer. The book became my constant companion, transforming mundane moments into literary escapes. As the pages turned, a newfound tranquility enveloped my nights, and the joy of sleeping in became an indulgence I cherished.

In the nexus of Manhattan's charm and the warmth of newfound friendships, my days unfolded in a captivating dance of flavors, stories, and the simple pleasure of reveling in the luxury of restful slumber.

In the midst of the hotel's daily bustle, I made friends with a maintenance wizard man who became a gateway to a different life—one with fewer toils and more government checks. He recommended me to set out on a path to legal residency in the United States.

He pleasantly introduce me to Gina, a captivating woman from Puerto Rico with an irresistible charm. In a unique arrangement, we forged a union, a marriage that promised not just legal standing but the potential for financial reprieve. The transaction carried a weighty exchange, a monetary commitment to ease the burdens on Gina's shoulders, for she was a mother of two, recently untethered from the complexities of separation.

Gina's was a vision of beauty, a slim brunette with a guitar-like silhouette. Her long, wavy hair framed eyes that sparkled with a mesmerizing light brown hue. Her wardrobe, a testament to sensuality, draped her in attractiveness, turning heads wherever she went. I was trapped by her allure and I fell for her.

As our unconventional partnership unfolded, nights ignited with passion and fervor. Nevertheless, the flames of our connection flickered against the backdrop of Gina's fiery temperament. Arguments, like tempests, stirred over the horizon, disrupting the tranquility I sought. Gina's attempts to assert authority and assign domestic duties unsettled the delicate balance, encroaching on the sanctuary of rest that I held dear. Despite the turbulence, my attraction to Gina deepened. An intricate dance ensued, where the exchange of sensual caresses became a currency for shared responsibilities. The nuances of our connection, however, began to wear thin as Gina's maneuvers to manipulate time and tasks disrupted the rhythm of my moments of repose. The request to care for her daughters, while noble, encroached upon my coveted moments of relaxation, leaving me torn between desire and the pursuit of much-needed time out. In the realm of academic pursuits, my enthusiasm for university was lackluster at best. However, a fortuitous encounter with John, a Peruvian engineer with a penchant for Colombian charm, infused a spark of opportunity into my educational journey. John, driven by a dual passion for academia and companionship, generously offered free classes in mathematics, trigonometry, and English reading comprehension, a lifeline for those aspiring to conquer the daunting university entrance exams.

Beyond the altruistic veneer, John hinted at a shortcut to college admission, leveraging his connections in exchange of a certain financial investment. His motivations were clear—helping aspiring minds while fostering connections with Colombian beauties. An engineer of the New York subway system by day, John skillfully wove promises of enrollment into the fabric of our dreams, especially for the four-year systems engineering program.

However, my gaze lingered elsewhere, veering toward a more expeditious path. Electro-mechanical technology, a two-year program with the promise of swift entry into the professional realm, beckoned me. With determination in my stride, I tackled the enrollment test, paving my way into the halls of the New York City Community College of Technology on Jay Street.

Amidst the buzzing corridors of knowledge, I embraced the allure of a practical education that promised not just academic achievement but a rapid ascent into the realm of technicians. As the doors of opportunity swung open, I stepped into the realm of electro-mechanical wonders, ready to sculpt a future where the hum of machinery and the thrill of innovation would be my guiding companions.

Engineer John, our benevolent guide in the realm of academia, not only steered us toward knowledge but also orchestrated a dance with the city's bureaucracy to secure financial aid for our pursuit of education. Positioned as members of a minority group, we navigated the bureaucratic maze to unlock financial support, a lifeline that came with a modest trade-off—a percentage for our mentor, John. The investment, though small, paved the way for a future illuminated by the glow of both learning and financial assistance.

As my academic journey unfolded, the demands of the classroom forced me to bid farewell to the hotel. Undeterred, I ventured into the labyrinth of opportunity, finding refuge in the university's job placement office. A serendipitous connection led me to a part-time position at an appliance store nestled in the heart of Brooklyn. This emporium of electronic wonders held a unique government contract to install air conditioners in municipal offices, adding a layer of civic responsibility to its retail charm.

My initiation into the workforce commenced as a cleaning person, an entry point that may not have been glamorous but certainly marked the beginning of my professional voyage. The canvas of my responsibilities unfurled in the chaotic tapestry of the store's basement, a repository of forgotten materials and spare parts. Undeterred by the disorder, I dedicated myself to the task, orchestrating a transformation from chaos to order in the depths of that storage abyss.

Two months of meticulous effort birthed a basement reborn, a testament to my dedication. Eager for new challenges, I eagerly embraced a shift in roles. Now, I found myself side by side with a fellow worker, navigating the city streets on appliance deliveries or scaling heights to install air conditioners. The tangible products of my labor transformed the once mundane store into a hub of both commerce and communal service, each delivery and installation a step toward a more appealing and industrious future.

Embarking on a journey that intertwined the heartbeat of New York City with the hum of appliances, I found myself in a role where every delivery held the promise of transforming households. From refrigerators to stoves and washing machines, I became a conduit for the infusion of modern convenience into the fabric of the city.

Yet, the challenge lay in the city's aging structures, most bereft of elevators. Undeterred, my fellow workers and I embraced the physical demands, maneuvering hand carts up narrow staircases to deliver the coveted appliances. The boss, wise in his counsel, added a touch of finesse to our deliveries—requesting a broom at each stop to leave behind not just an appliance but a spotless space.

Admittedly, my approach to the cleaning task was more measured, a product of reluctance and perhaps a touch of laziness. I preferred to focus on my expertise, assuring customers that their new acquisitions would be properly installed, encouraging them to return after the transformation was complete.

As the seasons changed, so did the dynamics of my work. During vacations, the boss entrusted me to operate independently, a testament to my versatility. Amidst my colleagues' attempts to upstage, I carved a niche for myself, emphasizing a slower but meticulous approach.

The rhythm of my life took an unexpected turn when my boss broadened my horizons. From appliance deliveries, I transitioned into the realm of air conditioner installation, a skill that soon defined me within the workshop. The feedback from satisfied customers became a melody, a testament to my ability to transform living spaces with both efficiency and precision.

In the midst of change, an invitation from my dear friend Juan Carlos, residing in Providence, Rhode Island, beckoned me toward a new horizon. He wanted us to go to Texas where houses were sold at a very low price. Tempting as it was, I explained I was doing well and that I had other plans. However, the idea of affordable homes in Texas, a potential canvas for realizing the American dream was not far from my mind. While Juan Carlos awaited my decision with unwavering patience, the prospect of future endeavors lingered, casting an intriguing shadow on the canvas of possibilities.

On the flip side, the complications with Gina, fueled by her ulterior motives, led to a decisive move. One day, seizing a moment of solitude, I gathered my belongings and bid adieu to that chapter.

In the heart of Jackson Heights, I carved out a tranquil haven in a small basement nestled within the walls of an old house. Eager to secure the space, I made a promise to the landlord—a pledge to remedy the house's electrical woes without charging a penny. The commitment paved the way for solitude, an oasis in the midst of the city's hustle.

Alone, but content, I embraced the wisdom of the old saying: "Sometimes it's better to be alone than in bad company." Despite a penchant for a less diligent and tidy lifestyle, my sanctuary exuded a certain charm. An easy life was my pursuit, and messy quarters became an eccentric reflection of my pursuit of tranquility.

Saved funds allowed me to trade the subway waits for the freedom of a vintage car, a relic from days gone by. Living in Queens, the daily commute from Brooklyn was no longer a tedious affair.

As the academic journey unfolded, financial aid dwindled, a testament to the decent salary I earned. The thought of dropping out flirted with my mind, but my cousin's persuasion and the relatively relaxing student schedule kept me tethered. Eventually, the diploma in electro-mechanical technology became my ticket to the maintenance department of a hospital, where I opted for the nocturnal hours—9:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. A choice fueled by a disdain for early mornings and the blissful absence of bosses during the night shift.

My duties were far from exhaustive—changing light bulbs and fixing minor short circuits. In moments of idle nights, I extended a helping hand to nurses with simple requests, warding off the specter of boredom. The gentle nature of the work allowed for naps, my own private interludes of 40 minutes or more.

Post-shift, a ritual unfolded—two or three gin and tonics paired with the enchanting tales of Stephen King. This concoction acted as a portal to swift slumber, from 7:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. The day unfurled in a slow ballet—leftover refrigerator delights, perhaps some takeout, followed by a leisurely interlude in bed and a rendezvous with the television. Weekends offered no relief, but my one day off was embraced with the luxury of sleeping straight through the night until noon.

The thought of hiring help to tidy my residence lingered, a perpetual item on the to-do list that always managed to be postponed. In the gentle cadence of my daily routine, I found solace, a rhythm that danced to the beat of my own contentment.

One Saturday morning, after a particularly grueling night at the hospital that felt like a Herculean effort, I stumbled home at 8:00 a.m., utterly exhausted. Seeking solace, I deviated from my usual routine and indulged in three more gin and tonic drinks than usual. As I collapsed into bed, the clock striking 9:00 a.m., a gentle dizziness from the gin enveloped me, making the journey into sleep a welcome episode.

In the hazy embrace of slumber, the TV flickered to life, revealing a whimsical gnome cartoon. The meaning eluded me, but in my fatigued state, I cared not, leaving the screen aglow in the dim room.

Little did I know that this serene Saturday would take a harrowing turn. Neglecting the wiring issues in my house, a short circuit ignited a blaze, unbeknownst to me in my intoxicated stupor. I awoke, coughing from the toxic gases, to a scene of engulfing flames. Panic set in as I realized my incapacitation – unable to stand, trapped in the very place I called home.

In the surreal chaos, the gnome from the cartoon appeared in a far corner, an unexpected guide in this unforeseen ordeal. As I pleaded for understanding, the gnome implored me to reflect on the things left undone, a stark revelation of my own laziness. The gravity of my attitude hit me like a tidal wave.

A realization swept over me – I was ensnared not just physically but by the very character trait that had defined my existence: laziness. Struggling for freedom, I grappled with the consequences of my negligence. In the midst of the encroaching flames, the gnome's words lingered, a poignant reminder of the price paid for a life left unchecked.

With my final breaths, I confessed to the gnome, a spectral guide in this fiery tempest, my profound regret for the careless attitude and indolence that had defined me. As consciousness waned, a sensation of being carried enveloped me, a surreal journey into the unknown, a testament to the profound impact of choices left unmade.

CHAPTER 7

IF DRIVING A TRUCK HAD BEEN MY LIFE

Transported through time, my memories blurred like the edges of a dream, leaving me with a sense of disconnection from recent experiences. Somehow I was back in the Puerto Rican’s place.

The catalyst for this temporal journey was a call from my cousin, Juan Carlos, and his alluring proposal. Struggling to piece together the events leading up to this moment, fragments of a dream about a fire lingered, ethereal and elusive.

Haunted by accusations and endless scoldings, I made a resolute decision to distance myself from the Puerto Rican girl. Despite being enamored with her, the relentless cycle of accusations and her dalliances with other men on weekends became untenable. Although I would miss her tantalizing dishes, one day, seizing an opportunity when she was absent, I took out and sold my sole possession—the television—packed my belongings, and boarded a bus bound for Providence, Rhode Island.

The city welcomed me with open arms, its grandeur evident in wide, clean streets and light traffic. Friendly faces adorned with perpetual smiles marked a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of my previous existence in New York city. The air felt cleaner, the sky more vividly blue, a testament to the change I craved.

Securing time off from my job, I shared my plans with my understanding boss, who did not object to my departure. My cousin, Juan Carlos, greeted me eagerly, leading me to their spacious duplex home. The generosity extended to a delightful dinner at a Portuguese restaurant in Warwick, where New England Clam Chowder danced on my palate, a precursor to my newfound love for the region's cuisine.

Embarking on a fresh chapter, I secured a job at a local factory in Cranston, Rhode Island, seamlessly transferring my undergraduate program to the Community College of Rhode Island. The camaraderie with classmates blossomed through shared sports, with baseball and soccer binding us together.

My appetite expanded in tandem with my newfound love for the delectable New England cuisine. Unbeknownst to me, the culinary indulgences were mirrored by a stealthy weight gain, a detail I brushed aside in the belief that nourishment was essential for excelling in work and studies. The enchantment of Providence, coupled with the flavors of the region, set the stage for a life where growth transcended the boundaries of time and place.

In the middle of the backdrop of a seemingly wonderful life, Juan Carlos and I were more than ready to travel down south to pursue the opportunity of owning our dream house. We chip in to buy an old but sturdy red delivery truck, transforming it into our makeshift haven on wheels to drive all the way down to Texas. Equipping our red chariot with two air mattresses and stocking it with an eclectic array of groceries—canned delights, loaves of bread, soft drinks, beer, myriad packets of chips, and more—we embarked on a cross-country journey with a singular destination in mind: Houston, Texas. The attraction laid in the abundance of abandoned houses, a consequence of the oil-induced recession, with banks uncertain about what to do with these neglected properties. The prospect of affordable homes beckoned, and we set forth with a modest sum of $5,000, determined to secure a dwelling and build a life.

As we navigated the highways to Houston, the trip unfolded like an epic adventure. Frequent stops every two or three hours introduced us to the delectable flavors of each city or town we passed by. The spacious van doubled as our shelter, providing lodging after long drives, while the bathrooms in free rest areas served as impromptu sanctuaries. Beer flowed, compensating for the hours spent behind the wheel and adding an element of camaraderie that kept our spirits high.

Our journey wasn't merely a physical one; it was an array for dreams and plans. The vision encompassed working with the truck for a home delivery service, saving money by sleeping in our van until the house purchase materialized. Our ambition pivoted around rejuvenating neglected houses, a task we were no strangers to from our days working on house projects in New York City.

The road stretched before us like an open book, each page filled with the promise of opportunity. As we traversed through cities and landscapes, the thrill of the unknown blended seamlessly with the purposeful pursuit of a better life. In the van, our mobile haven, dreams of renovation, adaptation, and settling down unfolded, turning a humble delivery truck into a vessel of aspirations hurtling toward the horizon.

Our arrival in Houston marked the end of a two-day journey filled with laughter, camaraderie, and a sense of adventure that clung to every mile. The vibrant city unfolded before us, and we settled in the enchanting southwest area, parking our van near the bustling Bellaire Boulevard.

Juan Carlos conveniently started working with the van in a delivery service company while I found purpose in the rhythmic hustle of a good restaurant that I started working in. It was situated near Richmond Avenue. From 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and then again from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., I diligently tackled the dish-washing duties. The chef, a generous soul, kick-started my day with a hearty breakfast, setting the stage for a culinary odyssey. By 1:30, I savored a large, delectable lunch, and at 5:30, a quick dinner. Finally, at 10:00 p.m., after the bustling restaurant hours, I reveled in another succulent dinner. A routine that, two months later, bore witness to an extra 10 kilos on my frame— a testament to the irresistible flavors that adorned my daily existence. Attempts at morning exercises persisted, albeit without a suitable space to call my own.

As the search for an affordable house proved elusive, a small studio apartment became our sanctuary a month later. Nestled in the southwest's rhythm, it housed a cozy living area that seamlessly transitioned into my sleeping quarters, strategically adjacent to the kitchen for late-night snacking without disturbing my cousin, Juan Carlos.

A twist of fate presented an opportunity at the restaurant— a waiter's position lay vacant. My vast experience in waiting tables made the transition seamless. The new schedule, working from Sunday to Saturday with Mondays off, brought a welcome change.

Fortunately, I encountered Angela, a Salvadoran enchantress. Tall and medium-built, with cascading black hair, she exuded warmth and stood as an exemplary mother to her seven-year-old son, Pablo. Beyond her captivating aura, Angela's culinary prowess captured my heart. Six months later, I took a leap, moving in with her, finding harmony in the shared rhythm of our lives. The enchanting cadence of Houston echoed the joyous symphony of newfound love and promising beginnings.

On a vibrant Sunday shift at the restaurant, I had the pleasure of serving a distinguished family from the bustling streets of Mexico City. I met Emiliano, a man of many talents—businessman and film producer and his gracious wife, Emilia, a quintessential homemaker. Their pockets overflowed with affluence, and their daughter, the charming Emily, added a sprinkle of youthful exuberance to their lives.

Emiliano, with his resolute stance on not learning English, seemed unaffected by the prospect of settling in the United States. Yet, a unique bond blossomed between us as we discovered a shared passion for gastronomic delights. Our connection deepened into an extraordinary friendship, fueled by our mutual love for the delectable offerings of the restaurant. Together, we reveled in the artistry of the menu, savoring every delicacy crafted with precision. Pastries, my personal forte, became a delightful bridge between us. As a token of appreciation, I often treated them to slices of the exquisite cakes I had learned to master, saving extra for my own indulgence during breaks.

Sunday brunch became a cherished tradition for Emiliano and his family, and I became their go-to server, ensuring they not only received exceptional service but also relished the richly flavored dishes the restaurant had to offer. The term "brunch" took on a special meaning as we blended breakfast and lunch between 9 and 11 a.m., creating a culinary experience that delighted the senses.

Beyond the confines of the restaurant, our camaraderie extended to Emiliano's spacious mansion in Sugar Land, Texas. There, I often transformed into a culinary maestro, conjuring up chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, or apple cakes, perfectly complemented by yellow rice, fried green plantain, and grilled meats. Our friendship became a tapestry woven with shared moments of culinary artistry and heartfelt conversations.

Emiliano, generous to the core, welcomed me into his business and family circles. Invitations to business meetings turned into opportunities for me to showcase my baking prowess, culminating in post-meal aperitifs that added a perfect finale to our gatherings. He introduced me not just as a server but as a cherished friend, granting me access to influential circles in Mexico City. Our connection, nurtured by a love for good food and shared experiences, transcended the boundaries of a typical patron-server relationship, unveiling a tapestry of friendship woven with the rich flavors of life.

Those exclusive invitations opened doors to a world of glamour and influence, allowing me to mingle with politicians and high society in Mexico. The best part? We didn't just hobnob; we created culinary masterpieces together, feasting like royalty. Full disclosure—I have a voracious appetite, and the lavish spreads Emiliano, his wife, and their daughter treated us to were beyond delightful.

As life's unpredictable currents flowed, my cousin had to rush back to our hometown due to his mother's serious illness. In a heartbeat, I agreed to let him take our saved money; family always comes first. Simultaneously, I transitioned from the restaurant scene to the open road, working on the truck. The new gig started at 8:00 a.m., whisking me through bustling streets until the late afternoon, and I reveled in the freedom of being outdoors, surrounded by the city's energy. And let's not forget the perks—easy access to my favorite fast-food joints.

Breakfast, a sacred ritual orchestrated by my girlfriend, didn't quite satisfy my insatiable hunger. By 9:30 a.m., I'd indulge in another hearty breakfast. Lunch, a feast of two double cheeseburgers, an apple pie, and a large soda, became my daily spectacle at noon. The 3:00 p.m. break brought donuts and coffee into the mix. The result? A burgeoning 20-kilo addition to my frame. Concerned, my girlfriend voiced her worries about our relationship and my health. I promised change, determined to shed the extra weight for her and our love.

A couple of months later, an offer from a coworker called my attention. He had a 14-ton Ford truck with a tailgate lift.He could not continue with the truck’s debt so he proposed me to take over it. The decision to upgrade turned out to be a jackpot. Bigger delivery loads meant more money and with a larger truck, I doubled down on my earnings. A win-win decision. Besides, I had more time to savor delectable bites on the go, turning my truck into a rolling gastronomic adventure. Each delivery brought not just profit but also the satisfaction of enjoying mouthwatering treats along the way. The road, now paved with larger possibilities, became a culinary journey I relished every moment of.

The truck became my second home, a rolling sanctuary filled with treasures. Inside the truck’s cabin, I had a small fridge stocked with beers and soft drinks, a trusty basket for impromptu donut or French fries, and coffee thermos for the road. Texas heat demanded the occasional soda or beer during my journeys, but I always had my coffee companion by my side. I indulged in chocolate bars and donuts, each bite a guilty pleasure that added more weight but left me powerless to resist those delicious snacks.

Galveston Island, a frequent destination, witnessed my deliveries of oil supplies. On one memorable trip, my truck bore the weight of about 10 tons of oil line tubing. As the clock struck 3:30, cruising on I-45 South at a brisk 120 miles per hour, I poured myself a cup of coffee. A frozen coconut donut beckoned from the basket, and with each bite, the world blurred around me. Attempting to grab another donut, disaster struck—I fumbled, the donut fell off my hand so in the rush to not let it touch the ground, I spilled hot coffee, and burned my legs. Instinctively, I swerved to avoid the burn, eyes off the road.

Suddenly, a deafening collision echoed through the air. My truck lost control, careening into barriers before somersaulting into the air, a chaotic dance before the inevitable crash into a pole. The absence of a seat belt, unbuckled in my haste for the fallen donut, proved a grave oversight. In the middle of the chaos, the short gray-haired man appeared, a silent witness to my recklessness.

"Why is this happening?" I implored, tears streaming down my face. The man, solemn yet compassionate, explained the magnitude of my mistake. My gluttony, selfishness, and carelessness had led to this moment. Overwhelmed with remorse, I uttered apologies for succumbing to gluttony.

Unexpectedly, the man approached, wrapping me in a comforting embrace. In that moment of vulnerability, his smile reappeared—a silent reassurance that change was possible, even after the crash.

CHAPTER 8

IF BEING A PILOT HAD BEEN MY LIFE.

I went back in time, but I did not accurately take into account the last experiences nor did I remember having lived them.

Now I was at Emiliano's residence experiencing a barbecue extravaganza that transcended the ordinary. The air was filled with laughter, the scent of sizzling delights, and the joyous chatter of a makeshift family. Angela and Emilia, the grill maestras, orchestrated a culinary symphony, while Emily and Pablo, the dynamic duo, had recreation in the yard.

Embedding in this festive tapestry, Emiliano and I found our spot of camaraderie. Corn on the cob in hand, beers at the ready, we indulged in the simple pleasures of life. Our banter weaved effortlessly with the ambiance, as we were mocking at others much less fortunate souls who were working outside under the unforgiving sun.

While chatting confidentially with each other, Emiliano unveiled a tantalizing proposition—to soar the skies in small Cessna planes. A desire to earn his flight certificate in the U.S. stirred within him, but a language barrier loomed at the flight academy. That's where I entered the scene, poised to be his translator and confidant during the thrilling journey of flight training.

I happily accepted thus, eagerly embracing the opportunity, a chance to break free from the monotony of my truck-driving routine. The prospect of venturing into the skies with Emiliano promised an escape from the ordinary. As the sun dipped low and the barbecue festivities continued, I sensed that this decision would not only elevate my social standards but also open doors to new and exciting chapters in my life.

The following day, when the clock struck 4:00 pm, and the promise of adventure awaited. we step into the exhilarating realm of a flight school. In the company of Emiliano, the thrill of the skies unfolded before us, fueled by a mere $50 that granted us an hour of flying training within the confines of a 4-seat Cessna 172 plane.

As the instructor pilot relayed the intricacies of flight, my role as translator added an extra layer of excitement. The plane ride was great. It was not that difficult. The plane is guided with pedals when it is on the ground and enough gasoline is injected into the engine to take it to about 60 miles per hour (about 95 k/h) and it can take off from the ground to take flight. When in the air, the plane rotates with the steering wheel to move the wings to the right or left or with the pedals to move the rear part of the rudder. To land the plane, the ailerons are placed at an angle of 40 degrees, the gas intake is reduced, so the speed is also reduced and the plane literally falls to the ground. The pilot has to be carefully very close to the ground so that when the plane falls, it does not bounce.

Emiliano's generosity, offering me $20 for each translation, added a touch of camaraderie to the experience.

As the night approached, we mingled with the luminaries of Mexican cinema, an assembly of refined individuals. Among this sophisticated milieu, I navigated the social behaviour with newfound finesse, thanks to Emiliano's guidance. The transformation extended beyond the skies; my wardrobe and demeanor evolved, seamlessly aligning with the etiquette of this exclusive circle. Slowly but surely, I morphed into a more sophisticated version of myself.

Yet, the dichotomy lingered—I yearned to shed the truck-driving routine that tethered me to a different world. Despite my elevated status among the elite, the wheels of the truck continued to turn, a constant reminder of the dualities that life often presents.

Stepping into the world of aviation dreams as Emiliano's flying practice reached its zenith. With a touch of camaraderie, I assisted him in navigating the intricate realm of theoretical exercises, an essential step toward obtaining his private pilot license. Yet, the challenges of calculating takeoff and landing distances posed a formidable hurdle, prompting Emiliano to temporarily set aside his pilot aspirations.

In an unexpected turn, the trajectory of our journeys converged when Emiliano, recognizing my fervor for flight, proposed a symbiotic exchange—I would teach him English, and in return, he would contribute financially to my own flight training. The offer was irresistible, and our shared pursuit of aviation dreams took flight.

We started in nightly English lessons, while my passion for piloting soared to new heights. Inspired by Emiliano's generosity, I embarked on a whirlwind of private pilot training, clocking 40 hours of flying and acing the theory exam in a mere five months. The moment my fingers touched the coveted private pilot certificate, excitement surged through my veins.

Emiliano, a connoisseur of fine tastes, indulged in the purchase of a 1960 Cessna 172 for $30,000. In a twist of fate, he asked me to become his private pilot. The condition was to let him do the flying, an arrangement that allowed me to gain flying hours into my pilot’s log while he perfected his piloting skills. The trust he placed in me not only elevated my flight log but also opened up a world of opportunities.

I decided to sell the truck and with the delivery truck sold and the skies beckoning, Emiliano and I embarked on airborne escapades to Miami, Chicago, and even Mexico City. However, the task of flying in and out of the United States in a private plane comes with its own set of requirements. So, the trip to Mexico was on a commercial plane.

While Emiliano was spending time with his family, I flew his esteemed friends to exclusive golf courses in the sleek Cessna plane. What started as a chauffeur service soon transformed into camaraderie on the fairways, where I seamlessly became part of their elite circle. The bond deepened, and I relished being their private pilot.

Amidst this jet-setting lifestyle, a decision lingered on the horizon—I parted ways with Angela. The simplicity and humility that once drew me now seemed at odds with the refined world I inhabited. Surrounded by Mexican high society, I felt the need for a partner with a superior character, someone who mirrored my own accomplishments and sophistication. Armed with flying prowess and a myriad of talents, I stepped into the realm of dating more sophisticated women.

In this world of opulence, forming connections wasn't a challenge. The pilot uniform, with its distinct appealing, coupled with an air of superiority that I effortlessly exuded, became my ticket to the company of refined women. The social echelons I frequented made it clear—I deserved companions who matched my elevated status.

When not in Emiliano's cockpit, I found myself cruising the skies with his friends. Emiliano, the generous benefactor, granted them access to the Cessna plane, urging them to explore the boundless skies at their convenience. Yet, the privilege came at a cost—covering the plane's fuel expenses and a service fee for the unparalleled experience they were about to embark upon. The sky was no longer the limit; it was an exclusive playground for those who dared to soar.

Emiliano and his friends not only graciously covered the costs of fuel and service fees for our high-flying adventures but also showered me with generous monetary tips, elevating our journeys to new heights. Their generosity extended beyond the cockpit, as they welcomed me into a world of exclusive golf courses, opulent hotels, and refined restaurants, creating an extravagant tapestry of experiences.

Embracing this lavish lifestyle, I refrained from dipping into my own pockets. Instead, I adorned myself in the finest designer clothes and cruised through the city streets in a sleek, sophisticated car, a tangible reflection of my newfound status among the elite. It became my mission to showcase that I belonged, a testament to the heights I had reached.

Between the daily flights, Emiliano presented an enticing proposition—to promote special tours and excursions on the plane for visitors from Mexico. The profit-sharing arrangement, with 65% for him and 35% for me, added an entrepreneurial flair to my role. Selectively offering these exclusive experiences only to those who could afford the pinnacle of luxury, I guarded the prestige of our airborne escapades, turning away those I deemed unfit for our high-flying lifestyle.

The financial rewards were substantial, but the real treasure lay in the relationships forged among the clouds. Bonding with actors, actresses, singers, politicians, and luminaries from Mexico and Latin America, my role as a pilot became more than a job—it was a passport to a world where every flight was a brushstroke painting a vivid tapestry of extraordinary connections and experiences.

A year later, Emiliano's vision expanded as he acquired a magnificent 1972 Cessna 42B Businessliner small plane for a princely sum of $100,000. This eight-passenger marvel boasted enhanced autonomy and a sleek design, marking a significant milestone in our airborne endeavors. With our reputation soaring, we charted courses to cosmopolitan hubs like New York, Los Angeles, and even Mexico. The success of our enterprise translated into a move to a more upscale neighborhood, a fitting residence for me and my sophisticated girlfriend.

In the following months, a prestigious assignment beckoned as I navigated the skies with a group of Mexican politicians on a lavish five-day tour across the United States. From the glitz of Los Angeles to the sin city of Las Vegas and the cultural richness of Chicago, every landing was a new chapter in opulence, culminating in a return flight to Houston.

The following day held the promise of a return flight to Houston. I was advised by concerned companions to rest, they insisted that my flying duties should pause for a day, emphasizing the importance of recuperation. Despite their well-intentioned counsel, my mind raced with the expectancy of another charter group awaiting for my service. Yet, determined to get the next tour group, I assured them that all was well and chose to press on, fueled by a sense of money and a desire to conquer another flying experience.

However, fate took an unexpected turn as severe turbulence, unleashed by a sudden weather shift, which battered our plane during the return journey. A thunder struck the plane, damaging crucial controls and plunging us into chaos. The cockpit became a battleground as I grappled with the disarray, losing altitude rapidly. The ill-fated descent culminated in a forest crash, shattering the once-pristine plane into pieces.

In the aftermath of the collision, I awoke to a surreal scene—a tree branch impaled in my stomach. Between the wreckage, the short man with gray hair appeared, a harbinger of introspection. He questioned my weakness, and in a moment of humility, I admitted my prideful nature. Recognizing that my arrogance had led to this perilous situation, I sincerely apologized and sought forgiveness. The little man, with a gentle smile, placed his hand on my head—a gesture of absolution that left me humbled and enlightened.

CHAPTER 9

THE ENDING

Life, to me, is a vibrant tapestry of experiences woven together in the grand school of existence. Each event serves as a lesson, an opportunity to glean wisdom and grow. Reflecting on my journey, I find fulfillment in the lessons learned rather than regrets for paths not taken.

While I didn't become a professional footballer driven by greed, my passion for soccer manifested in a different, altruistic form. Sharing my excellent skills, I've provided free coaching to children and young people in my neighborhood. The joy of helping others without expecting anything in return is immensely satisfying. Football, to me, is more than a game—it's a unifying force that builds both physical and mental well-being.

Despite not pursuing a career as a professional rider, my love for horseback riding fostered a deep connection with animals. Today, I share my life with two beautiful dogs, a testament to my affection for our furry friends. My contentment doesn't stem from material possessions but from the wealth of good health, genuine friendships, and the essentials that allow me to lead a conscious and love-filled life.

Transitioning from a Navy career to sailing on a cruise ship in the United States brought me closer to the vast and splendid sea. The journey introduced me to special places and people, leaving indelible positive imprints on my soul. Patience and understanding guide my reactions; I choose empathy over retaliation. Meditating on love for all living beings shapes my perspective, dismissing the notion of an eye for an eye. Life, to me, is about conscious living, cherishing the essentials, and embracing a love that transcends boundaries.

In my brief sojourn on the cruise ship, lasting just over two years, I unearthed the art of transcending desires. My reverence for women deepened, recognizing them not as objects to be used, abused, or belittled but as individuals deserving the pinnacle of respect. In this journey, I discovered a profound connection with a special woman who became my life companion.

Transforming into a diligent and active individual, I honed mechanical and electrical skills with meticulous care for every task. Procrastination found no haven in my endeavors; I embraced a proactive approach to life. Proficient in steering colossal trucks, I redirected my path, selling the truck to lead English classes for fellow truck drivers with limited English proficiency at the delivery company. A regimen of wholesome eating, coupled with exercise and self-discipline, has maintained my weight at a steady 76 kilograms.

While my dream of becoming a private pilot faced a hiatus due to inclement weather in Houston, Texas, during the winter, I redirected my aspirations to become a modest English facilitator in my hometown. Teaching English has become my vocation, a gift to those seeking competence in life. With an open heart, I lend an ear to all without judgment, extending support wherever possible.

From these extraordinary life experiences, I emerged a more humble, sensitive, and loving soul. My respect extends to all living beings, and my contribution to society is marked by a commitment to teach and embody the right values. Ever ready to aid those in need, my spiritual journey seeks inner peace. Life, in its entirety, has been embraced without regrets, an intricate tapestry woven with purpose.

Through the tapestry of my existence, I've gleaned the necessity of trading vices and bad habits for virtues, recognizing the urgency of this transformation. As I navigate the currents of life, I strive to create ripples of positive change and embody the principles that elevate the human spirit.

# Enrique Trujillo

I am the second oldest of 5 siblings. I had an excellent childhood because of the beautiful guidance received from my parents and the excitement of being surrounded by friends and loved ones. When I was 17, I got to travel a lot since first, I was a sailor for the Colombian Navy and then I was a seaman navigating the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean sea. I greatly enjoyed knowing the different places and cultures I had a chance to experience. I enrolled in a lot of activities throughout my life which fulfilled my existence as a human being. I have had the pleasure of working in different fields and learning a lot from each one of them. I love riding horses and watching soccer games on TV. I enjoy pleasant afternoons drinking coffee at sunsets. I like listening to classical music in my spare time. I also like collecting English courses. I was a fond reader of western storybooks and Clint Eastwood has been one of my favorite actors. I greatly enjoy Stephen King's books.