PRAISE FOR *QUEST*

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"My life has been and is nothing in comparison with John's, but one thing we have in common: the radical search for meaning, at any personal cost, and the experience of grace when the search becomes revealing in its purpose. *QUEST* deserves to be praised ... it exemplifies for any young or older reader in a bold and radical way what the search in life is all about; it gives the sense for meaning beyond all and every ideology. Read this book."
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"A riveting, important memoir. On one level, it's about an intellectually brilliant, adventure-seeking man's search for the meaning of manhood. He sets out with a belief in brawny masculinity and the importance of personal power, and he ends with the conviction that real men try to be healers. On another level, the book also provides an inside view of Nixon-era U.S. foreign policy. Using a desire for public service as a pretext for acquiring power for himself, Graham becomes a State Department official assigned to the Vietnam war's hottest hotspots and later to a nuclear-war planning unit in which no one questions the rightness of blowing up the planet. The hubris, cynicism and macho self-centeredness that Graham shows in his personal quest for manhood is thus mirrored in the policies in which he's a cog. Finally comes his hard-won epiphany: Compassion and trust, not toughness, are what resolve conflict. Cheney morphs into Mandela. Talk about character arcs. A dynamite read."
—Henry Aubin, columnist, *Montreal Gazette;* author of *The Rescue of Jerusalem*

"Fascinating book by a fascinating guy! While Graham's life contains enough adventures for a dozen more-ordinary people, I was much more drawn to his parallel inner quest."
—Joan Brunwasser, Op-Ed News

"I could not put this book down. I finished it with tears in my eyes. This compelling story has affirmed my own life's direction. Whether or not the reader has yet found that "sweet spot" of clear purpose and right livelihood as he eventually did, his words are encouraging and invite reflection."
—Margaret Elwood, musician, teacher and poet

"Full of unforgettable adventures and moving reflections. A great book for encouraging anyone who aims for the high road, even when they don't know where it will take them."
—Alan AtKisson, author of *Believing Cassandra* and *The ISIS Agreement*

"Inspirational. Enlightening. Captivating. I couldn't put it down."
—Steve Cambridge, entrepreneur, former Vice President of AtriCure, Inc.

"*QUEST* is one of the most interesting books I have read in years. It describes John's exciting life and at the same time I think everyone could draw some parallels with their own life, insecurity, searching, failing and succeeding. John's journey helps bring our own lives into perspective."
—David W. Finet, Executive Director, Opportunity Council

"John Graham rocks. He climbs them, but only the highest and toughest ones. His principles are rock hard in his adherence to them. His life story delivers goose bumps to any reader, whether their interest be social justice, informed patriotism, or just plain old decency."
—Dr. Richard Steckel, Director, Milestones Project

"An incredible life. An incredible book. John has followed not one, but three, passions, passions which the rest of us can hardly conceive of, much less attempt. But he has followed them, to their utmost limits, only to find when he reached these limits, that each was fatally flawed. With each such discovery, with triumph in his grasp, he had the courage, the instinct, and the wisdom to turn away and to begin to look elsewhere. What he found, finally, was that his purpose and calling was to serve others, to do good, to work to save the world. An extraordinary journey of an extraordinary human being."
—Richard Bakal, General Partner, the Bakal Company, LP

RISK, ADVENTURE

QUEST

AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

A MEMOIR

JOHN GRAHAM

To Ann Medlock,
my beloved partner and muse.

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CONTENTS

Foreword xi
Preface xv
Chpater 1 The Golden Bear 1
Chpater 2 Welcome to the Wider World 15
Chpater 3 Trial by Avalanche 37
Chpater 4 The High Road 63
Chpater 5 More Tastes of War 93
Chpater 6 Down Under 101
Chpater 7 Revolution 116
Chpater 8 Finally, in a Real War 133
Chpater 9 A Dangerous Game 143
Chpater 10 The Cauldron Boils 153
Chpater 11 The War Closes in 160
Chpater 12 The Easter Offensive 169
Chpater 13 In the Wake of War 178
Chpater 14 Temptations 190
Chpater 15 The Strangest Path 199
Chpater 16 In the Capital of the World 215
Chpater 17 On the Edge 227
Chpater 18 The Prinsendam 239
Chpater 19 A Promise Kept 256
Chpater 20 New Paths 269
Chpater 21 Whidbey Island 279
Chpater 22 Moscow 290
Afterword 296
About the Author 301

by Henry Aubin

FOREWORD

Every few years, Harvard's class of '64 puts out its *Report* a thick red tome in which members describe their lives. Of the hundreds of entries in the most recent edition, the entry that most intrigued me was by a classmate whom I had never encountered, one John Graham. "As a young man," he had written, "I lived on physical danger, screwed up in every imaginable way—and still ended up doing decent things with my life." The writer mentioned having written a memoir—the preliminary version of the one you hold in your hands—and I sent away to Amazon for it.

Here, in ascending order, are the three reasons I found it engrossing.

First, so far as sheer enjoyment goes, the book is a taut, colorfully told page-turner. It tells of high adventure—of scaling North America's highest peak via a supposedly impossible route, of hanging out with French Legionnaires in Algeria as a vagabond student, of getting tossed into an Iranian jail as a presumed spy during a hitch-hiking trip across Asia, of being held at gunpoint by Eritrean rebels, of serving in Libya as a U.S. Foreign Service officer during the coup that brought Qadhaafi to power, of being stuck in a beleaguered city at the height of the Vietnam debacle, of "playing with the fate of the world" as a nuclear strategist in the State Department and, finally, of almost dying in a lifeboat during a typhoon. Phew.

But that's just the book's surface.

Quest's revealing depiction of personal exceptionalism is another reason I value the memoir. Graham's initial presumption is that he is invulnerable—that he won't come to harm and can live practically indefinitely—is common to many young men, but his knack for surviving perilous situations (including beating the "one in a thousand" odds of emerging untouched by a Mt. McKinley rock fall) makes him an extreme case. "I simply knew that the pattern of deliverance would continue," he writes. He wonders if a "higher power" is behind this. "What if I was being saved to serve some higher purpose than my own?"

Deliberately or not, the book presents this sense of individual exceptionalism as dovetailing with national exceptionalism. As a reader, I see these as two sides of the same coin. For the generation of the Class of '64, the great arena for the display of U.S. hubris was Vietnam, and that country is also the scene of Graham's own hubris. For him, pursuing a Foreign Service career "was less about public service than about becoming powerful." A Vietnam posting was simply the "surest way [for a career] to soar." In retrospect, he sees that in Vietnam "The only thing I believed in was me." He is, then, no more idealistic than Washington: both see the war either in terms of solidifying power, in Washington's case, or in gaining it, in Graham's case.

One of the book's unforgettable scenes presents Graham and a colleague firing M16s into bushes; they're practicing self-defence as the enemy approaches. Graham, while shooting, notices the other man looking at him strangely. The latter explains that Graham had looked like a "real maniac. Your teeth were bared and your eyes were slits. You looked like you can't wait until it's people instead of bushes.... Sometimes you scare the shit out of me." The incident temporarily jolts Graham into seeing the "moral emptiness of my life." For him, a "mortal showdown with a human foe was the highest adventure there was."

But if the horror in Vietnam offers a sobering lesson in moral weakness for Washington and Graham alike, neither takes the lesson to heart. Henry Kissinger's State Department will promote the young man to the top-secret group that plans nuclear-war strategies. It is the perfect marriage between hubristic Graham and hubristic Washington: for the one, brainstorming nuclear war is a thrill ("What could be more exciting than playing with the fate of the world?"); for the other it is a realistic form of conflict resolution (the group "really thought that a nuclear war could be fought and won just like any other war").

Quest—self-centred but unabashedly self-critical—is thus full of sociological, psychological and political insights. It shows how an earnest, well-rounded person without ideological baggage can become part of the Strangelovian world of the ultimate power trip.

But my main reason I esteem this book is its theme—the question of what it is to be a man.

As an adolescent, Graham is spindly, bullied and insecure. A real man, he thinks, is brawny and powerful. "My search for manhood was anchored in tightly controlled toughness," he writes. He sees "gentleness and caring as weaknesses." He reflects his culture: John Wayne is a hero and, when the first 007 movie comes out while he is an undergraduate. James Bond becomes for him "the very picture of dashing smoothness."

It takes decades for Graham to evolve beyond this definition of manliness. Several experiences (including some that are mystical) lead to this. A private meeting in 1980 with Robert Sobukwe, the South African freedom fighter, is particularly important: the organization he and Nelson Mandela had created "would present a breathtakingly powerful model of healing to the world." As a voice for forgiveness and reconciliation, Graham writes, Sobukwe—dying of tuberculosis—was "tougher than all the heroes of my youth put together."

Yet, like so many of us, Graham does not act on what he knows to be true. It is only later, when in that wave-tossed lifeboat, that he hears, or thinks he hears (he is not certain which it is) a mighty voice telling him to stop horsing around and to do what he knows to be right—that is, to devote his life to service and healing. He not only starts practicing that himself but, with his wife, runs an organization that creates role models by publicizing individuals around the world who work courageously for the common good. This memoir, too, promotes this unassailably sensible idea that service can give purpose and satisfaction to life.

The book implicitly raises the question of why North America's popular culture does not give greater play to such a vision of manhood. Many movies aimed at boys or young men feature gun-blasting or sword-slashing assertions of power or revenge. Video games often have a similar thrust. Televised sports—especially football, hockey and ultimate fighting—also glorify the delivery of pain. Meanwhile, the decline in attendance at places of worship means this audience has less exposure to countervailing messages of kindness and forgiveness.

Quest has more hair-raising action than most adventure movies, and none of it is made up. At a time when so many young men are drifting and have little sense of purpose, Graham's hard-won insights on manliness deserve a wide audience.

Henry Aubin is a newspaper columnist, historian and novelist

PREFACE

This began as a book about the war in Vietnam. A civilian Foreign Service Officer, I'd been stationed in Hué, a politically explosive city just south of the Demilitarized Zone that then separated South Vietnam from North. Best known as the site of the infamous Tet massacre of 1968, Hué was a constant source of political opposition to the Thieu regime in Saigon, which was endlessly putting down anti-government riots and demonstrations in the city. I was there in 1971 - 72, during the rapid withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.

While my formal title was Advisor to the Mayor of Hué, my duties also included reporting on the complex political currents in the city, which gave me a front row seat for the slow-but-steady unraveling of the Thieu regime, at least in the northern part of the country. I left South Vietnam with ten pounds of classified documents in my luggage, determined to write the definitive book on the war.

But I soon found that many other "definitive" books on the Vietnam war had already been written (and more would be written). My book would be doing a lot of replowing. So those ten pounds of notes sat—for years.

Finally I came to see that the real story I had to tell was not about America's war, but about the war within myself that surfaced in Vietnam. Up to that point, my life had been one adventure after another, each more difficult and dangerous than the one before. But war was an adventure I'd not yet tried. I'd gone to Vietnam, not because I was ordered to and not because I believed in America's war aims. I'd gone for the sheer thrill of it and, as my role expanded, for the status and power that role gave me. Only in my final months in country, after a battle where I easily could have died and where I called for the deaths of others, did I start to question the shallowness of my motives for being there.

Back from Vietnam, that question soon led to others. How had my life become so hooked on adventure that nothing else mattered? How had war become my ultimate adventure? I was hardly the first young man to march

happily off to war, eager to prove himself, yet my search seemed darker, more driven. What price was I paying for the early path I chose? How could I change?

In the book I finally set out to write, I committed myself to a totally honest description of my struggle with these questions, with no idea the pit would be so deep. I print Gordon Lightfoot's song, *Sit Down Young Stranger*, here (and quote lines from it as the story unfolds) because its almost desperately sad lyrics so perfectly capture my struggle as a young man to find meaning in who I was and what I was becoming.

The second half of the book describes my path out of that pit, including a bizarre three years finding God through out-of-body experiences and trance healings, experiences so powerful they simply wore down my disbelief. Assigned to the United Nations, I had the adventures of my life, fighting—often secretly against my own government—for peace and justice in the developing world. Many more adventures followed.

The subtitle of this book begins "One man's search for meaning...." But that doesn't mean it isn't about you, the reader. We all yearn for meaning in our lives. In searching for it we all come upon opportunities, challenges and decisions. Many of the events I describe may seem exotic, and they probably are. But I don't think the *lessons* I learned are exotic at all.

I believe that a full life demands passionate involvement and that often means taking risks. The key thing isn't the risks you take, but what you take them *for*. As you'll see in these pages, I found that the most significant risks test not the body but the soul. You need to find what brings meaning to your life, and then go for it with everything you've got.

These understandings eluded me for a long, long time. *Quest* is the story of my search. My hope is that it helps you in yours.

—John Graham

Sit Down Young Stranger

I'm standin' in the doorway,
my head bowed in my hands.
Not knowin' where to sit,
not knowin' where to stand.

My father looms above me,
for him there is no rest.
My mother's arms enfold me
and hold me to her breast.

They say you've been out wandrin';
they say you traveled far.
Sit down young stranger,
and tell us who you are.

The room has all gone misty;
my thoughts are all in spin
Sit down, young stranger,
and tell us where you been.

I've been up to the mountain;
I've walked down by the sea.
I never questioned no one and
no one questioned me.

My love was given freely and
oft-times was returned.
I never came to borrow;
I only came to learn.

Sometimes it would get lonely,
but it taught me how to cry.
And laughter came too easy
for life to pass me by.

I never had a dollar that
I didn't earn with pride,
'Cause I had a million daydreams
to keep me satisfied.

And will you gather daydreams
or will you gather wealth?
How can you find your fortune
when you cannot find yourself?

My mother's eyes grow misty;
there's a tremblin' in her hand.
Sit down young stranger—
I do not understand.

Now will you try and tell us
you been too long at school,
That knowledge is not needed,
that power does not rule,

That war is not the answer,
that young men should not die?
Sit down young stranger;
I'll wait for your reply.

The answer is not easy,
for souls are not reborn.
To wear the crown of peace,
you must wear the crown of thorns.

If Jesus had a reason,
I'm sure he would not tell.
We treated him so badly,
how could he wish us well?

The parlor now is empty;
there's nothin' left to say.
My father has departed;
my mother's gone to pray.

There's rockets in the meadows
and ships out on the sea.
The answer's in the forest,
carved upon a tree:

John loves Mary—
does anyone love me?

by Gordon Lightfoot
(Reprinted with permission)

Chapter 1

THE GOLDEN BEAR

The drinking began that night in a thatched-roof, open-air bar, fifty yards into the jungle, 200 miles south of Manila. The place had a dozen wooden tables on a dirt floor, each with a kerosene lantern and three or four bamboo chairs. A couple more lanterns hung from the rafters, swinging slightly. The bartender was a big Chinese guy with a shaved head, bare-chested except for a filthy leather vest. I think my shipmates called him Han or maybe Hung. A half-dozen whores, barefoot in cocktail dresses, oozed among the crowd, about evenly divided between the ship's crew and local stevedores. One of the stevedores had a monkey that stole peanuts off the tables. Barely seventeen, I struggled to look like I'd been in places like this all my life. Meanwhile I forgot to breathe.

The whores headed for the American seamen and their dollars. My self-appointed guide to this world was a giant of a man named Roy, who worked in the engine room. He slipped a girl he called Lucy a five-dollar bill and she sat on my lap, pulled down the top of her dress and pressed her left breast against my face. I was paralyzed. Roy and the others roared with laughter.

"Gotta get your nerve up, man, then your dick," said Roy. With that, I downed a half-dozen rum and cokes in a very short amount of time. Lucy—and the bar—faded from view. I have no memory of what happened next. Roy told me later that I'd passed out and he'd all but carried me back to the ship. I missed not only the chance to end my virginity but also a pitched brawl with the stevedores that had trashed the bar and put two crewmen in the local hospital.

The crew was punished over that fight. I think Roy was docked some pay. My head throbbed like the ship's turbines and I couldn't look at food for a day and a half. Getting blind drunk and then hauled from a dockside brawl was not the introduction to manhood I'd had in mind. Still, part of me was pumped, thinking of the stories I could tell at school.



Golden Bear, summer, 1959. Just seventeen, Graham spent that summer as a member of the crew of a freighter in the Far East. The experience catapulted him from a staid middle class existence growing up in Tacoma, Washington to a lifetime of adventure.

But I'd say now that a bigger part of me was scared by the world I'd landed in that night and by my incompetence to deal with it.

It was the summer of 1959. Three weeks before, just after my junior year in high school, I'd sailed for Southeast Asia aboard a freighter named the *Golden Bear*. I was the youngest member of a crew of 36, and this voyage was the first even remotely adventurous thing I'd ever done. Standing against the rail, watching the hawsers splash into San Francisco Bay, feeling the deck shudder with the first thrust of the engines, my throat was so dry it hurt. The trip was a deliverance, a stroke of fortune in a teen life I was sure was unmatched for misery.

I was skinny, had a face full of pimples, and, after a sudden spurt to six-four, I was so uncoordinated I regularly stumbled going up the stairs. At St. Robert Bellarmine High School in Tacoma Washington, I put the chalk lines on the football field but never played on it. I won debate trophies, not girlfriends. The "in" crowd never invited me to their parties unless their mothers made them do it. I hung out with other social misfits and defended myself from real or imagined taunts by burying myself in books. Sitting, dateless, in the stands on Friday nights, watching classmates with padded shoulders and muddy uniforms do battle, listening to the cheers, I would have given anything to throw just one touchdown pass.

The revenge I swore for my humiliations was nonviolent. Someday all the bullies and jocks would be flipping burgers or selling washing machines when they'd see my face on the cover of Time magazine and be forced to contemplate their own miserable, unachieving lives. The anger that began in high school pushed me for decades. It also left a dark residue that time and growth have never fully cleansed.

The good thing about Bellarmine was the Jesuits who ran it. They made calculus and Homeric Greek exciting. They let me teach myself chemistry at home, taught me how to write and to speak in public, and steadily forced me to value all the things I could do well. It was a Jesuit who told me I could win a national essay contest—and demanded that I enter. The prize was a six-week trip to the Far East aboard a freighter. All I had to do was write 750 words about the Port of Tacoma.



Tacoma, Washington, circa 1950. Graham outside the house where he grew up.

I won—then almost didn't go when the sponsor told my parents I'd be going as a member of the crew. My Catholic mother feared that hanging out with seamen in exotic ports for six weeks would bring the "near occasions of sin" a little too near. I argued that her fears were groundless—and fervently hoped that they weren't. I finally talked her into letting me go.

And why shouldn't she trust me? For seventeen years my whole life had been about doing everything right. I wasn't born in Tacoma – I stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting there. I was an altar boy, an Eagle Scout, and turned in homework early. I never broke a law or missed a piano lesson. At a time when other kids were questioning authority, I found purpose in obedience. I anticipated commands before they were given. I fed on the praise of parents, teachers and priests because it gave me a sense of accomplishment when little else in my nerd-world did.

I didn't see then the price I would pay for following the rules as closely as I did. Blind obedience may have been the only way I saw to make my life work as a child and teen—but the pattern it left slowed my capacity to think on my own, and to gain the courage to find and live a meaningful life. Had it not been for that summer on the *Golden Bear*, the delay would have been even longer.

I know that sounds harsh. There are worse things than growing up in a safe, loving middle-class family in 'fifties America. But five decades later, I tell high school audiences what I wish I'd been told then—that thinking and acting for yourself are essential, and that rebellion is a necessary part of growing up.

Still—I wasn't entirely comfortable in the straightjacket I wore as a kid or I wouldn't have been so excited at the prospect of breaking out. The afternoon I heard I'd won the trip, I walked the two miles home from Bellarmine instead of taking the bus. The sidewalks and houses of Tacoma faded from view, replaced by scenes from every Jack London fantasy I'd ever had. Here I was looking tough and confident on spray-washed decks. That was me, striding down Asian streets dark with intrigue and lying with exotic, willing women. I couldn't wait. None of the "in" crowd at Bellarmine could equal what I was about to do.



Tacoma, Washington, 1956. Graham receiving his Eagle Scout badge, with his parents Al and Madeline Graham.

I drove down to San Francisco with my father to collect my prize.

My father, Albert, was a quiet, caring man who sold advertising for the *Tacoma News Tribune* for thirty-five years. He was tall, slender and balding, with the kind of quick humor that made him good with puns and quips. There was an Anglican reserve about him; I have few memories of him ever hugging me as a child, except for awkward squeezes at bedtime.

My father was also a cautious man. His early dream had been to be a writer, and he'd had his chances. After he died I found in his effects a telegram dated April 3, 1926. It was from the publisher of the *Honolulu Herald* offering him a job as a reporter in what must have been then one of the most exciting outposts of America. Given the chance for a grand adventure, he'd turned it down and never talked about it. When the Depression hit, the only job he could find was in advertising, and he never made the moves to get out. Long before I was born, he'd had the stuffing kicked out of him by the effects of heavy drinking, including a series of stomach ulcers that had grounded him for good.

By the time I reached my teens, my father was living through my achievements, long having lost the will to pursue his own. He'd take me up to the Elks Club for a swim, but we'd spend half the time interrupting bridge games in the clubroom so he could tell his friends about my latest report card. I hated the way he was deaf to his friends' half-hidden groans when they saw him coming with me in tow. I'd stand there, smiling and awkward, absorbing their dutiful compliments as if they were blows. My father was standing in my shadow when I was still a kid, and I knew there was something very wrong with that.

For most of that first day in San Francisco I filled out forms to get a seaman's card, which officially made me a member of the crew. I was assigned a job—typing cargo manifests—although, under the terms of the essay contest award, I didn't do more than a few hours work the whole trip.

The next day my father and I went down to the ship—huge, black, sleek, half-again as long as a football field. We watched for hours from the ship's bridge as cables whined and pallets of sacks and cartons swung through the air and settled softly into holds that filled the ship from her main deck to her keel. When the loading was finished in late afternoon, my father shook my

hand and went ashore. Today I wonder how he felt at that moment, watching his son about to sail west on the kind of voyage he never had the nerve to take.

I joined a line of seamen to sign on for the voyage in a large, frayed ledger. On line 29 was printed: "John Graham, Purser's Yeoman." When I signed above that printing and handed the pen to the next man in line, I felt ten feet tall.

An hour later, the *Golden Bear* glided out into San Francisco Bay. I looked up at the Golden Gate Bridge as we passed underneath, watching the movement of cars through the perforated decking and wondered if any of them might be carrying my father home. Then I walked to the stern on the ship's main deck and leaned against the rail, watching the ship's wake boil out beneath me.

I was moving rapidly away from my father, but the distance that counted was not just from him. Soon, I would also be seven thousand miles away from my mother and from the Catholic Church.

My mother, Madeline, was the third child of Croatian immigrants. She had a peasant's build, and dark hair framing a Slavic face with strong, angular bones. For generations, her family had scratched a living out of the thin limestone soil of Vis, a small, sunny island off the Dalmatian coast. Threatened by famine, they'd fled to America in 1898, carrying with them a commitment to their ancestry, to Catholicism, and to doing everything exactly as it had been done before. My mother was the most resolute person I ever knew. Until her final illness, I never saw anything stop her. In the mid-nineties, when Croatians, Serbs and Muslims were tearing each other apart in Yugoslavia, I was glad my mother wasn't over there. She could have singlehandedly kept the fighting going for years.

I could feel the vibrations in the rail as the ship's engines picked up tempo in the open sea, sending the bow rising and falling slightly, pointed toward the setting sun.

My mother's compass was as sure. She'd work long hours on any community or church effort to help the poor—and she'd publicly scold any teenage boy she thought needed a haircut. The sight of an interracial couple would have her fuming for days. Her political opinions pitted her against almost everything that happened after Eisenhower.

But at home, love poured from her. I remember her singing lullabies and, when I was sick, rubbing my cold-ridden chest with camphor. She gave up teaching for fifteen years to be at home when my older sister Wynne and I were young. The allegiance she invoked was so complete there were times I would have rather died than risk her frown.

Mother had a fearsome ally in the Catholic Church. If her rules weren't enough, the Baltimore Catechism had plenty more. My soul, said the Catechism, was like a bottle of milk, and through my weakness and disregard I allowed little black spots to pollute it every time I forgot to say my prayers or thought an unkind thought. "Mortal" sins turned the whole bottle black and poised my soul for eternal damnation until the sin could be confessed to a priest. Mortal sins were not just the really bad stuff, such as masturbation or missing Mass; eating meat on Friday would do it too. The Baltimore Catechism was a minefield that no healthy adolescent could ever cross unscathed. I wish I'd known that then. My failures were occasions of deep shame.

Now father, mother and Church were all receding with the California coastline into the dull evening light. I stayed on deck and followed the ship's wake until it flattened in the swells. For the first time in my life, I was on my own. No nuns, no priests, no teachers, no parents. No tests, no grades. No one's expectations but my own. When I shivered as the first stars appeared, it wasn't from the cold.

I bunked with a cadet from the Merchant Marine Academy. He was four years older than I. His name was Dave, and he was so annoyed at having to share his room, he said about a hundred words to me the entire trip.

My friend and guide on the voyage was Roy, a thirty-five year-old, two hundred and fifty pound black man who oiled the ships' engines. He adopted me from the first day, introducing me to the rest of the crew and showing me every mast and bilge in the ship.

Roy was also my protector. The second day at sea, a gay crewman (something I was too naive to spot) made a remark about me that Roy didn't like. In an instant, Roy slammed the man up against the wall, with his forearm hard against the man's throat until the guy's eyes bulged out. Roy then told the motherfuckin sonofabitch that if he so much as put his

motherfuckin hand on me, he (Roy) would cut off the guy's motherfuckin dick and cram it up his motherfuckin ass.

I watched this in utter awe. I'd never until then even seen real violence, nor heard such magnificent cussing. I kept staring. The gay seaman swore his innocence, and Roy let him down and he left quickly, rubbing his throat.

At seventeen, I so much wanted to become a man. But my mother was the toughest person I knew, and that only further confused my search for models of manhood. Now, watching Roy, I saw that this is how real men walked, talked and, moved through the world. I'd seen it in war movies and westerns, but that was nothing like seeing it for real.

My father couldn't physically have done what Roy did and, more to the point, he never would have tried. An extraordinarily gentle man, he was constantly shoved aside by more aggressive males. When my mother would learn of another loss, she would, in her insensitive Croatian way, find ways to worsen the hurt. "Oh, Al!" she would say in front of his children that night, in a voice not of compassion but of disappointment, "Why didn't you fight back?" Father would look down at his plate and silently pick at his peas. And I would look away. Had my mother been in his shoes, and had it been another era, she would have been running the newspaper.

I was terrified that I'd inherited my father's gentleness and not my mother's spine. When I was a toddler, my mother had made me a wonderful doll with brown yarn hair and stuffed him with chips of foam rubber. I'd named him Sammy and loved him to death; when he began to fall apart after a few years, my mother made a second doll. But when the seams in Sammy II began to rip, some Croatian clock in my mother's head decided that, at age six or seven, I was too old to play with dolls and she refused to make another. So I "borrowed" her sewing basket and repaired Sammy's seams and re-sewed his yarn hair myself. When Sammy II then mysteriously disappeared, I sewed his name on the inside cover of the pillow on my bed, and that pillow became the secret buddy I could tell my troubles to.

I not only never started a fight as a kid—I never fought back when bullies attacked. Once, in the fourth grade, a gap-toothed kid named Alex

stole my hat—a large, dorky-looking one with big earflaps that splayed outward—one no kid in his right mind would ever want to wear. My mother had bought it, however, and insisted that I wear it to school. Alex had lain in wait for me on the way home, grabbed the hat off my head, and taunted me to get it back. When I refused to fight, he'd dragged the hat through a mud puddle, then slapped me across the face with it. When he'd finally lost interest, I'd retrieved the hat, then sneaked into the basement at home to clean off the mud.

I worked as quietly as I could, worrying that my mother would discover me and ask what had happened. She would never have understood why I'd let myself be humiliated. Her barrel-chested brothers—my uncles—would have died first. What I dreaded most of all would be hearing: "Oh, John!" in a voice not of compassion but of disappointment, "Why didn't you fight back?"

Other bullies had followed Alex, and with each encounter I'd known I could not excuse my reluctance to fight as a principled avoidance of violence. I'd seen it instead as a lack of courage, an unmanliness passed down from my father—a weakness that I had to change.

I did the best I could. At twelve or thirteen, I simply stopped expressing, or even acknowledging, the gentle, caring boy in me. I hammered boards over my heart, and hoped that that would make me tough. That Croatian culture clock in my mother speeded the process. At about the same time I started to shut down my emotions, my mother said I should stop hugging my father goodnight and simply shake his hand. I obeyed—then pushed her message to an extreme she never meant. I stopped hugging anyone, including her. For years she would complain about the disappearance of "that loving little boy I used to know," without ever understanding the role she'd played in chasing him underground.

It was a long exile. In seeing gentleness and caring as weaknesses, I condemned for decades a vital part of who I was.

Now, on board the *Golden Bear*, I finally had my model for how to be a man. If only I could be like Roy! When Dave was on watch, I practiced being Roy in front of a mirror. I slammed my right elbow against the throat of an imaginary foe, then my left, then my right again. I looked as

fierce as I could and I practiced saying "motherfuckin" with a snarl, just like Roy.

Across the Pacific, the Philippines were the first port of call. Threading her way south through the islands, the *Golden Bear* stopped to take on dried coconut in Iloilo, a jungle port so tiny its dock was barely a third as long as the ship. As we nosed slowly closer to the pier, I stared at the warehouses, shacks and muddy alleys. Tacoma was half a world away.

I confided to Roy that I wanted to get drunk and get laid that night, if I could. He laughed and told me to stick with him because this would be the roughest port of the trip. The rougher the better, I told him smoothly, and was annoyed that he laughed some more.

Beyond booze and sex, however, there was something more I wanted on that trip. I wanted to rip open a curtain and see whole new possibilities for my life—ideas and visions and options that would free me from the cocoon in which I had been raised. I wanted something that would give me a sense of confidence and direction I'd never known. I had no idea what that something might be. But I knew it was out there, and that it would change everything.

The drunken brawl in Iloilo that night ripped open a curtain in my life all right, and I was lucky it hadn't ripped open my head as well. I never went out with the crew again. Iloilo had been no grand rebellion against seventeen years of being good. It hadn't even been a successful sally into sin.

Back on the *Golden Bear*, I read guidebooks from the ship's library on the Philippines, Hong Kong, Okinawa and Japan and mapped out shore trips for each stop—sometimes going with a few of the ship's twelve passengers, and sometimes on my own.

I loved Hong Kong and its harbor, a din of bellowing horns and shrill whistles. Ashore, merchants shouted from stalls hung with plucked chickens and bright cloth. At night, from the top of Victoria Peak, I watched ferries tracing yellow lines in black water in front of near land glowing with neon signs and electric lights. Further back, where people lived, thousands of lights and lanterns and cooking fires pricked the darkness like re fireflies.

Japan seemed much tamer. I took off for three days on my own to look at temples and palaces in Kyoto and to dodge busy people in crowded cities like Kobe and Tokyo.

I sent travel articles to the *Tacoma News Tribune*, the paper where my dad sold advertising, and the paper published them. Reading them today I'd say they were technically well-written but dull. The people in them were furniture. Abroad for the first time in my life, bombarded with new sights and sounds, I was a detached and pinched observer. The Jesuits had taught me writing as a craft, but there was no heart in anything I wrote. I'd closed that part of me down years before, in my despairing struggle to become a man, as defined by what my mother wanted and my father wasn't. And in repressing the gentle and caring emotions that I thought were keeping me from manhood—I'd repressed everything. I'd become afraid to risk *any* kind of emotional response for fear that the wall I'd hammered around my heart would fly apart. I told myself that emoting was what women and children did, with no understanding of how important an open heart was to becoming a complete human being.

I couldn't put it into words, but from some deep place I feared that if I really tried to write about the wonder and excitement I felt in Asia that summer, I'd be waking a part of me safely stowed, and the consequences could be terrible.

After Iloilo, the voyage was all about covering ground, not about risking any of it opening up beneath my feet. I approached the rest of the journey as if it were a survey course, with an "A" given for the most sights seen, the most miles traveled—even though there was no one to grade my performance for seven thousand miles. Getting A's was what I knew to do, what I was praised for doing. It was my high card, and I wasn't brave enough to play others, even had I seen them in my hand.

Despite my retreat from adventuring with the crew, that summer did change my life. Roy and the other seamen had shown me a new, brawny model of manhood and introduced me to a raw, physical world totally different from anything I'd known before. And, despite my wooden descriptions, simply being in those faraway ports had shown me much more than I could