lovereading.co.uk
If you love reading, you will love the unique services offered by lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**


A Teenager's Journey

Surviving Adolescence

Richard B. Pelzer

INTRODUCTION

In order for you, the reader, to understand and appreciate what this book means to me, I must provide some insight as to what my life was like prior to my teen years.

We were to all appearances a normal middle-class family in a small city just outside San Francisco, California, called Daly City. With most families in the neighborhood, at least one of the parents worked a middle-class job. My father was no different.

He worked as a fireman in San Francisco. Mom stayed home and took care of the five boys. On the surface, there was nothing out of the ordinary about us. We were just like the restat least, up to the point where I became aware that what happened to us as boys at home was different than what other children experienced in the neighborhoodor the country, for that matter.

We lived like wolves, able to turn on one another at will, able to devour one another when need be. It was necessary. However perverted it may sound, it was nothing less than a matter of survival.

In the early days, I don't think any of us kids felt what was happening was "over the top". It was all we knew. Perhaps my older brothers knew better, perhaps they experienced similar things before I came along. I don't know. I can only speculate about what happened before I was born.

From my earliest memories, life was completely and utterly bizarre. Inside the house and with the protection of privacy, Mom's ability to demonize and control her children knew no bounds. Eventually she mastered the ability to terrify a child beyond mortal horror. For many adults, it's traumatic to have to come to terms with your own mortality. But when a child becomes conscious of walking a tightrope

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer
Published by Time Warner Books

between life and death, the struggle to survive becomes personal, a matter of endurance; much like a pro athlete pushing himself beyond what he thinks he is capable of just so as to push himself even further. When a child has to constantly endure in order to survive, each accomplishment, each victory no matter how small, gives him the willpower to continue and endure even more.

For me, by the time I reached fifteen, I'd found other ways to endure: alcohol and drugs. It wasn't as if I was the only teen who drank in my school—most of the kids I knew drank. Most of the kids I hung out with did an assortment of drugs: nothing outrageous—marijuana, speed, crystal methamphetamine, cocaine or the occasional hallucinogenic.

Alcohol was different. At first it was a matter of desire: a desire to get drunk. Later it was more of a need to get completely bombed. As I look back now, I know the answer to the question most kids asked me: why I liked hard liquor when the rest preferred beer. It was just part of my personality. From drinking to drugs, everything I did had to be harder, bigger, more dangerous than what those around me were doing. As a teenager, I had an addictive and dangerous personality. It was much like I'd been as a child. In fact, it was a tribute to my childhood.

I started drinking at the age of fifteen. I never liked the taste of beerit always filled me up and I found it difficult to drink fast. On the routine errands that Mom sent me on to the local liquor store, with a note to the store clerk giving me permission to buy a pack of cigarettes for her, I usually managed to leave with a pack or two of smokes and a bottle of bourbon or vodka for myself. And no, the note said nothing about permission to steal—I authorized that on my own. Self-sanctioned destruction. That's what most of my young adult life was like.

As I turned sixteen, the realization that I was nearly six feet tall and weighed almost 180 pounds spared me from any further physical abuse at the hands of my mother. But it meant an intensification of the mental and emotional abuse, which was actually more damaging to me than being beaten unconscious or deprived of sleep for days.

As a teenager, I often wished Mom would make me sit on the hardwood floor again with my hands folded together, knuckles down. The pain of my own weight crushing my hands as I sat on them for hours was not as bad as feeling the eyes of the neighbors on me as I walked past their houses, knowing that Mom had probably regaled each one of them many times with accounts of my faults as a teen. Usually she would get the name of the drug or the brand of booze wrong, as she magnified my misdemeanors to any neighbor or stranger who happened to pick up the phone when she called. I always felt as if every one of the neighbors and even people several streets over knew my every move. It was shameful to feel their piercing stares and their complete disgust as they looked at me. Mom made no secret of who she called and when she called them. The only thing she kept to herself was the neighbors' eventual pleas for her to stop. Mom not only embarrassed me at my expense, she also embarrassed herself at my expense. There was no limit to what she would do to ensure I continued to feel less than human.

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

At first I always drank with at least one other teen, or a few friends. We hung out in the woods behind a small group of apartments just down the street. There we shared many "firsts": a first kiss, a first smoke, a first hit off a joint and even the first sexual experience. But with the move from my home town in California to a new town, Sandy City, Utah, came my introduction to solitude. I knew no one, no one my age who drank or smoked or did drugs. Sandy City and most of Salt Lake, most of the state for that matter, was very religious.

It took me several weeks to find the few fellow students who lived as I did: a life of drinking and drug abuse, secretive and out of control. By that time I preferred to drink alone, anyhow. I enjoyed the local park after dark, long after closing. I spent more time alone, after midnight, drinking myself into the Stone Age at Mesa Park than I spent sitting in class at Hillcrest High School.

The world was changing all around me, but everything I did and everyone I came across seemed meaningless and impersonal: everyone except Darlene. At that point, Darlene was the only one who could reach me. She was the only one that even tried. She introduced me to her husband, her family and a few select neighbors, including Judy Prince—people who weren't tainted by Mom's negative influence—not yet, anyway.

Looking back, I know that her kindness, her love and her unsolicited recognition saved me. What Darlene gave me at that time was more than I had ever expected from anyone. What she gave I treasured above everything.

She gave me respect, and the opportunity to speak.

She gave me friendship.

She gave me hope.

From the day I met Darlene my life changed—for the better, but also for the worse.

Now I was exposed to what a real family had to do to function. I was totally confused: my need and my overpowering desire to destroy myself conflicted with the love and respect I was being so freely given.

As a teenager, I made a lot of mistakes and some very poor choices that could have affected me for the rest of my life. Luckily, only a few of those mistakes have dogged my adult life. I could have been so much worse off than I am. I also know that there are teens today who are worse off than I ever was; more self-destructive, more ashamed, more hurtful and more dangerous.

I also know why.

There are events in life that we have to experience for ourselves: our first love, the birth of a first child, the loss of a loved one. There are other lessons that we can learn through other people's experiences. Those lessons spare us the cost and pain of personal experience. They also provide us with insight.

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

That's the reason this book has been published: to give all of us an understanding of just what a teenager, pushed to extremes, will do and how desperate he or she can become in the search for love and self.

I survived one of the most horrific and abusive childhoods imaginable. Those few people who knew what was happening did nothing to help. They were afraid to.

I was confused and I was damaged. My entire teenage life I continued the self-destruction. It became part of me. It constituted who I was and what I thought about myself.

This experience has helped me in ways that few people will ever understand. Until now.

1

GOODBYE CALIFORNIA

I had been part of what can only have been one of the worst instances of child abuse in America of the 1970s. But the preteen that once held me captive was gone—I was a teenager, and I was different now. I was determined to either stand up for myself or give up.

Unfortunately I chose to give up. I wanted, needed, to take my own life.

MORNING CAME, AND I leapt out of bed and got dressed before anyone was up. For the first time in years, I was happy. The rest of the household were going to be away for two weeks. I was finally going to be alone.

A few nights before, I had been in the basement, reflecting on my life—on the child I had been and the events that had shaped who I had become. The basement had always been a place I wished I could forget. Its concrete walls held all the emotions, fears and tears of the little boys, me and my brother David, captured and forced down there and abused. Those concrete walls held the secrets that only a few knew about. It was as if the emotions that had been absorbed in the concrete were what held the foundations together.

The memories of the things that had happened in the basement terrified me. They were telling me something, and I couldn't make sense of what I thought I remembered. I recalled myself as a little boy hiding in the basement from Mom, like an animal. Months before the hamster that lived in my room had escaped and found his way down to the basement. I found him hiding and shaking with fear under the steps. The same hiding place I knew so well. The memory of Mom laughing as she left me cowering under the metal shelves that had fallen on top of me once she'd

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

shoved me into them. The debris crushing me and her laughter as she walked away hurt me more deeply than I can put words to.

That's what most of my late childhood and young teenage life was like. I struggled to find words that described how I felt. I had outgrown my stuttering. I was older now. Instead of words getting tangled in my throat I found it hard to find words that expressed the hurt, the anger and the shame.

When I recalled that same little boy slumped on the bottom step, staring at a pool of my own blood after Mom had thrown me to the concrete floor, smashing my head, I saw my face reflected: meeker than meek and utterly humiliated. I was so ashamed of what I was as a child. The ghost of my past, the memories of the child who had been so abused, haunted me. Often those apparitions would reappear in my dreams but that one night, a few nights before, the ghosts were telling me to accept the fact that I was no longer that scared little boy.

As I got older, and felt I understood something about what had been happening to me, to an extent I was able to let go of it. But those experiences had not disappeared. Much like many apparitions will do, they reappear when we least expect it.

Now I was a teenager, and one thing I did know: I'd seen more misery than any child should have to, and I wanted it all to end. I wanted the shame to go away, the fear to evaporate and mostly, I wanted the ghosts of my past to just leave me alone. I wanted, needed, to end my life.

After Dad's death, Mom and Scott, my older brother, had decided to sell the house in Daly City, California, and move to Salt Lake City, Utah. The house was worth twenty-five times what Mom and Dad had paid for it years before.

When she left me in Daly City that morning, while she and "her family" went on their two-week vacation to look for a new house in Salt Lake, Mom made it a point that I "might not" be moving there with them. On the one hand I was relieved to be left alone. On the other I had no idea how or where I would live if they did leave me behind. I desperately wanted to leave that house and all the memories that lived there. I also knew that being fifteen and homeless in San Francisco was a frightening notion.

I guess what eased the fear was the belief that even if I was homeless, I would be better off. Meanwhile, I was determined to make the most of my temporary respite, no matter how short-lived it was.

Two weeks later, they were back. Mom and I were in the kitchen and she was doing her best, as usual, to degrade me. Only this time, she was ranting worse than normal. For hours I'd been listening to her drunken lies and delusions. She was pushing me further and further; her constant bombardment of insults were building up inside of me.

While they'd been away, I'd spent some of the money she'd left for me on new clothes. I'd been wearing the same shirt and pants for a year. It had felt so awesome

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

going to J.C. Penney's and buying myself new clothes. I knew she'd be mad if she found out, so I'd stuffed all the packaging into the garbage cans before they got back from Salt Lake that night. What I failed to anticipate was that she would go through the cans and find everything I'd put there. Not only the clothing packaging, but soda cans, and even the take-out container from lunch the day before. She was enraged with fury.

Suddenly, out of pure anger at what she was saying and doing to me, I made my hand into a fist and was about to square up to her. That rage helped me forgive myself for having been so timid up till then. I welcomed it, and yet I was afraid of it: that pure wrath, that building anger. I was terrified of the volcano nearing eruption from deep inside me. I knew that if I ever allowed that volcano to erupt, if I ever let go, it would be bad: really bad.

I backed down. I had to. I knew she was over the edge. It was three fifteen in the morning. Obediently, I picked up the trash she'd emptied out on to the dining room table, cleared up the floor and went to bed.

The next morning, I dressed, went quietly into the dining room and found the sugar bowl in the china cabinet. There I had placed most of my earnings from my paper routes. I took out all the cash. It amounted to just over fifty dollars.

I was disappointed that there was only fifty left, and I knew that the money I had hidden in the bottom of my dresser drawer was long gone. I had been spending more and more on whatever drugs I could find.

At first I'd taken on one paper route as a means of not only getting out of the house, but as a way of putting a few bucks in my pocket. Once I learned how expensive my new fondness for pot and cocaine had become, I had to take on a second, then a third paper route. The more I earned, the more I was spending. I was always broke, and yet wanting, needing, more cocaine. It was a vicious circle, and there was only one way to break it— I took on several more paper routes. In the weeks before we left Daly City Mom's threat to leave me behind had come to nothing. I was delivering three free papers to over thirty streets in my neighborhood. I also was responsible for several other routes delivering different papers that covered the same area. Each week nearly three thousand newspapers, all told, were being dropped in my driveway in bundles of fifty.

Not a single paper ever made it to any of the houses on my routes. At first I would dump them in the open sewer drain at the end of Crestline Avenue near the bottom of Westmore Hill. That disposal site worked well enough until I realized that it was backing up after heavy rains. The next site I found was a little more convenient, but more risky.

I placed the bundles behind the front steps of the house of a neighbor who recycled papers to raise funds for the local scouts. Thanks to the recycling center and to this neighbor who, like the rest, willingly turned a blind eye to the fact that so many papers were turning up for recycling, this went on for some time. Eventually, though, it became too risky. He asked me to no longer drop them off at his house,

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

as he was having to explain how he came by pre-bundled newspapers, papers that looked like they had never been unbundled, let alone read by anyone.

The next disposal site was the best. It was convenient and well hidden. Soon after the truck left my driveway each Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at 2 a.m., I would take the bundles to the trees behind the apartments where I hung out during the day. The papers provided warmth when burned, as well as seats to place neatly around the makeshift campfire me and my friends had built deep in the woods.

Many nights I spent sitting with a few friends, from well after midnight to dawn, smoking joints and drinking bourbon at that simple homemade campsite. As I took on more and more paper routes I spent more and more time in the woods behind the apartment complex near the end of Crestline Avenue. At first it was almost every night. I was saddened when fewer and fewer friends were able to spend the entire night out. Before we left Daly City I was spending most nights in the woods at "Camp Paper", and that's when I realized that my preference was for drinking alone. More times than not I was alone in the woods. Just me and Jim Beam, my new best friend, and my small campfire; although he didn't share anything of any value with me, my new best friend gave me more comfort than even Josh used to do. (Josh lived across the street, and had been my best friend since elementary school.)

Sad as it is to admit, being alone in the woods with a small fire to keep me warm, plus whatever it was that Jim Beam put in those dark square bottles, kept me together, mentally and emotionally. By now I was making nearly three hundred dollars a week not delivering newspapers. Almost all of it went up in smoke, up my nose or down my throat.

Whenever Mom drove me and my brother Scott down to the Crocker National Bank near Serramonte shopping center I'd shake my head in disbelief. My brother would cash one or two checks while I would be cashing over a dozen. Mom never said a word—she never asked nor did she even care. She had no idea I was not delivering on all those routes. She assumed I was slow at delivering the one or two she knew of. And most of the time she never cared, either, that I was out of the house nearly all night most of the school week.

The only time she would have a word to say about it was when I was still asleep when the truck honked after dropping off another load in the driveway; then she would yell for me to get out of bed and deliver those papers.

As I reached into the sugar bowl I knew there wouldn't be much left. I had been using the money on booze and drugs almost as fast as I wasn't earning it.

Finding just slightly more than I needed for the gun was a relief.

As I stuffed the bills in my pocket, I looked down the hallway to Mom's room and smiled.

I'm going to beat you at your own game, I told myself.

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer
Published by Time Warner Books

I turned around and walked out the front door. The normal walk to my old elementary school took about forty-five minutes. This time I wasn't going there, but to a friend's house just past the school yard. I didn't have many friends—I only knew a couple of boys about my age who didn't make fun of me or treat me poorly. They simply accepted me.

Jonathan was just such a friend. In the classroom, where other kids would tease me about the way I looked or smelled or about the clothes I had on, Jonathan would somehow make me feel better. He was smaller than I was and was picked on for different reasons. Together we sort of kept each other's spirits up.

He was one of the few people I had confided in other than my best friend Josh. He knew about Mom, how she beat me and how she constantly made me feel less than human. Jonathan couldn't truly know how bad it was, yet he understood. Our conversations were short and usually started with him asking what had been happening to me, especially if I looked more tired than usual.

He had offered to sell me a gun if I ever wanted to stop Mom. At the time I thought about it, but I'd never had the guts to seriously consider actually killing anyone—until now.

As I walked the same streets that led me both to school and toward Jonathan's house, I thought about why I was so comfortable with the idea of suicide. Ever since that night in the basement when I'd thought so much about my life and even seemed to have made some sense of it, I'd been determined to end it one way or another. All I had to do was find a way. I knew my friend was serious about the gun. As I made my way along the path through the trees by Westmore Hill, I realized that I wasn't scared; I was comfortable.

Before long I made it to Jonathan's house. I rang the doorbell, knowing in my heart that everything would be all right. His father answered the door, and I asked if his son was able to speak to me. He invited me into the house, and Jonathan came into the hallway and motioned for me to follow him downstairs.

In the corner of the basement was a small cabinet with a few pistols and rifles.

"If your dad finds out, there'll be serious trouble," I said.

"I've done it before," he replied smugly.

He had little concern about selling one of his father's guns without his knowledge. I knew that someday his father would discover it missing, but I wasn't going to be around to learn of the outcome.

He took out what looked like a chrome-plated 30-caliber automatic handgun. Without hesitating, I handed him the agreed forty dollars. My friend unloaded the magazine from the handle and showed me the several rounds, then reloaded the magazine. I thought to myself: All I needed was one bullet, but it doesn't matter.

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

I stuffed the pistol in my pocket and we left the basement via the garage door. I said goodbye and walked down the street. I could feel the weight of the gun in my pocket. It gave me satisfaction.

The walk back to the house I called "home" was almost spiritual. I took notice of the tree paths and the streets leading up to Westmore Hill. I would never see them again, I thought. At the steps to the high school I sat down, feeling the cold stone. I thought back to the house, and the basement. I was happy inside. For the first time in years I really felt happy.

I found my favorite place among the trees where I would often go and talk with God. I'd been talking to God for a while now, but it was always a one-sided conversation. I felt this would probably be my last talk with him. As I pondered taking my own life, the feeling came over me that if I did I would in some way be offending him. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed as if I would be giving up, and in an odd sort of way, giving in.

So, if I do this what will happen to me? I asked God.

As I lay on my back talking to him, I realized that the decision to take my life was all my own. God would have nothing to do with a teenager committing suicide.

I know I've been a disappointment to you and I know that you're angry with me. I just can't do this anymore. I respectfully and sincerely said. If you're going to help me then help me now!

As the last words softly left my lips I waited anxiously for a response. The minutes passed and the anxiety became anger as I realized that I wasn't getting any answers.

Eventually I gave up and found comfort in the thought that I was once again on my own. I started to think about how and where I would do it. The thought of the gun firing and the impact of a bullet to the head made me wonder just how fast death would come.

What if it isn't as quick as I think it will be?

What if I can feel the bullet rush through my skull tearing the bone apart, scattering it everywhere?

As I pondered my fear of the unknown, I realized that there was just no way of knowing what to expect.

It's not like I can ask someone who's done it. I thought.

I sat and pondered some more, this time about when I learned that my neighbor down the street had jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. She worked for the local phone company. When I was eight or nine years old, I used to secretly spend time talking to her when Mom was too busy with other things. As I thought about that day, I recalled the emotions that her mother shared with me: the sheer sense of

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

emptiness and wonderment was overpowering. I kept wondering what could have caused her to actually go through with it. She was a pretty girl who seemed to have friends. I didn't know what was on her mind or what was lacking in her life, but I knew that she felt strongly about it. She must have had a good reason. I recalled the few ink portraits I made. She had introduced me to a whole new form of speech by teaching me how to take ink to canvas and how to use pictures and not words to express myself. I wondered where they were now.

I knew that I would never know the reason why she did it, and I felt empty inside. The only people I would want to understand, when I was truly ready to do the same, were my two brothers Ross and Keith. They were the only ones that would even care, the only ones that would miss me.

Once I realized that there would be no answers to my questions in my conversation with God, I felt a sense of sorrow.

Please, please help me.

I don't know what to do.

I'm afraid. I'm lost.

Why are you letting me do this? I cried.

The next few minutes ticked by so slowly. A part of me wanted some sort of divine intervention, yet another part of me wanted confirmation that my decision to take my life was the right one. Neither came as I lay on my back looking at the clouds passing overhead.

Well then, I have nothing to lose, I said.

I stood up and looked back. I could see the tree line and the trails made by the hundreds of us kids as we all walked the same path to school each day. I recalled the years before when I would wander the school grounds looking for an answer, the hours and hours I'd spent sitting in the school bathrooms crying.

All I want is for someone to love me, I thought, as I started to make my way back home.

A few yards further on I found another place to sit and mull things over. I recalled better times, me sitting on Mom's lap being comforted when I had a fever, or banged my knee as a little child—I knew that she was capable of love.

But that was back then, before David left. David was older than me; he was born after Ross, my favorite brother, and before Scott. For as long as I could remember, David had taken the brunt of Mom's venom. He lived in the basement. Often when Mom referred to him she called him "IT". Mom made him work till he dropped, and most of the time past that point. She beat him daily, kicked him, cut him and starved him. More than once she locked him in the bathroom with a pail of cleaning

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer Published by Time Warner Books

solutions mixed together to make a toxic gas. She made him eat out of the dog dish under the kitchen table when the rest of the "family" ate in the dining room.

Then when he was thirteen or so, he disappeared. I thought at first that Mom had finally killed him; perhaps he'd failed to do something she'd told him to do. I was terrified. If she actually killed him, who else might she kill? It took me a while to learn that he was actually rescued and that the police had taken him away.

One thing I had known. I'd just felt it and it was as real as those apparitions in the basement that night; Mom needed a victim, and I'd be the next one. It hadn't taken long for my feelings to turn into a frightening reality.

On the one hand, I hated her with every ounce of my body and wished her dead more times than I could count. On the other, I remembered the times I'd wanted her never to leave me, to protect me from all the bad things the world had shown me. In a way I felt sorry for her and wished that I could erase all the pain and embarrassment she must feel inside from the guilt of the horrors she'd committed. I often wondered whether, if I told her I was the reason that she was abusive, perhaps she would let it all go and return to the "Mommy" I longed for.

I thought about the big dinners she would serve and the games of Tripoli we used to play in earlier years, and the comfort we'd all felt. Trying to make sense of it all was near impossible. When I was small she could comfort me as a mother, while at the same time committing acts against my brother that bordered on attempted murder. That much I understood. She was simply not in control of her actions or her thoughts. I believed that at times she had different personalities. Looking back at my childhood and all the times that I thought were good, those same times when David was going through hell, what was so strange was the realization that she was the same person. She could comfort me while beating him senseless.

I became convinced that she had lost her mind and was truly sick. In an odd sort of way that knowledge comforted me. The understanding gave me satisfaction, some sort of answer.

With a feeling of strength renewed, I stood up and continued on my way back home. Once I turned the corner on to Crestline Avenue, I saw the house—that dismal, dark, cold house. As I got closer and closer to the front steps I became ever more determined to find the perfect moment and place to take my life. My decision was made. I had no reason to postpone it any longer. I didn't want to just struggle on and on, endlessly questioning myself. I just wanted it over with.

Confidently, I walked quietly up the steps and into the front room. Everyone was still asleep. I made it back in time, before anyone had even noticed that I was gone.

Once in my room, I walked over to the black desk and sat down. Through the window, I looked across at Josh's house across the street and knew that within a few short hours I would either be on my way to Salt Lake City or in the morgue. Perhaps at last I would be somewhere I would be loved. A place where I could find the answers to the questions I had asked myself so many times as I lay on my back

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

talking to no one—perhaps now I would find out if there was a God or not. I looked forward to the answers. But I struggled with the question of the exact time and place. Where? When? Before everyone got in the car for the ride to Salt Lake City? Perhaps I could do it in the backyard. I had thought about doing it in the backyard for a while now. It seemed almost the right place. Or I could wait until I was in the car and we were all together.

But by now the removal men had pulled into the driveway and started to load what belongings we had already boxed up. Mom and Scott were packing the car. Once they were done, the neighbors came out one by one and said their goodbyes. They all had kept silent about what they had seen and heard in our house. I watched them, and I shook my head sadly. I was more than disappointed—every one of them had known what was going on and yet not one had stood up to help us.

*

Had this been 2006 and not 1980, anyone in the neighborhood, any of the teachers or administrators, any adult who had known what was happening in that house, would have stood up and helped me and my brothers. We have come a long way in twenty-five years. No one with a heart can stand on the sidelines and allow the kind of horrible abuse that existed in that house for so many years. Today, anyone knowing of such horror, such evil, would be held accountable. They would find themselves having to answer for their silence.

Frank and Alice from next door came out and hugged each of us, then talked to Mom for a few minutes. I looked Frank and Alice in the face and sensed they genuinely felt guilty. Helen, the neighbor on the opposite side, came out too and said her goodbyes. Even my older friend, Ben, who lived just down the street, hugged me and rubbed my hair as he often did to say goodbye. The last to show themselves were Josh and his family. They all came out and hugged each of us. Then Josh and I sat on the curb and talked about writing to each other. Josh had been my best friend all along. I was happy being around him and I'd enjoyed his friendship.

In a dead serious but gentle tone, I told Josh that I wouldn't be able to write back.

"I am going to end this nightmare once and for all", I said, as I patted the pocket that held my pistol.

Josh had seen Mom beat me and he'd seen Mom embarrass me more times than I could count. Even when I was running away from her, mortified with shame, and Josh was standing there watching in horror, he was always my friend. For years he had seen what I had gone through and tried not to make a big deal about it when I was so ashamed.

One of the more difficult and awkward situations I experienced was when Josh and I were freshmen in the same class at Westmore High School. It had to do with my smoking, which I had managed to keep hidden from Josh and his family for a couple of years. I was able to get away with smoking at school by keeping my cigarettes tucked into the top of my sock.

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer

In the middle of class one day Josh turned to me and asked: "Did you drop these?"

"Yeah—thanks," I replied, as he handed me the pack. It had somehow fallen to the floor as Josh sat down in front of me.

He was obviously mad at me. He had commented several times how he hated the way my mom smoked and smelled of cigarettes. Having handed me the pack, he simply turned away and ignored me for the rest of the class.

I felt both embarrassed and relieved. I was sad that he'd found out I was smoking by some simple accident rather than me talking to him about it. But I was relieved that I'd only dropped the cigarettes and nothing else.

As I casually slipped them back into the top of my sock I leaned toward my other leg to check I hadn't also dropped what was hidden there. I was relieved to discover the couple of joints and the small bag of cocaine I had stowed there.

I knew if Josh had ever found out I was doing drugs he would have written me off and never talked to me again. Thank God, I thought as I sat back in my chair and continued to ignore the teacher and everything else that was going on around me.

*

As we sat there on the curb outside the house in those few moments before I would leave and never see him again, Josh turned and looked at me. His face told me that he understood. He reached out and put his arm around my shoulder. I held back my tears. I was feeling the loss of a true friendship, and I knew he felt the same. But now I was being instructed to get in the back seat of our new car. Once Mom was in, we backed out of the driveway and turned down Crestline Avenue for the last time. I sat up and watched Josh out the back window as he waved goodbye. Once the car turned off the street Josh, Ben and all the others were out of sight.

As I turned back into my seat I looked at Mom, and she glanced back at me. If you only knew what you've done to me, I said to myself as she turned back to her driving. I placed my hand over my pocket, felt the pistol, leaned back and closed my eyes.

All I need now is the perfect place and time, I thought to myself as I drifted off.

I felt in my heart that soon enough I would be where I'd wanted to be all along: a place where I would be safe and warm, a place where I was loved, a place called heaven, a place I could really call home.

Copyright © 2005 Richard B. Pelzer