

Chapter 1

Shadows of the Past

Never suppose that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing. – Thomas Jefferson

“Please God, don’t let them hear me breathing.”

My lungs were on fire. I was breathing so hard — gasping for the cold night air. I was really scared. It seemed like one of the apartment managers had opened his apartment door almost at the same instant the rock had shattered the window. Before I even started running I could hear heavy footsteps dangerously close to the building’s entrance. As I turned the corner of the building I heard the entrance door open and one of the men yelling.

“You little son of a bitch, wait until I get my hands on you!”

I ran as fast as my legs would carry me. I knew both managers were chasing me because I heard each of them screaming. I had to find a place to hide. These guys were big and mean. I was sure they wouldn’t hesitate to hit me if they caught me.

I ducked into a building next to the street because I knew they would overtake me if I continued running much farther. If there had been more time to make my getaway, I would have run to

the building farther from the street where I had left my bike. I smashed the light bulb on the lower level and wedged myself into a corner. Since my clothes were dark, it would be hard for the management guys to see me — well, as long as they didn't have a flashlight.

“Oh God, please don't let them have a flashlight.”

If they didn't hear my breathing, surely they would hear my heartbeat. The pounding in my ears seemed as loud as the back beat on an Elvis Presley record. I could feel the veins pulsing so hard in my neck that they seemed to be on the brink of bursting. The thrill of getting revenge on these guys had been quickly replaced by fear — fear of being caught, fear of getting beat up and fear of having to explain it to Mom.

“God, I won't get in any more trouble if you'll just give me a break this time.”

It was late November 1956. I had chosen refuge in one of the sixty-eight garden-style apartment buildings that made up Clifton Park Manor, a large development northeast of Wilmington, Delaware. Each building looked like an Army barracks, except for the red-brick construction. They were three-story buildings. To reach the bottom level you had to descend a short stairway. That's where I was hiding.

Although it had been a very mild autumn and the first snowfall had not yet arrived, it was nevertheless a chilly night. To make things worse I was sweating from running so hard. My clothes were moist and, as they began to dry, it made me even colder. I was starting to shiver as I huddled in that corner, hoping and praying that the apartment managers wouldn't find me. If I sat there much longer, I worried, even after my breathing and heart rate returned to normal, my chattering teeth might tip them off to where I was.

I could just make out the door from beneath the stairwell. Suddenly the door opened and one of the managers reached for the light switch. The hair stood up on the back of my neck.

“They’re so close now, and there’s no way out,” I thought, “and they’re going to beat the crap out of me.” I felt like I was going to throw up.

“The little bastard,” thundered the other manager, “I’ll bet it was one of those little creeps that skidded their bikes through the flower beds today.”

“Dollars to donuts it was the kid on the bike I kicked,” replied the manager who was groping for the switch in the dark. He didn’t have a flashlight. “Oh hell, the light must be burned out down there — I can’t see a thing.”

“Forget it, he would’ve headed away from the street to stay out of the light. We better go back and cover that window, it’s going to be pretty cold tonight.”

The door closed. Thanks to a little dumb luck I had been spared discovery. But, I realized, I still had a problem to deal with. I would have to figure out how to fix the bent spokes on my bike’s back wheel. Unless I could straighten them, I would need a new wheel, and Mom didn’t have any money to spare.

“Thanks God,” I whispered. I assumed my prayers had been answered and I would do my best to honor my promise to stay out of trouble. It hadn’t occurred to me that a just God would not make a bargain to protect me in a situation like this.

“I wonder if there’s a bicycle store in the Mart,” I thought as I waited until it was safe to come out of my hiding spot. “If there is maybe they can tell me how to fix the spokes.”

Clifton Park Manor was located on a hill overlooking the Merchandise Mart. It was a 500,000-square-foot shopping center on the west side of Governor Printz Boulevard, centered around the

Strawbridge and Clothier store, one of the first department stores in Delaware. Opened in 1952, the Merchandise Mart was the state's first regional shopping complex. A group of prominent businessmen, many of whom were officers of the DuPont Company, developed the Merchandise Mart and Clifton Park Manner in America's post World War II building boom. The DuPont Edge Moor plant was located just east of Governor Printz Boulevard, and the company steered many of the young professionals who were moving to Wilmington into the communities northeast of the city.

Consequently, many of the families living in Clifton Park Manor and the immediate vicinity were employed by either the DuPont Company or the Hercules Powder Company, which had been part of DuPont. It was a prosperous area and, in those days, parking spaces in the Merchandise Mart were very hard to find during the holidays. After demographic changes, Clifton Park Manor (now called Paladin Club) would eventually become a haven for drugs and crime. Robberies, vandalism and muggings became routine events in the shopping center and merchants moved out. Today, the Merchandise Mart — renamed as Merchants Square — has the appearance of a blighted area whose days of prosperity have long since faded.

But in 1956 it was an exciting place to go. Just after the presidential election in early November, I had seen the glee on the faces of a group that had gone to a restaurant in the Merchandise Mart to celebrate the re-election of President Eisenhower. Everybody seemed to like the president, and that included Mom and Dad.

“After all those years of Roosevelt and Truman,” Mom said after his election in 1952, “it's wonderful to have a good man as president again.” Dad smiled quietly and said, “Indeed it is.”

On the eighth of October I had stood outside one of the stores in the Merchandise Mart and watched the fifth game of the 1956 World Series between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Yankees. I had seen the final out of the game on the store's TV screen — Don Larsen, whose career was otherwise undistinguished, had just pitched a perfect game. It made me happy that I had witnessed an ordinary man doing something great.

However, there were many things that made me unhappy in 1956. We had moved from the neighborhood in Richardson Park southwest of Wilmington where I had lived all of my young life. We had gone from being reasonably well to do to just barely making ends meet. Along with all of my childhood friends, I had lost my best friend in the world. The worst thing of all was that I had found out everything I believed in was based on lies — lies my best friend in the world told me.

Nothing made sense any more without my best friend. He had taught me so much about math and a code of values that would eventually guide my life. But, none of that mattered now.

“Why should I follow the rules when the rule makers don't? My friends don't care about the rules and they're real people. They don't lie to me and I don't lie to them. We trust each other. My friends are solid like oaks! Well, all except my best friend.”

I still hadn't gotten over the betrayal by the person who was my best friend in the world, the person I looked up to with love and respect, the person who was my first great teacher — MY DAD. It made me want to scream, but I just stayed silent.

“Mom is right,” I thought, “Dad *is* a liar. That's why they got a divorce. It really doesn't matter though 'cause I'll be thirteen in a few weeks. I don't need a mother or a father telling me what to do anyway. I'm old enough to take charge of my life from now on.”

I stood up, kicked the wall in anger and lit a cigarette. It had been about ten minutes since the apartment managers had gone, so I decided that it was safe to make my way home.

I got my bike and started pedaling up the hill to Bellefonte. My back wheel wobbled a lot and it took a great deal of effort to pedal. About two-thirds of the way home I had to stop and rest. Lighting another cigarette I thought, “In five more years I’ll graduate from high school and then I can go anywhere I want — no matter what anybody says.” I had always thought that when I finished school I would go to work for Dad. That didn’t seem very likely now that he had left me.

I was angry with him, yet I thought about him constantly. He had rarely spoken to me about what his life had been like before I was born, nor had Mom. I’m sure she would have told me about their life together if I had asked, but my tangled emotions stood in the way of asking. Unsurprisingly, as a twelve-year-old boy, I had no idea of how intertwined my fate was with Dad’s.