The collection of a young boy's early experiences in an Indiana farm town, through his college graduation and travels immediately after. Set in the 1950's and 1960's.

Finnegan's Passage

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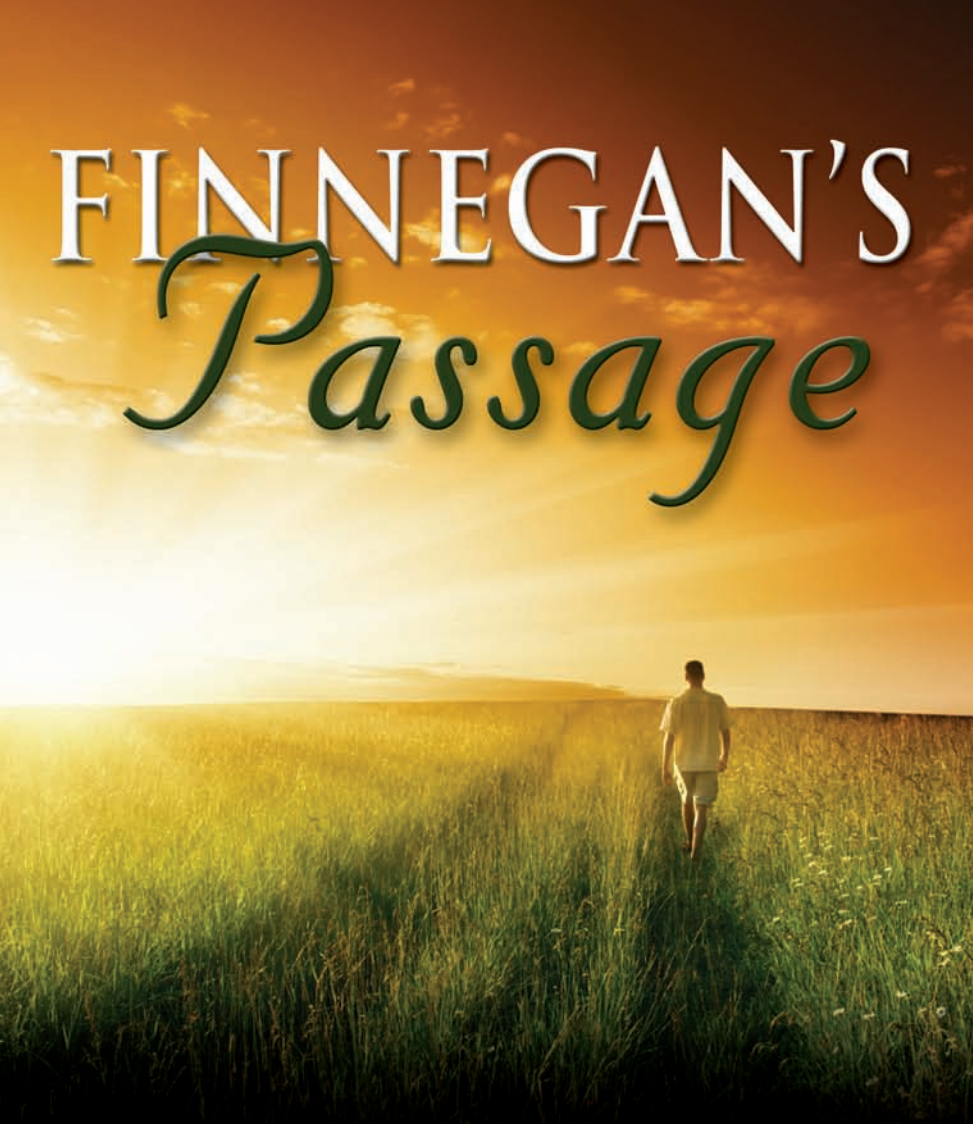

If you cannot find the truth right where you are,
where else do you expect to find it?

— Zen Poet, Dogen

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Miserable child, you disturb my dream. I had floated into a purple mist and found my youth again. There were glittering gateways and jeweled blossoms. If I close my eyes perhaps I will again return.

–From Ancient Chinese Folktale, Tiki Tiki Tembo

Great Expectations

June 13, 1957

"The old lady across the street would like you to pick up her bottle of medicine at the pharmacy," my mother said, as she lowered the telephone. "She's frail and alone, too sick to do it herself."

Reluctantly, I got on my bicycle for a trip downtown, mentally preparing myself to meet the old lady who lived in the scariest house in town.

Her house was unusually large with angular gables pointing in all directions. Clapboard siding that once held gray paint was now weathered and naked, giving the house a sinister look. Overgrown junipers and arborvitae pressed up against windows not opened in fifty years. The front porch, once a comfortable summer resting spot, was strangled by wisteria and enveloped by cobwebs. When silhouetted against a full moon, I imagined the house as the inspiration for an Edgar Allan Poe short story or poem. I passed it twice daily, once on the way to school and again on the way home, feeling an adrenaline rush with each quickened step.

Now, with medicine in hand, I tapped on her screen door and heard a faint voice beckoning from down the hall.

"Come in, boy. I'm in the bedroom." she called.

I stumbled over piles of magazines and stacks of shoe boxes as I worked my way toward the sound of her voice, guided only by dust motes dancing in a sliver of light through her heavy drapes.

Her bedroom was dark and congested, smelling of medicine and stale air. She lay in a poster bed wearing a lacy blue nightgown buttoned high at the neck. Thick red rouge stood out on her cheeks in stark contrast to the pale ashen color of her skin and the stringy gray hair that framed it. Pills, tissues, combs, and bobby pins were piled on side tables flanking the bed. Raising a glass of amber liquid to her lips, she spoke softly.

"Just set the medicine down anywhere. Thank you for coming. You must be Finnegan, the boy from across the street. Do you know that when I was your age, I wanted to be a famous opera singer? Could have been, too. Please sit for a minute while I tell you my story."

Soon I was trapped, making two or three trips to her house a week. Each visit lasted longer than the one before, thanks to her stories. I learned about her days as a schoolgirl, her passion for china dolls, her deceased husband, her part in a Broadway play, her choir solo at the Methodist Church, and Albert, her only son. Her dull eyes sparkled as she remembered times of great promise and possibility. But the sparkle rarely lasted. With each missed opportunity, untimely tragedy or failed relationship, her expression once again took on the gloom of the house. The smell of her bedroom, the bottles of pills and pins, her

medicine, and the glass of amber liquid all gave the impression of an unfulfilled life.

One winter day, after I had left for college, she passed away, falling victim to a heart too tired to pump. When I returned for her funeral, I was introduced to her son, Albert.

"Aren't you the boy who helped my mother?" he asked.

"Yes, and you must be Albert," I replied. "Delivering her medicine was nothing, really. Any kid could have done the same."

"No," he explained, "I wasn't referring to the medicine. You listened to her stories. You let her share her memories with you, memories of great expectations. While often disappointing, those stories were her source of comfort. You gave my mother a wonderful gift just by listening."

If a kid asks where rain comes from, I think a cute thing to tell him is "God is crying." And if he asks why God is crying, another cute thing to tell him is "Probably because of something you did."

–Jack Handey

Burning Memories

August 11, 1959

Absorbed in the newest editions of Superman comic books at the Rexall Drug Store, Tommy and I never noticed Mr. Dunham's approach from behind.

"Caught you boys stealing, didn't I?" he said, as he clamped one beefy hand to the back of my neck and another to Tommy's. "Empty your pockets before I call the police. And where's the other kid who came in here with you?"

Behind the candy counter, only a few feet away, Allen heard everything. Instantly, he bolted for the front door, rounded the display of magazines, and tripped over a table of cosmetics before plowing through a rack of sunglasses as he fell to the floor. Nine packs of stolen baseball cards and a couple of Snickers bars tumbled from his jacket. Both guilty and embarrassed, Allen lay there unable to speak with traces of fresh chocolate on his fingers.

The three of us were eleven that summer, too old for toy soldiers and not old enough for girls. To pass the time, we hung out at the Rexall on the corner of Main and Market streets,

where Mr. Dunham served up his famous "Green River," the finest lime phosphate money could buy – a sweet syrupy concoction that could be mixed with extra lime on request.

The Rexall also carried the best selection of Topps baseball cards in town. Large shipments arrived weekly, refueling our appetites for more cards. As serious collectors, the three of us invested every hard-earned nickel in Topps' six-packs, hoping to accumulate the entire set of five hundred seventy-two cards before September. Adding cards daily, we organized them by teams and displayed them in old cigar boxes, which made them smell like stale tobacco. At first just an innocent hobby, those baseball cards soon became our obsession, possibly our addiction. Even when we weren't buying, trading, or organizing them, they were always on our minds.

"Does anyone have Jim Baxes?" I would ask, anxious to complete my set. "He's an outfielder with the Dodgers."

Tommy only needed Minnie Minoso, his favorite White Sock. He was ready to trade me six Cubs and Braves for one Minnie, but I had no extras to spare.

One day, Allen got three Whitey Ford's in the same pack. Although we didn't care much for Yankee pitchers, he made us a deal we couldn't refuse just to get rid of two of them.

Details of Allen's bungled robbery traveled fast. When we arrived at our houses that night, we found our fathers waiting with sour dispositions. Pleading our cases, Tommy and I were found innocent, our only punishment a lecture on baseball card addiction. But with evidence too overwhelming to ignore, Allen was guilty as charged. He didn't even try to defend himself.

Determined to teach his son a lesson, Allen's unsympathetic father quickly sentenced him to an ironic punishment.

"Boys, I want to see each of you in our backyard tonight after dinner," he said. "This baseball card thing has gone too far."

That evening, Allen, Tommy and I circled a fifty-gallon drum in the alley behind Allen's house. As we watched in disbelief, Allen's father dumped his son's entire baseball card collection into the drum. He then turned to face Allen, who was crying.

"Son, this is what happens to kids who steal. I want you to remember that."

Saturating the cards with gasoline, Allen's father lit a match. Instantly, the cards exploded into flames. As they did, we watched years of memories burn right before our eyes, an offering to the idol we had worshiped all summer.

After that night, nothing was ever quite the same. Tommy and I finished out the 1959 season and put our collections away for good. But Allen never bought another card. He wouldn't even talk about them. He had lost his baseball cards and learned a lesson, one he would remember. He may have lost a piece of his soul that night, too.

You are a God, the world spinning before you in the darkness between the stars, a tiny blue marble, and you do not see the beauty of it. You strain yourself as hard as you can, trying to grasp the meaning of your terrifying short life and, even when it stares you in the face, screaming at you for attention, you do not hear.

–The Internet Oracle

Natural Causes

September 2, 1966

"Your position is next to the furnace, kid. Summer help always takes that spot."

The plant foreman pointed me to the blast furnace and walked away, leaving no room for discussion, so I took off my shirt and went to work.

High school boys in our little town always worked during the summer, not because we wanted to, but because we had to. Some of us worked to save money for college tuition, while others worked to support their families. Farm boys plowed fields, picked beans, and bailed hay. The rest of us took jobs in service stations, shops, and factories, thankful for any employment. I spent my last summer before college working in the Vitreous Fabrication Plant.

The Vitreous was known for its patented process of coating steel with fire-hardened enamel. The company's products

included sinks, tubs, kerosene lanterns, and cooking grills, all requiring durable coated surfaces.

Summer helpers like me could count on the least desirable jobs in the plant. My first assignment was in the furnace room, a literal hellhole kept warm and toasty by a two thousand-degree oven. Tubs and sinks hung from overhead conveyors as they passed through the heat. While asbestos gloves protected my hands, they couldn't keep hot steel from touching bare arms and shoulders. After only two weeks, I was as seared and singed as the tubs and sinks.

Anxious for another assignment, I jumped at the chance to help out in the "pickle room," where metal was dipped in a pit of acid. Frankie ran the dipping process as if he were a chef in a gourmet restaurant, making sure the "pickled" steel was treated with exactly the correct acid recipe. Frankie liked me immediately, and I liked him. He took an interest in advancing my "worldly" education. I was fascinated by his seedy stories and listened to his advice, especially as it pertained to female desires. We laughed all summer, and those factory days flew by quickly.

I never asked Frankie about his age, but judging from his badly wrinkled and spotted skin, he appeared to be in his mid-sixties. Splashing acid had burned holes in his clothes and created spots on his body, giving him the look of an old leopard.

"Breathing acid fumes is probably cooking me on the inside, too," Frankie joked, lifting his shirt to show me the scars on his chest and belly.

On my last day at work before leaving for college, Frankie and I were saying our goodbyes when I noticed moisture in his sad old eyes. He took a deep breath and moved in close to speak, not wanting anyone else to hear what he had to say.

"Kid, this is all I ever done, sixteen when I come here. Now you, you got potential. You work your ass off at that school, or I'll come there and kick it. Don't ever want to see you back here again. Understand?"

While confused at first, I later understood. Frankie knew I had enjoyed the summer at the Vitreous, but he wasn't about to let me make it a profession. He wanted me to do something meaningful with my life. It was his way of saying that he cared about me.

A year later, I received an envelope from my father in our dormitory mailbox. Inside, I found his note and a page torn from the obituary section of our weekly hometown paper. Circled in black marker were the words, "Frank W. Peace, died of natural causes, age 42."

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