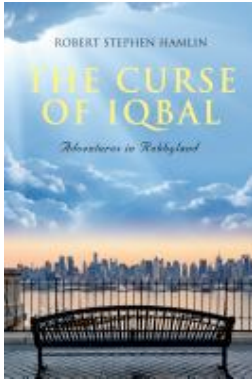


ROBERT STEPHEN HAMLIN

THE CURSE OF IQBAL

Adventures in Robbyland





The author recovers from potentially permanent brain damage, but is given a prognosis for a life of limited physical activity following a car crash. The gift of another chance to live allows him the enhanced perspective that life should continue to be a daily adventure. While his peers are coming home from war in body bags, he embraces serial retirement. Harboring a thirst for more, he never totally abandons a child's passion.

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THE CURSE OF IQBAL
Memoir of a Ship Broker's Son

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Robert Stephen Hamlin

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First Edition

Chapter 6

Mission Beach

After spending the summer in complete vacation mode, I headed straight for San Diego to begin anew my quest to do some writing. An easy mark for marketing ploys, and not knowing anything about San Diego, I fell for the first newspaper ad I saw for luxury apartments just for the single demographic. Contrary to the fantasy alive in my subconscious, sweet young things from Laguna Beach or La Jolla or anywhere else were not knocking on my door. San Diego had a most perfect climate, never hot or cold in the off-season I spent there. Without an income, I looked for a better situation. Lower Mission Beach fit what I wanted. Low key. My apartment was on the second floor of a former motel, a three minute walk to either the ocean or the rock jetty that marked the channel where boats came into port. A short drive west from the city center, take a left at the ocean, bypass Pacific Beach and go all the way to the jetty. It was a hundred ten dollars a month, ridiculously cheap, furnished, with kitchen. If you ever wondered, the Pacific is way colder than the Atlantic even in summer I was told, but mostly it was just the same to surfers in wetsuits. One day a scent that smelled like creativity wafted up to my apartment. The rocks at the jetty were a fine laboratory for ideas some called daydreaming.

Now what I needed were the tools of the trade. Pencils, paper, typewriter, wine and nature, and lots and lots of time. Taken with the fantasy of an easy route to success in writing freelance, I started out on my first early retirement by soldiering down to the supply emporium nearby, purchasing an Olympia typewriter and a pad of yellow lined paper. After all, had I not been chosen in military academy as Most Likely to Succeed? Still somewhat amazed that I had escaped the suits

of Wall Street earlier that year, I added to the peanut butter and jelly in my refrigerator with something from aisle eight. Wine was sold in supermarkets in California. Coming of age to legally drink in Pennsylvania when I turned twenty-one meant a visit to the LCB, the Liquor Control Board. One did not browse the aisles on entering the LCB store, there weren't any aisles. What you did first was to confront the seller behind the counter, tell him what you wanted, or look at his list. Most people knew what they wanted, no need to consult a list. Very mature. Back to the supermarket in San Diego, certain that Hemingway and Vonnegut would have approved, I purchased the very best bottle for the money, a gallon jug of Carlo Rossi white for under two dollars. It was a very busy life, trying to fit it all in. Aside from the hard work trying to save the world with a typewriter, I had to try to make ends meet by trading stocks. Learning great life skills in stretching dollars and cents could only get me so far. The stock game was yet to be mastered, but the idea of extreme short term trading had great allure. If one was to spend six thousand dollars to buy a measly hundred shares of some defense contractor or drug manufacturer, it would have cost you a hundred fifty bucks just in commission. Just as much when you sell it. Ridiculous. Quite a few stocks listed on the American Stock Exchange were moving up or down five or more points a day. New Process, listed on the ASE, ticker symbol NOZ was fun to trade. The stock guides described one stock I bought as 'not for the faint of heart.' Despite the outrageous commission structure, designed to weed out or eliminate poor wannabes like me, it was possible to garner an occasional profit on a fast trade. Many more stocks were traded over the counter, but that market was so murkily operated that amateurs could not really access it or trade on it with any confidence. I needed to stick to the listed stocks, those that traded publicly enough to be in the daily business pages of the newspaper. I could not care less about being a so-called investor in any corporation. The standard advice was to put your cash into a mutual fund and let the professionals invest it for you. Hah! Allowing myself to be drawn into the idea that I could succeed as an outsider playing a game for insiders, I must have had a gambling addiction. Obviously, the stock game was only for the rich, or those in the business of aggregating cash from poor schmucks like me. Putting my whole nest egg on

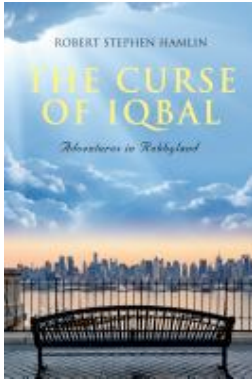
common stock would never make me rich enough to do anything very helpful for the human condition, or so I told myself. Of course, this was the world before Microsoft. Clearly, it was ego masquerading my hypocrisy. If I really wanted to help, I would have volunteered at a hospital or something like that. Where did I get the energy to get up early to go down to the stock broker's office? I hated early mornings, and New York opened at seven in the morning on the west coast. Just as in the lobbies of some of the Wall Street stockbroker offices, there were rows of seats where nondescript men with sullen faces sat watching the tape for hours at a time, perhaps until the undertaker carted them away. Beating the odds stacked so heavily against me meant that failure was practically assured. Success might mean not losing more than my shirt. I might have done that, lost my shirt, had my stockbroker humored me when I wanted to get into the futures market. Pork bellies? It sounded absurd but it was part of the games men played. Imagine that.

What kept me working at the fantasy of making riches on wild speculation was the immediacy of it. No one gets hurt. If I fail, only I get hurt. It was only money. I can take it. Leave me alone by the jetty on Mission Beach. Do not disturb me, my typewriter, and my gallon jug. Writing? Everything pointed to a long slog to become even passable at it. Money? I avoided being connected to those other traders watching the tape, and relished seeing myself the loner savant. Was I not merely doing the same as anyone would do, if they had a small nest egg, and a knack for picking stocks? However, the case was that buy, sell, or hold, whichever I did seemed to be the perfectly wrong choice. I made squat as a trader. The image was fine. The only thing that eluded me was reality. Broker pundits applauded my zealous goal of making money, but nothing seemed to work. It is said that timing is everything. Years have passed and it has been confirmed on the record that the specific years I dabbled and risked my bank account, on margin, have ranked among the worst ever for returns on investments in common stock. Sometimes I wonder, though, whether had I made it, and became a legendary trader, a Wall Street wizard, would I have quickly tossed my lofty ideals to do something good in the world, or would I be drunk with my success, would I spiral into decades of endless consumption, totally certain success was only what I deserved, because I had worked so hard for it?

Once there was a TV commercial for an investment house, Smith Barney, with an elderly actor saying to the camera, “we make money the old fashioned way, we earn it.” I got the joke. The old fashioned way, really, is we inherit it. With my trusty typewriter, stock charts, and Carlos Rossi, I plugged along day after day instead of asking myself if this episode was a mistake. The conflict between heart and head persisted. The money thing was for the head; writing was for the heart, a dream on life support, a need I had not yet emotionally been able to touch. Ever on the lookout for a silver bullet, or a quick and guiltless few bucks, I needed a better compass. Once I tried working a motel front desk. A very hospitable guy I saw myself as, with ever the best intentions to help a fellow traveler enjoy time away from the comforts of home. Hotel work in a great seaside city was a possible win-win, but speed linked with customer service proved too much for this big shot to accomplish well. The Famous Writers School sounded interesting. Everyone knew who Rod Serling was, and he was promoting it. It was easy to imagine myself years into the future, a famous writer, an ambitious young man, a successful stock picker, an avid devotee of all things rock and roll. I awaited the full pitch in the mail. When at last I sat and studied the information as if it were a prospectus, my inner cynic dismissed the pitch as yet another scam. Or maybe I held onto the fear that nobody would want to read anything I had to say, anyway.

Not yet meeting success in the Wall Street casino, not yet the gifted writer who did not write, I turned to something I was good at. I went shopping. Right there in the record store was the wild black and white cover of the first Santana LP. Soon I was listening to the second album of Led Zeppelin, turning the volume high. I heard on the radio some good groups would be at the football field where the Chargers had previously played in San Diego, Balboa Stadium. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. My friend Joyce, a student at Cedar Crest in Allentown, wrote me. We dated a few times before my accident, and I thought she was way above me intellectually. She told me about a new song called “Fire and Rain” by James Taylor. Sweet Baby James. One or two more letters came from her, and an invitation to join her on a school group tour of Europe in June. I did not hesitate for a minute, but failed to tell her how lonely I felt under the mask. Joyce was all things pretty, sweet,

young, and smart, and just graduating. Little violinists inside my head were calling the tune. Just as I was about to leave the west coast, Kent State happened. Colleges all over the country were exploding because the National Guard killed four students who were protesting the war. A fifth victim was paralyzed, and permanently. It was a time we all remembered where we were when we heard the news. The assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Kent State. I had stopped in North Platte, in the western part of Nebraska, to visit my mother's cousin. When I said goodbye, I drove straight through to Allentown, about twenty-two hours. I pulled over for about an hour and a half outside Youngstown, Ohio for some rest. It was early May. Schools were still in session, but all classes were canceled. It was a low point for many folks, but far lower for those killed and their families, shot dead by young men who followed orders, killed because they disputed government policies made by other men who did not know what they were doing. I was a long way from where I was seven Mays ago, sword drawn, in my last march in the village of Cornwall-on-Hudson on Memorial Day. Countless men were trying to stay alive on the other side of the world in a war they were told was to fight the evil of communism. At the very same time, men like me were playing every card they could to avoid being one of those men.



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