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The Angel

from home, to Vietnam, to forgiveness

by Jim Stewart

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JIM STEWART



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Chapter 2

We never strayed far from home in those days. There were no superhighways, and no 70 mph speed limits. As a matter of fact, 55 mph was downright foolish on many of the twisting, windy back roads that we traveled getting from point A to point B. Those roadways, and the lack of money, were the major reasons we didn't wander far from home. It just took way too long, and cost too much. It was money that we just didn't have.

Most of dad and mom's relatives still lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Scranton was about 175 miles from our house, as the crow flies, but it might as well have been like traveling to Mars, with all the back roads we had to take. As much as possible though we'd try to have a yearly visit with one another.

One year our family would make the trek, the next Uncle Halley and Aunt Helen, my mom's sister and her husband, would put as many cousins as they could in their station wagon, and make the trip down to our place.

Now, Aunt Helen had 11 kids. (She had given birth to 12 but one died at birth). Needless to say, it was harder for them to come see us than it was for us to go up and see them.

Dad usually had mercy on them as someone in their gaggle would have to be left behind. I had a mad crush on my cousin Beth, and certainly was supportive of my dad when he said that we should go up and see them instead. I couldn't stand the thought of having them visiting us and finding out that Beth was one of the ones left behind. That was unacceptable. Plus, Scranton was a big city, and there was much more to do to keep the kids busy while the adults visited.

We'd have the station wagon packed and leave early, usually around 7:00 in the morning. Our trip took us north through the back roads to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I would sit in the back seat of the

car, play with my baseball cards, and marvel at the beauty of the Amish countryside, with their immaculate handsome wooden framed houses, on perfectly manicured fields.

We'd always stop and eat at dad's favorite diner. We'd arrive early enough that breakfast was still being served. Each table in the diner had a small jukebox on it, and I would leaf through the selections looking for a favorite tune. I was usually given a nickel to choose three songs as we waited for our food. Mom always wanted me to waste one of my three selections on a Pat Boone song. Ugh! Well, it *was* her money. She'd usually have to settle for Elvis, who she loved anyways, plus two other selections of my choice. One was usually 'Rebel Rouser' by Duane Eddy and The Rebels, and 'Raunchy' by Bill Justis. Dad usually read the paper while mom ordered food and I lost myself in the music.

After breakfast, we were back on the road for the longest part of the journey.

Slow winding roads north to Allentown, and then Redding. We knew we were almost there when we'd hit the Joe Palooka Mountains and dropped down into the town of Wilkes Barre. We'd usually arrive in the late afternoon around three o'clock, or so. Once at my Aunt Helen's house it was time to be spoiled with love and hugs. I would follow cousin Beth around as if she were the most famous of movie stars. My plan was to marry Beth. What did I know?

As I got older, I started playing Little League baseball. My dad was my manager and coach. He'd spend time in the front yard squatting down and catching my pitches. He really wanted me to be a pitcher like himself. Dad had played minor league ball for a team in Scranton and had been offered a contract with the Boston Red Sox. At that time his choice was baseball, or my mother. He chose my mom. The result was me. Good choice.

After throwing way too many pitches out of his reach, or over his head, he decided that pitching was not the answer. I knew he didn't want me to be a pitcher because he kept saying, "Jesus wept, Jimmy!" I guess I also made Jesus cry.

I wound up at shortstop and hit sixteen home runs in fourteen Little League games. I *was* growing at an alarming rate and dwarfed many of

my teammates. I continued with Little League and then gave up playing in the Babe Ruth league when I saw my first good curveball. Suddenly, a baseball career was looking quite dim.

Dee was never an athlete. I admired how smart he was, as he always did well in school. Dee's parents put him in a Catholic school, while I went to public school. One day he was given a fine Gretsch guitar by his parents. He brought it over as soon as he got it and played the only chord he knew. Was the guitar going to separate us the way my baseball playing had separated us? I hadn't thought about it, but now was concerned and a little jealous.

"Jimmy, you got to get one, too. I don't want to play by myself. We could help each other learn."

"My mom and dad don't have any money. I'll never be able to have one." Dad and mom walked in my room, and watched Dee clumsily play his chord, fiddling with different strings, trying to put together a melody.

"We heard somebody playing a guitar. Can you play something?"

"Well, not yet, Mrs. Stewart. I've got a book and all. I'm going to have to start practicing a lot. Maybe Jimmy can get one too? Maybe him and me can practice together and teach each other." Dee looked up at my mom pleadingly. Dee was begging for me the only way he knew.

Mom and dad just turned and walked out of the room. I turned to Dee quickly.

"Dee Dee, you've got to practice here all the time. You've got to come here so, they'll hear you playing. Maybe they'll hear how good you are getting, and I'll get one too?"

For one solid week Dee came to my room, sat down, and we practiced. At first, I just listened, and then Dee taught me a few chords. I even called my parents in and let them hear how I was doing. My dad would always stand silently, hands on hips, listen for a moment and then walk away without a word. Mom was encouraging, but I could see sadness in both their eyes. I knew they couldn't afford a guitar for me. Dee continued to practice at my house, and we got better every day.

Dad and mom watched and listened as we progressed. Most of the time I sat and watched hopelessly when Dee played. I knew this was going to break up our friendship. Dee was totally into his guitar playing now, and I was just a sad sack cheerleader. My life was ruined. A few weeks passed and suddenly Dee stopped coming to the house to practice. I was crushed.

“Jimmy, time to get up! Time for breakfast!” My mom was yelling from downstairs in the kitchen. I rubbed my eyes and went into the bathroom to pee.

“Jimmy, hurry up now!” It was Saturday. What was the big deal about breakfast?

I washed my hands, and stumbled off towards the top of the stairway, still half asleep. As I looked down the flight of stairs my eyes burst open like old fashioned flash bulbs exploding at the academy awards. There it was! At the bottom of the stairway, propped up against the wall, was a guitar.

A beautiful sunburst color leaning up against the wall in *my* house. *My* guitar! My legs shook as I grabbed onto the banister to keep from falling down the stairs. It was beautiful. Cousin Beth was not as beautiful as this thing before me. Nope, no, no way. My dream of marrying my cousin was dwarfed by the thought of picking up this beauty before me.

On wobbly knees I poured down the stairs like melting ice cream, unable to catch my breath. My mouth was agape, and I was speechless. Surely my heart would pound its way out of my chest. I could feel the buttons on my shirt jumping and straining against the thread. I got to the bottom of the stairs and dropped to both knees as if worshipping some ancient god.

My mom and dad stood in the dining room looking in at me smiling that smile that only parents can when they’ve made their kids happy. My dad had his hands on his hips, my mom had her arms folded in front of her. My mouth was still wide open, but words were still not coming forth. Drool poured down my chin from my mouth being open for too long and not swallowing. I looked at my guitar in awe, looked at my parents and back at the guitar. I was gonna pass out. This was impossible. I had to be dreaming.

“Well, it ain’t gonna play itself.” mom said.

My hand shaking, I grabbed the guitar by its neck and looked at the name engraved on the head....Fender. I turned again and looked at my parents, still speechless.

My dad looked at me quizzically. “Are you retarded?”

“Well, Jimmy, if you stay down on the floor long enough with it, I guess you’re gonna have to name it. You gotta name for it?” I looked at my mom.

“Beth.”

Dad started to smile as he turned to mom and said, “I told you he liked her.”

“Jimmy, you need to get that over to Dee Dee’s and start practicing. Don’t you think?” Mom unfolded her arms.

I grabbed Beth by the neck and streaked out the front door leaving mom and dad in my wake. Like a woman being chased by a robber I frantically banged on Dee’s front door. Mrs. Clay opened the door and glared at me.

“Jimmy Stewart, whatever are you doing pounding on our door like that?” Then she saw the guitar. “Oh, my! Oh, my! Dee Dee! Dee Dee, come quick, Jimmy’s got a guitar!”

I could hear Dee rumbling toward the door. He took one look at me and let out a holler.

“Yahoo! We’re gonna be famous! We’re gonna be rock and roll stars!”

I spent the rest of the day and night with Dee. He taught me how to tune it, strum it and play a couple more chords. We would spend every spare moment after school strumming, inventing, and listening to the radio trying to imitate the sounds we heard.

My love affair with cousin Beth was now officially over. I had a new girl in my life. Her name was also Beth. Beth, the Fender guitar. There was no room for any real girl in my life now. Who needed girls? Dee and I were in love with our guitars, and that was all that mattered. We listened mostly to Duane Eddy and the Rebels in the beginning. Dee was hooked on Chet Atkins and picked up finger picking just like Chet. Our first gig was as a duo at a wedding on a farm. Our first pay

was a free chicken dinner. Well, even famous people had to start somewhere.

How I became Honey.

I was terrible in school. I don't know if I had a learning disorder, was just too lazy, or a combination of the both, but probably more the latter. Playing my guitar didn't pique my interest in scholarly things, that's for sure. So, I got the brilliant idea in the 9th grade that I would take algebra. Yep, convoluted form of math that I'm not sure anyone would ever understand, or even use after graduation. But..... I chose to give it a try. The algebra teacher was Mr. Blankenship. He was of a feminine persuasion, especially in his manner of speech.

After writing a long, long, long unsolved equation on the blackboard (had to have stretched ten feet). He turned, and with a smile and his demure tone, with somewhat of a southern draw he asked:

“Who wants to come up here and solve this?”

Foreheads slammed into their desks. All except one. Believe me I was just late in doing so. He must have thought I was actually interested in the challenge. Pointing his chalk at me.

“Come up here, you can do it.”

This man was nuts if he thought I was the answer. I struggled out of my desk and meandered to the board. This was going to be brutal. I stood with hands on hips, scrolling left to right wondering who the hell invented this crap. He handed me the chalk and I took it without even looking at him, still transfixed at the gibberish on the board.

I could have stood there until the bell rung, but we had at least another half hour of time left in this class. Left, right, left, right my head turned. I even let out a fake “hmmm” feigning that I might have an answer.

Mr. Blankenship cleared his throat. My classmates had to have known what was coming. I think I even heard a fart, but that might have just been imagination, or maybe it was me.

I wrote on the board.....'3/4'.

He shook his head, startled that I even knew how to write that and said it. Yes, he said it. It would stick with me from 9th grade through my senior year and many reunions afterwards.

“Now, **honey**, you know that’s not right.”

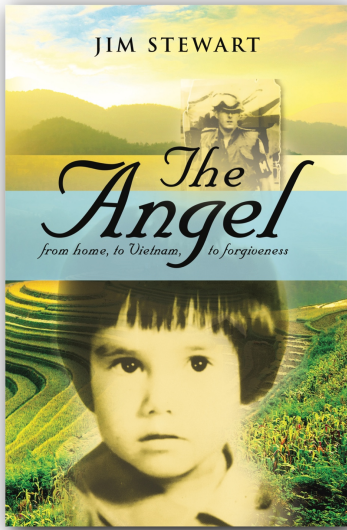
The room exploded. I didn’t want to turn around. I’m sure the Principal heard the laughter 50 yards down the hall. I expected him to arrive at the door at any moment wondering what the heck had just happened. It seemed like the laughter lasted the rest of the class as I sheepishly turned, red-faced, and walked back to my chair, but.....it became a term of endearment, not meant as an insult, and I was no longer Jim. I was Honey. It would be in my yearbook and it would just be, well, natural. I sort of liked it. I guess if the rest of the kids didn’t like me that would have bullied me, but that wasn’t the case.

Honey Stewart..... yeah!

In 1963 we moved away from Fair Hill to a house on Cowentown Road a few miles away. Dee and I continued to live, eat and drink rock ‘n’ roll. From our earliest group, The Mark IV Trio, The Checkmates, The Roy Cantler Combo, and finally The Sabres, with the *sharpest sound around*. There wasn’t a Roy Orbison, Beatles, or Rolling Stones song that we couldn’t match perfectly. All was well, all was well. We played every military club, bar and night club from Newark to Aberdeen, Maryland.

I could hardly drag myself out of bed some mornings to go to school after finishing a gig that got me home at two in the morning. As a matter of fact, I mostly didn’t. School was getting in the way. All I wanted to do was play my guitar.

I didn’t know it, but my *Life of Reilly* was about to be turned upside down. Like a thief in the night, all the peace and satisfaction were going to be stolen from me. Tragedy was going to enter stage left, and paradise was about to become a horrible nightmare of events.



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