

Leaving behind an indifferent Dad and a loving Mom, Mark Lavery hits the road in an old black Cadillac. Intelligent and curious, he sees the trip as the path to his future. During his travels, he and his values are severely tested with events and situations he never imagined. Ultimately, he comes of age and begins living the great American Dream.

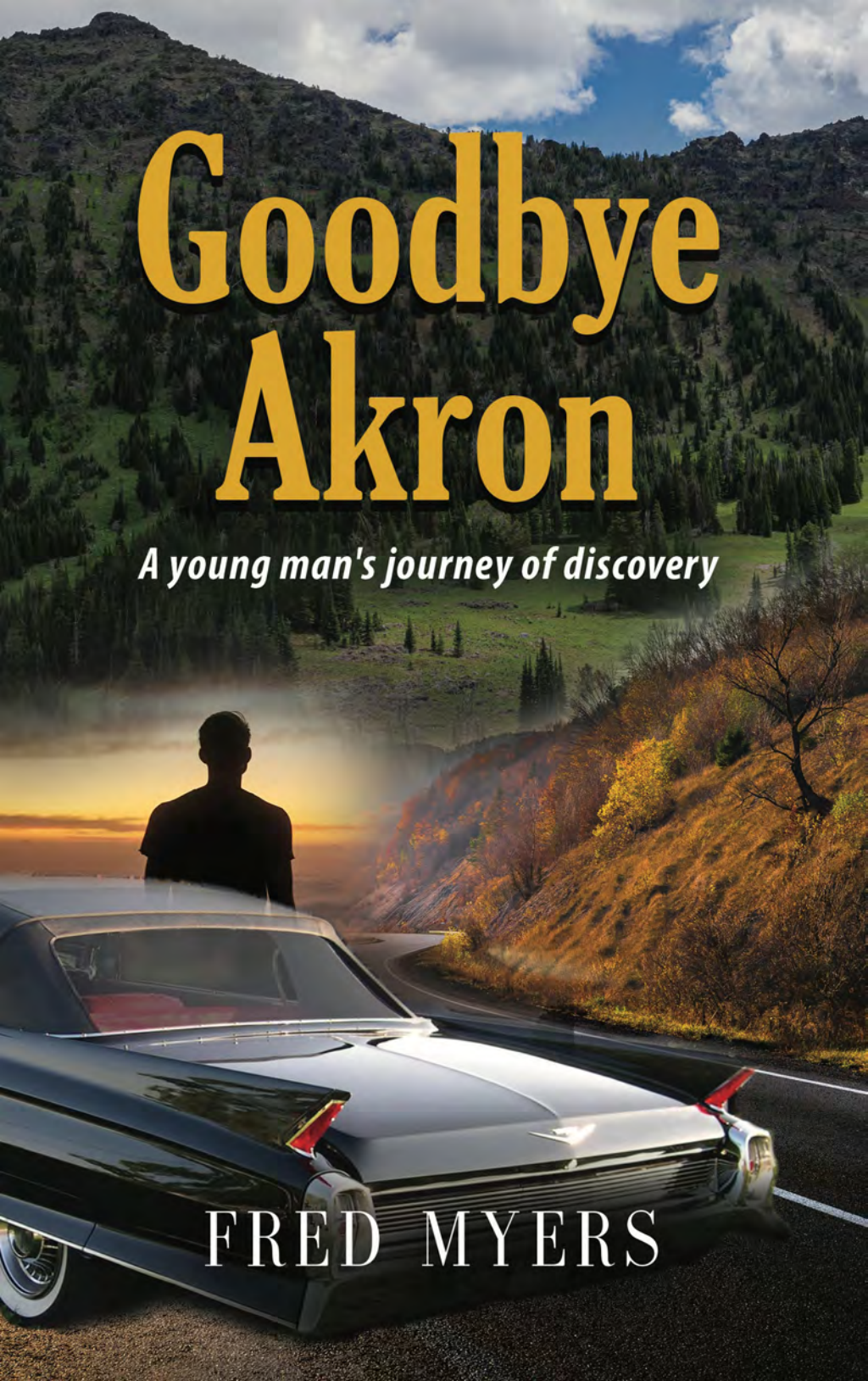
***Goodbye Akron:
A Young Man's Journey of Discovery***

By Fred Myers

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Goodbye Akron

A young man's journey of discovery

FRED MYERS

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CHAPTER 1

Mark Laverty was nearly out of patience. The chain on his bicycle had slipped off the rear sprocket. Each of his several attempts to get it back on had failed.

He was relieved, though, when he heard the familiar sound of the Chevy. That meant his dad was returning from work and would soon be walking toward the back steps where Mark sat.

“Dad, the chain came off, and no matter what I do I can’t get it back on.” Without saying a word, his dad leaned over the bike and with two quick motions, eased the chain into position. Then he stood, looked squarely at his ten-year old son, and said, “You know what, Mark? You will never be worth a damn.” He put his hands in his pockets, turned away, and walked up the steps and into the house, closing the door behind him.

Mark sat there, stunned and confused. His dad had never said anything like that to him before. Was it because he had had an exceptionally bad day at work, or was it because he, Mark, had done or said something wrong? He was so frustrated, he could cry. He almost did.

That first time, however, was only the beginning. Without any obvious reason, Howard Laverty continued to remind Mark of his yet-to-come dismal future. To make matters worse, he had begun to ignore nearly all of Mark’s achievements, including his excellent school grades.

Mary Ann, his wife, was alarmed at what she heard and saw. Whenever she confronted her husband about the issue, he turned her away with indifference or stony silence. She knew she couldn't duplicate everything fathers do for their sons, but for Mark's sake and to ease her own conscience, she did her best to fill the void.

A few times, Mark had good reason to hope his dad's attitude toward him might change. For example, on Mark's thirteenth birthday, several neighborhood friends joined the Laverty family to celebrate the occasion.

Everyone was in a festive mood when Mary Ann placed the birthday cake with thirteen lighted candles on the gaily decorated dining room table. After the birthday song, Mark, with a big smile, made a silent wish, took a deep breath, and blew out all the candles. All, including Howard, laughed when Mary Ann said she could hardly believe Mark was already old enough to have that much lung power. Only two days later, however, Howard again reminded Mark how worthless he would be in the years ahead.

Reluctantly, Mark realized the unexplained gap his dad had created between them wasn't closing. If anything, it was getting wider. Although still a kid, he knew he had to somehow challenge himself to become more self-reliant and act with greater confidence.

CHAPTER 8

Mark had done or said nothing to cause anyone at the plant to doubt he would be there for a long time. After all, he represented the second generation of Lavertys to work there.

Other than Mr. Robinson, no one knew of his plan to hit the road after only two years of work at the plant. Twice he had briefly hinted that idea, but neither his dad nor mom asked questions, and he didn't offer any details.

During his first year, Mark was constantly turning over in his mind the specifics of his anticipated departure. Although the trip itself was to be spontaneous, it had to be preceded by buying a car and pulling together everything he needed to take with him.

First, however, he had to reveal his plan to his mom and dad. The hardest part wouldn't be explaining what he intended to do, but rather picking the right time and figuring out what his first words would be.

That year, July Fourth was on Sunday. Everyone was looking forward to a weekend packed with fun things to do. For the Lavertys, that included going to a big fish fry held downtown at noon on Saturday, attending a special church service on Sunday morning, and going to the fireworks show in the park on Sunday night. Mark reasoned that sometime that Sunday afternoon would be perfect. That's when the three of them usually sat on the front porch to relax and read the Sunday paper.

“Hey,” said Mark as he looked at his mom, who had just finished reading one section of the paper, and his dad, who was still reading. “Do you two have a few minutes? There’s something I want to talk with you about.”

“Sure, this is as good a time as any,” said Mary Ann. “Is that okay with you, Howard?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” said Howard in a barely audible voice.

“Well,” said Mark, “I don’t know if this comes as a surprise, but long before I graduated from high school, I did a lot of thinking about what I wanted to do. I finally decided that first, I had to make some money. That’s the reason I went to work at the plant. My latest idea is to quit and take a long trip.”

“How long are you talking about?” asked Mary Ann.

“I honestly don’t know, and neither do I know where I want to go. I don’t want to have a destination. Instead I want to take whatever road looks the most interesting. I’ve read about many places I’d like to see, so I’d keep those in mind as I traveled along.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good idea to me,” said Howard.

“Dad, I can understand that. Even I get somewhat concerned. I have a lot to learn, and I’m bound to learn some things the hard way, but I can’t see myself chained to a steady 40-hour-a-week job, at least not this early in life. I want to see some things first. You know, get an idea of what everything is about. I’m having to trust myself, and I’m asking you to do the same.”

Mark had made a special effort to sound diplomatic. He needed to emphasize that even he didn’t have answers for all the questions concerned with what he was about to do.

“Well, Mark,” said Mary Ann, “you know that if you do

that, I'll miss you and I'll worry about where you are and whether you're okay. At the same time, I know you aren't a boy any more. You're growing up, and a trip like that could do you good."

"So," asked Howard, "exactly how are you going to do this?"

"First, I have to buy a car. Then I have to prepare it and myself for camping out, which will save me a substantial amount of money. If I later find out there's something I need but don't have, I'll buy it. I know that doesn't sound like much of a plan, but that's about all I can tell you."

"What's your schedule for doing this?" Howard's voice was beginning to sound argumentative.

"Dad, I'm planning to leave here next May, almost a year from now. I'm telling you and Mom this because I need to begin figuring out how best to do that. I wanted to let you know well in advance so you could get used to the idea of me being gone."

"Mark," said Mary Ann, "I don't have any problem with what you've explained, and I don't think your dad does either. It's just that although we'll know when you're leaving, we won't have any idea where you'll be or when you'll be back."

"I know that, Mom, but I can't be any more definite if I'm to do what I feel like I want and must do. This is going to be a time of discovery for me. I'll be okay. Any time I feel it isn't working out, I'll come back to Akron instead of trying to push on."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes, Mom, that's a promise."

Howard looked at his watch.

"Well, if that's all you've got to say, I think it's time we got ready to go to the park. I want to get a good place to sit to

see the fireworks.”

Mark was relieved to get that conversation behind him. He couldn't, however, help but note the irony. On Independence Day, he had unveiled to his parents the centerpiece of his own independence.

CHAPTER 11

As Mark headed west across Tennessee, he realized he had already verified Mark Twain's quote about travel being the enemy of ignorance and bigotry.

The farther south he went, the friendlier the people and the greater their willingness to engage with strangers. At times, his faster and more brittle way of speaking was evident enough to talk and laugh about. It was as if those he was with had known him for much longer than only a few minutes. Mariah, being the long black beauty she was, was partly responsible. Mostly, though, it was because of Mark's curiosity and his thirst for new insights.

Finally, he entered Nashville: a city draped over an uneven, almost mountainous landscape through which flowed the Cumberland River, a city steeped in Southern culture and gaining fame as the home of country music.

Enjoying his first night in town, Mark walked the downtown streets, finally stopping at a bar. He sensed that some of those inside were attempting to escape from themselves. As he glanced at a basketball game on the TV, he overheard talk from people relaxing after "another day at the office" or grinding their mental gears over what was either keeping their lives together or tearing them apart.

Mark had begun to reflect on his own life when he heard a voice directed toward him.

"You watching the game?"

Mark looked up at the screen, then turned toward the young man to his right.

"Nope. I don't even know who's playing. I'm not much of a basketball fan."

"I'm not either but thought I'd ask anyway."

Mark considered the question as an invitation to visit. He guessed he and the casually dressed but neatly put-together man were about the same age.

"I know this sounds un-American," continued Mark, "but except for a few of the key college games, I've never paid much attention. Not only that, sports are becoming so commercial they're not nearly as much fun to watch."

"The same thing has happened to me," said the stranger. "To be more truthful, though, I'm not willing to spend the time. I don't have that much to spare."

"Do you live here in Nashville?"

"I do now, but my permanent home is near Crystal River in northern Florida. I'm up here trying to make a go in music. If that doesn't happen and I run out of money, I guess I'll have to go back home."

"So I guess you're talking about country music?"

"I'm mainly country, but I recently tried to mix it up with some pop music."

"What do you play?"

"Guitar mostly, but I do fairly well on percussion. I always get excited watching and listening to such legendary drummers as Gene Krupa. I can't imagine how much practice it would take to keep the beat while doing all those flourishes with the sticks."

"Strange you should say that," said Mark. "I've always admired that talent. Have you made any progress?"

"Some, I think. Everybody sees Nashville's bright side, but underneath is a tough market that separates the

determined from the not-so-sure. For me, it's still a toss-up. I'm trying to win, but if I don't, I might end up disillusioned as well as broke."

"Well," said Mark, "you're never going to know what you're made of until you test yourself. That takes grit."

"It sure does, and I'm not giving up. I've got to keep going to prove something not only to myself but also to my friends plus my mom and dad."

At that point, the stranger asked Mark what he was doing in town. Mark obliged with a brief answer.

"Oh, man, what a bad thing to have happen between you and your dad. Still, you look like you're doing okay."

Mark then gave him an update of why he was in Nashville.

"That sounds like it would be a great adventure," said the stranger. "There are times when I feel like leaving all this steep 'pay me first' stuff behind and drifting while thinking that surely something will come along."

"Well," countered Mark, "I'm only twenty, so I can't say what's the best way to go, but I've already found out you must take charge of yourself. It's lots better to be the shooter than the target."

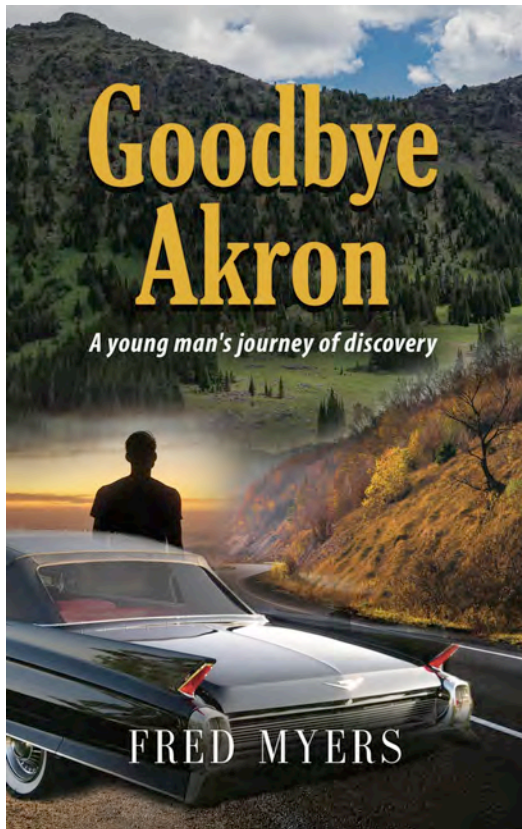
"I'd like to hear more if you have time. My name is Seth. On the age thing, you got me by a year."

"Hi Seth, I'm Mark. Sure, I'd be glad to tell you some of what I've already figured out."

Two hours passed before they ended their visit, shook hands, wished each other the best of luck, and said their goodbyes.

On his way back to the campground Mark could hardly believe he had left an imprint on another person of roughly the same age, and that he, in return, had received one.

It was a good feeling.



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