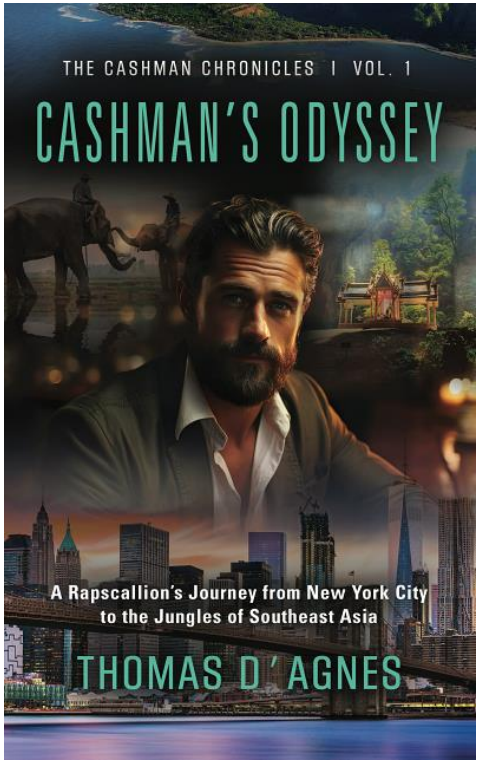

Larry Cashman dreamed of living in the tropics. Having few redeeming qualities, it was unlikely he could escape from New York City. Through uncanny good luck, he lived in Southeast Asia and Hawaii. Read his story in The Cashman Chronicles.

Cashman's Odyssey:

A Rapscallion's Journey from New York City to the Jungles of Southeast Asia

By Thomas D'Agnes

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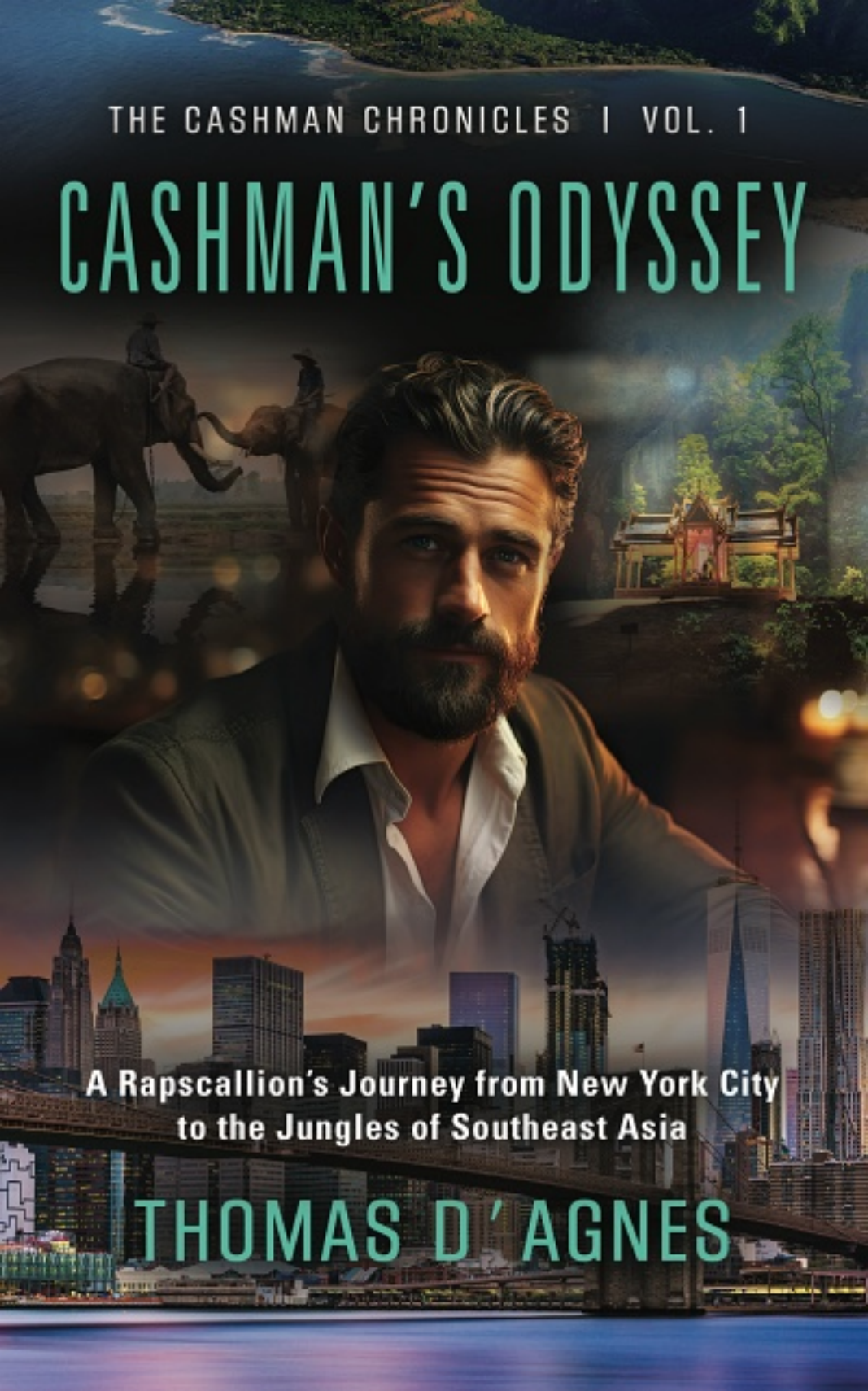
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CASHMAN'S ODYSSEY
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THOMAS D'AGNES

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“Rapscallion: A person, especially a child or a man, who is dishonest or causes trouble, but who you often still like.”
Cambridge Dictionary

“Rapscallion: a person who causes trouble, a rascal, ne’er-do-well.”
Merriam-Webster

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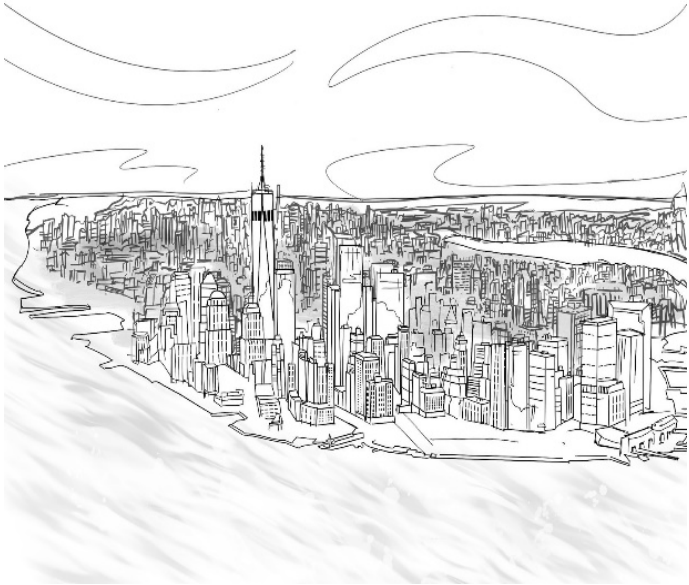

New York City, The Big Apple

I'm Larry Cashman, an Italian American who grew up on the mean streets of New York City in the 1950s and 60s. My neighborhood was a rough and tumble place. For a candy-ass and coward like me, the cauldron of racial and ethnic conflict that was New York City in the mid-twentieth century was a tempestuous place to live. It seemed that trouble was always brewing. The Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, and Polish communities were in constant conflict. Add to that the Black and Hispanic communities and there were neighborhoods where members of certain ethnic or racial groups couldn't venture without inciting conflict.

This was especially true for teenage males like me. I'm a lover, not a fighter. When trouble brewed, my first inclination was to cut and run. My Italian American family came to the U.S. in the early 1900s. I was named after my grandfather, Lorenzo Cassamassimo, who came from a desolate, impoverished outback near Naples looking for an upgrade in the U.S. of A. When he presented his papers to the immigration official at Ellis Island in New York City, the official took one look at Lorenzo's Italian moniker and said, "OK Paisano. You are now Larry Cashman."

Despite what you've heard about New Yorkers being cosmopolitan, they are actually quite provincial and self-absorbed. The New Yorker's map of the world, which became popular in the 1960s, epitomized the New Yorker's egocentric worldview.

Starting from the East River and looking west, the map showed Manhattan in great detail - the FDR Drive, 1st Avenue, Madison Avenue, Central Park, Broadway, 10th Avenue, the Henry Hudson Parkway, and the Hudson River – then the rest of the US, the Pacific Ocean, and finally the rest of the world. Manhattan constituted 70% of the world's land area, which is how New Yorkers viewed the rest of the world. For most New Yorkers, their world ended at the Hudson River. We knew New Jersey was on the other side, but why would anyone go to New Jersey? We stayed in the isolated confines of New York's five boroughs. Hell, most New Yorkers rarely left their ethnic enclaves.

It seems like every New Yorker claims they were born in Brooklyn. In my case it was true, but my family moved to Queens when I was one year old. In the geographic pecking order of New York City, I became a "Queens Kid," which didn't quite have the prestige of being from Manhattan, Brooklyn, or the Bronx, but ranked slightly above Staten Island. Queens was a bit more remote, perhaps a bit

more rural than the other boroughs in those days. But it had the same racial and ethnic tensions, the same urban poverty and crime.

My family lived in Queens Village, an integrated neighborhood with Irish, Jewish, Italian, Polish, African, and Hispanic Americans. The Cashmans were the quintessential first and second-generation Italian American family. My father, Roy, was born and raised in Brooklyn and worked as an accountant for the City of New York. My mother, Marina, stayed at home and ran the house. My older brother, Mitchell, was handsome, debonair, and an inveterate ladies' man. The women just loved this guy. My younger brother, Greg, was the brains of the family. He had such a large skull to contain that brain that I nicknamed him "the Head." Our little sister, Brianna, was the Princess. She was seven years younger than Greg, the cutest and most lovable kid, and her older brothers doted on her.

I was the black sheep of the family, always fighting with my brothers, teasing my sister, getting picked up by the police, drinking, and smoking marijuana. I never met an antisocial behavior I disliked. I was one year behind Mitchell in school. When the teachers got me one year after him, they couldn't believe we came from the same family. "Why can't you be like your brother Mitchell? He was so smart and well-behaved," they chided. "You're nothing but a troublemaker, Cashman."

I was smoking cigarettes when I was 10, selling illegal fireworks obtained surreptitiously from a dealer in Chinatown when I was 12, vandalizing homes at Halloween at 14, and drinking Southern Comfort before dances in high school. I didn't look for trouble, but it sure found me.

My father was an accountant with an MBA from NYU. When it came to education, he demanded that his children be well-educated.

He enrolled us in a Catholic elementary school, Our Lady of Lourdes, where the discipline was strict and the academics were rigorous.

I hated Our Lady of Lourdes, but its one saving grace was that it was a sports powerhouse. While I was undisciplined and a mediocre student, the one thing I could do was play sports. If you could hit a baseball, dribble and shoot a basketball, catch a football, and run faster than everyone else, you were treated like a king at Our Lady of Lourdes, regardless of your academic failings or behavioral indiscretions. Baseball, football, basketball, and track came naturally to me and got me out of some tight jams at Our Lady of Lourdes.

I was no all-star in the classroom, however. The teachers at Our Lady of Lourdes were Dominican nuns. They wore a black habit that concealed their faces save for their eyes, nose, and mouth. I thought they looked like aliens from space. They were also sadists. Physical discipline was not only tolerated. It was encouraged, especially for serial offenders like me. If I talked in class, I got slapped in the face. If I threw spitballs, I got slapped in the face. If I cursed at the nuns, I got slapped in the face. I got slapped in the face so often that I learned how to roll with the blow, moving my face in tandem with the impending blow to lessen its impact. I got so good at this that getting slapped in the face hardly fazed me.

Until I met Sister Theresa Marie in the seventh grade, that is. This old battleaxe was a particularly odious and repugnant creature who had little time for my shenanigans and loved beating the hell out of me.

On one occasion she was mumbling something in front of the class. I had brought a concealed water pistol to school and was blasting my buddies in the face for some sport in the back of the classroom. When she saw this scene unfolding from the corner of her eye, a livid Sister Theresa Marie, red-faced and foaming at the mouth,

rushed toward me. My first inclination was to blast her with the water pistol too, but she was on me in a flash. Expecting the predictable slap in the face, I prepared to roll with it. Critical to this maneuver was ascertaining the attacking hand. If she swung with the right, I rolled right. If she swung with the left, I rolled left. Either way, I was prepared.

You can imagine my horror when she drew both hands back to deliver the blow. Now I faced a conundrum. Do I roll left or do I roll right? The answer became moot as she swung both arms simultaneously and clocked me with both hands. This rang my bell. I was dazed, stunned, and confused. I can still see the old crone gloating at me. “You think you’re so clever, Cashman, but I’m onto your tricks. Rascals like you are going straight to hell. If you cross me in the future, expect more of the same.”

I ignored the old bat, of course, and she continued to beat the shit out of me. She could care less about my athletic acumen.

I cleaned up my act when I enrolled at Bishop Reilly High School. Having attended a Catholic elementary and high school, you might think that I was religious. Well, you would be thoroughly wrong. I didn’t attend Catholic schools out of any religious fervor. I was there because my parents enrolled me. When I was young and first exposed to Catholicism, I didn’t know any better. I became an altar boy because I heard you could occasionally make some money on weddings and funerals. My altar boy career ended abruptly, however, after I punched Father O’Malley in the face when I caught him with his hand on my knee.

Once I was old enough to know better, I couldn’t believe the Catholic Church was peddling this hocus pocus about Jesus Christ rising from the dead, walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes, restoring sight to the blind, and bringing dead people back to life.

Then there was the guilt trip with sins. You're born with original sin, so you are behind the eight ball from day one. There were mortal and venial sins and every kind of sin you can think of. Every time I turned around, I was committing another sin. You had to be baptized, confirmed, confessed, and anointed to keep your slate clean. I didn't buy any of this nonsense. By the time I was fourteen, I had concluded that it was all rubbish.

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At about the same time, I started to think about how I could make money when I grew up. I had developed several criteria to guide my career search: I didn't want to work too hard, I wanted to be my own boss, and most importantly, I wanted to make a lot of money.

My work experience up to that point held no prospects for the future. When not in school, I worked at the local butcher shop for Joe the Butcher, delivered tailored clothes for Cousin Ruthie the Tailor, and helped my Uncle Al sell fish door to door from his fish truck. These jobs had no career potential and met none of my exacting criteria. I had to look beyond them.

My father always said, "If you don't know what to do, become an accountant." He seemed to do all right, and both of my brothers studied accounting. But I couldn't see myself sitting behind an adding machine with a green visor adding up columns of numbers for the rest of my life. Plus, I couldn't add very well. Accounting was not for me.

One day while reading Newsweek Magazine, I came across an article on the most lucrative jobs in the US. Right at the top were physicians and dentists. The figures for their annual incomes were most appealing to me. They also seemed to work for themselves. Both our family physician and dentist had private practices and set

their own hours. But I couldn't determine how hard they worked. So I asked them.

Our family physician was a loathsome, offensive brute named Dr. Goodman. This guy was overweight, wore baggy wrinkled clothes, had bad posture, rumpled hair, bad breath, and pimples, and spoke with a garbled Brooklyn accent. I found him repulsive. But he was the only physician I knew, so I went to speak with him.

He regaled me with stories of the physical and emotional exhaustion he experienced during the thirty-six-hour shifts he worked as a resident; the stress associated with being on call and ready to see critically ill patients at any time and a moment's notice; the unpleasantness of dealing with death and dying. This litany repelled me even more than Goodman. What I found especially distasteful was the concept of being "on call." This state of mind – being off work but eligible to be "called" at any time to handle an emergency - was inconceivable to me. I'd rather be dead than live like that.

On the other hand, our family dentist was a stately, refined individual named Dr. Russo. He was tall, lean, handsome, and stood straight as a rail. He dressed impeccably, was always neatly groomed, and wore fragrant colognes. He was a gentleman's gentleman. He played golf every Wednesday afternoon, never worked overtime, never worked thirty-six-hour shifts, and was never on call. And I hadn't heard of too many people dying in a dental chair.

Now I had a comparison. The physician and dentist both made a lot of money. They were both their own boss. But one was an overworked, frazzled, fat, stinky, grotesque slob who was on call half the time. The other was a distinguished gentleman with a dignified and polished demeanor who never worked overtime. I knew which way I was going.

My plan for the future was set. I would become a dentist, open a private practice in a posh neighborhood like Garden City on Long Island, make a lot of money, and only work four days a week.

This plan had one problem, however. Competition for admission to dental schools was keen, and only top-notch students had a chance for acceptance. Seeing how I was lazy, inattentive, and disinterested, I had never distinguished myself academically. If I wanted to get into dental school, I needed to get my act together in high school and college. This meant that I would have to change my evil ways. Perhaps the word "change" is too extreme. I would merely have to modify, where necessary, some of my bad habits and focus a bit more on academics.

And that is what I did. In high school, I went to class, did my homework, studied for exams, and had decent grades. I continued to run track and play baseball and basketball, which took me to some sketchy places all over New York City.

Through sports, I had competed against and befriended African Americans, Irish Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, Polish Americans, and any other type of American you could think of, although I don't recall meeting any Albanians or Chechnyans in my youth. Regardless, everyone was the same to me.

While I was in high school, I played schoolyard basketball with an African American friend named Spoon. He took me and two of my buddies into African American neighborhoods to play basketball, at well-known courts like O'Connor Park in South Jamaica and Van Nostrand Park in Brooklyn.

When we arrived the first time, the full-court game on the main court stopped at the sight of the honkies. Spoon introduced us to establish our bona fides. Then the game continued with us sitting on the sidelines, watching. After one or two visits, some of the local guys

invited us to play half-court games on the side courts, to assess the quality of our game. If they thought we were good enough, they would invite us into the full-court game.

It was a thrill for a honky like me to play in the full-court game at O'Connor Park. Some of the players had played college basketball or were currently on college basketball teams. Sometimes even pros from the New York Knicks would stop by.

Then there were local legends whose drug habits or criminal records precluded their going to college, but they could sure play basketball. Herman the Helicopter could jump so high he could take coins off the top of the backboard. Sneaky Pete reputedly had the fastest hands in New York City. He could steal the ball before you could even bounce it on the ground. He also used those fast hands to swipe groceries from the supermarket, only this did not go undetected.

There was no way that a skinny white kid who was only six feet tall, couldn't dunk the basketball, and whose skills were not at their level, should be playing in the full-court game at O'Connor Park. But once the local guys got to know us and trusted us, it didn't matter that we were white. We were just three guys who wanted to play basketball. The local guys respected that and made sure we got to play, regardless of our skill set.

After a while, they invited us into their homes after the games to meet their families and have a meal. These were some of the best meals I ever had, though some of the cuisine was not recognizable to a yokel like me. This experience demonstrated that, even when racial or ethnic tensions are high, human beings can always find common ground, especially when sports and a good meal were involved. This lesson served me well years later when I lived with foreign cultures in Asia.

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Between sports and academics, I had less time for drinking, carousing, and getting into trouble in high school, although I certainly didn't abandon my aberrant behavior entirely. In hindsight, this was a good thing because I was able to get into a decent college, St. John's University, which was exactly one mile from my high school. In my insular world, that was about as far as I could stray from the hearth.

College was the real test. I needed grades that were good enough to gain admission to a dental school. My first strategic mistake occurred when I opted to become a chemistry major because many of the prerequisite courses for dental school were chemistry (in fact there were only two – general chemistry and organic chemistry). What a bloody mistake that turned out to be! I could have cruised by as a psychology or history major and simply taken the prerequisite courses for dental school.

No, genius that I was I had to be a "chemistry major." In addition to the prerequisite courses, chemistry majors had to take inorganic chemistry, quantitative analysis, physical chemistry, quantum mechanics, and advanced organic chemistry. To this day I still can't figure out why I made this call. Having done well academically in high school, I was a bit cocky going into college. When you get cocky, you make bad decisions. This was a good lesson, but apparently, it didn't sink in. This was not the last time I would make this mistake.

College was a grind for me. I was spending 10 hours per week fulfilling the laboratory requirements for my classes. The courses were difficult and intellectually taxing. And I was studying all the time. I was miserable. My misery was compounded by the weather in New York City. I hate cold weather, and New York City had plenty of it. My fantasy of living in Hawaii or some other place with a more amenable climate became more unrealistic every year. The best I

could hope for was to get to Long Island or New Jersey. I resigned myself to living with my misery.

While in college, I met a guy called FUBAR, short for Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition, which was his usual state of mind. FUBAR was a marijuana dealer. I had been smoking weed since I was in high school. When I went to track meets, the guys were smoking in the locker rooms where we dressed for our races. Sometimes we would get high before our races, which didn't exactly enhance our performance on the track, but we couldn't care less when we lost. In college FUBAR was my main source for buying weed. FUBAR was in a fraternity, whose members he provided with weed. "Why don't you join the fraternity," he said. "Then you will always have weed."

I'm not one to join hokey organizations, and there's nothing hokier than fraternities. But FUBAR's reasoning made sense to me. I was miserable in college, studying too much, and depressed by New York City's shitty climate. The only time I found some solace was when I got high. Why not join an organization that would provide easy access to high-quality weed? I decided to join the fraternity.

This was another example of bad judgment caused by hubris and too little information. I thought I would just sign on the dotted line, perhaps pay a small fee, and have weed for the remainder of my college years. It didn't exactly work like that.

To join a fraternity, you have to "pledge" the fraternity. This entails going through an eight-week "hazing" period where the pledges were subjected to all manner of indignities. There was verbal abuse, physical abuse, exhortation, intimidation, humiliation, and retribution. There were secret words, secret handshakes, secret texts, and secret traditions. It was all bullshit, as far as I was concerned, but I had already paid my money, so I decided to go through with it.

I hated pledging for that fraternity and its attendant rituals. Each year the fraternity held its Crystal Ball during the "pledging" period. This was a tacky formal event whose sole purpose was to raise money. The money came from selling overpriced tickets to fraternity alumni to attend the Crystal Ball, selling advertising in the tasteless magazine that was printed each year to accompany it, and sending out the pledges to prey upon unsuspecting students for small donations. Each pledge was given a piece of paper with one hundred spaces and told to collect twenty-five cents for each name. In return, the names would, purportedly, be printed in the Crystal Ball magazine as donors.

This was the biggest con imaginable. If 10% of those names got printed, that was a lot. I would hand a list of one hundred names plus $25 in cash to the fraternity Treasurer. The other pledges would do the same. In return, he provided no acknowledgment, no gratitude, and most important, no receipt. The cash went straight into his pocket. Then he'd send us out to get more.

I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid, and I know a scam when I see one. Plenty of money was going through the treasurer's hands, and some of it inevitably got stuck. Perhaps this fraternity thing provided greater advantages than just access to weed.

Pledging for that fraternity was eight weeks of hell. Physical abuse and intimidation didn't sit well with a candy ass like me. I feigned illness, made excuses, lied, blamed the other pledges for indiscretions — anything to minimize the hazing. In the end, I endured the hazing, secret words, secret handshakes, and brotherly camaraderie to become a fraternity brother. The payoff began with good cannabis. After years of choking on cheap Mexican weed, I was now smoking Thai Sticks, Colombian buds, and Maui Wowie.

But the real payoff came the next year when the new class of "pledges" came along. Now it was my turn to "haze" the pledges, a prospect that appealed to the bully in me. For the eight-week hazing period half of the fraternity members were assigned as "bad cops," and half as "good cops." The bad cops would abuse, humiliate, and intimidate the pledges. The good cops would try to protect them. The standoff between the good and bad cops, all staged and planned in advance, would culminate in a pitched battle between the two groups over the pledges. It was supposed to teach them some cheesy lesson about the importance of brotherhood, unity, and fraternity.

There was no question about which group I would be in. After getting my ass kicked the previous year, I was ready to kick some ass. And what better way to kick ass than with some defenseless pledges who couldn't fight back. Courage is not a quality I ever exhibited, or for that matter, admired. My genome is devoid of it. At the first sign of trouble, I am the first to run and I don't look back. When I'm in a tight spot, my bowels rumble so violently it leaves brown stains on my underwear. Now I could be an unmitigated bully with no prospect of repercussions or retribution.

I played this role to the max and enjoyed every minute. I made the pledges carry my books to and from class. I would send them to get my lunch, to wash my car. I even had them shine my shoes. I would excoriate them with the most profane epithets imaginable.

Once I was berating a pledge with some of my finest abuse when he had a look in his eyes as if he would come at me. "Are you eyeing me, boy? Damn your eyes, you scoundrel," I scolded. "Get down and give me 50." I loved to make them do pushups, especially the chubby ones. I was a natural at this.

The following year I wanted to be a bad cop again. But there was some inane rule that you couldn't play the same role two years in a

row. I protested to no avail. Then I had an inspiration. "If I have to be one of the good guys, a role I find monumentally distasteful, why don't you make me the fraternity treasurer? It will take my mind off the missed opportunities." Fraternity members are not particularly good judges of character, so they acquiesced and made me the treasurer. The fox was now guarding the chicken coop.

I am not proud of many of the things I've done in my life, but this next episode was one of the lowest. Oodles of money were coming in for the Crystal Ball and, like other treasurers before me, I wanted to skim some off the top for my efforts. Unlike other treasurers, I didn't even attempt to reserve a venue, find a printer, or disguise my shenanigans. I was intoxicated by the euphoria of all the money.

Unlike other treasurers before me, I was too stupid to embezzle the money. I just deposited it all in the fraternity bank account, assuming no one would know it was there, and I would somehow access it later. It was clear I had no future as a Wall Street Banker, who would perfect a system to rip off their customers and not only conceal it but get paid handsome bonuses to boot.

When my malfeasance was finally detected, there was hell to pay. A committee of fraternity alumni was assembled to take over the bank accounts and rescue the Crystal Ball. Another committee investigated financial irregularities. You can imagine their delight when they found all the money could be accounted for in the fraternity bank account. You can also imagine their incredulity at my stupidity. They summarized their investigation with the following remarks: "You are a reprehensible, malevolent brute, Cashman, of that there is no doubt. You are also an imbecile. You can't even embezzle money well."

This was one case, however, where my stupidity saved my ass. Since all funds could be accounted for, my malfeasance was purely

administrative. Since I didn't even know what administrative malfeasance meant, I couldn't care less. I was abruptly and unceremoniously ejected from the fraternity. Again, I couldn't care less.

In hindsight, this experience was a valuable lesson. If you're going to cheat, then make sure that you don't get caught. I would not be so stupid the next time. Years later, when I worked with corrupt governments and crooked dictators, I could see their cons coming a mile away. I had ripped off a fraternity. They ripped off governments. The methods were the same, but the amounts of money were orders of magnitude larger. And they didn't get caught.

Chapter 2: The Sixties – Cashman's Road to Perdition

Larry Cashman, the Unscrupulous Bounder

I started my senior year in college in September 1969, the final months of the tumultuous decade known as the Sixties. Charles Dickens began his classic novel, A Tale of Two Cities, with the famous quote: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." That pretty much sums up the Sixties.

The Sixties started with great promise: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier to eliminate poverty, inequality, and racism and the Baby Boomers coming of age and seeking to build a free, open, egalitarian society characterized by love, trust, and brotherhood. The Boomers listened to rock music, grew their hair long, smoked marijuana, and liberalized attitudes toward sex and racism.

Women demanded greater equality in the workplace, in the home, and in the bedroom. The contraceptive pill, introduced in 1960, expedited the latter. The civil rights struggle led by the Reverend Martin Luther King culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which ended the South's Jim Crow laws. It was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which eliminated the barriers that southern

whites had erected to keep Black people from voting. This was the best of times.

By 1969, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy had all been assassinated. Conservatives formed powerful constituencies to oppose the Baby Boomers' permissiveness, lifestyle, and values. More than 500,000 US troops were mired in the Vietnam War, and the military draft was expanded to supply additional troops needed for the war.

Social change for African Americans was stymied by racist bigots in the South, and Martin Luther King's non-violent resistance was replaced by the Black Panthers' more virulent form of "Black power." Campuses across the country erupted in violent protests against the Vietnam War and racial injustice. The coup de grace was delivered in November 1968, when Richard Nixon, the conservative antithesis to the counterculture anti-war movement, was elected as the 37th President of the US. This was clearly the worst of times.

I was oblivious to most of this. Oh, I liked the music and the promiscuity. The liberal sexual climate increased the likelihood that I would get laid more frequently. I had been hanging around with African Americans and playing basketball in their communities since I was in high school and never noticed their seething animosity towards honkies. But I was too immersed in my own little, insular world to notice the rest of it. Like every other college kid in 1969, I hated Richard Nixon and all he represented. But I was otherwise removed from the events of the Sixties and had little control over them. I tried not to waste my time with them.

As I started my senior year in college in 1969, I had one primary objective – applying to dental schools. This would not be easy. I had to somehow take my mediocre academic performance buttressed by my singularly unimpressive extra-curricular record and transform it

into a résumé that would entice hallowed institutions of academic excellence to accept me.

It was at this time that I discovered one of the talents that would serve me well throughout my life – the ability to bullshit, exaggerate, and obfuscate while still making the reader or listener, think there was an element of truth or substance to what I was writing or saying.

Playing basketball in O'Connor and Van Nostrand Parks became "community efforts to improve race relations and build bridges with African American communities." My improprieties as fraternity treasurer became "building the systems and best practices required to assure sustainability and transparency in fraternal organizations." My Ds in physics caused by cutting class to play basketball in the St. John's University gym were attributed to "difficulties understanding arcane scientific concepts before having either the intellectual maturity or mathematics foundation required to master them." My decision to become a dentist was precipitated by "my altruistic desire to contribute to improving oral health among poor, disadvantaged communities." By the time I was ready to apply, I looked like a superstar.

There were more than forty dental schools in the US in 1969. Given my distaste for cold weather and my subconscious desire to get out of New York, you would have thought I would have jumped at the opportunity to escape the shackles of my cold, miserable existence in New York and flee to a school situated in more hospitable climes. You couldn't be more wrong. I lacked the initiative, the vision, and the balls to take such a big step. My plan to get to a warm climate was to have Captain Kirk from Star Trek beam me there.

Instead, I applied to the schools closest to home – New York University and Columbia University in New York City; Stony Brook

University on Long Island; the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; and the University of Maryland in Baltimore. Although Baltimore was a bit of a stretch, I could drive to all of these places. That put them all in my comfort zone. A candy-ass does not stray far from the hearth.

I assiduously completed all the applications, composed fictional essays extolling my virtues of honesty, integrity, diligence, compassion, and altruism, and submitted them. The first students admitted would be notified in December 1969.

Much to my amazement, every one of those schools asked me to come for a personal interview. This presented another obstacle. At each interview there would be five admissions officers who had studied my academic transcript, had read my essays in detail, had done hundreds of these interviews, and were experts at spotting a charlatan when they saw one. I was in big trouble.

This was when I learned that I was not only an expert at bullshitting, exaggerating, and obfuscating in writing, I could do it in person too. First, I needed a tonsorial and sartorial makeover. I shaved off my beard, got a haircut, bought a suit, and ditched the Cowboy boots for wing tips and penny loafers. I studied all the fiction in those essays so thoroughly that I began to believe it myself. I stopped drinking and smoking weed and did some exercise other than playing basketball. When the makeover was complete, I looked like an all-American boy.

I nailed every one of those interviews. I explained away my mediocre grades with such sincerity that some of those idiots defended me under cross-examination during the interviews. I emphasized my dedication to community service even at the expense of my grades. Selflessness was my only motivation for becoming a dentist. The more I exaggerated, the more they swallowed it.

In the process, I realized that I was good at this shit. Maybe I should go into politics. The money was good, and the opportunities for graft were limitless. Plus, politicians lie all the time. But I might have to work hard in some office in a large city. And I would never be my own boss. I decided to stick with dentistry.

When it came to the school I wanted to attend, my objective was to choose the school where I could do the least amount of work in the shortest amount of time at the lowest cost so I could finish and start making money. And then I went for my interview at Columbia University.

The Columbia University School of Dental Medicine was housed in the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in upper Manhattan, directly across the street from the Fort Washington Armory at the corner of 168th Street and Fort Washington Avenue, the site of the indoor track meets where I competed every week for four years running track during the winter season. When I went for my interview, it was like coming home. While in high school, I had no idea that the imposing edifice across the street from the armory was the oldest and most prestigious medical center in New York City. I noticed that the buildings were old, stately, and architecturally unique, but I had no idea what this big complex was, nor did I have the curiosity to find out.

When I arrived for my interview, I was astounded that the old statuesque building I had seen for all those years in high school was not only a medical center but that it housed the Columbia University Dental School. It also housed the medical school. The hallways were paneled in dark mahogany. The lecture halls were steeply inclined amphitheaters reminiscent of those portrayed in movies about turn-of-the-century medicine. Walking the halls, you could stop in

strategically placed, glass-enclosed viewing rooms where you could observe open heart surgeries in progress.

The other dental schools I applied to were in modern buildings that reeked of disinfectants and fluoride gel and were sterile in comparison. This place oozed history. I fell in love with the place. But Columbia was the most selective, the most rigorous, and the most expensive of the schools I had applied to. Not to worry, I thought. Columbia won't accept Larry Cashman.

During the first week of December 1969, before I had even completed the first semester of my senior year in college, I received five envelopes in the mail, one from each school. I had been accepted at all five. What did Bob Marley and Abe Lincoln say about not being able to fool all the people all of the time? I guess it didn't apply to those morons on dental school admissions committees.

Getting accepted to all five schools meant I could choose the school I wanted. Unfortunately, the school I wanted was the most rigorous, the most expensive, and the most prestigious. When I chose to major in Chemistry in college, I paid a price for my arrogance and should have learned my lesson. Alas, once again, I let pride and prestige affect my decisions. I would have to make the same mistake multiple times before I truly learned my lesson.

I consulted with my father about the cost, and he guaranteed me that we could somehow manage. I accepted Columbia University's offer to attend their dental school. It was a decision that would change my life.

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All I needed to do now was wrap up my final semester at St. John's University and I was home free. As I entered my final semester in college, I was walking on air. I was 20 years old; I had already been accepted to the dental school of my choice, and I only had to

complete three courses that final semester to finish my bachelor's degree.

Compared to the heavy academic load I had shouldered for my first three years, taking only three courses in a semester was like going to school part-time. It was true that Columbia still wanted to see those final semester grades, but it was only three courses, so I wasn't worried. I had two choices for that final semester – I could buckle down and finish my academic career with a flourish to impress Columbia, or I could party like it was 1999. I decided to party.

My final semester in college was a blur of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. I had always indulged in weed and alcohol, but my drinking was perfunctory – maybe some beer or wine, but I avoided the hard stuff. Now I started drinking whiskey. On weekdays I would go to the local bar at 4 PM and start drinking Canadian Club whiskey with my buddies. By 8 or 9 PM we'd head out to a concert, or a party, or a discotheque looking for female companionship. Needless to say, in our inebriated, degenerated condition, there were few takers.

On weekends I would start drinking and smoking weed on Friday morning and continue all day. The next day, Saturday, I had to work at Joe the Butchers. Yes, here I was, a senior in college, and still working for Joe the Butcher one day a week to make some money. I had been working there since I was twelve. When you have no ambition, some things never change. At Joe's, the drinking continued unabated. We would open the first bottle of Seagram's Seven at 8 AM and drink all day. The only day I rested was Sunday.

What I didn't do very often was go to class. At first, I wasn't worried. I could handle three courses in my sleep. As the semester advanced, as I missed more classes and my exam results got progressively worse, it became clear that I was not doing very well in any of these courses. By the end of April 1970, the situation was dire.

I might pass, but the grades would be horrendous and Columbia would be horrified. I was unwilling and unable to stop the drinking and debauchery, and there was little time to correct the situation even if I could. Now I was worried.

What happened next confirmed my suspicion that someone's misfortune could be somebody else's good fortune. On April 30, 1970, Richard Nixon announced that US combat forces had invaded Cambodia. This represented a significant escalation of the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. Protests and demonstrations against the war, which had been growing since the Tet Offensive in 1968, erupted after the Cambodian invasion. On May 4, 1970, a peaceful demonstration at Kent State University turned violent when National Guard soldiers fired on student protesters. Four students were killed and nine were wounded.

The spectacle of US troops firing on, and killing, American students galvanized the country against the war. Agitated students on campuses across the country raised their voices in angry protest against the war. Almost five hundred colleges and universities across the US canceled classes for the remainder of the academic year in fear of violent protests erupting on their campuses. St. John's University was one of them. But they didn't just cancel classes, they decided to give all students a pass/fail grade.

You can imagine my surprise at this serendipitous turn of events. Here I was, on the brink of failing, with Columbia University waiting with bated breath for my final grades to see if I was a resolute student or a laggard and a blackguard who would coast if given the opportunity, when I received this reprieve. Although my grades were abominable, they were still passing. So I received a P for my final three courses, and no one was any wiser. I felt bad about the whole Kent State tragedy, of course, but I never had much of a social

conscience, and what little remorse I felt was overshadowed by the elation of avoiding disaster by the skin of my teeth.

Accordingly, my final semester grades, all Ps, were sent to Columbia; and Columbia was reassured that the glib, upright, well-dressed, articulate student they had interviewed had immersed himself in his studies during his final semester and would be entering their dental class in September 1970. Sometimes you just get lucky, even when you don't buy a lottery ticket.

Having dodged a bullet, I continued on my dissolute, self-indulgent path to destruction. The drinking became heavier, the marijuana smoking more frequent, and the carousing more intense. I was on the road to perdition.

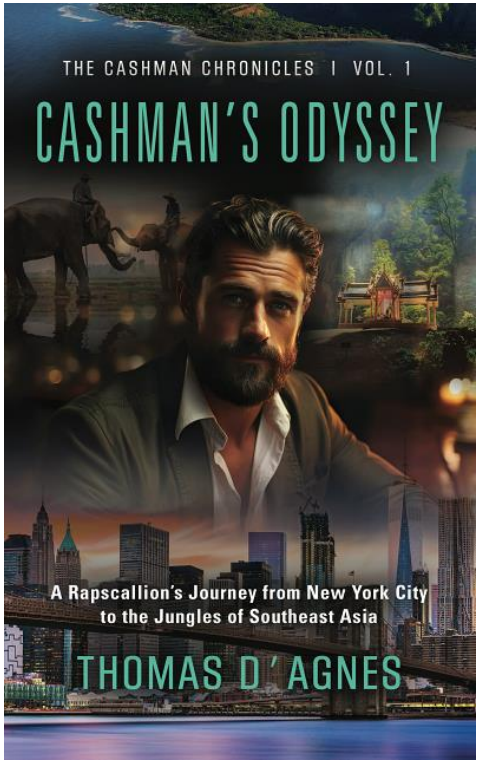
Then in June 1970, I caught a bad cold with a fever that I couldn't shake. It seemed like a garden variety flu at first, but then I got this debilitating fatigue that immobilized me. I decided to see my family doctor, that disheveled, stinking slob, Dr. Goodman. He had no idea what was going on (not that I expected anything different from this imbecile) but he did have the good sense to send me to see a hematologist. Fortunately, she was a lot smarter than Goodman and ordered the right blood tests. When the results came back, she told me I had mononucleosis.

Mononucleosis, more commonly called "mono," is quite common among young adults and was called "the kissing disease" because it was passed by a virus in the saliva. That was not the mode of transmission in my case because my romantic conquests were too infrequent to expose me through that route. You can also be exposed through a cough or sneeze, or by sharing a glass or food utensils with someone who has mono, the more likely route of transmission for me.

Mono is not very serious, but it is very debilitating. And the only way to recover is to rest. If you don't get sufficient rest, serious complications in the liver and spleen can arise. I had a particularly virulent strain of mono, no doubt due to my compromised physical condition from all that drinking, smoking, and partying. The hematologist's admonition to rest did not go unheeded — I could hardly get out of bed. Likewise, her admonition against drinking, smoking, and partying was also obeyed because I was too physically debilitated to engage in my former vices. I stayed in bed for two months that summer and dried out. In hindsight, it was the best thing that could have happened to me.

About the Author

Like Larry Cashman, Thomas D'Agnes was born and raised in New York City. He worked on the Navajo Indian Reservation in New Mexico, then spent 35 years living and working in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Laos in international development. He lectured in the International Public Policy and Management Program at the University of Southern California. He is retired and lives in Kailua, Hawaii.



Larry Cashman dreamed of living in the tropics. Having few redeeming qualities, it was unlikely he could escape from New York City. Through uncanny good luck, he lived in Southeast Asia and Hawaii. Read his story in The Cashman Chronicles.

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