

*A young man being misplaced in service and the joys and disappointments that he experiences.*

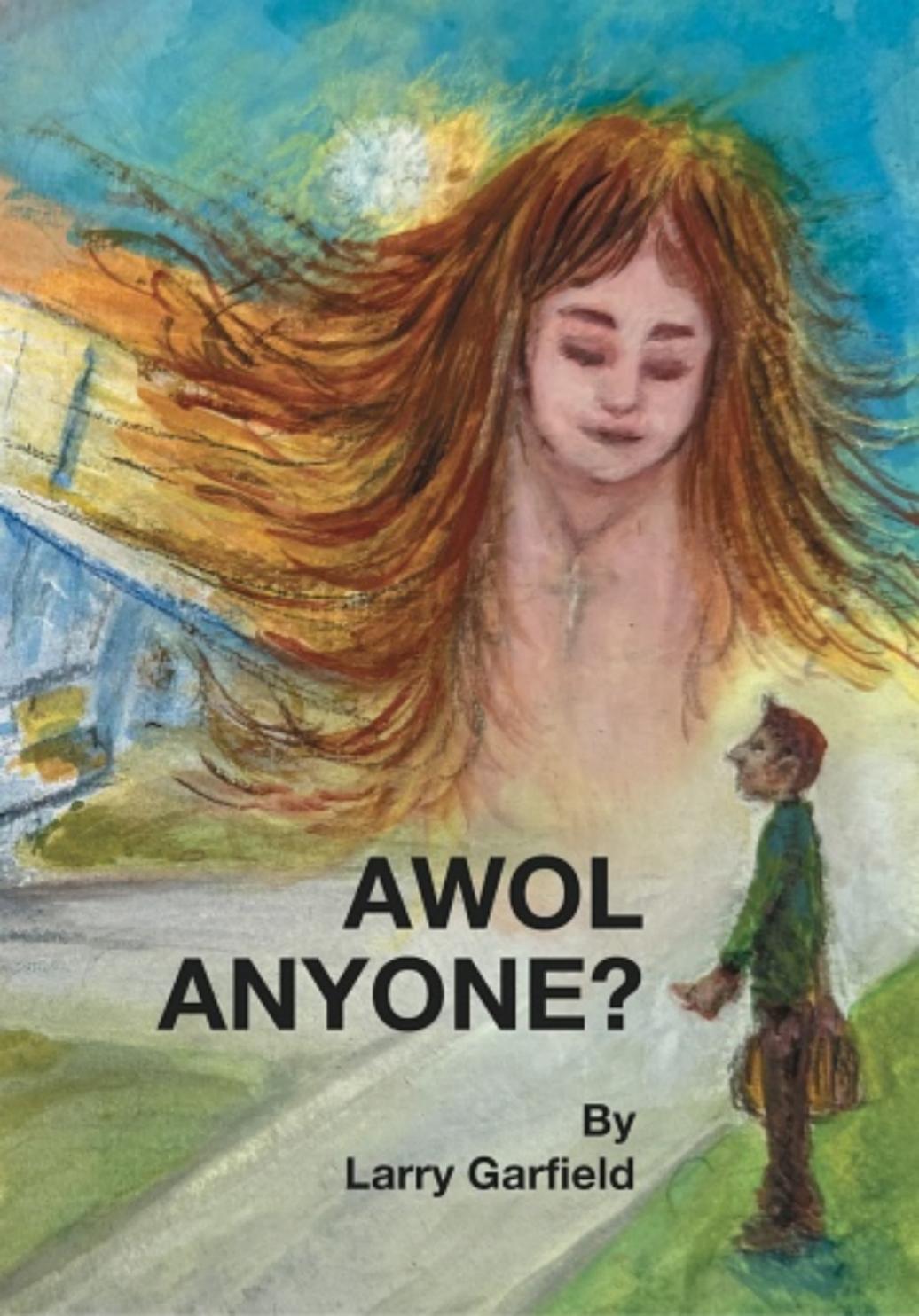
## **AWOL, Anyone?**

By Larry Garfield

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A painting with a soft, textured style. A woman with long, flowing, reddish-brown hair is the central figure, her eyes closed in a peaceful or perhaps sad expression. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top. To her right, a small child with reddish hair, wearing a green long-sleeved shirt and brown pants, is walking away from the viewer. The background is a mix of blue, yellow, and green, suggesting an outdoor setting with a sky and grass. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat melancholic.

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## One

Here I sit. The lights are dimmed, it being close to ten p.m. The ICU, the intensive care unit at Eglin AFB Regional Hospital, is quiet. I watch the heart monitor at the nurses' station as the two patients' tracings show perfectly healthy waves. It is not an unusual evening on the unit. Most of the treatment happens during the day shift. I hate the day shift! Not that I am adverse to work; as a matter of fact I really like what I do. If I wasn't doing this job, the service would drive me even crazier than it already does.

Oh, I guess I should introduce myself. I am Harold Grant, no middle name. My father didn't give me one; he didn't believe in it for boys. My sisters both got one. Their names are a bit strange though: the eldest is Francis Marie and the younger Marie Francis. Let's just say my father wasn't real creative when it came to naming his offspring. My father liked the name Harry but he named me Harold because he thought that

once I was a doctor and had an office, Harry would not be classy enough for my door.

You could say I am an extremely average guy. I stand five foot nine and a half inches tall. I like to round it up five ten, it sounds more imposing. I've had freckles all my life, which I haven't really liked, but they have become so plentiful that it's now almost like I have a constant tan. I have brown hair currently cut short because of my current status which is airman in the U.S. Air Force. I currently have two stripes and I don't know how that makes me any different from the one striper I used to be except that I make a few more dollars than I did then. Anyway, I am so average that I could get lost in a crowd even if there was no crowd.

I work as a medic in the Eglin Regional Hospital ICU and have been working there for approximately two years. Medics in the service can actually perform more extreme treatments for patients than nurses can do on the outside. As mentioned earlier, I like what I do, and the ICU nurses and fellow medics tell me that I am competent.

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Tonight is quiet and my mind is wandering and I am thinking back on what got me here; the how and why of it. If I had a real choice I wouldn't be here. It has been a fairly long road already and who knows what is to come in my next year or so.

I was a "draft lottery baby." At least that's what I would call it. Back in the days of the Viet Nam War, they (the U.S. Government) decided to have a lottery to be more fair (I am guessing here) in determining who would be called into the service and who would not. They needed men to fight the war and there were nowhere near enough volunteers. So they ran three lotteries in successive years: 1970, '71 and '72. I was lucky enough to be eligible for lottery number one!

Why was I eligible? Well, I wasn't in school at the moment, so no deferment there. I had attempted to join the Peace Corps; I do like peace. But I had no skills that they could benefit from or wanted, so no deferment there. I was healthy so I was definitely eligible and my birthday, October 5<sup>th</sup>, was definitely on

one of those ping pong balls and ready to be plucked out.

I can remember the evening of the lottery. I was sitting with my father in the room he had converted into his den. It was originally a bedroom but now with three of his children living away from home it was his television room.

My father didn't seem to have a problem with his eldest son being drafted into the service and perhaps dying in a far-off land. Not that he didn't love me. As a matter of fact, I was the fair haired child in my family. He thought that the service would help me grow up, which he didn't think I had done so far. I had only lasted about two thirds of a year in college and currently had a low level position at an area laboratory testing animal cancers. I was the rats' caretaker.

My father was a great guy but he was beholden to the U.S. Government and in particular the Army. He worked for the government for as long as I knew him and never left the Army after WWII, the big one. He was now a weekend warrior with the rank of

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Lieutenant Colonel. I understood why he felt the service would be good for me. It certainly had been good to him.

So here we sat; he in his favorite TV chair and I on the floor, where you would find me most of the time. A newsman came on a few minutes before they started pulling ping pong balls out of a revolving drum and gave us listeners his ideas as to how the lottery itself would go, what would happen to those unlucky ones that would be selected. "The ping pong balls all have dates on them, birthdates; January 1 through December 31. That is 366 dates and a corresponding ping pong ball for each date. They will be selected one at a time and each ball's date will be read and posted. Individuals whose birthdates match the first 30 balls selected will most likely be called into service in the first month. The next 30 to 40 the next month and so forth."

As I sat there all I could think of was that something over 300 would keep me safe. Of course my math was a bit off. If the reporter was correct, all those poor guys

with birthdates on the first 360 balls chosen from that drum would be off to war within the next year.

I felt that I had always been successful at bingo and this closely resembled it, with the drum and all the ping pong balls in it. This bingo game though held much more at stake for me and many other young men probably watching that night. Just when my hope was beginning to rise, I remembered that to be successful at bingo one had to have their numbers drawn early. I then began to get a bit more uneasy.

At eight p.m., a man in a gray suit, probably a government employee, walked out and positioned himself beside the drum containing the 366 ping pong balls (they included one for leap year). He gave it a good spin with the crank, I'm sure to give the impression of impartiality, and then began pulling out the balls one by one. As I sat there I watched as the first ten balls were drawn, called and posted; all was well. The next ten were then pulled and still no October 5th, my birthday. I was about to celebrate number thirty when "October 5" rang out from the TV.

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I couldn't believe it. Not only was I going, but in the first month! It was like being told that I have only a year to live and that actually was what it might be. It was the most disappointing time in my life and I have had a couple. I would soon receive a "greetings from the President" and I'd be off to the Viet Nam War.

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## Two

Over the next few months there was a rush for me to delay the inevitable. I had registered at a nearby community college and had gotten a deferment until the end of the current quarter. I did little studying but did play intramural basketball with a few guys I had played with in high school. We had a good team and actually won the championship of the league. And I gave little thought as to what I might do when the quarter came to an end, and come to an end it would. I was never one for planning too far in advance, but now with basketball over and the end of the quarter nearing I knew it was time to do some considering.

I felt I had three options. The first was to simply get drafted, hope for the best, that is, hope I didn't die. That choice had one benefit, it would only be two years out of my life. The second choice was to join another service, preferably the Air Force. That choice had the benefit of probably avoiding the war but had

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the disadvantage of a four year stay. I would probably come out alive, which, of course, was an advantage. My last choice was to flee to Canada. Many young men were taking this option at the time. I knew very little about Canada and knew no one who lived there. I also was afraid that I may never be able to come back to the United States. That idea was not appealing. I still had ideas of having a successful life in the future in the U.S. Remember, I was still considering being a physician and I wanted to do that in States.

So after a good deal pondering the options, I settled on the Air Force two weeks before being called up by the Army. I really had no idea as to what I was getting into but whatever it was, this was going to be my life for a while.

The first step in this process was basic training at Lackland Air Force Base Texas. Initially, basic was kind of a shock! After arriving by bus from the airport, I am standing under a huge building with 30 other guys wondering, "What am I doing here?" And I was sure I wasn't the only one.

This guy in a forest ranger hat, like the one that Ranger Smith wore while he tried to keep Yogi and Booboo from stealing the camper's picnic baskets, walked up and began yelling and cursing at our group of diverse young men, and it was scary. Some of the words I didn't even know the meanings of. We were called all kinds of names, our sexual orientation was questioned, and we were all from the wrong home towns. Then we were told that we would be sleeping in the barracks, which was the building we were standing under, only to be awakened at five a.m. our official start time every day for the duration of basic. I was kind of scared shitless. I still had no idea what this was all about.

Over the next couple of weeks I did learn a few things about myself. First, I learned I couldn't march. The group, or flight as it was called, had to march everywhere: to eat; to drill; to get shots; to the firing range.

It seems that when a group marches in the service they are not supposed to "bounce." All the heads are

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supposed to be flat. So my drill instructor got tired of yelling at me and calling me all sorts of names for “bouncing” and he finally gave up and made me a road guard. I then spent the rest of basic being like a school safety patrol, just like I had been in elementary school. I blocked traffic when the flight had to cross the street. I did get to run a bit, from street to street. I liked that better than marching anyway.

I also learned that if your soap is dirty you couldn't possibly clean yourself with it. I thought this was one of the stupidest things I had ever heard of but it was one of the things I could be successful at. So I shined up my soap regularly. My drill sergeant, you know the guy in the ranger hat, even complimented me on it. “This is the cleanest fucking soap I have ever seen. Good work troupe.” It didn't really make me feel proud.

I also learned I couldn't shoot, at least not straight. I guess I already knew this one. I had never fired any kind of weapon other than a slingshot and I wasn't really very good at that.

Everyone had to qualify with an M16 to pass basic. Almost all of the guys in my flight did it on one try; not me. The first time I shot I didn't qualify. My score was 82 out of 100 shots. It was strange that the guys on either side of me had more than 100 hits. Maybe they had placed the targets too close together.

The first day on the firing line the drill instructor stressed that the flight was to fire the guns on single shot. One explosion per pull on the trigger. As everyone was sighting up the target there was a blast of machine gun fire. Everyone hit the ground and the instructor almost lost his mind. "Who the fuck fired the gun that way?" A smallish guy a few people down from me raised his hand sheepishly and the instructor lit into him. I felt bad for little guy and I made sure my gun was set correctly. I was glad that my gun worked properly.

A few days later a couple of my less accurate marksmen cohorts and I went to try to qualify once more. This time they said I qualified. I was never told what my score was but I didn't care. I didn't want to do basic over again. By this time, about half way

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through, I knew I didn't want to go through it again. It wasn't scary anymore; more like a bothersome joke. So qualifying was fine and in a couple of weeks I would leave all this behind.

The next part of my indoctrination was tech school. This is where you learn to perform whatever job the Air Force has for you. As mentioned earlier I had been considering being a physician on the outside so when asked to pick a field to work in during my service time I chose medic, medical service specialist, and was granted that option. So I was off to the central Texas desert by bus. Wichita Falls was the place you would learn to be medical service specialist and that was the next stop on my military sojourn. A dryer, dustier place I had never seen before or since.

In a nutshell, I became a nurse in the Air Force in four weeks. It actually was a pretty complete kind of education. I thought that I learned more in that month than I had in all of high school and the short stab I had at college.

I learned quite a bit about the human body and how it could be broken by guns and bombs. I learned to dress wounds, stop bleeding and help evacuate injured soldiers from war zones. I would never use any of this training in the next few years. I would never see a wounded soldier and that was fine with me.

I did get my first taste of the psychology of human beings during that month at tech school but it really didn't come from the Air Force curriculum. My teacher was an animated NCO, noncommissioned officer, who taught while constantly walking back and forth in front of the class. They call anyone who has three or more stripes a noncommissioned officer. I guess it was supposed to make you feel better as you attained your third stripe and became a sergeant, but I really don't know.

One day our class arrived early and one of my classmates stood up and said, "Want to play a prank on our teacher?"

Almost everyone seemed up for the idea but was a bit afraid of what the prank might involve. One of the

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brave members of class asked what we were all thinking, “What do we have to do? Are we going to get in trouble?”

“Won’t happen. The sergeant won’t even know what’s happening to him. We are just going to get him to stop moving back and forth.” Our radical thinking classmate assured us.

Another brilliant, and I say that sarcastically, class member chimed in, “What are we going to do; beat him up; kidnap him?” There were moans and chuckles from the other class members.

“No, nothing like that. It’s very simple actually. When he’s over on the windows side of the room, everybody pay attention. Look him in the eye and take notes. When he moves to the other side of the room, look out the window. Put down your pencils and look totally disinterested.” Our brilliant student wasn’t really telling us to do anything we hadn’t already been doing anyway. There was a lot of not paying attention most of the time. He was actually just asking us to time our lack of attention a bit.

“Is everyone up for it?” he asked enthusiastically.

There were a lot of nods, and then the instructor entered the room. After depositing his briefcase and such on his desk he walked to the windows and began speaking. I took a quick glance around the room and noticed a number of students were sitting up straight and seemingly paying close attention. I joined in.

Then the instructor began his usual trek to the other side of the room. As he got about half way there the class became disinterested. Notes ceased; attention was switched off. Continuing to speak the sergeant paused for a few seconds on that side and then started back to the windows. About half way there all in class now became interested students once more.

This scenario occurred about four times and then something strange happened. The instructor did not continue all the way to the side away from the windows. He went half way a couple of times and as the class began to apparently lose interest, he returned to the windows. For the whole second half of the class, the teacher taught from the window side.

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There were a few chuckles from the class from time to time, but nothing that gave away what had just occurred. When class was over, I made sure I talked to the brilliant student who had initiated the prank. “Hey, my name’s Harry Grant. How did you do that?”

“Tim Wilcox; we did it, not me. It’s a simple psychology thing. It’s called operant conditioning.”

I was truly impressed with this cohort, “How did you, uh we, pull it off though? Why did he stop going back and forth?” I was really curious.

“We gave him what he wanted from us when he did what we wanted him to do.”

The smart student could tell I would need a bit more of an explanation. I felt and probably looked perplexed, so Tim continued. “What do teachers want? They want students who are interested in their subject. When students are looking at the instructor and taking notes they seem interested. When the NCO was near the windows, we gave him what he wanted, attention. When on the other side, we didn’t. So we,

without him even being aware of it, got him planted by the windows.”

I was kind of astounded, “You mean he didn’t even realize what happened?”

“Probably not. For him it was just another class.”

“Wow,” was all that I could say. I thought about going to the teacher and asking if he realized what had happened, but felt it unnecessary. It would remain magical and was probably the most interesting thing I had ever learned in my life. Tech school was more interesting than I ever thought it would be.

The rest of the time in tech school the instructor went back to his old habit of pacing and speaking and the class learned what it needed to finish this part of our military lives.

We were all now asked where we would want to be stationed. I had always wanted to go to Florida. I had been to Miami once for a week and liked it so Miami was what I put in for. I wasn’t given Miami but I got into Florida, barely. Eglin Air Force Base on the

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panhandle of Florida, just between Fort Walton Beach and Niceville (which I had never heard of) and learned it is just below Alabama (of which I had heard). Oh well, it was in Florida.

I finally got there and ended up staying at Eglin AFB for about two years, working in the ICU the entire time. It was not as horrible as I had thought it could be. Doing what I liked with a number of people I liked, and some I really cared for, made things manageable. I avoided most of the high ranking administrators by working the night shift, my preference. I not only liked my job, but found working with the young attractive nurses quite enjoyable.



## **Author Biography**

Larry Garfield is a retired psychologist who spent most of his working life as an Employee Assistance Professional. He now lives in the small colonial city of Fredericksburg, Virginia. He lives there with his beloved wife Catherine, who prefers the moniker “Cat.” They have been married for 43 years and have 3 children and 4 grandchildren.

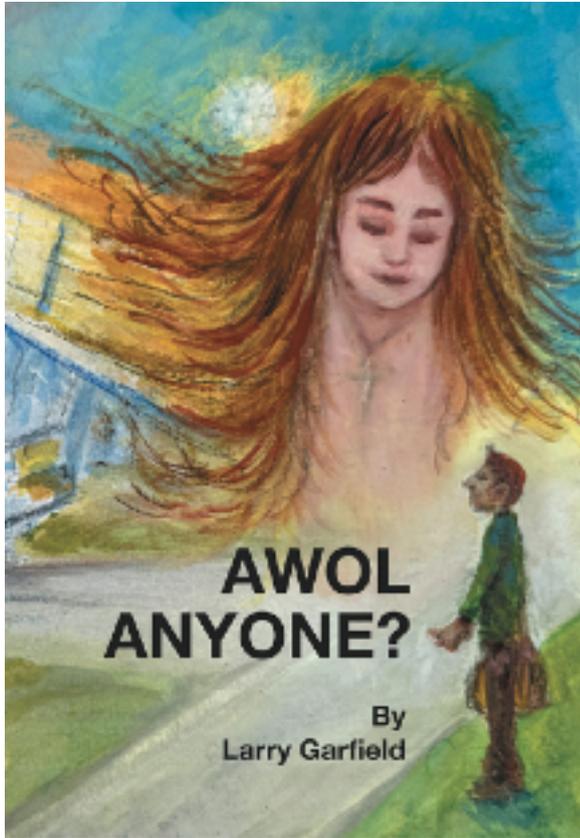
Larry says he originally wrote this story for his kids and grandkids to show them that there were things that

*Larry Garfield*

occurred in his life before they were even imagined that helped him become who he is today.

“AWOL Anyone?” Is his first and maybe his only attempt at public story telling. He says the writing of it was fun but the publication process was a stressor.

He hopes that you enjoy it.



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