

A moving story of a man confronting the memories that shaped him. What Never Was explores loss, longing, and the quiet work of becoming whole.

What Never Was

By John C. Panepinto

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://booklocker.com)

<https://booklocker.com/books/14769.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

WHAT
NEVER
WAS

A Novel by

JOHN C. PANEPINTO

Copyright © 2026 John C. Panepinto

Print ISBN: 978-1-961267-41-1

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-496-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

One

I admit I looked for an angle and fished for the “big one.” I desperately chased *that* story that gets you from the cubicle into the light. Oddly, the quest began in a less-than-inspiring moment. With the last bit of brain power, I limped through editing an article with the TV on in the background. I heard *that* song and drifted. I looked up. *And the winner is...*

When I saw Justin Parker win a Grammy for songwriting, the ping in my gut said, “This is something.” He didn’t fit the glamor motif in his blue jeans and a button-down shirt. His hair was full, flowing, well-groomed, and mostly gray. He wore a sad but knowing look, gracious but unaffected, and content to be in the background.

Then, when he mouthed, “Thank you,” as he received the vintage gold record player, I was hooked. He didn’t give the trophy a single look. He raised his eyes to Heaven, his lips somewhere between smiling and weeping. I couldn’t get my brows to relax for hours, and my head subtly swayed side to side. The mystery of the scene struck a chord, and it kept humming.

I’d first heard the song on a Christian radio station, and then it crossed over to country and made many new fans. The artist who sang the song had been a country headliner years ago, but she’d dropped off the airwaves. This song wasn’t like her old catalog; her past hits were the stock “three-chords and the truth” country songs. She’d had a rebirth in the Christian music genre and deserved the award as much as anyone. She sang from her core, doing justice to the music and lyrics...

The transition music played toward the end of her acceptance speech, but she finished anyway and marched stage right, followed by an unassuming songwriter and a couple of others who never got a chance

to speak. Though I'd heard the song just a few times, I remembered the chorus and the way it struck me. The piece wasn't formulaic or churned out in a Nashville publisher's room. I pictured the writing process as a gift of Grace, a flow that doesn't come very often despite your craft and commitment... Fading light and solitude, no sense of time or your last meal, a bottle of bourbon, and a familiar chair to hold you. As you honor that space, the chords and words come in their own time, and you're the vessel. You can't try to write it. It writes itself through you.

I've played a few chords, but I've never written music. But I *have* written. I'm not talking about the journalist pieces, but the works that made me feel like there wasn't much else I could do with my life. I had to write even if I was the only person who ever read the words.

Anyway, that night, something moved inside and morphed into a quest. I had to meet Parker. I had to hear his story. I battled the manipulative part of me that wanted the byline and notoriety, but if this was a story worth telling, I'd find a way to tell it. That tuning fork rang, and with assignments and deadlines, this type of resonance didn't happen often. I can't even remember the last time it did, and I hope bits of my soul haven't been lost to the articles that begin with "Secrets Revealed..." or "Five Ways to..."

Two

The first email:

Dear Mr. Parker,

My heartfelt congratulations on your Grammy Award. Your song truly stood out amongst many great and worthy nominees. The journalist in me hoped to hear your acceptance speech, and I'm sorry you didn't get the opportunity. That's one of the reasons for this email. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview you and share, in some form, what you might have said that evening.

My name is Matthew Marks, a journalist with a deep interest in music and songs of worship. I write for Revelations, a Christian print and online magazine with over one million subscribers. Also, I've freelanced for several magazines over the years, and I've included links to samples of my work.

I'm hoping the article I plan to write will open the music space for the magazine, and I've already pitched the chief editor about you, the song, and your story. I've researched and learned that you live outside of Nashville. I'm a North Carolina native, and I've called Asheville home for the last seven years. If this idea works for you, I wouldn't mind heading your way. It's a beautiful drive, especially if you know the back roads.

Again, congratulations on the music world acknowledging your gem. I look forward to hearing from you. God bless and be well.

Respectfully,

Matthew Marks

Risks define a good part of this business and, even with credentials, unsolicited queries of any type often die in the ether. Something I learned early on is that the stars don't align on your time. While everything is connected, that doesn't imply a direct path. A generous reserve of faith and patience helps, as well as having a few projects in the pipeline. My faith is full, and I have some patience left in the tank, but the projects of late have not been fulfilling. Constant brainstorming about mental health, therapy, practical spirituality, social media, and the downhill trend of faith, driven by polls and focus groups, ironically, can make one feel apathetic. I was ready for something different.

But Mr. Parker hadn't replied yet. He didn't have an agent, and he appeared to live a fairly private life. Even with the Grammy, a lack of information about him was an understatement. Unless you go back over a decade...

Signs and miracles have been used synonymously, and I didn't hesitate to listen. Sometimes, God works in not-so-mysterious ways. While the stars may not have been aligning, and the line not direct, intuition whispered to get moving. All directions pointed to Nashville. I wrote a second email and started packing.

Three

The second email:

Dear Mr. Parker,

I hope you are well. I'm following up on my email regarding your Grammy for Best Songwriter in the Christian Contemporary Music category. Since the show aired, the song has had a rebirth on the airwaves, and I'm sure you're reaching new listeners.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview you and share your story. I received positive feedback on the pitch from Sarah Francis, the editor-in-chief of Revelations. She's a big music fan and, as I mentioned, I hope this will open up the music space for the magazine. I look forward to your reply. God bless and be well.

Respectfully,

Matthew Marks

Research can be tricky and lead down dark alleys while eating up hours meant for other priorities. But I've always enjoyed the process, especially finding a gem that revealed depth for a story that had been skimming along the surface. I still hadn't heard from Parker, but I had a few leads that validated booking a room off the Nashville strip without a substantial reason to be there.

In my youth, I made a list of all the important ideas I wanted to write about. My "little black book of ideas" proved to be a pivot point between the journalism degree I'd earned and the possibility of pursuing a master's degree in fine arts. Like many young writers, I had dreams of

biographies and novels and reaching the heights of my literary heroes. Presently, those works remain unwritten, and I never went back to school.

Looking back, I realized I started with the wrong goal. I wanted to make a living as a writer. That sounded right, but once paychecks and financial obligations became intimate partners, work took on a different meaning. Like my black book, the creative force within me remains layers below what many call “the real world.” Yes, I’m making a living, but that never feels like enough. Something about the real-world path feels empty. Ironically, many articles I’m “assigned” are about that topic. It seems readers can’t get their fill and eat up articles on the emptiness of the real world. And as a topic, loneliness gathers a crowd.

After checking into the hotel and unpacking, I went for a stroll to shake off the drive. I found a coffee shop just a few blocks away, and the place was simple and friendly. While waiting for an “Americano,” I scanned the bulletin board strewn with a variety of announcements. Several musicians had information for local gigs, most likely not common hot spots. I took a picture of the board for later and scanned my emails. Parker had replied.

Mr. Marks,

Thank you for reaching out and for your kind words. I'll have to pass. At this stage of my career, I appreciate simple and quiet. Not sure I want to mess with this. After all, I've been writing songs since before I knew anything about music. Fifty years and 500 songs later, I get a piece of hardware. I don't mean any disrespect to the award or other deserving artists in the category. For me, it just is what it is. I read a few of your articles. You're a good writer. I wish you well. --JP

I heard the echo of someone calling me. The barista stared at me as she repeated my name just below a shout. I nodded to her and got my

feet to move. “Thank you,” I said and glanced at the name on the cup. “Matt.” I think she said, “Have a good day,” but all I could hear was, “It just is what it is.”

I placed the coffee on the table by the bulletin board and scanned it one more time. I have no idea what I was looking for, and no idea why I felt so rattled. I’d been turned down and rejected enough to fill a 55-gallon drum. I used to save rejection letters until, one day, I couldn’t see the point. The act just amplified the feeling of emptiness about the real world. That’s a recent insight, like the one that haunts and whispers that, perhaps, the emptiness isn’t *out there*.

Eyes still fixed on the board, I noticed in the periphery a couple entering the shop, one holding a guitar case. I turned and watched them move to what appeared to be the stage, which amounted to a small square of raised wood in the corner of the shop. I observed their setup routine and left shortly after. The hotel was nearly in sight when I remembered my coffee on the table back at the shop.

Four

Sarah, my boss, left a voicemail in her usual kind and firm tone, “Check your emails—*and* your deadlines.” Two articles and a book review awaited my attention, which had been scattered and barely held together with the question, “Well, what is *it*?” Maybe that was the angle that hooked me at the start. If “it is what it is,” and everyone seems to know that, then what is *it*? Mr. Parker seemed well aware. With that, the adventure renewed, and I felt certain I had to get the interview.

My backpack stared at me from the chair across the hotel room, and pangs of responsibility pushed me from behind. Unzipped, the contents seemed cozy, and I hesitated before upsetting the balance. I pulled out my black book and laptop, and in their absence, a hardcover and a paperback tilted back in the void. So, I pulled them out as well. The hardcover barked at me about the book review and unfinished work, and the paperback symbolized the freedom of my reading ritual.

As far back as I can remember, I had always read a book of my choosing, with several others waiting in line. Early on, the rebel in me refused to submit to required reading only, and the ritual saved me many times and in many ways. During a college seminar, I remarked that the humanities were supposed to help us think widely and critically, yet I never felt more hemmed in by content. The professor shot that theory down, and for a while thereafter, I wondered what I was missing. I stopped wondering after graduation and always had books of my choosing to revive me as needed.

With both books in hand, the hardcover won in weight and requirement. I fell to the love seat, flipped through the pages, and landed on the back cover. I met the author eye-to-eye and skimmed the hook,

which promised to enlighten the reader with nine key principles for Christian leaders. A sigh escaped me, and I mumbled, “It is what it is.”

Currently, “it” was the crossroads I had approached and seen in the distance for the last three years. Maybe more, but perhaps the resolution was so low that it seemed like a mirage. With the crossroads ahead, the rear-view mirror offered a stretch of billboards with articles, interviews, and book reviews that I’d written and promised to lead somewhere. But I’m still waiting for a sign.

Another sigh escaped, and a whisper, “God help me.” I’ve never been one for petitionary prayer. “Thy will be done” has been the source of my faith, and in the hardest of times, I’ve tried to be thankful. Here on earth, I had models of gratitude and grace before I was mature enough to realize who *their* role model was. I’ve tried to make the space for what He brought to me, knowing He knew, and I didn’t. But maybe it was time to ask for help. I don’t know.

The black cloud floated to the other side of the room, and I took out my phone to scan the picture of the bulletin board from the coffee shop. Before I started working on the review, I thought having something to look forward to might provide some fuel, and I landed on live music at a place called “The Taproom.” The band was scheduled for 10 p.m., a late start for me since I’m typically rolling over in bed at that time. But adding slots in my planner opened up hours of work time, which was a good thing in case I couldn’t connect with Parker.

Book reviews have always rated low on my preferred assignment lists. But Sarah had a knack for getting past my hesitations and pummeled me with positive feedback based on my previous work. She would never admit that my “singular perspective” meant, in part, she didn’t have anyone else to take the lead.

Speaking of lead, Dr. Joshua Paxson is a well-known authority on Christian leadership, and he's written five books on the topic. I hadn't read any of them, but I'd done three reviews of other authors on that popular topic. Two of Paxson's books remain in the top ten in the genre, and his sixth and most recent drew praise from several prominent leaders in diverse fields. I was supposed to be well into the project by then, but the pages of his book had remained crisp and unturned.

If I admit the sources of my hesitancy (and there are several), I teeter on a lack of patience and humility with the topic. The top six titles in the genre, and leadership in general, contained phrases that I found difficult to digest. Pick a number, for obvious reasons, avoid the number ten, and it's best if the number is odd, followed by any word or phrase that implies a source of life-altering wisdom. You have to avoid "commandments," because that one is already taken by a Higher Authority. Everything else is fair game, such as laws, secrets, habits, or principles. A reference to higher education also works well. You can't go wrong with "101" in the title. Then the brand and future titles are set with "102" and mastery-level offerings down the road.

The other book, the paperback I mentioned, heightens my hesitancy and tempts me to distraction. I offer no resistance and flip to the bookmark within C. S. Lewis' *The Problem with Pain*, one of his many works in my library. While I know of no specific Lewis titles on leadership, his words have led me through the deep, tangled forest of my own making.

An offering in *Mere Christianity* has stayed with me since I read it as a young teen. About the "Law of Nature," he states, "First, human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in."

When you're an adolescent and have no clue that you have no clue, an observation like that rattles your bones. You're left to wonder about foundations, fibs, and false fronts while trying to negotiate fitting in, finding your way, and finding out who you are, all while not getting kicked out of school or your home. How many times did these words, "they do not in fact behave in that way," circle in my skull when a friend tempted me with an adventure, or my latest crush passed me in the school hallway? Fundamentally, leading comes down to what Lewis referred to as the Law of Nature, of Right and Wrong, before culture began describing nature as something acting on us, or what we experience outside of us.

Even at this moment, decades later, I'm pushing limits and Sarah's patience, knowing what the right thing to do is while not acting on it. Hoping for guidance, I'm back to *The Problem with Pain*. The first line of the chapter, "Human Wickedness," offers, "You can have no greater sign of confirmed pride than when you think you are humble enough."

So...

I take that as a sign and double back to the assignment. A few paragraphs into the introduction, I hear the voice of distraction and arrogance lower until it becomes a whisper. A few lines later, silence falls, weariness fades, and a force moves within me, a flow that makes the ticks of the clock disappear.

Dr. Paxson shares his journey leading up to the book's conception. He plainly states that in adding knowledge, and teaching about leadership for decades, he realized he'd not learned anything new. He'd recycled ideas and became more about statements than questions. At speaking engagements and high-priced keynote addresses, he told the same stories, quoted the same verses, and set up the same punch lines. His clothes became more fitted and expensive, his hair more styled, and his teeth whiter. The more in demand he became, the less he demanded

of himself, the less risk he took to grow, and the less time he spent deepening his dearest relationships.

The final jolt for Paxson came while having coffee with his wife of thirty-five years. In the middle of their morning ritual, which had grown rich and serene, she asked, simply, “What’s wrong?” She knew him as well as he knew himself, and her intuitions were deep and true.

He answered, “I don’t know.”

Later, Paxson came to understand that he hadn’t spoken the truth. He didn’t know, yet he had not spoken those three words in years. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d said, “I don’t know.” Like walls falling all around, he wallowed and wept in the rubble, wondering what else he had missed. He spoke three more words and slowly began to push away the debris. “God help me.”

Paxson writes, “Most of us live in a complicated world built from man’s blueprints and toil. Few live held by nature and surrounded by God’s creation. These two homes can be vastly different for the senses and the soul. It’s easy to get lost in man’s symmetrical creations of straight lines and right angles meant to allay uncertainty. And you can travel the paved path for miles without meeting nature in her true glory. Trees and greenery in the developer’s hands are like adornments randomly picked from a jewelry box. They are barely echoes of beauty and goodness, on display for a brief respite from brick and mortar, more headstones than heart tones.”

Further, he offers, “What we pray and give thanks for steadily drifts from His Divine Plan. We have drifted from the Son He sent to guide us in His Plan. A Plan to become more and more like Him, to walk the narrow path He walked. And the only way back is to turn from the bread we consume to the Bread of Life. But how?”

I glance at my watch and raise my brows. It’s been a while since I’ve been immersed in an author’s words to the point of losing myself. I must admit that Paxson has awakened some dormant tones in my heart.

Like wind chimes, they touch and sing harmoniously, and I can't put this book down.

He goes on. "Once I opened myself to questions, they poured in as if they'd been dammed and waiting for the boundary to break... Am I successful? Am I doing the job I was put here for? These can be very different questions. They shouldn't be, nor should they be blotted out by the most popular question, 'Am I happy?' Our culture has become so frightened of words and demands. 'Don't should on yourself' has become a maxim of psychotherapy. Well, nowhere prior can that command be found, hinting that it's been constructed by the collective ego of culture. Perhaps we *should* be so demanding that we ought to 'should on ourselves.' Values, the highest of which is the Sacred, pull us toward the Truth and serve to remind us that, innately, we *ought* to do better.

"Are we so weak that we can't get up, start again, take another step toward Him, guided by Him? True, we will never reach perfection, but the glory breathes in the steps. We lose and find ourselves. We deepen our faith and glorify Him."

I look around to make sure he's not in the room with me. Has he been looking at my black book, the storage shed of opportunities gifted to me? At this point in most bestsellers, the feel-good stories begin, carefully selected to hook the reader and provide support for the thesis. We love a good story, and as one author on leadership poignantly pointed out, we've traded character for personality. It's much easier to read a story than live it, so the persona acts out the script, and in the process, we "identify" with this portrayal. We feel "happy." We learn a few tricks, but a few months later, we are looking for a new book with new tricks and won't admit why.

These observations never make it or are edited out of my reviews and articles. Sarah's comment on my "singular perspective" can also mean we won't sell a single magazine with that angle. "Time and place,"

she reminds me. For me, it leads to the roundabout of “the medium is the message,” and no one questions the medium anymore. It just is what it is. Give the people what they want. Sure, but aren’t we the ones overtly and covertly *telling* them what they want?

Paxson continues. “Back to the statement, ‘I don’t know.’ In my devotion, Scripture offered the words, yet I saw nothing new. The revelation that I ‘leaned into my own understanding’ struck me deeply and forced me to confess that I had not been listening. To grow means seeing things anew and understanding on a deeper level. There may be nothing new under the sun, but it doesn’t mean you will see what is in plain sight. You can easily end up in the shadows of your pride. It isn’t a case of diminishing your devotion; it’s a matter of opening more fully to His Grace. And this journey of learning and becoming on this plane ends only when we meet our Creator...

“Already knocked to the ground, I renewed my sense of humility and embraced the perspectives of the ant and the eagle. Late in my seventh decade on the planet, I embarked on my first innocent vision quest. I did not pretend to know. I steeped myself in not knowing. I gave up on statements and asked questions. I left the familiar and sought to find Him in everything. Yes, what I am describing may be extreme, but leaving the usual for the unknown tests one’s faith. I looked deeply into our culture, our families and community, our churches, our education system, and corporations. I explored ideas, disciplines, and concepts as disparate as quantum physics and social media. I talked and worked with many people outside my circle, many who didn’t know me, and I spent many days in silence.

“I was not looking for leaders in terms of status, success, or position. Nor did I walk the paved path of success to see what clues were left behind. High performers, Fortune 100 businesses, politicians, and preachers were not my focus. Most importantly, I ignored the experts in the field, the most published authors, bestsellers, including everything

I'd ever written. Plainly, in leading, I had lost my sense of direction. So, I emptied myself to the best of my ability, went to the Source, and began anew as an innocent disciple...

“We are taught to bear our burden, and that we are given nothing that we cannot rise above. And He also gifted us free will to choose. Certainly, evil finds its way into our hearts. What else could explain the wartime deaths of over 100 million in the twentieth century? But have we learned? Have *we* decided what our burdens will be rather than what life demands of us? Do we fall from our own choices and cast blame? Has darkness fallen over our land? Are we in the ninth hour and pretending to see the sun?

“In Matthew 27, Jesus cries out with a loud voice. Four verses prior, He cries out, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ We want to know this in our hearts. We want to understand. Yet, no matter how we try, we can never know. In labored breath, can we be inspired? In excruciating pain, can we know the Truth? In our last moments in this form, will a question be the last utterance from our lips? And what might we ask?

“If I am confessing, I want to know what St. Thomas Aquinas could not write. I want to know the revelation that stopped his prolific works. Sacred texts offer that those who speak do not know and that ‘The Way’ that can be spoken is not the way. Only from God’s breath can we hear, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.’

“The rest of us will have to ask and continue to ask. What follows are the principles promised by the title, but in a different form. After decades and five books of preaching, I believe this to be a better way of becoming and honoring the path of continuous revelation. We are

disciples, empty vessels willing to be filled, willing in Truth and Love to live ceaselessly in worship, for Thy Will Be Done.”

I’ve been swept away and lost track of time. It’s 9:30 p.m., and weariness has left me. The Taproom is about five blocks away. I decide to walk.

Five

The crowd inside The Taproom is diverse in age, but the attire and vibe shout country music lovers, evident in a sea of denim, ballcaps, boots, cowboy hats, and country music blasting from the house speakers. Every table is taken, and the dance floor buzzes with enthusiasm. I'm sure I have the look of an out-of-towner who doesn't get out much. Both are true, but the energy is palpable, and the outsider inside me enjoys taking it all in.

I scan the room while my stomach growls for attention. The scent of fried food floats like fog but provides a suitable accent for the setting. I spot an open stool at the bar and head that way. To the left, an older gentleman tips his ball cap, and I ask him if the seat is taken. He waves me in, and the woman to my right smiles and greets me. She's older, and her silver hair frames her poised and welcoming face. *Friendly*, I think, and ask her about the band.

"They're really good," she says. "Diesel and the Gas Guzzlers. They're regulars here and always a good time. And it ain't just gas they guzzle!"

She laughs, and I join her. I settle in, and the bartender comes in hot.

"What can I get ya?" she asks between chomps of bubble gum.

"Bourbon on the rocks, thanks. Can I see a menu, please?"

She smiles, and in one swift series, she wipes the bar, pours my drink, and places a menu in front of me.

"Visiting?" she asks.

I wonder about that don't-get-out-much look. "You could say."

"In that case, I recommend the Nashville hot chicken."

"Sounds good. Thank you."

"Comes with fries," she adds.

“Perfect.”

“I’m Mandy.” She smiles, blows a bubble, and leaves as fast as she arrived. My “Thank you, Mandy,” scatters in her tailwind.

My new friend says, “Food is great here. Make sure you ask for extra napkins.”

She finds this very funny, and I raise my glass to her. The bourbon eases over my tongue and tastes exactly like what I need. I scope the place, and it has a feel of everywhere and something new. It takes a long time to establish that, lots of music, drinks, greasy, rib-sticking food, broken hearts, and new starts.

“I’m Emmy,” my new friend says.

I smile. “Matthew.”

“My friends are in the bathroom,” Emmy says. “They’re *always* in the bathroom.”

I laugh. “At least you know where they are.”

She finds this very funny. “Mirror ain’t big enough. Anyway, when they get back, watch your chicken. They can be hawks.”

“Will do,” I say, and check my watch. “After ten.”

“Diesel and the boys aren’t good with time. Wait, I mean, they have a good rhythm, but they’re always late.”

“I get it. I have a friend like that. I have to subtract thirty minutes when I schedule with him. You’d think he’d have figured it out by now, but no. He always says, ‘Sorry, I’m late.’”

“Sounds like my husband. He was late to our wedding, God rest his soul. What is it with men?”

I shake my head. “Can’t help you there. I haven’t been good at figuring things out.”

“You’re a youngin.’ You have time.”

Thirty-two, I think, and still looking in all directions at the crossroads. Time may be relative, but it feels like it slips away faster with each day of doubt. Maybe that’s the “it.” I don’t know. The Law

of Nature rears its force, and I know right and wrong. But can we head in the wrong direction even when we choose to do what's right?

A loud whoop jolts me back to the Taproom. A big, burly man with a long, scraggly beard leads the band to the stage. The house system hums to silence and cuts off George Strait in the middle of confessing a third-grade crush.

Over the house speakers: "Are you *ready*?"

Another loud whoop, and the guy I presume to be "Diesel" steps up front and center. A bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and the other on the neck of his guitar, he salutes the Taproom.

Over the PA: "Put your hands together for Diesel and the Gas Guzzlers!"

A louder whoop and a round of applause. The drummer taps his sticks, and on the count of "four," a wave of music washes over the crowd. Three women rush from the hallway that must lead to the restrooms and wiggle their way through the crowd to the dance floor. They end up right in front of the band and wave back to Emmy.

Emmy turns to me and raises her brows. "They're a lot, if you know what I mean."

"Friday night," I say matter-of-factly and finish my drink.

She frowns. "Let's just say the day doesn't matter."

"Got it. Are you going to join them?"

"No thanks," she says. "It's safer here. Besides, I'm one line-dance away from a hip replacement."

"Geez. Sorry to hear."

"Don't be. I've had my fun. I'm just putting off the new parts for a bit. You know, the whole insurance deductible thing. Funny how us seniors are rushing to have surgery because we met the out-of-pocket when we should be Christmas shopping."

Mandy arrives like a stealth bomber. "Another?"

"Please," I say.

“Chicken’ll be right up.”

“Thank you.”

Fresh ice, a good pour, and Mandy smiles and blows a bubble. She’s gone again.

“She likes you,” Emmy says. “She doesn’t fill ‘em up like that. Forget the food. Bourbon’s a quicker way to a man’s heart. You spoken for?”

“No. You?”

“That’s a tough one,” she says and waves her left hand at me. “Still wear the ring. He passed a couple of years back. I still feel married. Not sure if that ever changes. We were together since high school.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry about... You don’t hear that much anymore. I admire the dedication.”

“It’s a vow. Though some don’t think so.”

“I do. It’s a sacrament.”

She tilts her head. “Well?”

I shake my head, and another “I don’t know” escapes from habit.

Mandy arrives with my order. “I brought you extra napkins. You’re gonna need ‘em!”

“Thank you,” I say.

“I’ll be back to check on you.”

“I told you! She’s a good girl,” Emmy says. “You know, even though Nashville is a big thing, there’s a lot of us small-town people. Everyone knows everybody’s business.”

I’m about to tell Emmy that I was an army brat and moved around a lot, but I end up asking, “Can I get you another drink?”

She shakes her head and points to the dance floor. “I’m their designated driver. Eat up, young man. I’ll be back. Keep my spot and don’t let them near your food.”

Emmy leaves, and suddenly, I don't feel hungry. Out of courtesy, I nibble on a fry. On stage, Diesel swigs right from the bottle as the others tune their instruments or sip whatever they're drinking.

Diesel wipes his beard. "Woo hoo! We're gonna do one by our good buddy, Justin Parker. Y'all heard the news? Got himself a Grammy!"

The crowd whoops as my head tilts.

"Y'all heard that song?" he asks.

The crowd roars and claps. Slowly, my jaw goes slack.

Diesel laughs. "Well, this ain't it! Ha! Hit it, boys!"

This ain't *it*. Hit *it*. It is what *it* is, and I'm sitting in the middle of it and still have no idea what *it* is. My head spins with questions, but the journalist in me can't settle the room. The last two questions dangle: How did I get here? What am I supposed to do here?

I consider that I may be one step closer to "The Interview," but one foot still hangs over a chasm. I wonder about the connection as Diesel sings Parker's song:

*My girl says she's had enough,
But she never did say of what.
Is my life another country song?
Well, let me tell you what I got.*

*I had one too many after I lost count,
But it doesn't mean I can't see.
The ride in the driveway sure ain't my truck,
It's the Prius that she left for me."*

The upbeat tempo has everyone moving and singing along. Emmy makes her way through the crowd, and I catch Diesel giving her a wink. Her comments about small towns and knowing everybody's business wiggle through the million little things sparkling in my skull.

She returns to the bar with a scowl. “Never a line for the men’s room. What’d I miss?”

Emmy doesn’t wait for an answer and claps along with the crowd. Those who know the words join the chorus.

*No, no! Not another country song!
Where every little thing goes wrong.
Where shots are downed or randomly fired,
Where keys do damage, and lovers are liars.*

*I promise you, swear on my daddy’s Ford,
I’ll refrain from playin’ them cowboy chords.
Then again, this tale’s too far along.
So, I guess this is another country song.*

“You know Diesel?” I ask.

“He’s my brother-in-law,” Emmy replies matter-of-factly.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. Diesel swigs from his bottle of Jack before the next verse.

*Now my new address surely won’t impress,
It’s where four-legged friends turn in.
There’s a real good view of my back porch,
Where all my belongings have been.*

*Still have no clue what I did wrong,
But it’s for certain I’ve run out of luck.
I see her momma pulling up in the drive,
Right behind a big moving truck.*

The band stops playing, and they clap and sing the chorus in four-part harmony. The crowd remains in the palm of their hands, and they either clap, sing along, dance, or all of the above. The outsider in me notices I am the only non-participant.

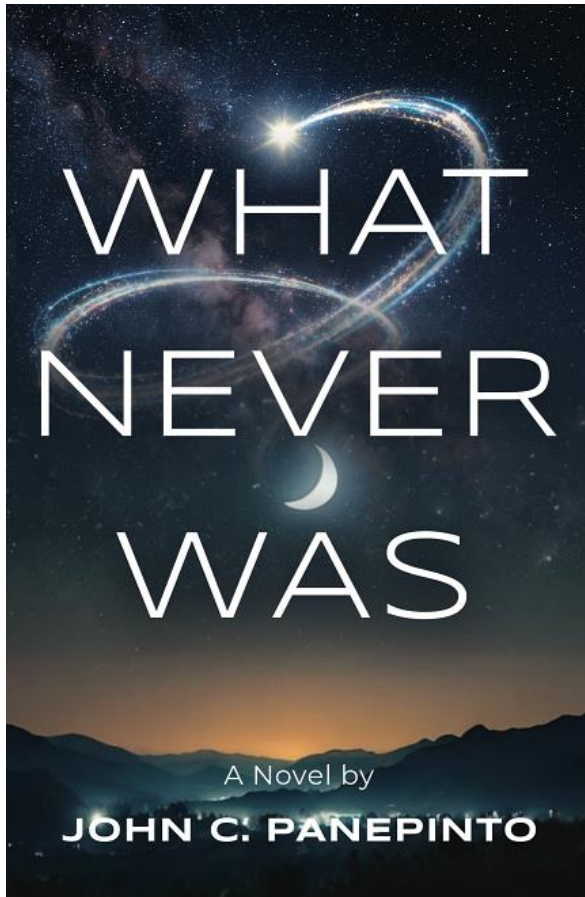
On a whim, I ask Emmy. “Do you know Justin Parker?”

She peeks back over her shoulder. “We went to the same high school.”

About the Author

Dr. John Panepinto is a clinical psychologist whose decades of work with children, adolescents, and adults give *What Never Was* its emotional clarity and psychological depth. With a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and a Master's in Counseling, he understands how memory shapes identity, how loss reshapes the self, and how new life often begins in the smallest, most human moments.

A prolific author, he has written widely on development, fatherhood, resilience, and spirituality, and his creative work spans novels, poetry, essays, and music. His fiction explores the fragile threads between past and present—and the courage required to become more fully human. His faith, family life, and decades of walking with people through their most vulnerable times shape stories that explore grace, healing, and the quiet ways faith works in the lives of ordinary people.



A moving story of a man confronting the memories that shaped him. What Never Was explores loss, longing, and the quiet work of becoming whole.

What Never Was

By John C. Panepinto

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://booklocker.com)

<https://booklocker.com/books/14769.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**