

## **The Last Hobo Meets the Moon People**

A Dearborn, Michigan Student Ponders the Meaning of Life

By Dan Grajek

## Chapter 1 / Escape from Paradise

*August 27, 1979*

*AWAKE, AWAKE, STAY AWAKE!* I exhorted myself as I lay there staring at the ceiling. My eyelids grew heavier. The relentless rhythm of the crickets—particularly their soothing effect—worried me almost as much as the guards lurking outside.

I knew in advance the sandman would be a formidable foe. At Boonville, the constant flow of activities typically sapped every ounce of energy by the day's end. But now I had two things in my favor. One, it was Sunday when The Family, by and large, abstained from strenuous labor. Two, the work I did accomplish actually helped in my scheme. Washing dishes late into the night allowed me to go to bed much later than the others. And the resultant adrenaline rush boosted my stamina.

The light streaming through the cabin window revealed the face of my wristwatch. It said 2:45 a.m.

*Cool! Only 15 more minutes.* Why did I decide to flee at *exactly* three? Perhaps I assumed it was the optimal time when everyone's in their deepest state of sleep. The idea it was the notorious "witching hour" evoked a chuckle. It somehow fit the occasion.

*2:59 . . . 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Go!*

My imaginary starting gun initiated a string of maneuvers that I'll always remember. I began to do the unspeakable, no, the *unthinkable*. I first peeled away my sleeping bag at a snail's pace. The actions that followed could be slow or swift, but I consistently took my time between moves like an experienced chess player.

*Sit up. Pause. . . Stand up. Pause. . . Grab sleeping bag. Pause.* Toward the door, I cautiously tip-toed over and around several "brothers" sprawled on the floor, keeping in mind that tripping over or stepping on one of them could be disastrous. For convenience sake, I had left on all my clothes including my shoes. However, the brief exposure to the fifty-five-degree air made me realize I needed my light jacket.

With catlike precision, I exited the knotty wood pine building, gingerly opening and closing the door to avoid the slightest sound.

As the cool, moist breeze invigorated me, I studied the movements of the night watchpersons on top of the hill. Around midnight, I had gotten to see them up-close. They were two pretty young women

named Deborah and Ji Su. After leaving the compound from the kitchen door, I smiled and said goodnight to the pair. Sitting in metal folding chairs facing out, they warmly returned the sentiment and resumed their private conversation.

During our brief exchange, I assessed the valley below as well as their blind spots. Three flood lights above exposed the main stretch of private road.

Boonville—a former girl scout camp—was located amid rolling hills and dense forest. If you brainstorm long enough, you could probably determine a number of ways out. But all of them appeared torturous except one—the path across the Maacama Creek bridge and onto State Highway 128. The two-lane road was literally right there on the other side of the bridge.

Looking at a map, the seven-mile-long stream formed an almost impregnable natural barrier—a moat, if you will—between Boonville and 128. It was 250-350 feet wide and curved along the west and north sides of the property, forming not quite a peninsula but almost.

I carefully reached into the cabin's crawlspace and pulled out my backpack. I then strapped it on after attaching my rolled-up sleeping bag.

*Showtime!*

That interjection of course means “it’s time to act.” But it also connotes entertainment, particularly that electric moment when the curtain rises. If you can believe it, my eyes were moist from laughter the entire time—in spite of the mind-boggling mess I was in. No, on second thought, it was precisely *because* of my dire predicament. You see, I was the kind of person who enjoyed danger for its own sake. Even though I manifested all the classic “fight-or-flight” symptoms—such as rapid heart rate, heavy breathing, and increased blood pressure—I was actually having fun. However, I was smart enough to realize that a sinking ship is enough to wipe the smirk off the face of a swashbuckling pirate.

*Wow! I can't believe this is happening. It's like I'm in my own movie.*

The soundtrack from *The Great Escape* played in my head particularly the drum parts. These compositions often built up the viewer's tension in nail-biting scenes where the protagonist executes clandestine operations under the very nose of his captors.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!* went the drums.

*Hightail it to the creek!* There, the trees along the bank, mostly cottonwood, provided ample cover.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!*

*Follow the river bank toward the bridge!* The sloped ground and thickets there made it difficult to tread. In some spots, you had to cling perilously close to the water's edge to avoid being seen. Once or twice I needed to grab a shrub to prevent myself from falling in. This would be tricky even without a heavy backpack.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!*

*Cross the bridge!* I took a deep breath as I contemplated the significance of the moment. *This is it, man. My big move. It's make-it-or-break-it time.* The structure spanned at least 300 feet. It was reddish-brown and barely wide enough to accommodate a pickup truck. To my relief, I saw no one at the entrance, but I still knew crossing it would be risky. The guards on the hill could probably spot me from afar on the lighted section of the bridge, the side adjacent to the camp. There could be chasers prowling on the dark side.

*Pretty risky but nothing is one-hundred-percent safe. And besides, Plan B is out of the question.* At that notion, I decided to take my chances and make a break for it. I stepped up the embankment and swiftly traversed Maacama Creek Bridge.

*Whew!* No Family members were waiting for me on the opposite end. No alarm bells or sirens. *I did it! I did it! I'M FREE.*

A few feet away, there it was—California Highway 128, my only connection to the outside world.

-----

I PACED EASTERLY DOWN CA-128. The lonely country road took many twists and turns because it followed the snakelike creek for about four miles. The stars emitted just enough glimmer for me to track the yellow line. The next town? Calistoga, twelve miles away.

Darkness of course cloaked the majestic Mayacamas and Palisades straight ahead. They form the western wall of the celebrated Napa Valley, the best wine-producing region in the United States. The highest peak is Mt. St. Helena (not to be confused with the infamous volcano Mt. St. *Helens* in Washington state). The M-shaped behemoth resides in a state park that's named after the great author Robert Louis Stevenson. In 1880, he spent his honeymoon at nearby Silverado, an abandoned mining

camp. Some of his descriptions of the rugged terrain ended up in *Treasure Island*, arguably the greatest adventure story of all time.

This made me think of Dr. Mose Durst, my favorite lecturer at the camp. In his speech back in San Francisco, the former English professor associated the romantic quest for buried treasure with the man's search for meaning. "*There's gold in them thar hills!*" he proclaimed impersonating an old prospector. The hill country he was referring to was Boonville, the place where you can "strike it rich" spiritually. The idea one could discover all of life's answers there intrigued me. I've always yearned for the absolute Truth—the ultimate Tao that transcends and permeates everything. I've thirsted to attain complete knowledge of it. However, when "Truth" purportedly required me to stay there, I started to panic.

Highway 128 flashed as from lightning. *Headlights!* I lunged to the side to let the car pass. The way the road curled around made it particularly dangerous for pedestrians, even in the daytime. Fortunately, traffic was negligible. Given the ungodly hour and the fact 128 connected two relatively small towns—Healdsburg and Calistoga—I would encounter no more than five vehicles. After the first one went by, it occurred to me that someone *local* might be behind the wheel—someone from Boonville!

What would happen if they caught me? Family members would certainly not ambush me, at least not *physically*. Using bodily force was a no-no because of the Constitution. However, they knew how to persuade. The words of my assigned "spiritual father," Jim Corner, could make me feel as heartened as a robin in springtime, or as guilty as a scolded puppy. And Family members could collectively "love bomb" me into submission. I could imagine them encircling me and singing:

*We love you Ted-dy. Oh yes we do. We love you Ted-dy. Oh yes it's true. When you're not with us, we're blue. Oh Ted-dy we love you. Yes we do. Choo-choo-choo!*

In spite of their questionable tactics, The Family seemed to have wisdom on their side. They allegedly based everything on scientific principles. They championed apparently self-evident truths such as: Humans are meant to be happy, Love is the key to the world's problems, Mankind seeks absolute values, and so on. They had the answers to everything and positive solutions to many problems I struggled with.

Their ace-in-the-hole question really stung me. . .

*Why would anyone want to leave paradise?*

No easy answer. If they asked me that point blank, I'd stammer like a school boy caught cheating. I'd recoil like Superman from Kryptonite. I may have even surrendered to the Family's wishes. Yes, I'd give up! I'd wave the white flag! The Family wouldn't have to kidnap me. I'd walk back to Boonville on my own accord. Heck, I'd even *run* back, and, after that, beg everyone for forgiveness.

Why?

You could call The Family anything you like—naive, corny, manipulative, phony, robotic, creepy, evil, etc.—and each adjective could be spot-on accurate. But, I have to say, in one particular area, they had a leg up over all outsiders: They built paradise, a literal heaven on earth, the perfect world. Mankind had long tinkered with the idea of creating a utopia, at least since Plato's time. The names Karl Marx, B. F. Skinner and Plato came to mind.

Like many others in my generation, one song planted the idea—John Lennon's "Imagine."

But philosophers had long debated about whether or not utopia is even attainable, given humanity's wretched state. Now I knew the answer. During my month-long stay in Boonville, I found out that it was not only possible, but it was an observable reality. I experienced it for myself!

*Experience* is the key word. My best friend Randal Stark back home once said it's the only sure means to prove anything is good.

With this in mind, it's easy to see how I left Boonville utterly conflicted. Part of me felt glad and happy to get away; the other part felt regret and sorrow.

Nonetheless, at 3:37 a.m. Pacific Time, I walked down 128 with a spring in my step. I was confident I had made the right move. Not only that, I was dazzled by the vivid celestial bodies about me. In the Detroit area where I'm from, you can only see a tiny fraction of stars due to the pollution. The speckled blackness served as a canvas displaying various scenes from Boonville etched in my memory. These mental pictures however were intermingled with ones from a certain Hollywood movie.

It's called *Lost Horizon*.

The 1973 film starring Peter Finch was front-of-mind because it was shown right before everyone went to bed that evening. (Everyone but me of course.) It haunted me all night. I associated Boonville with Shangri-La, the mountain paradise in the movie.

-----

3:45 A.M. THERE I WAS IN the pre-dawn dimness playing Dodge 'em Cars. (I avoided four of them to be exact.) Never mind being run over: Any one of them could be a car load of Family members hunting me down like a rabid dog—out of love and concern for my soul.

I was still cold. I still felt as nervous, jubilant, and theatrical as before. But, for the first time, I was besieged by another emotion: dread. I wondered, *what's going to happen of me in the outside world?* The scene in *Lost Horizon*—showing the terrible fate of those who dared to leave Shangri-La—popped into my head. I also heard Jim's voice warning me that Satan and his minions will pounce on me if I ever decided to split from Boonville.

Consolation came to the rescue when I remembered that The Family tended to exaggerate and even lie about things in order to keep restless folks like me in line. They called it "heavenly deception." Although this habit often annoyed me, I understood why they had to twist the truth from time to time. They did it for my own good, but most of all for the *common* good. And, sometimes, the end justifies the means.

But the dread also stemmed from a different source: my parents, my *biological* kin back in the Motor City. *Man, they're going kill me when I get home!* This newly realized concern made me break out in a cold sweat. Then there was Randal. . .

*Oh yes, Randal, Randal, Randal.*

Randal Stark was my best buddy since eighth grade—and now the worst snitch ever, but that's a story for another time. It's worth noting here, however, that my parents blamed Randal for *everything*.

One incident dramatized this. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, my mother told this twisted tale to some folks at a family gathering. (Eyes widened, the typical reaction of most people.) As she was talking, she spotted Randal sitting at another table.

"THERE HE IS!" she exclaimed pointing to him with her accusing finger. It was trembling. Those within ear's shot held their breath as if they were about to witness the unmasking of the Phantom of the Opera.

"It's all *his* fault," Mom muttered with nervous laughter. Mortified, my friend squirmed looking like he wanted to disappear. She then proceeded to mercilessly lay into him, addressing poor Randal in second person. "*You're* the one who instigated all that business of hitchhiking. You and your philosophy crap! *You're* the reason Ted got mixed up with those Moon people."

Randal the puppet master!

By the way, “those Moon people” were those I was trying to escape from on that fateful night in August of 1979. The other pejorative term—the one most commonly used—is “Moonies.” It refers to their leader, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the Korean preacher/businessman who founded their group—The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, or, in short, the Unification Church.

Words associated with the sect evoke fear. . .

“Fanatics” . . . “Brainwashing” . . . “Doomsday cult. . .”

-----

*4:01 a.m.* Plodding along California Highway 128, I felt totally exhausted. On top of that, I was hyper-anxious about getting home fast to straighten everything out.

*Here comes another car! An orange '75 AMC Gremlin.*

*Ah, what the heck. I'll raise my thumb in the air.*

The Gremlin stopped. As I approached to see who's in it, my stomach began to quiver.

### END OF CHAPTER ###