Chapter 1

My Perilous Start

When I was four months old, a few days after a photographer had taken my baby picture, my father lost his job. When the photographer returned bearing the proofs for my parents to choose from, they could no longer afford the photos. The man took pity and gave them a proof for free, which my parents displayed on our living room wall, alongside pictures of my siblings. I wore a cute little Onesie. My right hand was extended in a posture of blessing, a beatific smile lay upon my features, purple ink etched the word *PROOF* across my belly. Adding to this indignity, I was afflicted with cradle cap, which, in combination with a stray shadow, gave me the appearance of wearing a yarmulke. I looked like a
miniature rabbi whom the Lord, in that fickle way of the Divine, had placed among the Gentiles. Like my brothers and sister, I was baptized Catholic, though I now believe that was done to throw me off.

When I was old enough to notice my picture, I asked why I was branded so peculiarly.

Glenn, my oldest brother, took it upon himself to explain this and other mysteries to me. “You’re not one of us,” he said. “Someone left you in a banana box on our front porch.”

“We thought someone had given us bananas,” my father said. “It was a real disappointment.”

Shaken by this revelation, I looked at my mother.

“We love you just the same,” she said, patting me on the head.

Thus, I was as Moses among the Egyptians, set adrift in the reeds, a stranger in a strange land.

As a young child I was prone to illness, lurching from one infirmity to another. After one was healed, another rose and took its place. When I was finally healed of the cradle cap, my eyes became inexplicably crossed and my legs turned inward. My mother drove me to Indianapolis to the Shimp Optical Company, where I was fitted with binocular-like glasses. A few weeks later, splints were lashed to my legs and I lay on my back for several days, like a bug-eyed beetle stunned by a spritz of Raid, which is where I was when John F. Kennedy was shot. But I had my own problems and gave his predicament little thought.

In addition to my poor vision and limited mobility, I had
a profound speech impediment and could barely make myself understood. My parents employed a speech therapist who came to our home each Thursday and had me repeat words with the letter r.

“The wed caw dwove down the gwavel woad,” I would say, over and over again.

The therapist, a Mr. Wobewt Fowtnew, eventually diagnosed me with a weak tongue that couldn’t curl sufficiently to make the r sound. He advised my mother to have me take up bubble gum and brought a bag of Bazooka each week for me to chew. This gave me little incentive to correct the problem, and I continued to suffer.

Suffering was the common theme of that decade—the 1960s. Although my parents tried to hide its more violent aspects from us, I sensed something nefarious was under way. It had been our custom to watch Walter Cronkite after supper, but more and more often my siblings and I were shooed outside to play, where we would consult with the other children about world affairs.

Tom Keen—who lived three doors down, was four years older than I, and knew everything there was to know—told us we were at war, fighting the communists in Vietnam. I wasn’t sure who the communists were, but knew they were bad since we had drills at school in the event they attacked us. Ours was a passive resistance—we crouched in the hallway, hands over our heads, until the theoretical bombs stopped falling and Mr. Michaels, our principal, came on the intercom to tell us it was safe to return to our desks.
Mr. Vaughn, our immediate neighbor, blamed every social ill on the commies. I deduced from him that communists had long hair, didn’t bathe, listened to rock music, and lived, not only in Vietnam, but also in California, which I looked up in the atlas my father kept next to his recliner. California seemed perilously close, less than a foot from Indiana. I would lie awake at night, worrying about the communists and their near proximity.

The communists weren’t the only threat to our well-being. Mr. Vaughn also warned us about the Japanese. “Gotta watch those little Nippers. Turn our backs on ‘em for a second and they’ll sneak attack us. Feisty little devils, the whole lot of ‘em.” Mr. Vaughn had a German shepherd named King, ostensibly to protect him against the Japanese and communists. But I fed him dog biscuits through the fence and we were thicker than thieves, King and I.

Despite these threats to my well-being, I reached the age of seven and went with my father to the town dump on a Saturday morning in search of a bicycle. Doc Foster, our town’s garbage man, guided us past heaps of trash, scavenging various parts of bicycles until we had enough components to fashion suitable transportation. It was, when we finished assembling it, an object of kaleidoscope beauty—a Schwinn Typhoon, consisting of a green, slightly bent frame, two tires of differing sizes, a blue back fender and a yellow front one, and Sting-Ray handlebars. The bike lacked a seat, adding to its uniqueness, so I learned to ride standing up.

Thus equipped, I set out with my brothers to explore
our surroundings, riding east down Mill Street and north on Jefferson to the Danner’s Five and Dime, where we visited the parrots and listened while hoodlums taught them dirty words. The hoodlums not only led the birds astray, they played pinball, an activity I have ever since associated with moral delinquency.

Across Main Street from Danner’s was Lemmie Chalfant’s plumbing shop, where Lemmie’s wife, Violet, planted geraniums in a toilet bowl on the sidewalk outside their front door. Three doors south of the plumbing shop was the Buckhorn Bar. We would pause from our travel and peer into the smoky recesses of the tavern, watching the ghostly figures move about, the silence punctuated by an occasional burst of wild, intoxicated laughter. We were captivated by the depravity—swearing parrots, the swirl of tavern smoke, the yeasty scent of beer spilling through the door of the Buckhorn onto the town square—and would stand at the door until the bartender, Raymond Page, yelled at us to leave.

Kitty-corner from the Buckhorn was the Abstract and Title Building, in whose basement Floyd Jennings sold bicycles to the rich kids, the very bikes we peasants would eventually cannibalize, living off the dregs of other people’s prosperity. The rich kids lived on Broadway Street, which the old timers called Millionaires’ Row. When the town was platted, it had been named South Street, but when the moneyed class settled there, they desired a more illustrious address and the name was changed to Broadway.

It was nine blocks long, on the south side of town,
running parallel to Main Street. Smack in the center of Broadway sat the county jail, where Sheriff Merle Funk and his family lived in the front rooms and the prisoners resided in the rear. On the street side of the jail was a dog kennel, where the police dog lived. The dog had misplaced loyalties and would hurl himself at the fence in a mad effort to rip out the throats of elderly women strolling past, while being positively friendly to the inmates. The inmates appreciated his devotion and, not wanting to hurt the dog’s feelings, never tried escaping.

My brothers and I would pedal our bicycles by the jail, stopping to aggravate the dog before entering the prosperous end of Broadway, riding through a tunnel of oak and maple trees, past movie-star homes with large porches set back from the street. It was clear we were trespassers, that we didn’t belong there with our cobbled-together bicycles. I imagined what it might be like living in one of those houses, like Richie Rich, who I’d read about at the Danner’s Five and Dime, even though Tom Keen had told me that reading a comic book without paying for it was against the law, the same as stealing.

One summer afternoon, while riding down Broadway, I stopped to rest. The disadvantage of riding a bicycle with no seat was that periodic breaks were required to restore one’s vigor. A lady exited a home and walked down her sidewalk, greeting me as she approached. To my surprise, she knew my name, though she didn’t say how. She was very kind and lovely, in a refined sort of way. I never told anyone
about her, but suspected she was my real mother, who’d been caught up in a torrid affair of which I was the product, and to avoid scandal she’d left me in a banana box on the doorstep of a poor family, where I would not be materially blessed, but would be loved, for the most part.

For the next few years, I expected her to reclaim me, to rescue me from the Papists, and take me to my true home, where I would be given my rightful due—a new, one-color bicycle with its very own seat, all the Richie Rich comic books I could read, and various other treasures beyond my current reach. But apparently my real mother loved me too much to uproot me, so I was raised among the Gentiles and learned their ways, though always in the back of my mind was the conviction that my true home was on Broadway Street, among the well-to-do.