

CHAPTER 10

Finishing school was not a requirement for James. He had known early on that his was not to be the normal path taken by others. He had spoken briefly with his Father about this matter and knew for certain that although he was not to be a prophet for his God as His Father had been for His, he was not to be a common laborer either. He knew that his Father and God truly loved the world, and that his mission was to experience all that man and this world had to offer, to at times solace those around him and serve his Father, but mostly just to enjoy the existence of being in this place. It was not a heavy burden, but his God and his Father so loved the world they wished to share its pleasures with a son of their own.

To this end, when James started his journey after the first of the year, he had headed north for New York. Not having witnessed vast amounts of snow or rural people first-hand, he spent most of his days hitchhiking or walking. Through talking, seeing and experiencing his surroundings and the people, James was beginning to understand his Father's love for this world. James spent many hours in conversation with his Father and His God. Quiet times on the side of the road or in a park were often spent in discussions with one or the other or both of His Fathers.

It had become obvious through the conversations and his experiences on the road that his life was not to become one long backpack trip into the most pleasant of circumstances. His Father was convinced that the true beauty of human beings and their surroundings could only be experienced by examining both sides of life. As surely as there was good, there had to be evil. Not even God had been able to produce an object with only one side. His Father and God felt that their son must be able to see the exquisite purity and beauty in the simplest of acts, in the greatest and smallest times of adversity. James had to experience these adversities and their acts of good and evil, as well as those things which were still pristine and pure in their beauty. For these reasons, both Fathers retreated to allow James these experiences as he reached New York.

Cardinal Michael had heard that John was off on missionary work, but did not believe it. For years he had heard about this young man. He was in the conference called to discuss this child when the roar from their parishioners had become so loud that the church could not ignore the fact that his birth was the only one to occur in this circle of light, on Christmas, the only birth recorded to have occurred in the whole world during this time period. Sure, others had been born on this day, but there were no recorded births in the world except John's for a four-hour time. There was also seemingly no other light to shine anywhere but on that birth. His parishioners were sure it was a Second Coming or a sign from God. After extensive ecumenical work and scientific evaluation over two months, the council concluded that other than the miracle of birth, there was nothing special about this child.

Yet the findings didn't totally end the reaction. Some still claimed his presence was a sign from God, and pledged their loyalty and fortunes to this young man.

"Loyalty and fortunes, huh?" Michael scoffed to himself. "The only loyalty and fortunes went to his old man, Dexter Love, and his dippy wife. God created one miracle and gave us His son to save our souls. Why do they have to believe that He needs to come and see us again or send someone else to do it? It upsets the balance of the way things should be. The people should leave the interpretation of miracles to those of us who have been taught properly and accept our declarations. Why do they question us? It just seems such a waste of time to constantly deal with these side issues. Still, his emergence has increased attendance at church and increased the funding. We will just have to keep him under control."

Cold and gray, that was how James first saw New York City. It was one of those days where the air was chilled by the wetness in the air more than the wind from the north, and the clouds covered up any hope of warmth from the sun. Despair hung in the air, but James was enamoured with it all. He had seen Atlanta and other cities on His quest up north, but there was no place like New York, and this is where his grandfather and grandmother had lived __ the family his mom and Dad did not speak of for fear of hurting his feelings. But, yet how could anyone truly grow unless he knew his roots. He had to see his family. He had to try to reconcile the great gap between his mother and his grandparents. He had spoken often of this with his Father, but his Father always listened in silence. James knew about free will and faith, was taught well by his Father and his dad, but just did not understand why Jesus could not force the reconciliation upon his family. He hoped to learn why and to complete the task that eluded his Father.

The neighborhood where Cindy Franklin grew up as a child was just as desolated and poor as when Jame's mother described it. But, in his eyes, it had all the wonder of a forgotten world __ new avenues to explore, people to know and understand. The poor sign in front of an old building, now vacant, said "New Life Freedom Church." The windows were cracked and broken, and the door was chained shut with a heavy lock. Scraping off the snow on the sill and rubbing the dirt off of one of the panes allowed James to peer into the old sanctuary of that forgotten altar to God. It appeared much smaller to him than in the many tales his mother had told. He looked off to the side and saw a door leading to another room. Perhaps, he thought, that could be the room mom first saw my father. He decided to go around to the side and see if he could get in.

The alley where the door to the side room exited was far worse than the street, a feat James thought impossible. Litter crawled up the walls and what wasn't litter crawled also. After kicking a number of bottles and bags away from the door, James was able to fall into the side entrance to the building. Inside the reek of animal and human debris caused him to hold his breath and gulp for

fresh air. But, in that pile of garbage rose a menacing figure of dirt and filth the likes of which James had never seen. It seemed to speak and advance, waving a bar of some sort. James's startled look was the only thing that seemed to keep this creature from striking.

Suddenly, James regained His senses and understood what the figure was saying.

"Wha' you wan' boy!" the creature shouted. James' lack of response moved the creature forward into the light from the door and he was able to make out that this fearsome creature was just a scared, frightened old man.

James regained his composure just enough to warble out, "Nothing, I want nothing from you."

"Then what you doing here, boy?" shouted the threatening figure.

"Lookin'," said James.

"For what?" cried the man, now close enough for James to smell the filth and whiskey on him.

"For a past," James said calmly and looked the man right in the eyes. Suddenly, the man dropped his raised hand.

"You the boy?" The man asked, his eyes peering violently into James.' His gaze followed all the contours and folds of James body and clothing.

"What boy?" Asked James.

"The one they said was His. The one it's said was made right here in this room. You Him?"

"You the Boy?" The man asked, almost pleading.

"My mother did conceive me in a place such as this. But, why do you ask?"

The man pulled James into the light and looked deeply at him. Suddenly, the man smiled. The anger, the frustration, the despair melted with that smile and the man began to cry quietly. James reached to support him, but the man stood tall once again and waved James off.

"No, boy, no. I won't be needin' any more help standin'. I been asked to give you a message. If you should come, I'm to tell you that the family you seek has moved ten blocks North and one block over. The Church's name is the same and your grandmother waits for you."

"You been waitin' for me?" asked James incredulously.

"Dear Lord," quietly cried the man, "We all have." With that, he walked past James into the alley and left.

James stared after him, unable to move at the suddenness of the confrontation and the news that accompanied it. He looked one last long look around the dingy, rat infested, filthy room, then turned and left to begin his hike ten blocks North and one block over.

John had an expense account, connections, and cash. Although he was experiencing the world by himself first-hand, his mother and father had insisted that there was no reason why he had to suffer through any hardships on his trip of self-awareness. Although John knew in his heart that

his mother truly loved him, he was sure a shopping trip in New York City was the main reason she wished to accompany him on the first leg of his "missionary" work. Such a dependence on material things was one of the many reasons John wished to take a year off from the work of the Church.

John had always known the circumstances of his birth. His father and mother had never lied to him about his natural conception. He, as his parents, never committed the sin of claiming to be God's child, but had let the people come to their own conclusions. Funny, he thought, but the more we protested against divinity, the more we were christened with it.

John also knew there was someone else out there with which he had a connection. Always in the back of his head, in his heart, he knew. He had asked his dad, then his mom, who his "friend" was. His parents would look puzzled, replying, "why, everybody," and then just laugh a little nervously. So John just quit asking, but he always knew there was someone out there he had an allegiance to, but he never knew whom. That was part of this little trip; maybe he would find this person. This person and many other things, John thought with a smile as he looked down from his first-class cabin window on the big city of New York.

"You know, being famous and rich has its advantages," John chuckled as the young flight attendant checked on him again with that little cute smile of hers.

The limousine from the hotel was John's first clue that he was going to have a hard time finding himself. He had looked forward to renting a car, driving in traffic, even getting his own bags. But even before he had written down the address of his hotel to the cute attendant, the chauffeur from the hotel had gathered his luggage, brought the car around, and met him at the gate to shoo away the "groupies."

John recognized the desire to please him and do his job, so he made no fuss as he got in for the ride to the hotel. But, after arriving and checking in, John noticed that a car rental booth was in a corner office next to the hotel. He resolved to complete his car rental that evening and went to his room, hoping that at least the attendant might take him up on his offer of dinner. However, before he even took off his coat, the phone was ringing. He answered to find another minister on the other end wanting to know if he would like to join his church for dinner that evening.

"No, thank you," John replied. "I just got in and have yet to unpack. If you could call me tomorrow maybe, then. Thank you for the offer, but I have to go. Thanks again, goodbye." John quickly hung up, and then took the phone off the hook.

"Man, this is going to be a lot more difficult than I thought," said John. He stood up from the bed, grabbed a duffel bag full of clothes, and headed out the door of his room to the elevator. Pulling a baseball cap close to his head, John took the elevator to the first floor and snuck across the lobby to the car rental office. There, with the keys to a Buick and a dash out the side door, he began his quest to find "something."

The church was bigger, and it was a church, no storefront sanctuary for a few good- hearted people. James' grandfather was now the pastor of a full-fledged, bell-tolling, bank- mortgaged, pew-standing, stained-glass church. A modest size, but James could tell by the chorus of parishioners inside that it was well attended. What day is it, anyhow? James thought. Better yet, what time is it?

James walked toward the front doors of the church. Suddenly, he froze. What am I gonna say? He thought. Hello, grandpa, I'm your forgotten grandson. Or better yet, hello, this is your bastard grandson. He took a few more steps, grabbed the door handles, pulled, and walked inside.

It was warm inside, blessedly warm, not just from the heat of the furnace, but from the joy of standing in a sanctuary of God. James never could get over the warmth he felt being in a house of His Father and Grandfather. There was another set of doors leading to the main sanctuary, set open. The doorway made it easy to see the robe-draped man preaching at the front of the church. My Lord, thought James, this is a powerful speaker. Standing at the doorway, James became mesmerized by the powerful, simple statements of faith so forcefully and eloquently stated before the congregation. Quite a few "amens" and "Hallelujahs" emanated from the audience. Then the chorus began, beautiful, sweet, and powerful.

The robe-draped man was beckoning for James to come forward and have a seat at the front of the church. James looked closely. Could it be his grandfather? He had graying hair and wrinkles around his eyes and face. He smiled as if he had the answer to all happiness and only wished to bless James with this knowledge. He was not quite six feet tall, but stood ramrod straight, giving the impression that he was much taller than all those around him.

James made his way to the front pew, never taking his eyes off the man, sitting down where he pointed and listening only to the thoughts within his own head. The chorus was reaching a crescendo of faith. James had only been slightly aware of the older black lady dressed in yellow that he had joined in the pew. But a touch on the arm made him turn and look into the eyes of the woman with which he had been seated. Then it seemed that the music, the preaching, the congregation, all froze and passed out of the realm of his consciousness. The old, gray-green eyes of that woman were crying and smiling all at the same time. Her wrinkles joined in a smile as big as any he had ever witnessed in Aunt Jenny's face, and she put a finger to her lips and bid him keep quiet. She continued to hold him tight and he continued to stare at her. He could begin to hear the music and the congregation and James knew he had found his grandmother.

As the congregation filed out of the church, James' grandmother continued her hold on him. As they filed past the man who had been preaching, she said, "Robert, this young'uns goin' home to supper with us. He got no place to stay and nothin to eat and its God's will we provide for those less fortunate."

Robert looked quizzically at James, then smiled at His grandmother. "I am not goin' to stand in your way wife. I've seen that look before an there ain't no use trying to dissuade you." Turning to

James, he said, "You're welcome in my home for supper. Please take my wife on ahead and I'll be with both of you shortly."

James, surprised at the turn of events, mumbled his thanks and was led away by his grandmother.

"Chile, it is so good to see you," his grandmother said. "How'd you know who I am?" asked James.

"Because your grandfather may rule the roost, but I rule the house. Here, let me show you." As they turned the corner, his grandmother reached in her purse and pulled out a wallet stuffed full of pictures. And there his family was Russ, Judy, and James. "I been gettin' pictures of the family for years. Aunt Jenny been keepin' me up to date on all your affairs. Lord, I miss bein' with my babies." With that, she started crying.

"But why don't you come to see us? Why don't you call my mama? Why haven't you been there, gramma, why?" pleaded James.

"Oh, darlin,' don't you know how I wanted to hear you call me granma? And don't you know how I wanted to be with all of my young uns', babies as well as my own daughter."

James and his grandma stumbled on together toward a brick row house with a sturdy front porch. "Chile, don't ever think I don't love you. But, I chose your grandfather long before we even thought of your momma. He's a good man, but when his own daughter, the apple of his eye, turned up pregnant, well..."

"It hurt him deep inside, it hurt his pride. I called Aunt Jenny. I knew she'd take care of your momma and I figured in a few years we could all get together again. But, Lord, when Cindy claimed you was the child of Jesus himself, and denied having had relations with your daddy, your grandfather disowned her. He not only felt she was denying her own sins, but committing blasphemy and diminishin' his faith and work." Granma sighed.

"Come on in the house and don't tell granpa who you are," she went on. "He still hasn't forgiven Cindy and thinks you a bastard child. We'll eat, spend some time together, and when he's gone to bed we'll catch up on family. Jus' do as I say for now, here he comes. We'll talk later." Grandma smiled.

James looked bewildered as grandpa came up the steps. What once was a certainty in his life became instant confusion. His grandmother had known all about him, kept in touch with them through his Aunt Jenny, and he knew nothing about it. Even his Father had not divulged this secret. What does it mean he wondered?

"Ya look confused, boy," said his grandfather as he came up the steps. "Well, don't be. It's the Christian way to offer hospitality to those of us less fortunate. Come on in. Let us feed you and offer comfort. Besides, it would be a sin against God himself to deny anyone the chance to taste my Millie's cookin'."

James entered the doors ahead of his grandfather and looked around. He was in a small

entranceway. A worn but decent throw rug was in the center of the floor. The house was heated well, but the walls and floors fairly reeked with the love a community had given to one of its own. Pictures, plaques, and knickknacks cluttered the area. The door to the right was made into a sitting room, covered with thick carpet and even thicker drapes. A fire roared in a fireplace set against the wall. A big cozy couch set directly in front of it. The sides and back were set high and covered with some kind of cloth that captured the heat and made a soul feel as safe and comfortable as a babe in its mother's arms. "Where does the light come from?" James wondered. "Maybe set off by the mirrors," James said aloud.

"Did you say something, son?" asked grandpa.

"I was thinking how the mirrors seemed to reflect the light. What a fine home you have, sir." "Thanks. We like it fine, and it is nice of you to say so. By the way, what is your name? Millie didn't seem to pass it on at the Church."

"It's James, Robert, and if you would pay attention you'd know these things," grandma said, bustling in. "I did tell you at the church, but you was so busy with the deacons you didn't hear me again. Now come help me set the table. James, you wash up in that bathroom off the side."

The smell from the kitchen immediately reminded James of his Aunt Jenny's cooking. It must definitely run in the family, smiled James as he hurried to clean up. It had been awhile since he had had that kind of home cooking.

It was as if he had jumped into a pool of memories. The yams, potatoes, chicken and that pie were reminiscent of home. Grandpa, Robert, had allowed him to say grace, and grandma Millie doted on him, making sure he had enough food, claiming he was wastin' away by walkin' down the road.

Millie kept the conversation light and James was pleased to give her the deception. Her recent revelations had totally destroyed any resolve he had practiced while on the road. The few minutes spent around the table allowed James to regroup and rethink his approach to the whole situation with his grandparents. He had changed from seeking a relationship with his family and establishing some roots to possibly reconciling the father with his mother. Yet the recent conversation on the front stoop with his grandmother suggested that that subject may still be taboo in this house. How could old disagreements continue so long? Thought James. And how could a man so devoted to His Father reject so completely his Son?"

As Millie had predicted, Robert excused himself shortly after dinner to take his Sunday afternoon nap. James offered to help with the dishes as Robert went upstairs. "Grandma, why don't you and Grandpa see Dad and Mom? What's really up? I know Mom really misses the both of you so much."

"Oh chile, we miss her so much too," said granma.

"Then go see her granma and call, or write a letter. What's the problem?"

"It seems so simple to you, James. But if it were just a few bad words or an argument, we

probably would have resolved our differences long ago. But it involves more. It involves who we are and what defines us. In essence, it is our souls we are defending."

"I can't believe that my birth could possibly be a definition of someone's soul," James said quietly.

"Oh chile not you. Not even your birth, honey. It was your mother's reluctance to accept her responsibility for your birth. Oh, we were hurt deeply that she had become pregnant and not been married, but even that wound would have healed. But her insistence that you were the Son of Christ, not just another child but the actual Son, to claim divine intervention, even an immaculate conception, to hide her shame, that was a wrong we could not forgive. We even asked her to recant. We explained our views about her statement, but she never retreated.

Her father prayed for and with her, explained again and again how she was committing a sin. He explained how it was hurtin' him, me and his church. Your momma just wouldn't accept her responsibility, so your grandfather sent her away. To accept her would have been to accept such a belief. To accept such a claim would have destroyed your grandfather and my beliefs, the essence with which we had defined our lives." Grandma was crying slightly.

"So I called Aunt Jenny and sent her down south. We thought that with less pressure and some help from others, she would see her errors, accept her responsibility and come home to us. Then, instead of Cindy, Aunt Jenny came North. We couldn't believe your mother had convinced her of the divinity of your birth. Your grandfather denounced anyone who would blaspheme the Lord in Church that Sunday. But your Aunt Jenny stood up and called him on it right there in church. Lord, it is still talked about today. They had words and Jenny walked out. Never did come back to the house. I had to send her clothes back by parcel post. Your grandfather and I decided right there never to contact the family again until such time as Cindy regained her senses. We prayed every day for the Lord's intervention and a sign that she had returned to the fold. And I suspect," added Millie, crying softly, "you're that sign."

"Let me understand," said James sitting down next to Millie at the kitchen table. "You think that my coming to the church to seek you and grandpa out is a sign that my mom has accepted the fact that Jesus is not my father?"

"Yes, chile. Why else would you be here? And as soon as he gets up I'm goin' to tell your granpa, then we'll go down to Georgia and see all my babies. Take you with us, too. You gotta be wantin' to see your moma."

"Oh Grandma, I am so sorry." James said quietly. "I may be a sign, but if you want to go see Momma, you will have to go knowin' she hasn't changed her mind one bit. And I wouldn't disavow my Father for the sake of your beliefs or any others. You will have to accept me and your daughter for who we are. I'm not here to reconcile you and my family, and I'm not here to change any beliefs. I am here to see my family, to let them know they are loved and missed, and to let them know the only ones suffering are themselves by denying the company and comfort of their family. For one of

the most wonderful gifts God has granted us is family."

Grandma's tears came a steady stream now. "You gotta be my sign. I waited so long an I cain't wait any longer. I want to see my daughter, my grandbabies, but I cain't leave my husband. Cain't leave my life. Oh James, you cain't believe your Jesus' Son. What shame, what life will you live? How will I ever be able to see my family?"

"Why do you deny that I am Jesus' Son? Why?" desperately asked James.

"It just cain't be, chile, cain't be. It wasn't prophesied, wasn't planned. God didn't let us prepare, let us know. What could this mean if you were? Is it the end of the world? Are we all heading for hell? What would it mean?" Grandma was fairly shaking now.

"Why does it have to mean anything, grandma?" asked James quietly. "Is every birth prophesied? Is every birth a symbol or sign? Can't a birth merely be the act of love between two people? Couldn't Jesus have had a child because he just so loved the world?"

"But, Cindy?" Grandma was quieter now, dabbing a hankie at her cheeks. "Cindy wasn't good enough to be the bride of Christ. She wasn't trained. Wasn't prepared."

"Wasn't good enough?" James spoke forcefully, in hushed tones so as not to wake his grandfather. "She was prepared enough and good enough to be cast out by her own family, yet hold onto her beliefs in the face of all her detractors. Why will you only believe the good in others, the quality of others, but not the quality of your own family? Do you spend so much time with the people in your own family that you're only able to see the warts in those closest to you?"

You and Grandpa raised a good child, out of all the billions in the world, Jesus chose her to have His Son. Instead of being proud, you worried about your own position, own wealth, own beliefs. I am the Son of Cindy and Jesus Christ. You will have to live and deal with that and reconcile yourself. If you wish to see your family and resolve your differences, go south. They will greet you with open arms. It is only your own prison that keeps you here, and you have the key to the gates that will set you free."

"I.. I don't know if I can," wept Grandma.

"Can what?" said Grandpa, opening the kitchen door. "Millie, why are you crying?"

James stood up, turned and faced his grandfather. "She doesn't know if she can accept the fact that I am the grandson you and her abandoned so many years ago," said James.

Millie stood up between the two, trying desperately to shush James.

"Robert, this is your grandson James," she said "Cindy's first child. I've known all afternoon."

Robert stood motionless, then reached out his arm as if to shake James hand. Startling both James and Millie, Robert grabbed him in a large bear hug, tears streaming down his face. "James, is it James? Oh, thank the Lord I was able to see you before I died. Your momma is she O.K? You will stay, won't you? What about your family? Are they all right?"

James was overwhelmed by the sudden change in the emotional atmosphere and short of breath by the hug given by his grandfather.

"Grandpa, ya gotta let go."

Grandpa released his bear hug, but held on tightly to James' shoulders.

"Tell me everything," he said, sitting down at the table. "Millie, please get us something to drink."

"Well everyone's all right. Russ and Judy are in school, last I heard. And..."

"Hear that Millie? There's two more grandkids. We got three grandbabies." Grandpa was beaming. Millie forced a smile and looked pleadingly with James over Robert's head.

"Yes, Robert, I was told earlier," said grandma.

"Three grandkids, can you imagine?" grandpa smiled.

"You think Cindy will let us see her and the rest of them babies, James?" asked grandpa. "I don't see why not," James said.

"Well, son, you know we had a fallin' out."

"From what I heard, momma thought you didn't want to see her."

"Never. Never said I didn't want to see her. I said I couldn't see her if it would condone the actions she had taken. I suppose considering your here and she's doin' fine, she must've finally accepted the responsibility of her actions. Otherwise, her claims would have led to her destruction." He turned to Millie. "Told you that trip would straighten her out Millie."

"Grandpa, the trip didn't straighten momma out. She's known who she is for a long time," replied James. "It appears to me you and Grandma are the ones who are lost."

"What you sayin', son? You can't believe that tripe your momma has been claimin' all these years. You would have to know it's not possible. I mean can you make miracles? Walk on the water? Change water to wine? Do you have some divine aura that gives you special insight?"

James shook his head.

"Well, you admit yourself you're not special. Now let's get on with this visit and forget this fantasy of your mothers." Grandpa smiled again.

"No, grandpa. Just because I am not blessed with miraculous powers does not mean I am not the Son of Jesus Christ. Where is it written that a Son of Jesus has to heal the sick and call the faithful to worship? Jesus does not put his plans or his Son forward for the approval of man, nor does he feel obligated to reveal himself to his children."

"Don't argue Scripture with me, child," grandpa said sternly. "I was studying scripture before you were born."

"Who is arguing Scripture? We are arguing what is. None of this is written, none of this is foreseen. This is what Jesus wants, and he does not ask your approval or judgement," stated James.

"Well, I can see this is going nowhere." said grandpa, standing up from the table slowly, his hands trembling. "Your mother has raised you as she wished and it will cause you no end of grief and

heartache. I tell you now, grandson, if you proceed with this vile notion, others less generous than I will see to your destruction. I myself cannot be a part of this blaspheme. I ask you as I did your mother to recant your statement and come back to the loving arms of Jesus."

James sighed, a tear falling from his face. "You will not understand that to do as you ask is to deny the God that you embrace."

"If you will not recant, you must leave. I will not have you in my house, shaming me in front of the Lord!" Grandfather's voice rose with each syllable.

"Then I leave. Grandfather, I love you. Goodbye." Turning to Millie, James said tearfully.

"Grandmother, you hold the key to your freedom. Use it if you can. I love you. Goodbye." With those words, James walked to the front door, turned to look at his angry and proud grandfather, his crying grandmother, opened the door, walked out and never looked back.

The ride out of New York took much longer than John thought. Man, is this city big, he thought as he asked another stranger for directions to the quickest highway out of town. He felt he had been running around in circles for hours.

Finally, he reached a highway and headed west. He had no idea where he was going, but he just had to have some time for himself. After putting about forty miles between himself and the city, John spied a motel sign at the next exit, pulled off and went in to see about a room.

"You have a room available?" John asked the female receptionist in a sweet, good-natured tone.

Looking up, the woman smiled and replied, "Yes, sir. We have a couple of singles left. The cost will be \$65.00 a night. May I register you?"

"Sure, sounds good to me. What do you need?"

"Well, I need your driver's license and a credit card and to fill out this form." The lady pushed a small, postcard-like paper to him.

John retrieved his wallet and produced his identification, then proceeded to fill out the form.

"You know you're missing?" asked the receptionist.

"What?" said John.

She pointed to the television in the lounge. There on the screen, John's image was projected with the word "missing" and his name juxtaposed under his face. The commentator was finishing a report that the police in a nine county area were on the lookout for him and there was suspicion that he may have been kidnapped.

"Lord, if this is what happens when I take off for a drive, what kind of reaction will I get when I order a pizza?" John thought out loud.

"Well, ya better call somebody if ya don't want everybody worried about you." The receptionist giggled. "An I don't wanna be around when you order that pizza. Couldn't stand the

religious significance of that. Make going to Pizza Hut a trip to Church."

John started to laugh. "I wouldn't know if that would help their sales or force them to shut down. You equate church to some things and lots of people will avoid it like the plague."

The receptionist laughed. "Yeah, but we could make those that order anchovies do it in the confessional and take penance for that sin."

John laughed again, then smiled. "Well, nice thought, but it doesn't answer my question about how I'm going to let them know I'm OK without letting them know where I'm at. And I better let them know soon before somebody gets in trouble, including me."

"Just call from that pay phone over there. If they do track it, they'll ask me if you were here and I'll say no." The receptionist smiled.

"Ah, but what if they check the registry and my credit card?" asked John.

"Well, the registry don't show John Love booked, Mr. Waters, and you just happen to be paying in cash." the receptionist smiled again as she started to burn John's earlier documents in a convenient ashtray.

"It appears everything has been worked out for me. So what do I owe for this inspired act of deceit, Miss?" John grinned.

"Maggie, just Maggie. And the price of this fortunate act of deception is an autograph, pizza and a blessing." She smiled coyly.

"Ah, the autograph is no problem, and the pizza is acceptable if you do the ordering. No anchovies. But the blessing, you know, does not carry the word of God. Just my best wishes." John smiled as he headed toward the phone.

"Well maybe we aren't talking about the same kind of blessing," said Maggie. "Tell you what, make your call, take this key, and I'll see you in your room with pizza after I get off in an hour."

"Done." said John as he picked up the phone and took the key offered from Maggie. John dialed the phone, quickly reached his father, and tried once again to explain that he wished to see the world.

Maggie was as good as her word. One hour later there was a key in the lock and there was Maggie, large pizza in one hand and cold beer in the other.

"You always keep a key to your guest's suites?" asked John, rising to give Maggie a hand. "Only the cute ones. Don't forget to fork over the cash for this pizza preacher boy or I turn you into the Feds." Maggie laughed.

"Mr. Waters has never in my experience wshed on a deal with a lady." John handed her more than enough to cover the cost.

"Thanks. And now shall we partake of our sustenance?"

"Please, let's do." said John, seating the pizza on the floor and crowding around it with Maggie. John stopped briefly before eating to whisper a blessing.

"Wow," said Maggie, "you are a preacher boy. Never did see anyone bless a pizza before. 'Course, considering this is one of our local boy's specialties, it probably needed it."

"Well, I do believe in Jesus and His Father, and it don't take nothin' to say thanks," replied John, grabbing a piece of pizza.

Between bites Maggie asked, "Then what are you doing out here? You seem to have your head on straight, God on your side and serenity in your voice. At least it appeared that way when you said the blessing."

"Searching," said John, reaching for another bite.

"Lord, you aren't one of them people trying to 'find' themselves, are you? Seems every other boy or girl I see in here needs to find themselves. As if anybody would take the time to hide their 'self' from them."

"Well, yes and probably no," said John.

"Strange answer," said Maggie. "Sounds like a story."

"I've never told it even to myself, so I'm not sure how it goes."

"Well, we got half a pizza, four more cold beers, at least six hours before I'm due anywhere. Besides, you still owe me an autograph and a blessing, so you best be talking 'cause I ain't going nowhere till I hear what's troublin' our number one preacher boy."

"Okay, you win. I'll talk, but when it gets boring, make me stop. I can't stand to be boring and I can't stand to hear boring people." John winked.

"So far you are boring, but go on anyhow, maybe it gets better," she teased.

"Well, most people know the circumstances of my birth." John said. Maggie nodded assent. "Well, what they don't know is all my life I have felt a connection to something...no, no, someone. As if we are meant to be together. I need to find that someone to complete whatever task that is. It feels as if there is a big hole inside me that can't be filled unless I find that person and complete that task. So, in essence, I'm trying to find myself by finding someone else."

"You mean that once in a lifetime permanent companion?" Maggie purred.

"No, not a wife or kids." John smiled back. "But someone who will piece together my life."

"Well, it all seems interesting, but how you gonna do it? I mean with your connections, seems you could spread the word from the pulpit and your companion would come running to you."

"No, I don't think so. You would have to understand my lifestyle to realize the number of 'individuals' that would easily volunteer to be my companion. No, I have to find him myself, untainted with the trappings of my life. I just seem to feel this is the right way to approach him...or her."

"So how you gonna look for him or her and how long you got to tramp around the world to find this soulmate?" Maggie said playfully.

"Well, I got a year before I go back. I guess I'll just throw the dice and see where they land, if

nothing else, maybe I'll see a lot of country and meet a lot of nice people like you."

"Honey, you don't know how nice I can be." Maggie giggled, leaning forward to John and planting a long sensual kiss.

"Wow" said John as he fell back against the bed.

"Now, honey, bout that blessing you owe me." said Maggie as she slid off John's shirt. "This isn't the position I usually give blessings," said John.

"Didn't say you was giving the blessing." murmured Maggie as she kissed him again.

John woke up on the floor next to the pizza a pillow at his head and a blanket partially covering his body. The smell of stale beer permeated the room. John looked around, but Maggie had obviously left earlier. Sunlight through the window indicated it was probably midmorning. John rose from the floor went to the restroom to clean up and recap what had happened.

Maggie and he had finished their intimate relationship, and then continued talking into the wee hours. He laughed as he remembered that she wanted his autograph on her bra. Luckily, he had resisted and signed an extra T-shirt instead. She had helped him to decide on a path for his year of discovery and he was anxious to get a start. It was hard for him to understand some of the things she had brought up, like how his life was an inspiration to millions in need of hope. He had always known he was an attraction, but a celebrity and an inspiration? Hell, he was lucky just to be able to learn how to drive a car. He thought it was funny people thought of him that way. Maggie had laughed when he protested that he was by far the last to be a worldwide inspiration.

But maybe his parents did keep him too protected. He knew that he had rarely ever seen TV footage of his appearances. His father had meticulously scripted any contact he had with the public. Even his friends were the children of his father and mother. The private schools and tutors kept him isolated also. He laughed at himself. He had never before analyzed himself like this; it was starting to become obvious that he had a lot of learning to do.

"Well, she was right." John said to himself. "I've got a lot to do and learn and I better get started." He entered the shower and started humming to himself as he cleaned up.

John left his room about an hour after showering and headed for his car. He decided to head west, driving some of the time, flying some of the time, and walking some of the time. He was going to take Maggie's advice too. He was going to see some of the churches large and small along the way, as well as the scenery. He planned to spend about three months in the U.S., then travel overseas and do the same thing. Maybe he would get a feel for whom he was and what he was to do. Maybe he'd also find that someone in the process. Anyhow, if later encounters with the people were as great as the first encounter, this was going to be a great trip.

John threw his duffel bag in the car then headed for the front office. He walked up to the counter to check out and asked the attendant if Maggie was around.

"No." the attendant replied, "She won't be back until the night shift. Would you like to

leave a message?"

John slid an envelope with her name written on it across the counter. "I already have the message. Would you see she gets it?" John asked.

"Sure will." The attendant said and looked up to take the envelope. "Man you look awful familiar. Do I know you?"

"Probably not." John smiled. "It's the first time I've been in this town. Thanks for your help." He turned and walked out the door.

Getting in his car, John started it up, took a deep breath and shifted into gear. Heading for the highway, John took the first exit that said west.

James had headed toward the harbor. Not knowing what to do and receiving no direction from his Father, James had walked and found himself on a pier. What to do now? He thought. The last few months he had had a purpose, but now that he had met his grandparents and apparently made things worse, he was truly free and the whole world lay ahead of him.

"Now what?" he said to himself.

There was no litany of priests to guide and provide for him. He was a man, a single entity in the vastness of the world and universe. James sought the solitude at the end of the pier and talked to his Father.

James didn't think it much of a productive talk. His Father wanted him to experience man and the world, but what to do and how to do it was left totally up to him. James couldn't exist without eating, he knew that much, so a job was in order. But what kind? He wondered. When you have the whole world at your feet what do you do where do you go? Worse, how do you do all this and experience man and the world? Just then, a ship's horn blew.

"God will provide," James said as he headed for the ship.

"It was a bloody coronation," thought Cardinal Michael. He had been watching reports of John Love's travels across the world, probably more closely than most. His belief that it was probably just a chance for John Love to sow some wild oats may or may not have been correct. Whatever, the original intent John had just blown the religious and secular community out of the water. Never knowing where or when he would show up, indeed admitting he had neither itinerary nor agenda, but leaving his travels to the will of God, had been a streak of genius. This week in a Midwestern church, the next day at the slums of Chicago, one day in the Cathedral, the next week heading for the Orient, he was everywhere, taking the whole world with him. It was as if he was introducing all the neighbors down the street to one another.

His presence had made politicians commit to human rights projects they had rejected for years. Even the hint of his appearance created immediate responses to the human condition. His popularity was at an all-time high and the press was in perpetual hunt of his next appearance. His

ability to disappear and reappear at will, no doubt with the help of the believers, had the press in a quandary and the public laughing at their ineptitude. It had added to his mystic and made many more believers.

Cardinal Michael just didn't know how to deal with it. John had never claimed divine intervention, never professed the ability to perform miracles, and never, ever claimed this trip was more than missionary work. But the parishioners were asking questions almost daily about what the Church's stance was on this supposed "miracle man." The Cardinal was getting very short in his answers to the parish and in conversations with other priests. The Church would only acknowledge his good deeds and welcome any help from a fellow man of God. They by no means would even hint at divinity especially if John himself professed no special anointment.

"But, heavens, I will be glad when this tour is over and we can get back to the Scriptures," sighed Cardinal Michael.