**Summer of Seventy**

“Hey, Georgetown”, the voice said. I looked up, searching the featureless faces surrounding me as I straddled a bulky bicycle waiting for the light to change. A smattering of non-descript pedestrians mingled anonymously at a major intersection in downtown San Francisco. We were anxiously awaiting the signal to cross the wide boulevard now teeming with lethal traffic. It was a typical summer day, early afternoon, and a cool breeze was drowning out the warm sunbeams piercing the cloudless sky. Then, it hit me. I was wearing my navy blue windbreaker with the school name in bright white letters on the front. It was my most valuable possession. Whoever had uttered those familiar words must have seen it. Although I was at the front of this crowd and poised to be the first to break free, my curiosity held me back. Instead of jumping on the pedals the moment that light turned green, I hesitated. The very instant the red lamp flickered off, a formidable mass of humanity surged forward with a common goal: to reach the safety of the sidewalk on the other side. But I was not the only one holding back. Turning around, I looked up at the ruddy, smiling face of someone who looked as much out-of-place as I felt at that moment. Before I could formulate a single rationale thought, he spoke again.

“I’m from GW,” he said. Oh yeah, I thought, George Washington University. Georgetown and GW were friendly rivals in Washington DC, a place thousands of miles away. “I’m Robbie”, he continued, still smiling. “What are you doing in San Francisco?” Naturally shy and skeptical, I wasn’t sure what to say. By this time, the light had changed back to red and another crowd was gathering around us. Being self-conscious, I wanted to say something dramatic or at least interesting. But that took too much effort and I just wasn’t good at spontaneous discourse. What I really wanted to do was sound smart, you know, like a Georgetown guy. Instead, I punted: “Summer break. And you?” Now, it was Robbie’s turn to ponder an answer. “Same as you”, he said without hesitation. For some reason, I was surprised at the simplicity of his response. Here we were, two total strangers, both far from home, standing on a street corner on a chilly July day in this windy, left coast city. We had something in common, and I was hungry for familiar conversation. Lucky for me, Robbie was as gregarious as I was introverted. He kept the conversation going where I would surely have ended it. There was a reason to keep talking but I didn’t know it then. Neither did Robbie, but we would soon find out.

It was 1970. The Vietnam War was raging and civil unrest was everywhere. Haight Ashbury was fading and Berkeley was a buzzing hive of radical activism. I was a long hair. In those days, hair was a badge worn with honor and naiveté. It was distinctive and natural. You could hide it under hats or wigs, or you could conceal it in a ponytail behind your head. If your mood changed, you could cut it off. It would grow back. Best of all, the girls loved it. The so-called weaker sex had a clear advantage over clueless long-haired guys in the haircare department. They were frequently compelled to recommend suitable shampoos and seemed to enjoy brushing out long snarled strands of unruly tresses. I certainly didn’t mind the attention. Long hair was tres chic, especially on the west coast. There was something ethereal about the feel of a lengthy, silky mane cascading over your shoulders and back. “Letting my freak flag fly” sang David Crosby. It was our anthem, and we flaunted it.

Robbie didn’t have long hair. Was he straight or a stoner? Was he one of those libertarian-types who want you to think they are hip though they voted for Nixon? No, he didn’t have that know-it-all look. He was too easy-going. He seemed interested in what I was doing and why. For some reason, that didn’t bother me. I was alone in a crowded city. Other than nosey roommates, a surly boss and some nameless vagabonds, I knew no one. But I didn’t care. It was exhilarating to be in an unfamiliar place. I was receptive and susceptible to curious strangers. That is good, I think. Robbie kept smiling and talking. “What are you doing on that clunky bike”, he said. “Working”, I told him. I was a messenger trolling the streets of downtown San Francisco on an industrial-grade bicycle with a stiff, torn seat and a giant, steel basket up front.

“How did you get that job”, Robbie asked. “Are there any openings?” I knew the answer. Schlepping packages around the business district, dodging nimble cars and smoke-belching buses (and sometimes electric trollies and chain-driven cable cars) was one of the only jobs readily available to long-haired males in those days. Robbie had that youthful, clean-cut look that opens doors. He could walk right in and snag a decent job in this town. He didn’t need my job. But I was wrong.

My guard was up a little, so I told him about the daily grind of a bicycle courier. Every morning, you arrive at a rundown, musty office on the wrong side of town and are told to choose your two-wheeled tool from a small selection of sorry-looking rejects. You greet your fellow pedal-pushers and watch with envy and loathing as the experienced elites unlock their speedy, gleaming models and test their squawking walkie-talkies. When hired, you are told you can earn extra cash if you are fast and efficient. By demonstrating extraordinary skills and exemplary habits, you will attract the attention of the dutiful dispatchers who will reward you with bonus assignments. Once you prove your worth in this primitive, low-tech world of commerce, you just might score a portable 2-way radio. “See those guys on the sleek bikes”, they tell us. “They are the golden boys.” These office-bound cheerleaders mischievously egged on the clueless long-hairs with relentless rants about better bikes and higher pay. When fully equipped, you are given an address and some sketchy instructions. If the boss is feeling good or likes you, he might throw you a plum assignment. Once, I was dispatched to the executive suite on the uppermost floor of the Bank of America building. When I exited the swank elevator, I entered an alien world of shiny suits and lusty perfume. Most often, I was dispatched to one of the rendezvous points scattered around the City to await further orders. You see, the company had these private phones in random places hidden in plain view. These telephones were the jet-black indestructible plastic models of the era but without dials, only a receiver and a cradle. You would roll up, fling open the door, drag your bike into a sterile hallway, and wait. As soon as that instrument emitted a distinctive metallic ring, you had to lift the receiver and identify yourself. The muffled voice on the other end would then spit out an address for you to memorize or scribble down (if you were lucky enough to have a pencil and paper handy). Sometimes, you were told to stand by. Another ploy was to send you off to another phone location closer to an anticipated assignment. All this fuss for minimum wage, no benefits and lots of exercise. It was dangerous too. More about that later.

“Where are you staying”, Robbie wanted to know. “Berkeley,” I replied, “near the University.” Everyone knew about UC Berkeley, even us easterners. It was the highbrow branch of the vaunted UC system to all except the elitists in Los Angeles. Classic California: Bears versus Bruins. What is the difference? But Berkeley is also a city and I was living there in the house with the boar’s head mounted above the front door. My new roommates and I had discovered that stuffed animal’s head in the dusty, cobwebby attic during an exploratory tour of our multi-story house. No one knew how it got there or where it came from. We unanimously agreed it belonged in a prominent place. Where better, we thought foolishly, than the street-facing exterior of this otherwise forgetful abode. With clumsy craftsmanship, we managed to fasten it high above the front entrance. We didn’t consider the consequences should it fall on an unsuspecting visitor, the mailman or one of us. Our nondescript residence instantly became a semi-significant landmark. Years later, during a discussion about my summer in Berkeley, someone asked me if I lived near that house with the boar’s head. I couldn’t contain my excitement when I admitted I not only lived in that house but I had helped hang that bristle-haired tusk-toothed face on the front wall. My megawatt smile evoked heartfelt pride and an expectation of respectful admiration; indeed, I was a part of local lore! But fame is fickle and subjective. Instead of anticipated acclaim, the questioner responded with a look of incredulous bewilderment. “Why the fuck did you hang that stupid stuffed pig’s head on the outside of your house?” There is no reasonable answer to that question and I was too stunned to think of one. Just another clueless counter-culture custom, I should have said. After all, how can you explain a pet rock? Instead of a hoped-for round of kudos, all I got that night was a crescendo of mocking laughter.

Robbie and I talked about Berkeley, San Francisco and travel. We each had to get back to DC for fall classes. My cross-country plans were ill-defined but involved hitchhiking because I had no money. Growing up in a lower middle-class family with eight siblings, I had learned valuable life lessons about budgeting and opportunistic sustenance. We didn’t know we had limited resources; we just had fewer material possessions than most folks and ate an awful lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and tuna casseroles. For vacations, we went on camping trips in our spacious Chevy station wagon with our food, shelter and clothing lashed precariously to the pitted, chrome plated roof rack. We slept in a gargantuan tent with a high-ceiling center and two low-sloped wings on either side. It was the largest canvas camping lodge you could purchase at Sears. Although my high school had a pretty decent cafeteria, I never once bought lunch there. Early each morning, my mom would lay out an assembly line of white bread slices filling the length and breadth of all available counter space. On every other piece, she would slather a thin layer of jelly. Most days, it was grape and it came in half-gallon glass jars with massive metal lids. The remaining pieces were smeared with a dollop of runny peanut butter from institutional-sized tins. By the time all us kids were in school, she was going through two entire loaves a day. As the oldest, I was entitled to three PB&J sandwiches. If you’re counting, that’s fifteen a week. Oh, and we had homemade cake. Everyone knew my mom could bake and I would look forward to that tiny slice of heaven every single day. Was I lucky! Broke was something that happened to cars and furniture. In that distant summer of youthful past, the thumb was just the ticket. Make a sign, find a spot and throw it out there. Even girls were doing it then (although they undoubtedly never told their parents). You could go anywhere, at any time, and it cost nothing. Or so we thought.

Robbie wanted to explore Canada, our vast neighbor to the north. I vaguely recalled some long road trips with the family in the eastern provinces, but knew it would add extra miles to go north from San Francisco and then south once we reached Montreal. Did Robbie have money? “No”, he said, “but we won’t need much.” He was right about that. Robbie was one of those folks one would politely describe as fiscally tight. I was a dyed-in-the-wool cheapskate (mostly out of necessity). When you don’t have much, you learn how to stretch what you do have. A dedicated skinflint can stretch a dollar so far it screams for mercy. More likely, the dollar sits crumpled and forlorn in the tightwad’s pocket. Meals come and go, but it still sits there, lonely and reserved. A good moocher can hold out for days without reaching in that pocket. Sometimes, the worn bill comes out of its hiding place only to be introduced as “my last dollar; I better save it for later.” Major cheapness spawns a reputation and that begets unpopularity. So it is much better to put a few dollars here and there in your clothing and sparingly withdrawn a bill, very slowly and reluctantly, on rare occasions. That was Robbie’s style and he was a pro. As the weeks passed, I watched him with pure admiration.

“Do you want to join me on my trip north?” Robbie asked. His voice was sincere and his excitement was believable. A three-second introduction followed by a two-minute conversation, and I was hooked. We were both from the same place. We needed to get back before school started, and we were young and adventurous. As we later learned, we were also road-smart and resourceful. “Sure”, I replied. “When are you leaving?” Robbie paused and looked around as if someone was listening. “Well, I don’t know just yet,” he said. “If you really want to go, we need to talk about it. How can I find you?” A normal person would have probably stopped right about then and realized this whole idea was nuts. But I was not a normal person, and neither was Robbie. So we exchanged contact information and promised to be in touch. We were boomer kids born in the 50s and raised in the 60s. As long as we stayed in school, we could avoid the draft unlike many less fortunate guys at that time. We could get an education, elude Vietnam and give ourselves a chance to do better than our parents. College was not the real world. Outside the walls of academia dwelled the “unwashed phenomenon, the original vagabond” from the Joan Baez songbook. Joan was heralding Bob Dylan with those words, but she could have been describing many others during that period in our history. We were the Horatio Algers of America in the late 1960s. We were hippies with attitude.

So Robbie and I did connect and plan that trip. We also lived it. My memory is not so clear, but Robbie kept a diary. For reasons only he can explain, that hand-written notebook remained a secret for almost fifty years. Then, Robbie found me on the internet and said he wanted to tell our story. Was I interested? Of course, I said. The question, we decided, was whether anyone wanted to hear it. After a tasty dinner at Robbie’s Manhattan residence, he read from his journal and we agreed to give it a try. Stay tuned if you want to know what happened.