

I. IN THE BEGINNING

IN THE BEGINNING, BOB DIDN'T PLAN TO START A RELIGION; IT just happened. That's how Bob viewed most of his life up to that point. It just happened.

It just happened that he was born fifty years ago in the Northwest Region of the Free Nation. When he was twenty, it happened that a strong, stout woman named Helen would pick him out and decide to marry him. It happened they would inherit a house from her parents where they would live for thirty years until it happened she would leave him on his fiftieth birthday.

When Helen married Bob, her father put him to work framing houses. Thirty years later, he was still at it and his back was sore. It happened that Bob would never be able to give Helen a child. Maybe it was for the best. Parenting is tough. Like most people, they probably wouldn't have done a very good job.

The day after Helen left him, Bob discovered he was ragged, middle-aged, childless, wifeless, going-on-old. He found himself living in a ragged old house on a ragged old street, talking to his ragged old dog named Bud. That was before Bud started talking back to him. Pretty soon God would talk to Bob, too. God would call him "Son."

Bob had no clue why Helen left. One day everything was normal, the next day, it was his birthday and she was gone. The night before his birthday, he shuffled home tracking sawdust into the house. He pulled a cherry soda from the fridge, plopped

down on the sofa, aimed the remote, flipped the channels, nothing on, flipped the power off, drank cherry soda, patted the top of Bud's head, and stared at the blank screen. Pretty much the same as every night.

"Bob . . . BOB! Bob, do you hear me? We need to talk."

That was Helen. Nothing new. She'd been saying that for years. Bob continued to stare at the empty TV. Bud, the ragged old dog, nudged Bob, turning the power on in Bob's hand and making it pat his head some more.

Helen began to cry. Nothing new there, either. "Bob, I'm living alone! This house is more empty when you come home than when you're gone!"

Same old . . .

"Bob, if you won't be my husband, I'm leaving you. I mean it this time!"

She meant it every time. But tonight something different happened. On this night, the night before Bob's fiftieth birthday, something happened that would set in motion a chain of events that would change his life and change the course of history.

He kissed her. It wasn't much of a kiss. But he kissed her just the same. On the lips. Then he said, "Good night, Helen. I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

Nothing new except the kiss.

You could say it didn't have the intended effect, but as far as Bob was concerned, there probably was no intended effect. Just a kiss out of the blue. For Helen it was the final betrayal, the kiss of death. Being the first time in years Bob had done such a thing, it took her by surprise. She stumbled aside, eyes wide watching his dusty back as he lumbered toward the bedroom. She felt the aftershock of his sticky lips on hers, the sweet cold of cherry soda, an absent peck and nothing . . .

Helen finally knew. Bob was an empty frame on a vacant lot. The wind blew chilly through the beams. She had to go.

Dry eyed, Helen wrote him a note and set it on the kitchen table. She didn't pack. She put on her warm coat and the little beanie she always wore. She stuffed some pills and a toothbrush into her purse. She didn't bother saying goodbye to ragged Bud. He was sleeping with Bob anyway. She took the car keys off the hook and left the house as if she were going shopping. Bob didn't hear the engine start. He didn't hear its trail disappear into the night. He slept on.

* * * * *

In the morning, Bob arose with the light. He peed and farted and reached under his blue striped pajamas to scratch. Catching a glimpse in the mirror, he saw a prickly gray face with thin white hair sticking out the top in an abstract design. He guessed it must be him.

Bob stumbled into the kitchen, figuring Helen would find him there; figuring on the empty bowl at his place at the table, set next to three sizes of spoons and a serrated knife lined up neatly on the right; figuring on the four boxes of cereal standing at attention like soldiers guarding the rear flank, a quart carton of milk leading the brigade; figuring on the grapefruit stationed to the left, sliced and quartered.

Figuring on that which came to him the day before and the day before that, coming to him again. Instead, what came to him was an eight-by-ten photo where he usually found his morning feeding. It was a picture of the exact layout of his breakfast. On it was a yellow sticky that said:

*Here's how to make your breakfast. It's time
you learned to do it yourself.*

Beside the eight-by-ten sat Helen's note, which he didn't pick up. He only craned his neck a little as he stood and read:
Dear Bob,

*When I married you, I vowed, "Till death do us part." You
haven't kissed me for years so how was I to know? Well, you
kissed me tonight and now I know. You're dead. Guess I'll go.*

*Bye,
Helen*

"Well, that's that," Bob said aloud.

Bud heard him where he was sleeping and pulled himself up in sections. Fourteen years ago, Bud would have sprung to his feet, wet tongue flopping eagerly from his smiling face. But now the dog was ragged and old and he labored to stand, one quarter at a time.

"Well, Bud old boy," said Bob, "I guess it's just you and me now."

Bud panted, smiled, and wagged.

"Yeah Bud," he continued, "I must have worn her out."

More panting, smiling, and wagging.

"What d'ya say we take the day off, Bud?"

Fine with Bud. They took the day off. And then some.

Bob never went back to work. When the phone rang, Bob would say, "Let it ring, Bud. I hate the damn phone anyway."

When Bob saw the mail fall through the front door slot, he'd order Bud, "Leave it be. It's just people who want my money."

Bob didn't do much of anything but sit in his dark house with the curtains closed, talking to Bud. Sometimes he'd watch TV, but usually there wasn't anything on. There was one show Bob did like. It was the preacher who was on every day at four o'clock. Reverend Rufus wore a white suit and a hairpiece that looked like road kill without the tail. People would roll up to Reverend Rufus in wheelchairs or stagger up to him on crutches or cry because they were dying of cancer. Some people had smaller complaints like a kink in their neck or ringing in their ears. It was all the same to Reverend Rufus who would close his eyes and shiver and lay his hands on their heads. A handsome young man was there to catch them as they fell or rolled backwards, and the next thing you knew, they were walking out of their wheelchairs or throwing their crutches away or turning their necks in every imaginable direction. They were healed!

"Praise the Lord!" everyone would cry.

Bob would cry, "Praise the Lord!" along with them.

Then he'd clap his hands, snap his fingers, and shake a fist above his head and shout, "*Helluva deal!*"

Reverend Rufus had an 800 number you could call to send money. Sometimes Bob would send him some.

Bob became a typical bachelor. He never thought to wash his clothes. When he ran out, he dug through the dirty pile and started over again. He ate ok for awhile, but the cupboards got pretty empty. The cookies were the first to go. Then the Cheeze Puffs. There were a few Hot & Hardy Soups that got him by for a few days. The vegetable bin never got opened, so pretty soon, the bin began to take on a life of its own. Bud ate what Bob ate.

Bob never left the house. You can imagine the smell. Bob didn't notice, but Bud sensed something weird. Bob did remember to let Bud out back to do his business—except when he forgot—at which time, Bud would whimper and do his business in the corner of the living room. Bob didn't wash,

brush, or flush. His skin turned pasty and he had raccoon rings around his eyes. You could say Bob let himself go.

One day, Bob was talking to Bud as he always did:

“Just you and me, Bud.” And:

“Ha, ha, Bud. Doesn’t it just go to show?” And:

“What a life, eh Bud? Never a dull moment.”

But on this day, Bud talked back. “Bob, how long are we going to go on like this?”

“What’s that you say, Buddy boy?”

“I said, we can’t do this forever Bob. Something’s gotta give. For one thing, I’m hungry. Aren’t you hungry?”

“Well, I guess I hadn’t given it much thought.”

“Man can’t live on love alone. Also, a little fresh air would do us both a world of good.”

“Fresh air . . . Hmm . . . Right again! It *is* getting a little stuffy in here. See, Bud? That’s what I keep you around for—you save me from myself!”

“I’m happy to. That’s my job, Bob.”

“And it’s *my* job to see that you’re fed and exercised and groomed! I have an idea,” Bob said, his voice cracking with emotion. “Let’s make a pilgrimage to the In ‘n’ Out grocery and get some chow!”

“Chow?”

“You know—grub . . . vittles . . . food!”

“I like that idea, Bob. Will you get me some milk bones?”

“I think that can be arranged,” said Bob. “Well then Bud, what are we waiting for?” He clapped his hands, snapped his fingers, and shook a fist above his head.

“Helluva deal!” he declared.

* * * * *

Off they went on their In ‘n’ Out pilgrimage. For the first time in ages, there was a spring in Bob’s step. As he and Bud walked briskly, their talk was lively and animated.

“Bud, I’ve got to hand it to you,” Bob exclaimed.
“Sometimes you’re inspired!”

“Well, Bob,” said Bud, “it takes a wise man to know when he hears the truth.”

Passers-by gave them a fairly wide berth.

Bob and Bud merrily made their way past ragged houses, over ragged railroad tracks, and onto a boulevard of ragged

shops. Gun shop, liquor shop, porn shop. Beauty shop, shoe shop, tattoo shop. Everything you could possibly want.

Fast food. Espresso. They passed a church. They passed a bar . . .

“Bob?” asked Bud. “About those milk bones . . .”

A loud crash disrupted their conversation. Bob turned to see a large, young black man pitching backwards out the bar door and collapsing on the ground, holding his head which trickled blood. A wiry white man followed fast, raging toward him with evil intent. He aimed a kick at the downed man’s ribs, but the black man caught his leg, blunting the force of the blow. The white man tripped and down he went. The two rolled around in a scuffling heap, disengaged, then scrambled to their feet, banged up and panting, facing off for the next round.

That’s when Bob said, “There’s a fight! *I* have to stop it!”

Bob waded in, a man on a mission. He strode between the foes, parting them like the seas. There they were—two strong young men facing off, the poisonous juices of hate and destruction pulsing through their bodies. And there stood Bob between them—white-haired, a head shorter, paunchy, pasty, and past his prime. Bob talked earnestly, reasonably, and fast, waving his arms while he swiveled from one man to the other.

“Oh my! What in heaven’s name have we here? I know at this moment both you guys want to kill each other and hate fills your hearts but please please stop and think what you’re doing. When you woke up this morning did you think you were going to get yourself in such a fix today that you would have to kill or be killed? Think back to when your mother brought you into this world! Think back! I know she wasn’t the mother you wanted her to be, but when she begat you she loved you more than anything and wanted you to be happy, warm, safe, loved and protected from all the hard knocks of life.

“Think back! Think back to your mother’s love! You have the same choice now that you have every moment of your life—you can hate or you can love. If you choose to hate this man before you, you will hurt him and you’ll feel better for oh maybe ten minutes and then the pain you caused will seep into your soul and eat you from the inside out. But if you love him, if you forgive him, you will love and forgive yourself and you will be healed! Look at this man! Look! Look! He’s your brother! All your brother wants is what you want: To be loved and healed! Love thy brother! Heal him! Heal thyself!”

The two men fidgeted. They looked down and around and everywhere except at each other. They sneaked peaks at Bob out of the corners of their moist, sheepish eyes.

"Come, come . . . There, there . . . Isn't this better? No one hurts. We're all in this together. We're all the same flesh. Prick us and we all bleed. You are him. He is you. Come now. Heal yourselves. Brother . . ." Bob addressed the black man on his left. "What is your name?"

"Smith . . . Larry Smith," the man muttered toward the ground.

"And you, sir," said Bob to the wiry white man on his right. "How may I address you?"

"Um . . . I'm Eldon. Last name's Smith."

"You see?" exclaimed Bob. "Eldon and Larry Smith! You *are* brothers! Now please . . . please . . . no more fighting among brothers. Shake hands and walk away. That's the spirit . . . Come closer . . . Shake on it . . ."

Eldon and Larry Smith reached out tentatively. They grasped hands gingerly, then more firmly. Bob extended both his hands to clasp the backs of their heads, and as he did so, they fell into an embrace. Their bodies wracked with sobs as they wailed tears of a millennia.

Bob stood outside the hug, hands resting on the men's heads, absorbing the two men's pain as his eyes gazed heavenward. Once cleansed, the two brothers stepped back, but their hands lingered to grip.

Bob released Eldon and Larry, and when he did, they let go too. Looking sheepish again, they mumbled a few words, then walked away, arms around each other . . .

Bob returned to Bud who had been watching the event from a distance. "I'll be happy to buy you those milk bones, Bud," he said, as if he'd put a bookmark in the discussion and opened right to the page they had left off. "Which kind did you say you liked?"

* * * * *

Bob and Bud resumed their merry conversation and their lively step.

"Look, Bud. There's the In 'n' Out now."

"What a bargain!" Bud exclaimed. "Soup is only \$1.99!"

"That's *soap*, Bud. S-O-A-P. Can't you read?"

"I'm just a dog, Bob. I don't read very well, but it's a

miracle I read at all!"

Bob and Bud continued talking in this vein as they entered the store. Behind the counter, Lakshmi Jackson looked up from the science text she had been studying. She was perplexed because she could only hear Bob's half of the conversation. To her, it sounded like:

"So Bud, what kind of milk bones do you want . . . ? Well, that's a surprise to me, Bud. I always thought you liked . . . Bud! You're interrupting me again! Haven't I taught you . . . I know, I know, Bud. But you're just going to have to wait till we get home."

Lakshmi Jackson stepped out from behind the counter. She wore a Levi jacket over her traditional *sari*. The label on her tennis shoes said, "Free Nation." Her eyes were blurred behind the thick lenses of the black-rimmed glasses that covered most of her round, brown face. Although she was nineteen, Lakshmi still wore the small black *kajal* dot her mother put on her forehead every day of her life to mar her beauty. This protected Lakshmi from evil.

"May I help you, sir?" asked Lakshmi Jackson, eager to please.

"Thank you. That's very kind of you. Bud here would like milk bones."

"We have several kinds, sir. Which kind would you prefer?"

"I'll let Bud field that question," said Bob. "Bud?"

Lakshmi Jackson looked at Bob, then at Bud, and back to Bob. She wished this ragged man would take his ragged dog and go away so she could get back to her science book, but she was polite. "Sir, I don't quite understand"

Bob gave a little chuckle. "That's Bud. I keep telling him he has to speak more clearly, but it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. He says he prefers the flavored ones that come in several colors. Would you happen to have . . . ?"

Bob noticed that the store appeared to wave. It seemed to him like a fun house with the curly mirrors that make everything look strange and distorted. Just so you don't think he was going crazy, that's the way it looked to Bud and Lakshmi Jackson, too. The three of them felt like they were on a small boat in the high seas.

The wavy sea began to shake. Cans rattled and fell from the tipping shelves. Lakshmi Jackson's black-rimmed glasses bounced all the way to the end of her nose. She heard Bob shout:

"Get under cover, Bud! We're having an earthquake! I know, I know . . . Yes, yes, you already told me . . . ! But you'll have to wait till we get home . . . No, Bud, stop arguing with me!"

Then she couldn't hear him at all above the clatter and the crash. The earthquake meant business. In fact, Lakshmi Jackson had to get out of the way quick because things were flying every which way and—*look out!* A high, heavy shelf teetered right over her head, ready to fall and it would certainly crush her . . . But Bob leapt in front of Lakshmi Jackson, knocking her out of harm's way and catching the falling shelf in his outstretched hands, ducking to absorb the blows of jars and cans that rained upon his head. The earth rattled and rolled while Bob heroically held his position, a human wedge against a rogue shelf, knee deep in peanut butter, fruit cups, and canned stew.

When at last the ground stopped shaking and the earth's tectonic plates settled, Bob pushed the empty shelf upright and backed away. Bud and Lakshmi Jackson looked on as he casually picked through the rubble, gathering shopping items.

"Do you have a bag?" he asked Lakshmi Jackson. "I don't have enough arms to hold all this stuff," he chuckled.

Lakshmi Jackson didn't know how to act. The floor had just given way under her, a strange man who conversed with his dog had appeared from nowhere to save her life, and now he was rummaging through the fallout and asking her for a shopping bag? She scurried behind the counter, dug out a bag, and hurried toward Bob. Holding it at arms length, she presented it to him.

"That'll do just fine," said Bob. "Are these the kind of milk bones you wanted, Bud?"

Lakshmi Jackson watched as Bob filled his bag to the brim, talking to Bud all the while. When he could hold no more, Bob stumbled toward the counter and set his treasure down. "Well," he announced grandly. "Let's square up."

Lakshmi Jackson was flustered. "Oh no, sir. You saved my life. Besides, you can see we've lost power—the computer won't work. The cash register's crushed. Please take it."

"I would no sooner take groceries without paying for them than would I slay my first-born son!" Bob declared emphatically. "I insist. This should cover it," he said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled wad. He stuffed it into her palm and closed her hand over it.

"Bud, the hour is late. No time to waste. Young lady, it's been a pleasure doing business with you. Bob's my name. And yours?"

"Lakshmi Jackson, sir."

"Goodbye, Lakshmi Jackson. Till we meet again"

Bob and Bud exited the In 'n' Out while Lakshmi watched, dazed and perplexed through her thick, cracked glasses, the wad of bills still clutched in her outstretched hand.

* * * * *

Bob and Bud headed home, wading through a maze of mashed cars, cracked pavement, and downed power lines. People emerged like squirrels on the first day of spring, peaking out with looks of shock and wonder. Gingerly, they tested the ground, checking their limbs to make sure their arms and legs, fingers and toes were still there. Others, not so lucky, lay littered every which way, crying and struggling to escape the rubble that buried them. Bob moved quickly, a man on a mission, setting his shopping bag down to lift this beam and roll that slab with superhuman strength, releasing one grateful victim after another.

"It's ok, ma'am," he reassured an elderly lady. "I think I can pull you out if you'll please give me both hands."

She reached out and Bob gave a mighty pull, dragging her squirming and straining like a child being born out of a concrete womb. Bob was pulling with every measure of strength and tenderness in his being, when he heard off to his left:

"Help! Hurry! Blast your teeth, man! Hurry up and help me!"

The first time Bob laid eyes on Ivan Bunt, he was upside down. Propped against his toppled wheel chair, his wild red hair spread on the ground in all directions, a bushy red beard springing up from his chin covering half his green flannel shirt. Desperate blue eyes stared trapped and angry behind brows as red and bushy as his hair. Two knee stumps pointed like pillars toward the sky.

"Fry you for breakfast, man! Help me up!"

"Just one moment, sir. I'm helping this dear lady. As soon as I've got her out of"

"Measles!" exclaimed Ivan Bunt. "I'm standin' on my fiddlin' head in my wheel chair and all my blood has left my torso! Break your nose! Help me up I say!"

Bob focused on the task at hand, while Ivan Bunt's litany of curses played loudly on.

"Mold your mayonnaise! A pox on your pajamas! May your tongue grow hair!"

"Patience, my brother. I'm on my way." Gallant Bob helped the lady dust off and made her promise she was fine. Reaching into his grocery bag, he produced a can of pears.

"For you, ma'am." He presented her the gift. "And now, the squeaky wheel"

Dazed, perplexed, and clutching a can of pears, the rescued woman watched her savior as he carried his grocery bag toward the upside-down and sputtering Ivan Bunt. "Good day to you, brother. I suppose you'd like me to help you get upright."

"It's about tinkerin' time!" barked Bunt. "Stop standing there scratchin' yer fleas and set me straight!"

"I'll fix you up right away," said Bob, and with that he lifted Ivan Bunt, wheelchair and all, turned him over and placed him right side up.

"There now," Bob said with a satisfied smile. He wiped his hands. "Good as new."

"Good as noodlin' new," Ivan Bunt mimicked. He was breathing loudly and sweating profusely. "If'n I was good as noodlin' new, I could waddlin' walk, now couldn't I? If'n I was good as noodlin' new, I wouldn't have to ride around in this wart-ridden wheelchair. Needles!" he muttered.

Bob felt Ivan's pain. A magenta warmth enveloped Bob's body and he tingled from head to foot. Energy poured through him, hot and strong. He was overcome with love of life. He was overwhelmed by the heartbreak of the world. His entire body vibrated with surging magenta force. He laughed a mournful laugh. He cried a joyous cry. He stood pigeon-toed before Ivan Bunt, gazing blissfully toward the heavens, rocking side to side, hugging himself like Ray Charles.

"Uh . . . What's goin' on, pilgrim?" asked Ivan Bunt. "You'd better get a grip on the reins, hoss. Yer startin' to scare the drool outta my doodle."

But Bob hardly heard him. "I'll save you, brother! I'll save you!" he cried joyously. "You will walk again, brother! You will walk!" he chanted. "Feel the current that burns like a torch through my fingers! Stand up and walk!" Bob cried.

"What the wallowin' . . . ?" Ivan's shaggy blue eyes were open wide. If he *could have* walked, he *would* have walked as far from Bob as he *could have*.

Bob slowly and steadily approached Ivan Bunt, eyes rolled up, arms outstretched. "Walk, my brother!" Bob laid both hands on Ivan's head. "Stand up and walk!" he commanded. Bob was in a zone.

"Ow! Howdy doodlin' Doody! Get your hammerin' hands off'n me! Ow! That's hot! Duelin' dingbats! That hurts!"

But Bob would not yield. He stood tall, smiling, as electricity seethed through him, fusing his hands with poor Ivan Bunt's head, the two men fixed for an eternal moment in a vibrating magenta rapture.

It was over.

Bob jerked back and released as if repelled. Wild-haired, wild-eyed Ivan stared at him, no words escaped his wide-open mouth. Red prints blazed on his forehead where Bob's fingers had burned.

"It's over, my brother," Bob smiled. "You may stand up and walk now."

Ivan snapped to. "Walk?! Are you blind, man? Blast your bunions! Look at me, you loon! Have you lost your lugnuts? I ain't got no livin' legs! Flies, man! What kind of crazy crock are you, anyway—ya come over here an' burn the bats out of a guy's noggin and then ya tell 'im to walk when he ain't got no limpin' legs? Mangle your maggots!"

Bob looked puzzled. "You mean you can't walk?"

"Binge 'n' purge, man! Of course I can't walk! Didn't you hear me? How can a poor wayfarin' ranger walk when he AIN'T GOT NO LUMBERIN' LEGS!?"

Bob unbuckled Ivan Bunt. With love and patience, he lifted him out of his chair and set him on the ground.

He couldn't walk.

"Thanks for nothin', Ahab," said Bunt. "Now put me back in my chuggin' chair!"

Bob put him back. "Some day you will walk, my friend. As for now . . ."

He reached into his shopping bag, withdrew Bud's box of milk bones, and handed the remainder of his treasure to Ivan Bunt. "Take this, brother. It will give you sustenance."

Bunt rummaged through the bag, muttering as he dug. "Rr-rr . . . chili. Rr-rr . . . artichoke hearts. Hmm, I like chili . . . I like

artichoke hearts . . . Rr-rr . . . Oh, looky here . . . Got some of them wieners in a jar . . . Sleepin' slumlords! I do like them wieners in a jar!"

Bob looked on, pleased that he had brought such happiness to his new friend. "May I ask, sir, since our paths have crossed, by what name should I address you?"

The bushy red face was buried deep in the bag as he continued his exploration. "Bunt," he said into the bag. Then he emerged and looked Bob square in the eye. "Ivan Bunt. That's mighty kind of you to give me all them vittles. Mighty cuddlin' kind."

Bob could see Ivan's eyes were glazed and moist. He took Bunt's hands in his. "I'm proud to meet you, Ivan Bunt. I am Bob. Whenever you need a friend, you will find me."

"Mighty kind. Mighty kickin'" kind," Ivan nodded, his eyes overflowing. Then: "Rattle yer rats, man! Blacken yer blood! Now you've gone and plundered my peepers!" Ivan Bunt sniffled as he turned and wheeled himself over the rubble, towards home.

"Well, Bud," Bob announced. "I think it's high time we went home ourselves."

"I'm glad you didn't give him my milk bones, Bob," said Bud.

* * * * *

Bob and Bud arrived home shortly before dark. Lamps and dishes were toppled from the earthquake, but to tell the truth, after a couple weeks of Bob's bachelorhood, things hadn't changed all that much.

"Home sweet home," said Bob. He sank satisfied into his stuffed chair.

"Uh, Bob?" said Bud.

"Yeah Bud, what is it?"

"Would you mind if I had some of those milk bones now?"

"Why, of course, Bud. Silly me."

Bud took his milk bones and was happy. "These are the kind I like," he said.

"Nothing but the best for you, Bud." Then: "Well, I guess you could say it's been quite a day."

"Yeah, Bob. Quite a day," said Bud as he chewed.

Then Bob clapped his hands, snapped his fingers, shook a fist above his head and exclaimed, "*Helluva deal!*"

"Helluva deal, Bob."