

Chapter Ten

Winn

The laughter coming from the kitchen smote eardrums as it rolled into the living room in waves, drawing the attention of everyone in the small apartment.

“Wow, *someone* is having fun,” Teresa remarked as we peeled off our jackets. “Yah. I’ll grab us something to drink,” I said as Teresa sat down, striking up a conversation with Tony’s wife.

I headed toward the kitchen following the voice, buffeted by another wave of laughter ballooning from the kitchen. Leaning against the counter was a guy gesturing wildly as he spoke, entertaining the small group of people huddled around him. Handsome and well dressed, his white teeth flashed, punctuating the stream of words emitting from his wide mouth in rapid bursts like a woodpecker drumming on a chimney pipe. I stood beyond the circle for a few minutes, captivated by his energy until he pushed his hand through the entourage like a politician looking for a vote. “I’m Winn.”

© 2015, The Underage Traveler
Richard Pierce Thomas
rickpthomas@comcast.net

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher.

“Rick,” I responded. Winn returned to his storytelling while I grabbed a Heineken from the stash chilling on ice in the sink and quickly became absorbed in the story.

Teresa appeared at my side awhile later, giving me an annoyed look.

“I thought you were bringing me a beer?” She said, grabbing the bottle out of my hand and taking a long draw. We listened for a few minutes longer until Winn finished the story with a punch line rewarded with laughter and the group dispersed as he approached the two of us.

“How do you know Tony?” he asked. I shared the backstory and he did likewise. Tony’s neighbor, Fez, was a childhood friend with Sarah, Winn’s girlfriend. Fez and Winn met while attending Seattle University.

“Good Catholic boy then, huh?” I said.

“Oh yeah,” he said with a wry grin. “That’s how I learned metric conversions; they were imprinted on my palms from the O’Dea High School brothers trying to enforce their discipline. It didn’t work,” he said, closing his eyes as he laughed. He entertained us for a while longer until another guy joined the conversation, introducing himself as Fez.

“Oh, we’ve got the lowdown on you,” I said, and we laughed along together while Tony joined in. Soon we all were joking around, reciting lines from Monty Python movies, Bennie Hill episodes and The Beastie Boys songs. The simpatico energy among us apparent, the Four Amigos were born and we began hanging out as often as we could without suffering permanent consequences from the wives and girlfriends. When the Amigos were at our place, a small 1920’s bungalow in the heart of Ballard, Teresa indulged our stupid humor while we egged each other on. Fez was the most talented though, a damn near walking pop culture encyclopedia and able to sing any cartoon

jingle: George of the Jungle, Wally Gator, The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show, you name it. We'd sit around drinking Heineken's and doing our best to trip him up. It never worked. Fez didn't miss a tune.

When fall arrived, we spent Sunday afternoons planted in front of the television watching Seahawk football games. After the game, we'd head over to the Seattle Pacific intramural fields for pickup games of flag football that always devolved into tackling drills. Sunday evenings resembled an emergency room as we nursed our injuries with ice packs, Dick's Burgers and leftover warm beer. Fall gave way to winter and the games continued indoors as we moved from one household to the next for get-togethers. Teresa and I were engaged, Tony's wife became pregnant with their first child, and Fez divorced his wife. These were the salad days -- when we hadn't yet realized the burden lurking amongst us that came with personalities with baggage.

The following fall of 1988, Teresa and I were married. The Four Amigos were in the wedding of course. The reception was the highpoint. Everyone looked happy -- all smiles and eyes bright with promise. Especially Winn who entertained the crowd with unending toasts and emceed the garter toss. He then led the conga line around the sweaty banquet room and the party rolled on until the banquet manager kicked us out at midnight.

We had an early morning flight to Mexico for our honeymoon so Winn chauffeured us to the hotel near the airport. Winn and Sarah came up to our room to finish the last bottle of champagne and the four of us sprawled on the king sized bed, recounting the evening. As the women chattered on, Winn and I watched TV while sharing the last of the champagne.

“How long you gonna be in Mexico?” Winn asked. He gripped the bottle around the neck as if to hold it down for slaughter, drinking from it instead. A dribble escaped from his mouth wetting his unbuttoned collar. He stared at the cable channels flying by while I marveled at the polk-a-dot socks I had found to match the cummerbunds and bow ties I had sewn for the groomsmen.

“Ten days,” I said.

He had asked the same question several times before the wedding and I gave him the same answer I had given him the last three times. It struck me then that it wasn't my answer he was looking for. There was something else he wanted to say but couldn't. I stared at his profile for several moments as the girls erupted in laughter.

“What's going on?” I said.

He stayed silent, staring into the TV. “Nothin’”

“Sure?” I said. I had left the door open for him. He just needed to walk through it.

He looked at me and then dropped his gaze, but for a moment his eyes betrayed him. I saw Winn as I'd never seen him before -- as if a boy on a rock in a churning ocean, desperate to make sense of life. Like looking at my own reflection that I didn't recognize, I had an instant understanding and I knew more about Winn in that moment yet he became even more unknowable.

“Nah,” he said with a half laugh, draining the last of the backwashed champagne and then belching loudly.

Sarah shot him a glare and then glanced at her watch. “We've got to go and you guys have a plane to catch in a few hours,” she said. She slid onto the carpet and scooped her heels off the floor.

“I’ll see you when we’re home,” I assured Winn as we exchanged hugs.

“Yeah, I’ll be around,” he said, flashing a recognizable smile, Winn firmly in control.

We returned ten days later, spent from the travel and with memories firmly planted of the Mexican harbor side hotel in Zihuatanejo where we slept in everyday, ate breakfasts on the beach and spent our afternoons napping and making love. The cocoon of the honeymoon began to fade as soon the airplane wheels chirped on the tarmac at Sea-Tac airport. We re-immersed ourselves into the work routines, Teresa at the tile shop in Fremont and I at the plastic manufacturing plant near the Bardahl Oil sign in Ballard. Winn appeared on our doorstep within a day of our arrival and his energetic update of events during our absence helped buoy the transition. We laughed and swapped stories and talked of future trips we could take together with all the amigos.

A few weeks after our return Winn was visiting on a Saturday afternoon helping me apply tinting film to the glass on my truck. I had mentioned wanting to have it done professionally however he convinced me to do it ourselves as he’d done it before. It wasn’t going well. The freshly applied film kept moving every time he touched it, creating wrinkles and bubbles. Winn shouted and swore as he attempted to keep the film in place while he trimmed the edges with a straight blade. I winced as he sliced deeply into the rubber seal along the edges of the window.

“Winn, I don’t think it’s working,” I said.

“Give me a minute, this is not that hard. I sprayed too much water on the window is all.” He peeled off the film and jockeyed it back on the glass. Not being able to watch

him any longer, I went into the house to grab a beer, wondering how much it was going to cost me to fix the damage once the windows started leaking.

I returned with a couple of beers and a bowl of chips and sat on the steps of the front porch, watching Winn mutter to himself as he continued to reapply the film. He eventually sat down next to me in visible disgust, shoving a handful of chips into his mouth and washing them down with a large gulp of beer.

“I think we’re done,” he said, expunging a cloud of corn chip fragments.

“Great,” I said. I tipped the beer bottle, swallowing the backwash as I tried to think of something else than the shredded window seals.

“I haven’t heard you say much about your family,” I said, changing the subject.

There was an awkward silence. Winn stiffened.

“What do you want to know?” he said.

“Siblings?” I said.

“Yeah, two sisters. One’s married.”

“Brothers?”

Winn drained the beer bottle and threw it onto the front lawn. “Nope. Not anymore.”

“What happened?” I said.

“Drowned. I was a kid,” he said and then he forced a nervous laugh, but he wasn’t smiling.

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” he said. Winn walked over to the truck to inspect the windows. “This should work,” he said, picking at the corner of the film. I watched in silence as he gathered his tools and headed for his car. “I gotta go. See you this weekend?” he said over his shoulder.

“Sure, come on by,” I said as he slammed the car door, becoming invisible behind tinted windows impenetrable to thermonuclear explosions and anyone wanting to see who was driving the car. The silver Mercedes raced down the block red taillights pulsing briefly as the car ran the stop sign at the corner, disappearing behind traffic.

I didn’t ask Winn about his brother again and he didn’t offer anymore. We didn’t see Winn for a couple of weeks and then he showed up one Saturday, effervescent and full of stories and for a while it was back to old times but it wasn’t the same. We still did the same things we did before; played touch tackle football, watched Seahawk games and talked about cars we wanted to own yet it wasn’t the same. Everything that used to be funny suddenly felt tired and used. And it wasn’t the only thing that changed.

Winn’s business exploits had always been a bit of a mystery. He always seemed to have one scheme after another going, the most recent being a partnership to import designer clothes that were sold at private events. It appeared legit when they rented offices had phones installed and then overnight the business shut down and Winn wouldn’t say much. About the same time Winn had moved into an apartment with Fez and the friendship they had formed in college began to fray. Fez was getting into it with Winn over the late night visits from people that wore sunglasses at night and didn’t smile. Fez’s new girlfriend was also butting heads with Winn and the tension between them put

a damper on the group like a fart no one wants to own up to. Then we heard that Sarah had broken up with Winn and the unity amongst us hung like a severed appendage.

There were other things that happened, like the 1950 T-bird Winn had gone in together with Tony and Fez. I had bowed out when offered to buy in because I didn't have the money. Winn totaled a car going too fast around a corner and was hurt in the accident, though silent accusations from the others questioned how real the injury was. He had a wild story about being run off the road but from that point on, when Winn's name came up the others grew silent. He stopped dropping by on the weekends and his absence felt like missing the top step on a stairway that isn't there and you realize it never was.

Weeks turned to months without word from Winn and eventually we stopped asking about him. It wasn't until a message on our answering machine the following spring brought him back to memory. It was definitely Winn but he sounded different. His voice was tight and thin, displaying an urgent tone. Teresa and I played the message several times, our minds racing as we wondered what could be happening.

"Call me," he pleaded.

I reached his answering machine in a return call and told him to drop by at lunchtime the next day. I left early from work and waited for him nervously in the living room, staring at my uneaten lunch. The minutes crawled like indignant ketchup until it was noon and I found myself hoping he wasn't going to show when I heard the thumping of his stereo as he pulled up to the house. The music shut off mid-beat followed by the car door slamming. I stood at the door ready to greet him and watched him sprint from the car. He reached the porch and nervously looked both ways down the street.

“Hey,” I said, opening the door to let him in.

“Hey,” he said. We embraced stiffly and he took a seat on the couch looking uncomfortable, spying Sydney curled up on her pillow by the heat register. She let out a low growl and he laughed nervously while I let her out the back door. I grabbed him a Coke from the fridge and sat down across from him.

“What’s going on, Winn?” I said. “Your message has Teresa and I wondering what’s up?”

“You are not going to believe this,” he said with staccato laughter as he gulped his Coke. “I’ve been working on a car deal with some business associates. It was supposed to have finalized, but it’s been delayed.” He glanced up from the coffee table and then looked down before I caught his gaze. He stared into the Coke can, plucking a flat note on the finger tab with his thumb.

“Okaaay,” I said after a few seconds of silence, not sure if I was supposed to respond.

“I borrowed some money to get into the deal,” he said.

“And?”

“And...the people I borrowed from want their money back,” he said.

I studied Winn’s face closely as a cloud crossed his features like a passing squall.

“I need a thousand dollars by tomorrow morning or they are threatening to do bad things.”

“A thousand bucks?” I repeated.

“Yeah.”

“By tomorrow morning?” I said.

“Yeah.”

A thousand bucks! I thought. What the hell? Was this a joke or was he conjuring this story to work me for a loan? I didn't know what to think and the reasoned part of me should have asked a whole lot more questions; should have challenged him on the scant details he was offering.

“I'll see what I can do,” is what I heard my voice say. *Shit, how was I going to explain this to Teresa?* We tried changing the subject to small talk but it was too awkward to sustain. He left soon after he'd arrived, glancing around nervously as he walked to his car.

I tangled with how to explain this to Teresa that night when she asked me point blank about his visit. I wasn't prepared to give her the well thought out version. Probably because it didn't exist.

“Did Winn come by today?” she said.

“Uh, yeah. He did.” I said.

“What did he want?” she said as she kicked off her shoes and leaned back into the couch, sitting on her ankles.

I shared the conversation with her from earlier in the day and she listened impassively as she picked at the imaginary loose piece of skin on her lower lip.

“You're not seriously considering loaning the money are you?” she said, her eyes now smoldering.

“I know, I know,” I said, staring at the threadbare sculpted green rug. I felt trapped, pulled by my need to save the day while my pragmatic side screaming that this is not my problem to solve. After twelve hours of internal turmoil and debate, I found

myself at the bank taking a cash advance from our credit card. I slunk back into the house, avoiding the glare from Teresa. I left a message for Winn to drop by the house the next day as Teresa would be working and would make the exchange easier. I woke early the next morning and after Teresa left, began practicing what I was going to say while cleaning the espresso maker. Everything I said sounded sanctimonious.

“Yo, anyone home?” Winn shouted into the house, when at last he came by. He stuck his head halfway through the threshold.

“Hey Winn, come on back,” I shouted. He entered the kitchen where the espresso maker was in pieces on the dinette table. “Wow, looks like a project,” he said, surveying the autopsy.

“Yeah, not sure I’ll get it back together.”

He watched in silence as I held an odd shaped fitting in my hand, puzzling over what it attached to. I attempted to connect it to several different pieces, and finally gave up. I pulled an envelope out of my shirt pocket and handed it to Winn. “Hope this helps.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, folding the envelope and tucking it into his back pocket. “Hey, we should get together for drinks sometime. You and Teresa can meet my new girlfriend.”

“Sure, that’d be great,” I said. I wondered if it would ever happen.

“Yeah, well uh, great. I’ll call you then, okay?” he said.

“That’d be great,” I said.

We hugged stiffly and then he let himself out of the house as I sat on the stool looking at the myriad of intricate pieces wishing I hadn’t tried to fix it. Some things couldn’t be fixed.

Regular contact with Winn fell away after that. I reached out to him a few times to check in only to get his recorded message. I stopped calling and his name didn't come up between Teresa and I, being more of a sore subject than anything else at this point. He'd all but vanished from my regular thoughts when he called me at work one day, catching me off guard.

"Hey, it's me!" he said, laughing heartily. He sounded like the Winn of old, the infectious energy coming through the handset in waves.

"Are you kidding me?" I said.

"I want to take you guys out to dinner," he said. "I have something for you."

"That would be great," I said, confirming the date. I smiled to myself as I hung up, thinking how Teresa would take the news.

"What makes you so certain he's going to give us the money?" she said as I filled her in on the unexpected call.

"Why else would he have reason to call out of the blue and say he's got something for us?" I reasoned.

"I don't know. I just sounds weird," she said with evident disdain.

The following week was hectic and I didn't think much about the dinner until the day of. As were getting dressed I was surprised how nervous I felt, twice knocking over a glass of water and stubbing my toe.

"Fuck!" I yelled.

We drove to the restaurant in silence and waited in the lobby, my idling knee the only giveaway to how nervous I felt.

“Relax,” Teresa said, placing her hand on my thigh. I turned my attention to the Mariners game playing in the bar when Winn arrived, parking his car in front of the valet station askew. He carried himself with his old swagger, tossing the keys to the attendant. There was a woman in the passenger seat we did not recognize. All peroxide and glamour, she held out her hand dramatically to the other attendant to be helped out of the seat. Teresa rolled her eyes as the valet parked the Mercedes in a conspicuous spot in front of the restaurant.

“Hey you two,” he called out as they entered the lobby and we exchanged hugs with him.

“This is my fiancée, Jackie,” he said as we lightly shook hands with blonde.

“Fiancée? Congratulations,” I said, looking for her reaction. She avoided my gaze, looking to the bar.

The maître de lead us to a small round table and were seated, Teresa across from Winn and I across from Jackie.

“Where did you meet Winn?” Teresa asked her, attempting to break the ice.

“At a dance club,” she said with flat, mascara caked-eyes. She looked briefly Teresa’s way, daring her to ask more. Teresa didn’t pursue it and switched to catching up with Winn. We sipped well drinks and watched the boat traffic go by until the alcohol began to loosen the small talk into reminiscing. Soon Winn and I were laughing and shouting about the bumps and bruises from Sundays playing football. Jackie even managed to crack a smile though her eyes remained hard and wary. We worked our way through dinner as Winn filled us in on his business ventures -- exotic cars and trading

companies while dropping names -- all sounding as improbable as Jackie's desire to be there with us. As we were waiting for desert, Winn changed the subject.

"I've got something for you guys," he said reaching into his suit jacket pocket and extracting a fist of cash. As if anteing up for a high stakes poker game, he counted out a thousand dollars and fanned the Ben Franklins on the table, catching the attention of the group next to us. Winn shoved the money toward me as if cashing in all his chips, his face showing something between pride and relief. I put the money in my pocket, thanking him and we finished dinner late in the evening.

"You *see*," I said with vindication as we headed home. "I told you he would pay us back."

"Hmm," Teresa mused. "I don't know. Something isn't right."

"But we got our money back!" I was hoping to hear the words, *you were right*.

"Yeah, I know. But still...and that girl he was with, Jackie? What was up with her?"

I had the same questions. I fantasized confronting him on his stories but as with all the other times, I couldn't do it.

I called Winn a week later to get out for a beer one on one but only got his answering machine. I left a message that went unreturned and soon he again faded from current thought. We moved to Los Angeles soon after the dinner, taking a job with GE. Two years later we had returned to the Northwest, settling in the Vancouver, WA area when we received another unexpected call from Winn.

"Winn called today," Teresa said as I fell back into the couch, tired from the long day of client visits.

“No kidding? What did he have to say?”

“He’s in town. He wants to come by this week and say hello.” We mused for a while longer trying to figure out what he wanted this time around.

Winn came over for dinner a few nights later and the moment he walked in the door we knew this was going to be more than just a typical catch up conversation. For starters, his eyes were electric blue, a striking contrast against his dark brown skin. Teresa and I held each other’s gaze, communicating volumes silently as he talked, excitedly filling us in on his adventures. Teresa’s expression said it all and did not need any words. *Don’t you dare lend him any money.*

We laughed along as he told his stories while not being able to take my eyes off of his like a cat chasing a laser pointer. He had the same manic energy I remembered, though somewhat forced and he seemed to sense that we noticed which made him only try harder. He also did not mention Jackie, nor did we ask.

“What happened to your eyes?” Teresa finally blurted.

“I was working under a car at a show a few months ago. The car slipped off the jack stand and I was pinned underneath injuring my eye. I had a cornea transplant and the only one available was blue. This one is a contact to match the other one,” he said pointing to his left eye. Winn tipped his beer bottle, masking the nervous twitch in the corner of his mouth as we stood speechless, mouths agape. Teresa and I looking at each other to see who was going to challenge him on the story, neither did and he continued on into the evening telling his wild stories. Teresa and I sat idly listening, each one more sounding more impossible than the next and I recalled Dad’s bi-polar fueled stories. The parallel made me question everything he had ever told us, wondering what, if anything,

had been real. As Teresa and I watched him pull away later that night I realized that as crazy as Winn had become, I still like his company and reconciled that the only thing I could say for certain was that I loved him still. No different than anyone else in my life that was difficult to love, I felt love for Winn and thought that perhaps for him, we one of the few friendships in his life that was real also. I went to bed wondering when we would hear from him next, but it was Sarah that called us not long after that with news of Winn. The FBI had indicted him for fraud involving his failing car brokerage. I knew at this point I surmised it would be a very long time, if ever, before we heard from Winn again.

By the time we our daughter was born in mid-1992, we heard from Sarah that Winn had been released from a minimum-security prison in Oregon and was serving out his parole in Salem. I fantasized I would run into him at some point as my business travel took me down into the Salem area on occasion, but I never did and we lost track of him for good at that point. I did not stop thinking about him though, and he would casually enter my thoughts now and then. As fucked up as he was, I missed him. Sarah called us six months later to inform us of his death.

“Yes, it’s true,” Sarah said, assuring me as I accused her of bullshitting me.

“How did he die?” I asked, still not believing the news.

“Colon cancer.”

We attended his memorial service and when the priest called for friends and family to come forward with remembrances, I tried but failed, making it halfway to the pulpit before I turned back gasping for air.

At home, Winn's face stares out at me smiling as I walk past the picture of him and the rest of my groomsmen hanging in the hallway, all of them lined up together smiling broadly as they hold me horizontally in their arms. We all look impossibly young and I can still hear his voice, booming across church narthex as the photographer snapped our photos.

I am haunted by his memory and the realization that I am not nearly prepared in this life to accept loss. Whether with Alice's death, or with Winn's, like a breath that I cannot draw in enough, I am left short and gasping. There are moments when I feel resolution, only to have them reveal themselves to be no more than simple denials and I am back to feeling unprepared for this journey. Like discovering I have been holding on to a stranger's hand in the airport, I let go and stand in the middle of the concourse. Parents race purposefully to their gates with kids in tow while I watch, unnoticed and alone. The underage traveler, uncertain where, or how, or which way to go next.