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PAUL MCGOWAN

TRUE

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LIONCREST
P U B L I S H I N G

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Paul McGowan
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“Paul McGowan is the real deal, 100% inspired, inspiring and a genuine mensch. This book will make you laugh and push you to do something remarkable. Go make a ruckus.”

Seth Godin
Author, *This Is Marketing*

For Terri

CHAPTER 1

“I have been through some terrible things in my life,
some of which actually happened.”

— *Mark Twain*

MY FAMILY MOVED to Anaheim because my father heard it was the promised land—a new beginning in an affordable and up-and-coming rural suburb of Los Angeles, carved out of acres of sweet orange, walnut, and avocado groves. Sure, car exhaust mingled with the citrus blooms and orchard dust, but it was the gold rush days of the early 1950s: jobs were plentiful, land and homes were new and cheap, and outsiders were welcomed with open arms. Even better, Disneyland had opened just three years before the McGowan clan arrived. Along with my sisters, Sharane and Bobbi, I spent many nights camped out on the front lawn, watching the nightly fireworks displays explode in bristling starbursts of gold, yellow, and red.

It was 1958, and the warm evening air of Southern California was intoxicating. Our development of tract homes—then a new trend—wasn't quite as impressive as the Magic Kingdom, but it was orderly and symmetrical. It was named Gibraltar: a nine-street square carved out of a small patch of the orange groves that surrounded us like green-capped sentinels. Where the orchards' borders ended, our neighborhood streets began. Those orchards and groves, along with the acres of strawberries, the multiple fruit stands, and the occasional egg and dairy farms, offered endless adventure for me and my fellow neighborhood ruffians.

With school out for the summer, I was on my own as soon as the front door closed behind me. My parents, Don and Sue, didn't give a second thought to leaving a ten-year-old boy on his own without plans, guidance, or instructions other than a stern “don't get in trouble.” In fact, once out that door I rarely returned home until dinnertime or dark, depending on what kind of trouble we were actually causing. And

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there was certainly plenty of that. I had the devil in me back then, and shudder to remember some of the stunts we pulled.

On Saturdays I would get up early and ride my bike south on State College to Chapman Avenue, then take a tough uphill climb through the city of Orange with its traffic circle, and finally reach Irvine Park, about 12 miles from my house, by noon. In those days bikes had no gears, heads had no helmets, and cyclists took their chances with traffic. My typical attire was a T-shirt, shorts, and PF Flyers: black canvas high-top sneakers with white rubber soles and white cotton laces, finished off with a round “PF” on the side. In Irvine Park I would meet with school buddies from Placentia and Yorba Linda, to see what kind of mischief we could manage to assuage the summer doldrums. On an average weekend we’d at least roll trashcans into the small lake—their tops would fly off, leaving a swath of half-eaten chicken, brown beer bottles, crumpled napkins, and empty bean cans with their jagged metal lids still attached. Other weekend projects to battle boredom entailed letting the air out of the park ranger’s truck tires, hiding behind boulders to scare the crap out of unsuspecting hikers near Rooster Rock, skidding our bikes along dirt trails sternly marked “no bikes,” or craftier misdemeanors like my first scrape with the law, one that should have landed me in jail.

It all started innocently enough on a lazy Saturday afternoon. My new best friend, David Wiley—a dark-haired, athletic, alpha-male transplant from Dallas—helped me prepare the bait: overalls stuffed with newspaper, a hoodie sweatshirt with a basketball for a head, and Dad’s old boots pinned to the pant cuffs. We hoisted the body out of the garage and dragged it to the edge of the orange grove nearest my house, its lifeless head bouncing along La Palma Ave as twilight approached. The street was empty, so we threw the dummy face-down onto the road and hid amongst the trees, preparing an arsenal of rotting oranges scooped off the fertile ground. Night sounds surrounded us as we tensed in the shadows. Suddenly, the highway turned to daylight. With a loud boomp boomp, a car mangled the torso and screeched to a halt. The body, now crumpled on the asphalt, was lit red by taillights. The car roared away.

“Shit!” said David. “Hit and run!”

“Hang on!” I said. “Here comes another.”

The body, twisted on the highway, was again brightly lit as a car swerved to miss it. Doors were flung open. Soon, gasps of horror turned to cries of panic under a hail of oranges, as we pelted the driver and passengers with our stores of orange ammunition.

“What the hell?” cried the driver, shielding his head as he knelt next to the body. “Dammit, this is a dummy!”

Without warning, the sound of a third vehicle paused our barrage of oranges. Tires screeched, doors opened, and bright lights again moved toward the lifeless lump on the road as we prepared our next round of missiles. Suddenly, the world flashed bright red and blue.

“It’s the cops!” cried David.

“Run!” I yelled, not daring to look back. Halfway into the orange grove the flashlights started gaining on me, so I hurtled Old Man Niedermeyer’s fence and hid in his cactus garden, braving the poking spines. The cops’ bright lights played over the orange trees as red and blue washed the grove. I held my breath and exhaled only after they left. David and I would live to see another Saturday.

School wasn’t far away. After barely graduating from sixth grade at McFadden Elementary in Placentia, a mostly Hispanic village three miles northeast of Gibraltar, I wound up in Placentia’s Kramer Middle School, where I struggled through seventh and eighth grades. I hated school, and I didn’t feel any better about it when my parents threatened to send me to Catholic school if I didn’t graduate. I didn’t take the threat all that seriously—we weren’t Catholic, and anyway we couldn’t afford private school. But the threat of those mysterious Catholics was ample motivation to scrape by with just Cs and Ds.

I was a goofy-looking kid. It was bad enough that my parents demanded a fresh crewcut every two weeks when my peers were experimenting with grooming; worse was a prominent set of buck teeth that I’d earned by sucking my thumb well into kindergarten. My upper lip couldn’t cover my jutting teeth when my mouth was closed, and they didn’t begin to straighten out until seventh grade, when orthodontists filled my mouth with painful silver wires and bands, loudly advertised by a metal hoop

attached to a flesh-colored elastic headband. Despite all that hardware, I tried to dress like the in crowd—but our family lacked the money to buy stylish clothes. It was the end of the postwar economy, and a decade and a half into the Cold War. The nation was on a growth curve that had yet to trickle down to the up-and-coming middle class. When those soft, checkered Pendleton shirts were all the rage, my mother did her best to make me some by hand, but her generosity backfired: the clothing snobs at my school rolled back the collar of my homemade shirt to expose the lack of an authentic label, then ridiculed me for being too poor to buy “real” clothes.

My main friends at school were the same ones I hung out with from our neighborhood, including David. There was Dennis, the kid that went along with everything: a lanky, stumbly, pigeon-toed redhead who lived a shout away, on the other side of our backyard fence. And Tony, always up for any sort of trouble: a short, fiery, black-haired spitfire driven by the devil (if you listened to my mom) or more likely by the ants in his pants. And of course there was the kid no gang could be without: Mike, teasingly called Mikey—a afraid of his own shadow, and hoping for status and acceptance through misadventures. He was made timid by his overbearing father and shy by his ever-perfect mother, who neatly dressed him in pressed new clothing before letting him leave the house. And if those weren't high enough hurdles in a neighborhood of barefoot louts in ragged shorts and T-shirts, Mikey had the misfortune of living next door to the neighborhood curmudgeon, Old Man Niedermeyer.

Late afternoon and most evenings would find David forced to practice piano while the other four of us played tag football on the asphalt circle at the end of our street, Belmont Place. It was our four against the rival gang from Sandalwood Court, or sometimes the toughs from Banyan Place. I wasn't as good at catching the football as Tony, so I wound up quarterbacking while Mikey and Dennis defended the line. At times we had a small audience: my two sisters on our home's tiny oval of Dichondra, the reclusive spinster across the street peeking through her curtains, Mikey's mom inspecting us through their upstairs window, and, without fail, Old Man Niedermeyer. His home was at the

eastern curve of the cul-de-sac and from his porch he could see all the way down Belmont Place to Whittier Drive. He was a retired Orange County sheriff and, before that, a Marine. We knew this because the rear window of his blue-and-white 1958 Oldsmobile had been taken over by a menacing skull, with rifles for crossed bones and USMC slogans emblazoned across the top—DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR paired with SEMPER FI.

Niedermeyer was probably a fit man at one time, but he'd long ago fallen into disrepair. His enormous pear-shaped midsection folded over his belt and hung down like a drape. He was large enough to have difficulty walking, forced to swing each leg out before planting his foot down with a thud. But he could move with surprising agility when the situation called for it. If one of our footballs landed on his cactus-ringed property, the unlucky retriever had to be quick or risk that mountain of a man's iron grip and punishment: a phone call to his parents or Niedermeyer's buddies at the sheriff's department. Worse was when the ball landed close to him. If he got it first that was the end of the game. I don't know how many balls he collected over the years, but he certainly had an easy dozen.

Niedermeyer was the target of a great deal of mischief and retribution from our little gang: toilet paper rolls decorating his prized trees, burning paper bags of dog shit on his porch, and always the easy favorite: the doorbell ring and a quick dash for safety. I had never bothered much with him, personally: he'd never caught me in his yard and I'd always managed to escape before the sheriff's arrival. But it wasn't like that for Mikey. He had been marched home by the old man more than a few times, where his father would beat him within an inch of his life. Mikey always talked of revenge but never did anything about it, until one late summer's evening Tony told him to "put up or shut up." I could see Mikey biting his lower lip, holding back tears at the challenge.

"You gonna start crying?" Tony tormented.

I felt sorry for him. Mikey stuttered when he got anxious and that made it all the worse. The other boys would copy his halting speech until Mikey fled for home. I didn't want that to happen again.

“Let’s egg the old man’s house tonight,” I proposed.

Egging someone’s house was standard practice, especially on Halloween. Each kid would pocket a few eggs from the fridge and together we’d launch a fusillade attack on windows and the front door. But this would be different. I could see Mikey’s spirits rise at the thought of laying waste to Old Man Niedermeyer’s house, so I wanted to make this the crime of the summer — perhaps the century — a feat that would become neighborhood legend. Instead of pilfering a few eggs from our parents I told the bunch we’d raid Wright’s Egg Ranch and fill a shopping bag full. It was a brilliant plan, one that was audacious enough to extract revenge for Mikey and fame for me.

Wright’s Egg Ranch was south of us on La Palma Avenue. It was a big place, with row upon row of caged chickens. Most people would visit Wright’s through the small retail store in the front, but enterprising young thugs like us could hop a fence and get what we wanted. It was dark and moonless at 9 pm and just a little cold, as it gets near the first of September. The crickets’ chorus had slowed due to the chill, but still their million-voice symphony accompanied the stealthy march of we four rogues. I was the first over the fence, so the others hid as I surveyed the scene.

“Come on over,” I whispered.

We stalked the darkened rows of cages as quietly as we could, but those chickens seemed easily awakened: their wings flapped and their beaks broadcast scolding squawks as we lifted egg after egg, filling our Alpha Beta shopping bag full. By the time we had gotten to the far end of the row — closest to the Wright’s home — our eyes had adjusted so we could see by the swath of bright stars clustered in the Milky Way.

Mikey tapped me on the shoulder. “Let’s go, we have enough.” I could tell he was scared. I didn’t see Tony, but Dennis nodded too. None of us had ever tried anything this daring.

“Shhhh,” I cautioned, and motioned with the crook of my finger for the troop to make our exit.

Suddenly the entire chicken yard burst into noise: cackling and feathers flying everywhere. I spun around to see that Tony had thrown one of

the eggs at a chicken and was preparing a full barrage. I grabbed his arm and pulled him close.

“Are you nuts?”

Tony broke away and started running back towards the fence, peppering chickens with their eggs, and soon the whole place sounded like an angry mob. The idiot.

“Who the hell’s out there?” bellowed a voice just behind us.

It was Mr. Wright. The sudden lights blinded us as we ran for our lives.

“Stop, you little thieves!”

I stumbled into Mikey, who had been running as fast as he could with the bag of eggs. He fell, and his face plowed straight into the yolks of a hundred eggs. I grabbed him by the shirt collar and we sprinted to the fence amidst the cackles and cries of hundreds of agitated chickens, just as Mr. Wright was about to play his trump card.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” he ordered.

Shoot? A gun? Jesus. I considered for the smallest instant following his orders and raising my hands in surrender, but that fence was now within sight. The hell we’d pay for getting caught stealing eggs was too much, and it was every man for himself. Tony and Dennis had already hurdled the fence, so Mikey and I vaulted ourselves as high as we could before tumbling over that barrier head first. I felt the hot searing pain in my legs and butt before I heard the retort of the shotgun. He had shot us, just as promised. Another BOOM! echoed just as we landed on the other side. I could hear Mr. Wright running towards us; soon we’d be back in shotgun range. My legs and butt felt on fire, but I could still run. Was I dying? Bleeding to death? It didn’t seem to matter right then, all I could think of was getting away. I felt the back of my jeans once safely away from the egg ranch: sticky and matted with blood. I imagined a gaping flesh wound with spurts of pumping blood like I’d seen in the movies. Tony took a look at my backside after I pulled my pants down.

“Rock salt,” he declared, then he and Dennis hightailed it back home.

We’d each told our parents we were spending the night at the others but now we’d need a new story. Dennis and Tony had gotten off without

a scratch but Mikey and I were in rough shape. His face and clothing were covered in yellow goo and the back of his fresh-pressed jeans was peppered with holes and caked in blood. I felt awful but didn't know what to do, and figured for his safety he should just go home and get help. I told him my plan: throw my clothes in the trash, use the garden hose to wash out the salt still burning in my legs and butt, and hope not to get caught. Mikey couldn't manage that and 'fessed up to his father. We didn't see him back in the football game until the next summer.

My friends and I struggled with growing up, as I suppose all kids do. We did our best to not get caught for our mischief, and worked hard at elevating our social status at school, but that wasn't all we struggled with. Puberty made me one horny kid—an unfortunate fact when you're an insecure middle-school dork trying to move unnoticed into high school. I watched with envy as the suave guys coolly chatted up every starry-eyed girl in my class. How they managed such poise and confidence was a mystery to me: as soon as I got within ten feet of a pretty girl, my heart pounded, my face flushed, my ears burned, and my throat constricted. I was mortified by the thought they'd uncover my deepest desire: to discover the wonders of sex with them.

I could think of nothing else, and was almost certain that every cool guy and cute girl in my class were having wild sex all the time. By my senior year, in fact, I was convinced that I was the only virgin in my entire high school. The shame I felt of not connecting with girls haunted me, feeding my deepest fears and greatest anxieties. But I had other fantasies that kept my self-esteem from total collapse. Some days I felt deep in my inner being that I was somehow destined for something special—perhaps to be a leader or an inventor, some sort of innovator who might someday change the world—but when the daydreams snapped back to the present, I found my imagination never matched my reality. I was still an uncool kid without a direction or a girlfriend. Choosing a direction seemed important, but it was a distant second to my far more urgent lack of a girlfriend.