

The Rewrite

A novel by Greg McGee

Prologue

I don't know what caused you to pick up this book and start reading. Maybe it's the dazzling cover art, or the clever title that has brought you here. I like to think a friend told you how great it is, without spoilers. My publisher tells me I have until the end of this page to convince you to buy my book and I've already squandered far too much of it. So, I better get started.

You have been told this is a novel. *It kind of* isn't. Most of the characters are real and went through the very emotions and actions written here. It's just that they did it in a parallel universe. Whether or not this qualifies as fiction is up to you.

You see, something happened along the way and life didn't turn out how it should have for me. I made the wrong choice at a critical moment, years ago, and only recently, on my 68th birthday, did I discover this.

Recently, as I was having a self-reflecting evening, lubricated with wine, it dawned on me that by my standards, I have made a complete wreck of my life. It's been interesting, fun here and there, and not devoid of love and drama. But, not successful. As I approach the end of my time on Earth, by my estimation, I have accomplished very little. I have no assets. No retirement plan. No wife. No children. What friends I do have, all very dear to me, are elsewhere and I rarely see them because I can't afford to travel.

I rarely get to do the things I love to do. And, I can no longer figure out how to get paid for the use of my considerable talents. So, I'm driving Uber 6 nights a week to supplement my so-called social security.

Time is not my friend, and each day brings death a little closer.

Which is why I decided to do a rewrite.

I am going to go back to that moment, long ago, where I took the wrong road, and I'm going to give the wheel a good *yank* to swerve it down the road that I should have taken.

Whether or not this imaginary success brings increased happiness or just another brand of misery remains to be seen. I am not a masochist, so the odds are I have happiness galore in store.

I'm writing this prologue before the book, so I don't know exactly what is going to happen yet, just like you. I'm inviting you along for the ride.

Close the book. Take it to the cashier and buy it. Go find your favorite coffee shop and let's get started.

Go on. I'm waiting in that parallel universe, which begins on the next page. The year is 1967. I am 17 years old, in Port Lavaca, Texas.

Chapter 1 Naivety

I was holding the letter from Baylor University in my hand. It was the offer of a scholarship. A full ride in the Music Department. Somehow, they had gotten wind of my singing talent.

It wasn't a secret. My high school choir won First Place at All State competitions every year, and I routinely won pretty much every solo competition I entered as well. I wasn't half bad as a piano player either. I would beat the piano half to death on The Surprise Symphony by Hayden, or the Bach etudes or the Minuets. What I really wanted to play was boogie woogie music, but it was hard to come by in Port Lavaca. I was something of a "star" in my little town of Port Lavaca. Even with a face that looked like raw meat, due to the second worst case of acne, I had the best voice in the whole damn school.

I can still hear my Mom's exclamation when she read the letter. "Maybe you could have your own church choir some day! You could lead the singing right there beside your Daddy!"

All I could think of was "No way!"

I hated church music. In fact, I hated church. Everything about it. This was a bit of a problem, being that my dad was a Baptist preacher. But it's the truth.

And now, my worst nightmare was staring me in the face.

In my naïve little brain, the only future I could see from this scholarship at the biggest Baptist university in the south was that I'd NEVER get away from these smarmy Christians. I'd be stuck leading the singing in a church choir forever.

So far, I'd been able to "fake it." Of course, I had to go to church 3 or 4 times a week, and 7 days straight when the summer REVIVALS came around. Yeesh.

I sang the songs. Slept through the sermons. Stood firm in the pew and resisted the emotional trickery of “the invitation” that, later in life was explained to me by Leonard Cohen:

Well it goes like this: The fourth, the fifth,
the minor fall and the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

When others around me would traipse up to the front and “rededicate” their lives over and over, which is the Baptist version of confession, I’d grip the pew till my knuckles turned white, resisting the sad and tragic looks from my dear Mother as she once again went home to roast a chicken for lunch, saddled for another week with the smithering certainty that her poor, misguided son was going to hell, and she couldn’t prevent it from happening.

My parent’s didn’t know how I felt about church, and I wanted to keep it that way until I was out of high school and on my own. I had no idea what my life was to be, but I knew that *my* plan wasn’t *their* plan.

I didn’t even have a good reason to hate church. Nothing bad had ever happened there. No scandalous behavior, no abuse or perversions. My Mom and Dad had always been excellent parents. They’d always been good to me, and kept me warm, loved and safe.

There was one minor misunderstanding, though, that I’d had all through my childhood. It came from the repetition of the phrase “The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost” that I heard every time anybody said a prayer. This was particularly effective after one of my Dad’s fire and brimstone sermons in which he would gleefully describe the horrors of hell that awaited anyone who did not turn away from sin and believe in Jesus. I’d piss my pants sometimes as his mellifluous voice would rattle the church timbers on a warm Sunday morning. Holding the huge, tattered black leather Bible high above his head, he’d rant about the wages of sin, about how

sinners would be roasted in everlasting fire, the flesh would be burned from their bones, their eyes would pop open and their brains would boil in their skulls and they would be trapped for ever and ever in a lake of fire, until the end of time.

From the age of 4 to 8, my reality was that I was living in the same house as God. I was his Son. And what terrified me was, *he knew everything*.

I had bad thoughts. I was a sinner. I couldn't get away with nothin'! And I was surely going to roast in hell. Satan erupted all over my face, in red, oily pimples, little volcanoes of pus and deeply buried blackheads that made me hard to look at, and I assumed, harder to love.

One day, in particular still causes me to tremble. At my new school, where I had just graduated from kindergarten to First Grade, there was this big, scary looking thing made of grey painted cinder blocks called the "Men's Bathroom." This is where I was supposed to go to pee, instead of the nice, safe little room I was used to at the back of the classroom. On my first visit to this disgusting place that reeked of shit and stale piss and overrun toilets, there on the wall scrawled in *human feces*, were the words "FUCK SAIL". I had no idea what these words meant, but I was pretty sure that *just seeing* them was a sin.

That night I couldn't go to sleep. I laid there twisting and turning in my bed as long as I could, imagining that I would soon be roasting in the fires of HELL with God laughing at me because I was such a bad boy and I'd looked at these horrible words. Aaaarrgh!

Finally, I crawled out of bed and, weeping intensely, went in to talk to Mom and Dad.

Well, that was a big disappointment. I think I saw them smirk, although I can't be certain. It was dark.

I didn't feel like they gave my massive spiritual crisis the attention it deserved and, obviously, over half a century later, I still resent it. All I wanted to know was what those words

meant. And all I got was “They don’t mean anything. You didn’t do anything wrong. Just forget about it and go to bed.”

They meant something!

And I’ll never know what.

You may be asking “*what the hell does this have to do with my story?*”

Oh, right. Why I hate church.

Well, the reason I hated church is that I never got satisfying answers to the really hard questions about life. In fact, when I asked the hard questions, what I usually got was a stern warning from Mom, (“Greg!”) or a knitted brow from Dad.

Dad’s forehead was almost as terrifying as his mellifluous voice. He had these impressive parallel furrows, about 4 of them, carved by genetics across his face. He could make them straight and deep, or knit them into a V, or with the lift of his eyebrows, create concentric semicircles. Valuable tools for a preacher.

What do I consider a hard question? Well, for example, take the idea of God having one Son, who came to Earth and was born and then horribly murdered, which was a big spiritual bargain struck to save all of mankind from our sins. I won’t go into details. It was very confusing to a kid, and, today, adequately covered elsewhere in Christian midrash.

It became even more confusing when, at school, I started to learn about The Universe. Space was all the rage back then, as the USA and the USSR rushed headlong into the heavens in the grandest and most expensive pissing match ever conceived by human kind.

Anything was possible! When my unfinished mind began to contemplate The Universe and the idea of infinity, going on and on in every direction past the point where we can even imagine how far it goes, well, it actually BLEW MY MIND.

Even as a child, once the existence of the Universe was pointed out to me, I didn't believe for a second that Earth was the only planet that had intelligent life. I mean, it didn't seem to me that people were all that smart anyway. How hard could it be to do it twice, or a thousand times, or a bazillion times on fantastic planets strewn across the Milky Way?

The main question that I just couldn't get any reasonable answer to, from any of the people I assumed had all the answers, concerned civilizations on other planets in the far-flung regions of the galaxy.

To wit: do each of these civilizations on other planets have their own Jesus? Why wouldn't they, if God is a loving God?

This question, unfortunately, brought up a whole raft of other questions. Why does the Bible say "his only begotten son?" God must have millions of sons! And why just sons? Why not daughters? And how does a spiritual being that has no need of a body even have a son in the first place? I hadn't even figured out the reproductive system of humans at this point, but it still smacked of absurdity.

And if there's a son, who's his wife? Sure, Mary is the human wife, but what about the wife that lives up there in heaven with God and cooks his breakfast? Does he only have one wife, or a wife for each planet? The Bible, as far as I understood it, seemed to indicate that it's a sin to have more than one wife.

As you can see, the complete Christian mythology began to break apart early in my life. I couldn't really talk to anybody about it at the time, because all I got were furrowed brows and stern warnings that I shouldn't be thinking about such things.

They were probably right. None of this makes one iota of difference in the Earthly realm, or for any spiritual being that deals with the Earthly realm. But it was, I don't know, sloppy

writing, I thought. It always bothered me – still does, in fact. Especially when you consider that it has had such a profound effect on everything in the history of human civilization on Earth.

When Mom reads this novel, I'm sure she'll be surprised at all of these questions.

Hopefully she'll have a good laugh.

Chapter 2 Rebellion is Good

Ok, so I had this scholarship in hand, which meant a free college education. And I turned it down. This was a big mistake, the one thing that I regret most in my life, and in a moment, we'll get switched over to that other path. The path not taken.

We all have things that we wish we could go back and change. Which is exactly what I'm going to do right now. I'm going to go back and change my decision. Because, in a novel, the writer is God. In THIS novel, I have that power.

To put the kibosh on this Baylor University scholarship I told my parents that what I really wanted to do was become a marine biologist, because I loved the ocean so much. This was hogwash, although I did like hanging out at the beach. But it made sense to them because it sounded like a serious, worthwhile career.

Best of all, it got me off the hook of becoming a church choir director. I loathed the very thought of this. At the time, this role was played by whoever was willing to take on the task for \$50 a month or so. This was the 60's, long before the advent of "Christian Music." I didn't like church music because it was maudlin and emotionally manipulative. But, mainly, singing it made my throat hurt, because all the songs were in too high a key for my bass/baritone voice. (I later learned that this could be easily solved by transposing the songs to another key.)

I hope you're getting an idea of just how naïve and provincial I was. I lived in a small town, deep in the Bible belt of south Texas. The country was still in a state of shock, rage and mourning at the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. There was a lot of shame involved, because it had happened right here in Texas!

Then, like a breath of fresh air, The Beatles arrived, bringing their jaunty British accents, their witty antics, and a new kind of music to the world would change everything.

I remember, at age 14, feeling resentment at all the excitement of “Beatlemania.” The girls went wild! At first, I thought they represented a threat to my hero, Elvis Presley. But, it didn’t take long for them to win me over. I still remember that February evening in 1964 when The Beatles played live on The Ed Sullivan Show. I was hooked.

I learned to sing “She Loves You yeah, yeah yeah.” Mom even let my hair grow out long like Paul. I think she saw them as an improvement over Elvis with his disgusting, gyrating hips.

Being that I was the best singer in school, of course I was asked to join a rock band or two, but that was shot down immediately by my parents. Even though Mom let me grow my hair a little long so I wouldn’t be the only boy with a stupid looking shaved neck, Daddy put his foot down on Rock and Roll.

“It is the devil’s music and you are to have no part of it! Period.”

I was, at the time still in the habit of obeying my parents. I knew it would make a fool out of my Dad if his son was a singer in a rock band, because he railed against it at least once or twice a month in his sermons.

Yet, my parents’ hold on me was beginning to loosen. The times, they were, a changing.

I discovered that I was a rebel, and, that being a rebel had its rewards. This came about when my choir director, the esteemed John Williams, presented me with an ultimatum: “get a haircut, or you will not sing in any future choir concerts.” I thought this was ridiculous, as my hair was barely touching the top of my ears or the collar of my shirt. But Mr. Williams would not be moved.

So, I did what any rebellious young hot shot would do: something stupid. I went to a barber shop and paid for my first haircut. It cost me \$2.75 of my own money but it was worth every penny.

My mom always cut my hair, but I knew she would have talked me out of this idea. I had the barber completely shave my head. Then, I had him sweep up the hair, and I took it away.

Later that night, I put it in a shoebox, and left it on Mr. Williams' front porch.

The next day, I turned up with a bald head and took my place on the back row behind the altos as usual. Mr. Williams took one look at me, didn't even crack a smile, and told us to pull out the sheet music for the Bella Bartok piece. Jeez, that was not what I expected.

After class, he called me into his office, and told me that I was banned from concerts for the rest of the year, or, until my hair, or lack of, was no longer a distraction to the choir's appearance.

In the Calhoun High School 1967 yearbook, you can see me there on the back row with my bald head. Along with a few other boys in my class.

Yep. I started a revolution, of sorts. I didn't even encourage any of the other guys to shave their heads. They just did it on their own! When the school heard about me being banned from concerts, 6 other boys that weren't even in the choir shaved their heads in protest.

This taught me a lot. It taught me, first of all, that I had power. I didn't have to be a slave to the ideals of my elders.

It also taught me that I was not invisible. My self-image at the time was the guy with the second worst case of acne in the school that girls tended to look the other way from when I said "Hi", who got kicked off the football team because he was just not "football material", who never got to go to any of the school parties because people were dancing and that, according to the Baptist church at the time, was a sin.

I was not just the guy who was too short, had a big nose, crooked teeth and hair that was too curly and would never look like Elvis, or Paul.

People actually admired me in a way, simply because I was a smart-ass punk who did something brave and interesting. And, as an added benefit, I had one, notable talent:

I could sing like an angel!

I just needed to learn how to think.

Note To Self:

OK, back up, back up, back up. You've gotten carried away with telling the real story of what happened, and, well, it kind of goes downhill from here for about 50 years and I end up the way I am now, which is not all that interesting. Time to switch to the alternate universe. This is where the fun begins.

Chapter 3 Ask A Friend

I was holding the letter from Baylor University in my hand. It was the offer of a scholarship. A full ride in the Music Department. Somehow, they had gotten wind of my singing talent.

It wasn't a secret. My high school choir won First Place at All State competitions every year, and I won pretty much every solo competition I entered as well. I was something of a "star" in my little town of Port Lavaca. The second worst case of acne, but the best voice in the whole damn school.

My worst nightmare was staring me in the face.

A scholarship at the biggest Baptist university in the south meant I'd NEVER get away from these smarmy Christians. I'd be stuck leading the singing in a church choir forever.

I couldn't wait to get over to my friend Geoffrey's house after school and show him the letter.

"Jeez. This is great, McGoo. You're on the gravy train!"

Geoffrey, by the way, was a tall, skinny Jewish kid -- one of only 4 or 5 Jews in the entire school -- and we'd been best friends since we started singing in the choir. We were both outcasts, for different reasons, from the mainstream of high school society: me, because I was a preacher's kid who was prevented from going to most of the school parties due to the dancing and other sinful stuff; Geoff, because he was a Jew, and, well nobody quite knew how to feel about Jews in the Bible Belt.

Nevertheless, we were like brothers.

"No. Man. You don't understand. I'll have to be a church choir director for the rest of my life! I'll be trapped!" I was in a state of panic.

“Have you ever heard of Janis Joplin?” Geoff was looking over the new record album he’d just purchased. He carefully took it out of the wildly colored cardboard cover.

“No! Who’s that? Did you hear what I said?” I was a bit perturbed that Geoff was so preoccupied.

“Check this out. This is unbelievable.” Geoff carefully put the record on the stereo and sat on the couch.

For you youngsters who are not familiar with the raw, tortured, power of Janis Joplin’s music, I urge you to stop reading right now, download one of her albums, preferably “Big Brother and the Holding Company” (1967) and listen to it before continuing.

Go on. I’ll wait.

Geoff and I sat there, silently for about 5 minutes after we played the album. I think maybe I was crying, but, I’m not sure why. Her music did something to me. Kind of reached into my soul and found painful spots and stabbed a hot poker in them and then pulled out the pain and somehow made everything feel better. Weird. I didn’t know anything about the power of music at the time.

“So, what should I do?” I asked my best friend.

“McGoo. Don’t be an idiot. This is high school.” Then, Geoff sang, ala Eric Burdon and the Animals (1965): “You gotta get out of this place. If it’s the last thing you ever do.”

“Right,” I said, with a sigh.

“Do your parents have the money to send you to college?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, the answer is no. They don’t. Preachers don’t get paid squat, and he doesn’t have any money to send you to college, so you better get your ass to Baylor, dude.”

“But...”

“Greg....Greg...Listen.” He sighed. “What are you good at?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you? A football player? A thespian? You wanna be a doctor? A lawyer?”

“Yuk. Boring.”

“What are you good at?”

I sighed. “Singing.”

Geoff jumped up off the couch. “Right! You’re a singer! So, go to college, man! Get some training. Learn about music theory and history and shit. Learn to perform and everything.”

“But, if I go to Baylor, that means I’ll have to be a choir director.”

“Says WHO?” Geoff was beginning to lose patience with my narrow view of the future.

“Well, that’s what my parents would want me to do.”

“Dude. It doesn’t work that way. You leave home, go to college, you get to do whatever the fuck you want! This is a free country. You don’t have to sign a contract to promise you’ll sing Amazing Grace for the next 20 years. Jayzus! McGoo, sometimes you’re so fucking stupid.”

We were silent for a minute as Geoff looked for the next album he wanted to play.

Finally, I started to dream a little bit. “You really think I could do something like that?”

“What?”

“Be a singer.”

“Dude. You can do whatever you want. Just go for it. McGoo, listen to me, brother.”

Geoff grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me.

“You’ve got it. You’ve got everything you need.”

“I’ve got it.” I smiled meekly.

“Yousa!”

I laughed, as I started to feel like I could have a future that I wanted.

“Now. How ‘bout some Hendrix?” Geoff was back to business. We only had limited time before his parents would be home and we’d have to turn down the volume on the stereo and finish mowing the lawn. “Sure. Hey! I can play the guitar too. Maybe I could be a lead guitar player!”

“Ha. Don’t get cocky, McGoo. You ain’t no Jimi Hendrix.”

“Not yet!”

We both laughed, as Jimi took us on another musical joy ride.

