

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
Prologue: <i>Between Panic and Desire</i>	xiii

### *part one. PANIC*

<b>1.</b> Introduction: <i>Hello, My Name Is</i> _____	3
<b>2.</b> Son of Mr. Green Jeans: <i>A Meditation on Missing Fathers</i>	7
<b>3.</b> Double Vision	15
<b>4.</b> Son of Richard M. Nixon	19
<b>5.</b> Three Bad Trips, 1968–77	27
<b>6.</b> Questions and Activities before Continuing	33

*part two. PARANOIA*

<b>7.</b> Introduction: <i>Imagine That</i>	37
<b>8.</b> Baseball, Hot Dogs, Mescaline, and Chevrolet	43
<b>9.</b> Number Nine	53
<b>10.</b> 1984	69
<b>11.</b> Questions and Activities before Continuing	73

*part three. DESIRE*

<b>12.</b> Introduction: <i>Why Oprah Doesn't Call</i>	77
<b>13.</b> Son of George McManus	79
<b>14.</b> Three Milestones	85
<b>15.</b> Leonard Koan	89
<b>16.</b> Son of a Bush	95
<b>17.</b> Three Days in September	99
<b>18.</b> What You Want, What You Get, What You Need: <i>A Post-Nixon, Post-panic, Post-modern, Post-mortem</i>	109
<b>19.</b> "Curtis Knows Best": <i>Towering, Permanent, Perilous, and Soon to be Televised on a Widescreen Near You</i>	123
<b>20.</b> The Final Chapter	135
Index	139
About the Author	141

## *PROLOGUE*

### *Between Panic and Desire*

Deep in the scrub hills of Jefferson County, about eight miles north of Punxsutawney, lay two towns, Panic and Desire, separated by farms, trees, and a narrow road.

Returning from Pittsburgh one morning, I tug my steering wheel to the left, swing off the main highway, and motor up a steep rise. I have seen Panic and Desire on a map, and for some reason I want to visit.

Desire comes first, and proves to be little more than a few old houses and a modest cemetery. I'm curious how the town got such a name, what it is like to live here, what the people know that I don't, so I roll my compact car down the main road, looking for someone to ask.

But no one is out.

The graveyard appears to be my only alternative. I search the

ancient stones for clues until a large white dog appears from nowhere. He shows me his teeth, follows me to my car, and barks his sharp warning until I leave.

So I head to Panic, a five-minute drive past tumbledown homes and modest trailers—families who have lost their farms, and those who are barely hanging on.

Like Desire, Panic turns out to be just a few ragtag family houses along a strip of asphalt. One of the homes has been completely gutted by fire and blackened furniture litters the front lawn. It looks as if it has been this way for months.

A white-haired gentleman bundled into an orange hunting jacket ambles down the road, so I step out of my car, walk toward him. “Any idea,” I ask, “why they call this place Panic?”

He gives me an odd look.

“How about Desire?” I ask.

The man in orange shakes his head, offers a sad shrug, hurries down the road before I can squeeze in another question.

I’m intrigued, though, and fairly stubborn. In nearby DuBois there is a library, and I am heading more or less in that direction.

Twenty minutes later I’m in the stacks, unearthing a handful of local history books. For the next two hours I settle in at a wide table and read about the first European settlers—German and Scotch-Irish farmers pushing west across Pennsylvania in the early 1800s. The hills were full of deer, wild turkeys, and wolves.

There is no mention of Panic *or* Desire. The best I can find is the story of a man named Daniel North who was repairing his axe one morning when he heard his hogs let loose an unearthly squeal. North went to see what the matter was and saw a massive bear throwing one of the hogs across a field. The man attacked the bear with his axe, but only grazed the animal, and so the bear turned on him—man and bear, face to muzzle.

North, according to legend, started kicking at the bear, though it was easily twice his size, and eventually chased it off his farm into the woods, where it was never seen again.

Mr. North, one of the history books revealed, “thought it miraculous that the bear did not hug him to death.”

Miraculous indeed. The shaggy bear story, if it is even true, occurred in a part of Jefferson County very near to where Panic and Desire were eventually established, and the story could explain the root of either place name perhaps.

Or perhaps not.

I ask the librarian. She doesn’t know either.

So I return to my car, but instead of continuing east toward home, I double back, revisiting the road that separates Panic from Desire.

At what I approximate to be the halfway point, I pull over, switch off the ignition, and get out one more time into the cold March air. I am in the middle of a small patch of hemlock, a secluded spot, and it is here that I finally realize I don’t want the actual answer, the truth of where these towns found their names. The mystery is sweeter.

I just bask in the unknown for a while, alone on the road, halfway between Panic and Desire.

Until it occurs to me: I have been here all my life.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Hello, My Name Is* \_\_\_\_\_

Human beings, truth be told, are inept narrators of their own lives. We don't often see what is right in front of us; frequently what we think we've seen is not actually there. In almost every case we see a decidedly distorted view, as if peering out through a rippled window.

Freud based much of his work on the idea that we instinctively project our own thoughts and feelings into the minds of others. Too often we end up hating those other people for what we presume they believe.

Buddhist philosophy revolves around a similar concept: we humans are guided by delusion—the delusion of “self”—yet we tenaciously insist that this is not the case.

The monk Thich Nhat Hanh, exiled from his native Vietnam in the early 1960s for advocating nonviolent civil disobedience, puts it simply and best:

“With a fearful panicking mind,” he warns, “we can easily mistake a rope for a snake.”

Well that’s me, all over.

I see the world through undeniably distorted lenses, the particular curves and hollows of my distortions fashioned by forces personal and political, intimate and widespread. My mental optics are warped by the fear and panic induced by the Kennedy assassinations, the King assassination, Kent State, the rise and fall of Richard M. Nixon, *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, Chuck Manson, the breakup of the Beatles, and the drinking, depression, and divorces that shaped my early family life. Add in countless nights of smoking too much dope and driving pointlessly in circles, and you’ve mapped the roots of my delusion fairly well.

But here’s the rub: for the most part this list of formative events is communal. An entire generation lived through the untimely death of JFK (lost a good father), the resignation of Tricky Dick (lost a dysfunctional dad), and the turmoil of Vietnam (lost our Uncle Sam). We’ve all spent years, or maybe decades, feeling fatherless, cynical, unmoored. We were told to reach out to our government, grab hold, and it would pull us up out of the swamp. Instead it often turned, slithered, and bit us on the hand. The old rope and snake trick, in reverse.

Invariably we perceive our ongoing lives through the filter of this shared history, as if faded Kodak slides were somehow projected directly onto current events. All that we know about Watergate and the subsequent cover-up toddles into the voting booth with us thirty years later; our experience with Vietnam—whether we fought, protested, or stood on the sidelines paralyzed by confusion—shapes our vision of every new military adventure the Washington yahoos dream up; and the

tragedy of 9/11 at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in the Pennsylvania field down the road from where I live, will color wide swatches of our world for who knows how long.

We have double vision: what we see and what we expect to see, one scenario overlapping the other, until we aren't sure which is which.

And to compound our confusion, we live now in an increasingly virtual world, where words are detached from meanings and images digitally altered. Each major and minor moment in our collective lives, whether a war, a natural disaster, an avian flu, or a celebrity divorce, is now packaged and spun—*predis-*torted before we even get the chance to project our individual prejudices upon it and misperceive it through our own inadequate lens.

No wonder so many Americans seem content to look the other way or simply shut their eyes. The world stopped making sense around the time Ronald Reagan stepped out of the movies and invaded Grenada.

So, given that I don't see clearly—that in fact, my vision is even more distorted than most (more on that later)—it makes some odd sense that I would write a memoir. I was there, after all; I misperceived it with my own eyes.

Or maybe this isn't memoir. Perhaps it is a generational autobiography—a chronicle of those events most responsible for twisting our collective psyche over the past forty or so years, especially for those of us who remember where we were on the day Kennedy died. The first one.

Paranoia *does* run deep, and we've been wading in it, up to our hipbones, for decades. Something's happening here, and what it is ain't exactly clear, but it seems that someone dropped acid on the observation deck of the World Trade Center, and our view has been topsy-turvy ever since. The folks at Three

Mile Island may have avoided a meltdown, but many of us weren't so lucky.

The walrus *was* Paul.

William Carlos Williams, the poet, once said, "Look . . . we're human beings—we're looking for company, and we're looking for understanding: someone who reminds us that we're not alone, and someone who wonders out loud about things that happen in this life, the way we do when we're walking or sitting or driving, and thinking things over."

He was explaining the appeal of Frank Sinatra, believe it or not, and, yes, Old Blue Eyes figures into this story too, but not quite yet.

For the moment I'll just pretend William Carlos was talking about me, or at least about what I'm trying to do here, as I lean on my red wheel barrow, glazed with white chickens, exploring "Lumpy" Brannum, Frank Zappa, and Baba Ram Dass. My aim is to reassure you, the reader, that you're not alone. Or maybe to reassure myself.

Or perhaps I'm just wondering out loud about things that happen in this life, the way we do when we're driving—on that road between Panic and Desire.

You'd better get in.

We're leaving any minute now.