

Salvation on Death Row

THE PAMELA PERILLO STORY

John T. Thorngren



Pamela Perillo and I worked on this project from 2010 through 2017. The background for this collaboration is remarkable.

In the mid-1990s, a bid request appeared in our local paper for an independent firm to read the water meters once a month in an adjoining town. This job sounded like a perfect opportunity for “Jerry” and me to work together. Jerry lived nearby in the same neighborhood I did. He was smart, good with his hands, and unemployed except for odd jobs. And a big plus: I knew he would be trustworthy and reliable, not only from my own intuition, but because he was well-known and an avowed Christian who openly helped the homeless. He could read the meters, and I could supply a corporation, truck, insurance, bond, initial financing, and paperwork. A perfect match. After obtaining the necessary forms, I planned to approach Jerry with this idea, get his approval, and obtain a performance bond.

On a beautiful spring afternoon, I was fishing from the shore of a lake close to both our homes. A tree-lined bank about three feet high rose behind the shore where Jerry surprisingly appeared as if I had called him.

“Doinganygood?” he clipped.

“No, not really,” I replied. After a few minutes of chit-chat, I made the proposal: your hands, my brains.

His response sounded like an electric typewriter, one word per stroke, far too fast for my aged mind to digest and not particularly on the subject. I tried to check the size of his pupils, but the sun was behind him, and I was unable to confirm my suspicion.

I had learned about looking for this pupillary phenomenon from years past when a young man came up to me while I was pushing a lawnmower, jerked it from my tightly held grip, and said,

“I’ll do that. You don’t have to pay me much.”

That young man stared at me with dazed blue irises encircling little black ink dots for pupils. Pinpoint-sized pupils, I later learned, are one of the effects of speed (methamphetamine)—that and talking in a time warp.

Something didn’t click at that point next to the lake between Jerry and me. Something was reminiscent of my conversation with the lawn-mower guy, so I let my offer die on the table. Jerry moved away shortly after that.

In 2010, about fifteen years later, I heard from Jerry’s ex-wife that he had been tried for capital murder following a drug-induced rage that ultimately ended in several homicides. The state where the crime occurred, similar to Texas, used a bifurcated trial: one for conviction, the other for punishment. Jerry enjoyed an extensive rifle and pistol collection, including automatic weapons. This was, of course, brought out during his conviction and played a major part in his punishment. The jury returned a verdict of death by lethal injection. As of this date, almost twenty years later, Jerry still waits on Death Row in painful apprehension as his appeals twist through the court system and the state scampers to find the necessary drugs for his death.

Does Jerry deserve the death penalty? I don’t think so. Narcotics deserve the death penalty, but of course, one cannot separate the drugs from the person who uses them. Although the legal system has become more enlightened to the defense of mitigating circumstance in the punishment phase, nonetheless, Flip Wilson’s famous argument that “the devil made me do it” doesn’t seem to impress a jury. Prior to Jerry’s trial, I, like so many others, was non-pulsed about applying the death penalty. Jerry’s experience changed my thoughts and touched my life.

How many people have been touched by alcohol or drug addiction? An overwhelming number, almost two-thirds of our adult population. In my youth, the problem was alcohol. Somewhere in the 1960s,

narcotics “exponentiated” as the predominant source for addiction. One of the key findings in a 2004 survey of 801 U.S. adults conducted by the Peter D. Hart Research Associates was: “Some 63 percent of U.S. adults surveyed said that addiction has had a great deal or some impact on their lives.”⁽¹⁾ Certainly it has had an effect on my own family; a close relative passed away from a drug overdose. With such high probability that you, the reader, have been affected by addiction, let me pose a question to you. What if your loved one were so under the influence that he or she committed such an extreme act as that of Jerry or Pamela? How would you feel then about the death penalty? Not to pontificate or condemn, but another question: Are you under a dangerous addiction at this moment?

I wrote to Jerry, and we readily agreed to collaborate on his story in the hopes that it might help others. We had barely started before Jerry realized that because the penal system in his state (and all others) scrutinized every page of correspondence, the details of his life and the homicides could endanger his appeals. We placed the project on hold.

Still, the execution of someone who had been possessed by narcotics while committing a criminal act haunted me. As a fiction writer, the thought occurred: *The novel's the thing to place before the conscience of the people* (*Hamlet* paraphrased). Yes, a thought-provoking Great American Novel about the injustice of the death penalty, especially in my native state, Texas. I decided that my central character would be female. Midway through the novel, it was evident that I needed a description of the female Death Row Unit in Mountain View. On the Internet, I found an old prison pen-pal request from Pamela Perillo. After several letters and telephone conversations, Pam and I realized that we had the same purpose for sharing her story as that which Jerry and I had intended, a plan for a book born of a hope that it might help others.

John T. Thorngen

April 2, 2017

To: All held captive—in chains or addiction

I recently learned that the story of my life will be published at the beginning of next year. Toward the end of that year, I will have been incarcerated in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice for thirty-eight years. A few months after that will mark my sixty-third birthday, meaning that more than sixty percent (almost two-thirds) of my life has been in prison—a penalty for a brutal crime I committed under the influence of narcotics.

I still grieve for the families I hurt and pray daily for their forgiveness. After much research, the author and I located most of the members of these families, and I was preparing to contact them. Fortunately, before I did so, I learned that such contact is not permitted and can increase one's sentence.

This is a painful narration of my life and friends on Death Row. May you learn from it that experimenting with beginner and designer drugs is tantamount to Russian roulette. There is no *recreation* in recreational drugs. What happened to me could happen to you or someone you care about. May you realize what horrors lie on Texas Death Row. May you understand that no life is worth taking through a state-sponsored system in the name of revenge. May you see that we all have a purpose and are worthy of life, even in prison.

Pamela Lynn Perillo

Note Davenport, Iowa, as my birth home. Name me Pamela Lynn Walker. Set the third of December 1955 for my birth date, a day against a backdrop of cold, gray drizzle. With Christmas approaching, color me in a scene painted by Norman Rockwell set in America's Heartland—a Christmas baby, a precious cherub in a pink bassinet under the holiday tree, with wisps of auburn hair accentuating deep-water-green eyes looking into the joyous faces of her parents and siblings. Only Rockwell could capture the feelings of all those present, in their facial lines and especially in their eyes. My mother, smiling fully, beneath long brown hair. My father smiling also but with lips in a thin line, his brown hair slicked back, his sideburns just a hint. My brother and sister with varied expressions from a boy's questioning frown to a girl's happy grin.

But this is a misplaced dream, something I might have imagined from the cover of an old *Saturday Evening Post* resting atop knock-knees covered by a plaid skirt while sitting in a doctor's office.

By the age of ten, such ideas were mist upon the wind and resembled nothing of the muddy road I trod for so many years. Certainly, no joy could I remember in my journey from Iowa. As I grew older, I would learn that joy would look solemnly different from this misplaced dream. Surely infancy follows a divine plan to protect the memory of little ones. Sometimes I'm thankful for those very early years being blank slates of memory, for the brief time in my life before I was faced with all that would follow.

* * *

When I was a year old, we moved to California, the land of milk and honey. The family then was my father, Joseph Franklin Walker; my mother, Wuanita; my older brother, Randy; my older sister, Joanne,

and me. Our portion of the land of milk and honey was an island called Compton in a sea of cities within LA County known collectively as Southern Los Angeles. Compton, one of the oldest cities in the United States, had by the mid-1950s become a mixture of warehouses, industry, and blue-collar residences, still mostly Anglo-Saxon. For my father, following better pay consisted of stamping out fenders for large trucks on an assembly line.

For a while, we rented a home on Peach Street. I don't remember anything about the house except the pretty name of "Peach" and that it was near El Segundo Boulevard. Besides, we didn't stay there long enough to remember much. Daddy evidently needed to move elsewhere. Perhaps it was a rent problem, or perhaps it was a neighbor, maybe a new neighbor Dad thought the "wrong color." Minorities were moving in and were quickly changing the demographic to "less than one percent pure." But it might have been for a larger house; my brother, David, had just come into the world. Whatever the reason, we moved to another neighborhood in the city of Lynwood, several miles north and a smidgen closer to Los Angeles proper.

The Lynwood home was a real dollhouse and not much larger—an *Alice in Wonderland* variety. Although the ceilings were high, the walls kept closing in. A concrete stoop with one window to its left faced Cortland Street. There was no overhang at the front door to protect a visitor from inclement weather, but no matter, because it never rains in Southern California. From the outside, it was little more than an oversized shoebox, and on the inside, a child's diorama: a tiny living area on one side and a miniature dining room on the other; behind them two bedrooms, each wide enough for little other than double beds; a utility space designed to hold a washing machine; and a matchbox-sized galley kitchen in which we had to stand single file.

The bathroom is one of my clearest memories. To flush the toilet required quickly pouring a pitcher of water down its throat. The

bath tub was an ancient, 1920s cast-iron relic with claw feet. On hands and knees, you could look under it and check for monsters, usually after the fact because they had already crawled into the tub and were trapped—huge, black spiders. On Cortland Street, at the malleable age of around five, certain events solidified in my memory.

“Ayeeee,” screamed Randy as he stormed in through the back screen door early one morning.

I was in the kitchen with Mom, who was standing at the porcelain, one-basin sink wearing her usual dress of nothing but a bra and panties. As we both turned, the reason for Randy’s cries spilled like a red waterfall onto the checkered linoleum floor; crimson blood puddles jumped from the white squares and hid along the black. His lower lip wiggled down to the tip of his chin, a thin piece of raw flank steak.

“Thaf dog dif thif,” he wailed.

“You’re talking about King, the big German Shepherd down the street?” I asked. “He wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

“You were teasing him, weren’t you?” asked Mom. “What were you doing to him?”

“A sthick. Pokin’ him wit a sthick...”

“I told you not to do that, didn’t I?” she yelled as she raised her hand to a striking position, retracted, and pressed a wet towel to Randy’s face.

I heard Mom mumble some ugly words as she marched from the kitchen, words about not having time to waste in some hospital emergency room, needing some sleep, working at the restaurant at night to support us all. Minutes passed.

“Wenf is she comin?” asked Randy between sobs.

“I guess she’s changing her clothes.” Looking back on it, there might have been other things going on in that room, but one thing was certain, she was in no hurry to end Randy’s suffering.

Randy never approached his canine adversary after that, but he sought vengeance in other ways.

Just a year later: “What do you call that little bird?” he asked me.

I was holding a fluffy yellow chick in my left hand and stroking its back with the other. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought of a name yet. Maybe ‘Peeper.’ Listen to her peep. Isn’t she cute?”

“Let me see,” he said as he grabbed the chick and in a blur plucked off its head. Blood squirted all over the back stoop as the poor animal fell to the ground, still wiggling. I screamed. Randy laughed. I didn’t tell Mom. I might be the one who got in trouble.

There were other instances of retaliation against animals. Cats, neighborhood pets or strays, became Randy’s victims of choice. They didn’t fight back like dogs. Mom knew about it but didn’t say anything. The first time I heard the shrill cry of a tortured cat, I ran out into the back yard.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

“Nothing. None of your beeswax.” A small black-and-white kitten wiggled and writhed upon a clothesline, her ears “clothespinned” to the line.

The worst of the worst came around New Year’s Day and the Fourth of July. A loud pop, followed by the wails of a wounded cat, and we knew that Randy had paper-bagged another cat with a firecracker inside.

Years later, I could come to understand Randy’s behavior within the context of my family history. I would learn that abnormal aggression, especially with transference toward animals, can follow family lines.⁽²⁾

Certainly, a disposition to become addicted to drugs and alcohol is a well-known example of genetic or learned behavior within a family also. At that age, I had a gut sense that some things were very, very wrong, but it was impossible to put into context. Quite simply, this family life was all I knew.

* * *

Nearly always in her bra-and-panties “house dress,” I guess Mom was what men called a “looker”: long, brown, wavy hair (that she frequently combed while sitting at the dining room table), richly tanned skin, and distinctly green eyes. One would have thought her a native of

Malibu Beach rather than Iowa. Her beauty certainly worked for Dad; they added two more to the family while we lived in the dollhouse in Lynwood—another brother, Dale, and then my youngest brother, Ronnie.

My father was born in 1927. At the age, or should I say underage, of seventeen he enlisted in the military toward the end of World War II. Consequently, we always celebrated his *two* birthdays, his actual and the one he lied about in order to be of official age to serve his country. Although my sister and I would soon learn a very different side of our father, to most others I am sure he appeared to be a reliable man, slow to anger and a hard worker who did his best to provide for a growing family. Somewhere in Iowa, he received the nickname “Little Joe.” I figured it was because all the Walkers are small in stature.

Even before Dale and Ronnie, the hope for peace and quiet from other family members was a mirage. After Dale and Ronnie came into our family, there were seven of us all together at Little Joe’s mansion. I often thought of myself as Snow White living in a dwarf-sized house with seven dwarfs. Snow White in relation to the size of the house only; I certainly didn’t feel significantly above the others in any other manner. The capacity limit for the kitchen was three, and it was fortunate that all of us were small.

Ronnie slept in a crib in my parents’ room, but the rest of the children shared one of the house’s tiny bedrooms and three of us slept in one double bed. I usually slept at the end, across their feet, and awoke earlier than the rest. An ever-increasing twinge of emptiness reached down into my innards almost every night, a buried feeling that I was insignificant and worth so little.

“Why are you getting up so early, Pam?” asked Joanne.

“Because I need to.”

“Your gown is wet. I can see it. Did you pee yourself?...I’m gonna tell Mom.”

“Don’t, Joanne. Just don’t. You know we’ll *all* get the belt.”

My first day to begin school at Will Rogers Elementary was a rubber band of emotions, back and forth from happiness to dread. Breakfast was an upper.

“Oh, you’re going to have so much fun. Meet new friends,” Mom said with a fluorescent green to her eyes that seemed to tell me she’d be glad to see me gone.

“Joe,” she screamed, “have you seen my sedatives? I left them right here on the kitchen counter. Doesn’t anyone care that I’ve got to get some sleep before work tonight?”

* * *

As I walked to school, I kept telling myself: *You are pretty. You are pretty just like your mom. You have the same pretty skin, brown hair, and green eyes. You are going to have fun.* And the first day was great, especially recess. I was standing near the jungle gym when two girls approached.

“Hi,” I said. “Want to watch me hang by my knees?” They giggled as I flipped my legs over the bar, and my dress fell down over my head. “We saw your panties,” they laughed.

“My name is Ginger, and this is Renee. What’s yours?”

“I’m Pamela, but everyone calls me Pam. I live on Cortland. Where do you live?”

“We both live on Duncan, right around the corner from you. We’ll come see you after school. What’s your address?” asked Ginger.

“No, no, no... We can meet at Logo Park just down the street, or I’ll come see you.... What’s *your* address?”

My house was *visitors non grata*. It was fall and the weather was cool. We had no heat other than the gas oven in the kitchen. And the place smelled; it always smelled of something wet, something mildewing, something dead. And the commode, gosh, what if they had to go to the bathroom and find it took a pitcher to flush?

Renee and Ginger became my best friends at Lynwood, and I loved to go over to their homes and play. Renee even had a trampoline, but I sure didn't want them at my house—yet it had to happen at some point.

“I get to go first,” I said at school recess later that fall as I held the tetherball and wound up to smash it around the pole.

“I get to play the winner,” yelled Renee. Ginger lost. I was good; in anything athletic, I was good. After I had beaten Renee, it was time to go back inside.

“You've got oranges on the trees beside your house. I saw them on my walk to school this morning,” said Renee. “Can we come pick some?”

“Oranges? Oh, we've got all kinds of trees. Yes, we've got two orange trees—sweet ones, nice and ripe. We've got peach, avocado, walnut, nectarine, lemon. Take your pick. You can come get some, uh...but you can't come inside. My mom's asleep. She works at night.”

It wasn't exactly a lie; she did sleep during the day and work at night, but it was in the morning that she slept. Around noon, she awoke, took her happy pill, and combed her hair.

* * *

Winter was finally over, and the damp cold that permeated the house had evaporated into March. No more trying to stay warm from the oven in the kitchen. California is not always “the land of eternal sunshine.” Winter does get chilly. March and the season of spring–summer–fall began—a season that changes little until the beginning of the next winter. Peach trees were blooming, crocus and tulips were flowering, and dichondra ground cover was flourishing. The annual uplift to my innate morbidity had arrived.

Mom had come home from work, fixed breakfast, and taken her sedative before closing herself in the bedroom. I was scrambling to get ready for school.

“Come on, Joanne, I've got to pee. You've been in there an hour. Open the door,” I screamed.

“Bug off,” she yelled back. Randy walked by and “frogged” me in the arm. “Ouch,” I cried, and then Mom’s bedroom door opened with a rush.

“I didn’t do anything,” I pleaded. “Joanne won’t come out of the bathroom.”

“Don’t you kids understand that I’ve got to get some sleep? Get out of there, Joanne. All of you, turn around.” A thrashing was eminent. Whatever was convenient—a belt, a broomstick, or a coat hanger—served as an instrument of passion. That day she chose a curtain rod. *A curtain rod?* Mom was not an old schoolteacher, but she thought in kind: If one of you is guilty, all of you are guilty.

That evening, after Mom had taken her upper to go to work, Dad and the rest of us crammed into the little living area around the fish-bowl-sized black-and-white TV. At Ginger’s and Renee’s houses were televisions that you could actually *see* while sitting in a chair several body lengths away.

The opening theme of *Bonanza* filled the little room like the water we poured into the toilet.

Dad loved Westerns. At the commercial, I asked him, “Does everyone call you ‘Little Joe’ because of Little Joe Cartwright on TV? You don’t look like him. You’ve got slicked-back hair, and his is curly. But you always wear cowboy boots, blue jeans, and cowboy shirts. And your hair is brown like his. Is that the reason?”

“No,” he said, smiling. “They’ve called me that ever since we lived in Iowa. I can’t remember where it came from, but all my friends have always called me that.”

“I’ll call you Daddy Little Joe.”

“Don’t. Just don’t.”

I didn’t yet realize how different they were. In that moment, my father was not unlike the handsome Little Joe onscreen with the wide, white smile that every girl loved, the loyal Little Joe who couldn’t bring himself to hurt anyone.

I dropped eighteen-month-old Joseph at Little Joe and Helen's house. I wasn't worried about Joseph enduring sexual abuse from Little Joe—he'd never bothered my brothers—and I knew Helen would be a good caretaker. So with the money Mike had sent me, I flew to Tucson, Arizona, to join Mike, Linda, and the trucker.

As we headed down the highway, Mike's ploy with the trucker became evident. I don't remember the trucker's name, so I'll call him Happy. Happy and I were supposed to copulate all the way to Florida as payment for my airfare. Later I learned that not only did Mike want me with him as insurance against my possibly turning him in, but also he and Happy had made this deal before I arrived.

I wasn't into that, and Mike and I fought many times over his belief that both Linda and I were placed here on earth to turn tricks and give him the money. The air brakes on Happy's mammoth eighteen-wheeler hissed as it shuddered to a stop on the interstate's shoulder.

"Out!" Happy yelled. "Get the *hell* out of my truck."

The moment Mike threw his duffel bag to the ground and slammed the door, Happy crunched gears in a rage and roared off into the morning sun.

After that, hitchhiking was our mode of transportation. It wasn't the best way to travel, and I was getting frantic: no methadone and no heroin. The winds gusting along the highways were cruel. I needed something warm in my veins. The sole substitute was pills that truck drivers gave us, and they were playing Ping-Pong with my mind. It had been several weeks now on the road without heroin. Traveling by one's thumb is slower than taking a Greyhound that stops at every ten-mile-apart town on a single-lane back road. After five days on speed and smoking PCP, we crossed the Texas state line. The last driver had sold

us a long-lasting supply of PCP. ⁽¹⁸⁾ One of its street names is Angel Dust, but if it's the dust of an angel, it must be from the fallen angel, the devil himself.

And so we fell into the world of Texas. The state of Texas revels in being unique, the best, and the biggest, such as being the only state that has flown the flags from six other countries; the state that encompasses the King Ranch, a ranch bigger than the state of Rhode Island; the state that has the world's largest helium well; and the list goes on. Although no longer the largest state, Texas still claims to be bigger than Alaska after global warming melts Alaska's ice. When Texas can't be the best, then she will glance sideways and accept the last and the worst, such as a recent ranking at the bottom for health care and having the worst droughts in 2012, 2013, and 2014. Texas will never give up her cowboy-tough image. It is inherent in her history and in the land itself, from the water-moccasin-filled and mosquito-infested Big Thicket on her east to the powder-dry and rattlesnake-populated desert on her west.

Concerning crime and punishment, Texas historically reflects the toughness of her native roots. For the years 1976 through August 21, 2001, Texas had the highest execution rate in the United States at 472 deaths, almost five times that of any of the other thirty-five listed execution states. Although Oklahoma had a higher incidence per capita, Texas still ranked second in per capita deaths. ⁽¹⁹⁾ Texas had the largest prisoner population of any state, 157,900, at the beginning of 2013. ⁽²⁰⁾ Certainly no hint of being soft on criminals should ever be cast on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), nor on its governors with their seldom-if-ever-used powers of pardon.

Surely, unless one's mind were in an altered or *non compos mentis* state, he or she would not knowingly commit a crime in Texas. It is speculated that Charles Manson might have considered Texas as a home for "The Family" but changed his mind based on his experience of being arrested in Laredo in June 1960, for violation of his probation in California. ⁽²¹⁾

Compared to California, Texas is indeed a tough state, a fact of which I was not aware and couldn't have comprehended anyway in my drug-addled condition.

Mike had a jail acquaintance in Houston "who would take care of us." Mike seemed always to know someone *who would take care of us*, so we thumbed it farther south, far out of our way to Florida, to the back side of Houston. Our truck driver needed to head even farther south and turned from Loop 610 onto the South Freeway near the Astrodome. Mike's friend was supposed to live near that point, so we walked back north from where he let us out up to Loop 610.

It was February 21, 1980, a Friday, and the weather was classic Houston, overcast and around sixty degrees, not particularly comfortable, especially when we stood near the freeway where two-ton bees and wasps zoomed by, flapping grit into our faces. When we neared the Astrodome, a van stopped in front of us on the shoulder. It was large and white with square corners like a bread truck. The driver, Robert (Bob) Banks, talked with us, or rather yelled over the traffic, for a few minutes and offered to compensate us if we would help him move from an apartment to his newly rented house. Money? We readily agreed. Mike's friend could wait.

Bob Banks motioned us into his van and insisted I sit up in the passenger seat. I glanced in the back and noticed a spider's lair of white nylon rope crisscrossing bedposts, tables, etc. After some introductions, Bob asked, "Where you all headed?...Florida. Oh, that's a great place to go."

"What do you do for a living, Bob?...The oil business.... I hear that's rather good pay."

"It's okay; at least it got me out of an apartment and into a house. I couldn't take all the noise and being crammed up together with others like bees in a hive. My new house is just a few minutes from here, over on Hepburn."

Like we knew or cared where Hepburn was; besides, Banks was making me edgy. He kept directing every question and response at my chest. Between his eyes on me and his glancing at the road, it was a miracle we even got to Hepburn. The street on which his new three-bedroom mansion rested was a single-lane blacktop in disrepair and close to a railroad track. The one remarkable thing was that there were some young palm trees along the road, palm trees just like those in California.

We helped him unload a few pieces of furniture and then returned to his apartment for another load. Because it was getting late, he decided we would resume work tomorrow. That evening, Banks took us out to a nice restaurant. We all waited behind him at the cashier's counter. He pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his wallet. I whispered to Mike, "He looks like he has a lot of money." Mike grunted and smiled in the affirmative. After dinner, we went to a bar. PCP and liquor were roiling in my head. I was not having a good time, especially since Banks kept sidling his chair up next to me and whispering sweet "uglies" in my ear.

"Would you please quit nuzzling me?" I groaned.

The party sort of died, and we left for his new home. After we slept that night, Banks treated us to breakfast, and we went to his apartment to shower and pick up another load of his belongings. While Banks was in the shower, Mike showed me what he found.

"He has guns. Look...and we know he has money. I'm going to call a friend back in California and let him in on this one. We got a bird's nest on the ground, a real live pigeon."

Mike made his call on Banks's telephone. His California friend wasn't interested. Mike placed the guns, a .45 revolver, an M-1 rifle, and a shotgun, into the van.

That night we went to a rodeo at the Astrodome with Banks paying our way. I planned on a good time; Western music, Western attire, and rodeos were things I grew up with and thoroughly enjoyed. I beefed

up heavily on PCP and a few pills left over from who-knew-where and who-knew-what was in them. I guzzled plenty of beer at the rodeo, hoping it would dull the pawing and groping from Banks. When he left us for more beer, I said to Mike with a laugh, “I’d like to kill him.”

Later in the evening, Mike left for a long time, and Linda and I went to find him. He was leaning against one of the walls in a walkway looking into space like he was in another dimension.

“What are you doing?” we asked.

“I’m planning.”

“Are we going to do it tonight?” I asked.

He didn’t respond, and we three returned to our seats, where Banks continued to prod me and talk nasty.

“Let’s go. I’m getting really, really tired of this.”

“No, baby,” said Banks. “We’re just starting to have fun.”

“Mike,” I said slowly and with emphasis, “we are going to do it tonight.”

I don’t think—but who knows what mind I had left to think with—that I was talking about anything other than robbery and getting away from this creep. We did *finally* leave and went to a bar where Banks continued his sexual onslaught. I continued to drink heavily.

* * *

Banks parked his truck in front of the attached garage at his new house, and we stumbled out, all grateful to leave the roar and bounce of his truck. I noticed a half-alive moon weakly trying to overcome the gloom that reflected the brightness of the Houston skyline. It was dropping into the 40s, a temperature I considered extremely cold. I noted a Volkswagen in the driveway.

Another Bob had arrived: Robert (Bob) Skeens. Bob Skeens, a friend of Banks from Louisiana, had just driven up to help with the move. Banks introduced everyone, and when he got to me, he leaped to my side and put his arm around me. I elbowed him hard. I walked over to

Mike and asked quietly, "Why don't we get a gun from the van and do it now?"

"No, it's not the right time."

I smoked some more PCP-laced marijuana, drank some beer, and got the .45 pistol. Angry, paranoid, invincible, seeing strange things, and feeling not myself, I had morphed into Missus-Mister Hyde personified.

"Linda, why don't you go get a gun from the van, and we'll come in and surprise them," I said.

I presume she declined. I faded rather quickly after that. But in the morning, the drugs and residual booze fought for what little sense I had left. I smoked another PCP-laced cigarette and got the pistol. Both Bobs had left to get coffee and doughnuts for their "guests." I woke Mike and Linda. "They're gone," I said. Mike, ever with an expressionless face, got the shotgun and hid in the hall closet.

When the unsuspecting pair returned, Mike rapped several times, quickly, from inside the closet. As Banks approached to investigate, Mike jumped out with the shotgun held chest-high and yelled, "Okay, this is a robbery!" Skeens responded appropriately in fear; but evidently, Banks thought we were playing a joke because he smiled and walked closer with his hands out and palms up. Mike hit him in the jaw with the butt of the shotgun and he fell. I came from the back with the pistol and a length of the white nylon rope from the truck and said, "This is no joke." I also had a machete that I used to cut some pieces from the rope for Mike to tie the hands of the dazed Banks. I pointed the pistol at Skeens and ordered him to the floor. Mike tied his hands also. We went through their wallets.

"Wow," he shouted as he flipped through Banks's thick pad of bills, "he's got 800 dollars here."

We placed Skeens in one of the bedrooms and secured his feet and hands to the bed. Mike sat down on the floor with Banks and looped the rope once around his neck. He motioned to me to grab the other end and pull.

Did Mike exert a Charlie Manson type of mind control over me? Did I think I was paying back Little Joe for his molestation? PCP mixed with everything else I had taken produced an altered state with demonic tendencies.⁽²²⁾ On PCP, there is no mind with which to think, just a dazed reaction to whatever happens.

* * *

Unlike hemp or cotton rope that when pulled tight remains in place, this was nylon, a fiber that stretches and gives. I guess this was the reason that later, the court determined—I don't know how—that strangulation took a long time, ten to fifteen minutes. I don't remember much, certainly not the length of time it took for what unfolded. At one point I was in a dark cave, Mike was a giant tarantula with glowing red eyes, and he was pulling me toward him with a bright-white spider web. At another point during a similar fog, Linda had evidently entered, sat down in front of me, and began to pull, because I felt the rope give for a moment. Through a bright tunnel, I heard thunder and saw her long, brown hair moving in a storm. Red rain fell all around her. She squealed and cried.

And then a voice echoed through moving darkness: "If you don't have the heart for this, then go load the Volkswagen," said Mike. "We're leaving in it."

Mike motioned to me to stop and go to the back bedroom where Skeens awaited the same fate. My memory contains total absence of that incident. All three of us methodically rifled the house for small items we could pawn, taking a camera and a radio/cassette player.

When we left, I felt the wrongness of all we had done in some deeply hidden crevice of my heart. That this was not me in my body. That I had to get loose from this high. That I had to get away from Mike and Linda.

EPILOGUE

At a certain stage in life, I suppose we all reflect on what we have done and how we wish we had done some things differently. Whether we compare our past to a journey, a book, or a tapestry, there are paths, chapters, and threads that we wish were not there. Mine are ever before me. Like the gray weather that I was born in, I look out every day upon the gray concrete that surrounds me. And I remember. With reflection comes the quest for reason. Why? Was it all because of external problems: a dysfunctional home—I should say a house rather than a home, a small wood box of which I was ashamed; peer pressure, to run with older youngsters and do cool drugs; unloving parents, a mother who abandoned me and a father who molested me? Were drugs the root cause?

Collateral causes for sure, but no, the problems were internal. Me, a child of God, given free will, and, most regretfully, I chose drugs. I committed a brutal crime. During thirty-six years of incarceration, I pray daily for forgiveness from the families I hurt.

Have I paid my dues in prison? Is anyone able to pay on earth for what they do on earth? At least my spiritual dues were paid some 2,000 years ago on Calvary. With God's forgiveness and mercy, I hope to live out my days free from these walls.

In January 2016, I learned from my most recent review that my release had been denied. After thirty-five years in prison, I was disheartened. But most devastating was learning that it will be January 2019 before I will receive another review. This will mean, when I get out then—thinking and praying on the positive—that I will have been incarcerated almost thirty-nine years.

When I do get out, the first thing on my list is to join the Calvary Commission Refugee Program ⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ near Palestine, Texas. They have a

Christian respite, a transitional program, where I can learn how to function and adjust to a world I haven't seen in over three and a half decades. We are able to notice some changes in the world while in prison. We can touch the electronic age and receive e-mails. We can read magazines and see the new styles. We can read newspapers and follow current events. But no, it can never be the same as being free. Freedom, I want to experience it gradually and under instruction from a Christian perspective.

I want to have a home church and to feel like a normal human being. After that, I would like to continue training dogs for the disabled. Yes, I would still like to do what I am doing now. I feel that this is something for which Providence divinely molded me through life and a means whereby I can give back to the world some of so much I have taken. I know we are all given a purpose, and I joy and rest in knowing mine.

Thank you for reading my story. Thank you for your understanding. Thank you for allowing me to express in writing my thanks to my Savior, to Christina, and to Joseph for my very life. Thank you for your prayers and support.

Lord Bless,
Pam Perillo, 2017



Pamela Lynn Perillo, 2013
