

Part I

1.

Mike Danzig didn't fit in. It wasn't because he didn't like people; he was capable of deep love. It wasn't because he was stupid; he'd won many academic prizes. It wasn't because he was ugly. Although he was thin to the point of being lanky, at six feet two, with clear blue eyes and the features of a young boy, he possessed a basic handsomeness. Mike Danzig didn't fit in because he saw the world from a different point of view than everybody he'd grown up with. So at eighteen, he'd decided to leave his home in New York City for a new life in California.

Mike sat in his old white Pontiac on a chilly October morning waiting for the car to warm up. The shiver that ran through his body reminded him that he was still three thousand miles away from California. When he was sure the car wasn't going to stall, he eased the transmission into drive and began his journey.

An expression of hope crossed his face as he drove through the slippery New York streets littered with wet newspapers. He got on the Cross Bronx Expressway and merged into the fast lane. As he drove toward the George Washington Bridge, he looked up and glimpsed the outline of his old high school, St. Luke's.

Mike's memories of St. Luke's were bittersweet. St. Luke's was an all boys' Catholic high school, a dinosaur of the changing Bronx of the 1970s. He'd wanted to go to public school, which was co-ed, but his parents wanted him to go St. Luke's, so he went. Tradition was important to his parents.

Mike blew the horn in triumph as he crossed the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey, but memories of St. Luke's refused to leave his mind. He found himself unconsciously running his index finger around the collar of his sweater as he remembered how the collar of his school uniform had chafed his neck. He remembered how the illusion of grandeur created by St. Luke's Gothic exterior was shattered by the grimness of its dimly lit hallways.

Rigidity was the theme of education at St. Luke's. The teachers were competent but unimaginative. Discipline, not instruction, was their first priority. In the words of his Latin teacher, "Boys, we don't just teach academics here. We build character. Outside, society is burning up. If you're going to survive in the real world, you've got to know what you believe in and who you are."

Socially, the school was dominated by two groups, a gang of boys led by Dominic Martelli, the son of a local mafia leader, and the boys who played on the school's athletic teams. Mike's older brother, Carl, had been a starting halfback on the school's football team. His father wanted Mike to follow in Carl's footsteps, but Mike was neither muscular enough nor interested enough to even try out for the football

team. Mike filled his time outside school by studying, working at a part-time job, and spending time with his best friend Roger Stefano.

Physically, Roger and Mike were opposites. Roger was short and fat. Roger's school uniform always looked rumpled and sloppy. The bulge in shirt pocket caused by his most prized possession, a twenty function electronic calculator, did not help Roger's appearance. Mike and Roger became friends because as two of the best students they were always in the same honors classes. Unlike most of their classmates, Mike and Roger were not motivated by the jealous and spiteful competition for grades. They were primarily motivated by a love for learning and their own pride. People like Dominic called them nerds, but that didn't really bother them.

Mike smiled as he remembered how he and Roger had learned computer programming together. St. Luke's had only one computer terminal, which even in 1975 looked like an antique. Roger joked that the terminal looked like an old brown typewriter hooked up to a roll of yellow toilet paper, but appearances weren't important to Mike. He loved the terminal and the off campus computer it was connected to. The computer was everything his classmates weren't, responsive, intelligent, and fair. Once a week, the computer was accessible to the ten students in the computer club. Extracurricular activities were required of all honor students at St. Luke's. Since the club's adviser was rarely present, the other boys usually spent their time playing cards and left the computer to Mike and Roger.

"I love this thing," Roger said as they watched the computer run their latest program.

"Yeah, it's too bad we can't do this instead of going to school," Mike said.

Roger shrugged, "I'm not so sure. They say that school is the best time of our lives. Then we have to go to work, and that's even worse than school."

"I don't believe it has to turn out that way," Mike said. "People walk through life keeping their eyes closed, so they never know that things can be different."

Roger didn't want to argue with his friend. Besides, he secretly hoped that Mike was right. Roger's father was an accountant, who came home every night looking so beaten, he simply sat down, poured himself a scotch, and turned on the TV. Roger's mother made sure that his father's dinner was ready at precisely the moment he finished his drink.

"I hope college will be different," Roger said.

The mention of college dampened Mike's optimism.

"My parents can't afford to send me to college, so I'll never find out if I don't get a scholarship," Mike said dejectedly.

"You'll get one," Roger said.

Mike realized that Roger was the only person except Mary Liz he was really going to miss, but Mike knew Mary Liz wasn't going to miss him.

The Pontiac's big engine was warmed up and in its element on the long straight-aways of Pennsylvania Interstate. Mike felt he was going through a great moment of transition in his life. By crossing the country on his own in search of a better life, he was raising himself from the landless serfdom of a city dweller to the self-reliant freedom of a true American pioneer. But the proud moment faded when he stopped for dinner at a McDonald's just after crossing the Ohio border. The sight of families eating together made him feel self-conscious about being alone. He finished his meal quickly and got back in his car. He thought of America as a vast barrier that stood between him and his goal of California. He was determined to cross as much of that barrier as possible before sleeping.

After Cleveland the exits got farther and farther apart, and Mike got sleepier and sleepier. Each mile was a battle to keep his eyes open. He tried every trick he could think of to stay awake. He kept the windows open, blasted the radio, and even resorted to slapping himself in the face, but sleep was steadily overcoming him. He was angry with himself for needing to sleep. He resolved to cross the Indiana border that night, but the border was still fifty miles away. Finally, at two o'clock in the morning he crossed into Indiana.

He was so tired by the time he found a motel that he just passed out on the bed with all his clothes on. When Mike got up the next morning, he was upset to find that it was almost noon. He'd planned to be in Chicago by one. Now he would be lucky to make it by three. He took a quick shower in the aging bathroom of the motel, settled his bill, and got back on the Interstate. Mike was awestruck by eastern Indiana's seemingly endless acres of farmland. The thought occurred to him that all this land was once an undeveloped, continuous wilderness, but that piece-by-piece the land had been fenced in as the frontier had moved west. He wondered if there was still a piece of unfenced America left for him in California.

His experience of growing up in New York made him question if there was.

The only open spaces in New York were the public parks and beaches, but these could hardly be described as wilderness.

"Jesus, this traffic is awful," his father said as they waited in a two hour traffic jam that was part of the ritual of the Saturday summer outings to Jones Beach.

"There are all kinds of things could be done to make it better," Mike said. "It's just that the people in charge don't use the right kind of technology."

"Oh, and I suppose you could do a better job?" his father asked disdainfully. "I think the people in charge know a little more than you do."

“The same people who covered up Watergate, lost Saigon, and let New York City go broke?” Mike retorted.

“Hey, smart mouth,” his father shot back. “I served my country in Korea. Your uncle died fighting in World War II. Your grandfather left Poland and arrived in this city with nothing. I'm proud to be an American, and you should be too!”

“I am proud to be an American,” Mike said, “but being an American doesn't mean believing somebody just because they're in charge. It means being free. At least that what it says in the Declaration of Independence.”

His father stared at him. He could tell his father wanted to hit him. Mike knew he had gone too far, but he also knew he'd said what he really believed.

His father narrowed his eyes and said slowly, “You'll get yours. One day, you'll have to work all day to support your family. Then you won't be running around acting so goddamn above it all.”

Mike said nothing aloud, but thought to himself, “It will be different for me. Just wait and see.”

Mike's mother broke the silence. “It's hot in here. It's too bad we don't have air conditioning in this car.”

On the surface, this comment seemed perfectly innocent, but everyone in the Danzig family knew otherwise. Margaret never forgave her husband for not being able to provide what she considered to be a decent life. George worked as a welder, but his job never provided more than a modest income. The family's fortunes peaked when they were able to rent a two-bedroom apartment in the East Bronx in 1964. During the nineteen sixties, demand for welders in the New York area steadily declined as factories went broke or went elsewhere. In 1968, Margaret got a job as a typist. She got the job because she had to, not because she wanted to, and she never quite let her husband forget it.

George Danzig glared at his wife and son. It was obvious from the look on his face that he didn't know which of them he hated more. Then he looked at his other son, Carl, in the rear view mirror, “Ah, it's no use talking to a wimp or a snob about what goes on in a man's world. Hey Carl, do you think the Giants are going to make the playoffs this year?”

Mike said nothing for the rest of the trip, but when they got to the beach, Mike was still upset. Carl sensed this and took his brother for a walk.

“I hate when Dad attacks me,” Mike said when they safely out of earshot of their parents.

“He doesn't know what else to do,” Carl said. “You shouldn't argue with him. Fighting isn't the way to get ahead in this world. You've got to go along to get along. I'll bet you wouldn't want to fight so much if you started going out with some girls.”

Carl's words struck a nerve. As a football star, Carl got lots of girls. Mike thought the best of Carl's girlfriends was Suzanne Lenardi. Suzanne was bright, sensitive, soft-spoken, and very pretty. In short, Mike thought Suzanne was too good for Carl. Mike looked down at the sand and said, “I haven't met any girls that I really want to go out with.”

Carl laughed, “Don't give me that line. You're just afraid to go up and talk to them. It's O.K. They won't bite you,” Carl paused, “unless they really like you.”

Mike knew Carl was partially right, but Mike was convinced he was right about waiting for the right girl. He looked at the girls and women on the beach. This was a different beach from the one they showed on TV. Attractive friendly young women populated the TV beach, but this beach was in New York and the TV beach was in California.

He looked at the women again. His eyes settled on a young woman in a skimpy bikini who was sunning herself on a nearby beach towel. Suddenly the woman jerked her head up and yelled, “Get over here before I slap you,” at a three year old boy building a sand castle. Mike reaffirmed his promise to wait for the right girl, one who was beautiful on the inside as well as the outside.

Hunger interrupted Mike from thinking about his past. He hadn't eaten all day, but since Chicago was less than an hour away, he pushed on. His meager travel budget did not allow much money for sightseeing, but he was determined to visit Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.

Roger had visited the museum on a family vacation and talked about how the exhibits showed not just the theory of machines, but actual working models. Mike had gotten his fill of theory in school. He wanted practical knowledge. Contrary to his expectations, the museum, especially the computer exhibit, depressed him. The museum showed the accomplishments of Edison, Bell, and Ford. Although he felt that there was no way he could ever approach these giants, they provided an inspirational model. They had used their creativity to successfully overcome poverty and obscurity. He vowed to create something of value before he died.

Spurred by his visit to the museum, Mike headed out of Chicago in a rush. The fading late fall light wrapped the massive skyscrapers in a royal purple coat. The scene was visually beautiful, but it reminded him too much of New York. So he was glad to be on the Dan Ryan Expressway heading south and then turning west again. Whatever future he had, it was in California.

Mike drove until he was too tired to go on. He found a motel near Des Moines, Iowa. As he turned off the light and closed his eyes, he heard the unmistakable sound of a couple having sex coming from the next room.

The sound made him feel intensely lonely. He was too embarrassed to even find relief in masturbation. The sounds of lovemaking brought back the pain of losing Mary Liz. He fought back tears of loneliness as visions of a life without love filled his mind. "Was she really the right one after all?" he thought. "Am I ever going to find someone else? Even I do, will I lose her too?" He tossed in bed trying to find a position where he could not hear the couple, but it was no use. Finally, they expired and he fell asleep as well, but he woke with memories of Mary Liz on his mind.

He'd met Mary Liz at his after school job at the Windsor Castle candy store. If the store bore a resemblance to any part of a castle, it was to the dungeon. The store was old, dark, and musty and its shelves were cluttered with junk. Against this background, he couldn't help noticing her beauty from the moment she walked in. She was wearing a leather miniskirt, a T-shirt, and a black leather jacket that made her firm, well-shaped body look like a panther's. Her body only served as a setting for her lovely face with its high cheekbones, large widely-set brown eyes, sensual full mouth, and dark black hair that fell over her jacket in waves. She was not only beautiful but also possessed the easygoing self-confidence that made her the obvious leader of the two other girls who were with her.

Her beauty intimidated him. Mike thought of a thousand reasons to treat her like any other customer. He looked at her again out of the corner of his eye. Desire and fear struggled for control of his mind.

She walked up to the counter, rocked back on her heels, smacked her gum, looked at him coolly and said, "A pack of Marlboros."

Although she was playing the tough street girl, he sensed an underlying sensitivity in her eyes that contradicted her tough exterior. He couldn't just let this girl walk out of his life. He had to at least find out her name. It was now or never. Mike's mind went into overdrive. He didn't even notice that his palms were sweating. Mike knew she was under eighteen. The owner sold cigarettes to underage high school kids all the time, but Mike saw his opening and went for it.

"I'm sorry," he said, wincing at the way his voice cracked. "We can't sell you cigarettes unless you're eighteen."

"I'm eighteen. Want me to prove it?" she asked daringly.

"Yeah. I want you to prove it," he said, "by showing me your I.D."

"Dork!" she responded confirming her age by the adolescent tone of her voice.

She handed him a wallet with a badly forged driver's license, but when he took the license out of her wallet to examine it, he noticed her school I.D. with her name, Mary Elizabeth Connell, and her address, which he quickly memorized.

"Thank you, Mary Elizabeth," he said handing her the wallet and a pack of cigarettes.

As she left the store, she called out a parting curse, but there was a distinct look of interest in her eyes.

Calling Mary Elizabeth Connell was the most difficult thing Mike had ever done in his life. His fear of rejection almost paralyzed him, but the night after he'd met her, he looked up her phone number. He went into the living room, swallowed hard and dialed her number on the heavy black rotary phone. She did not make it easy for him, but he managed to ask her for a date.

He took her to the Cloisters, an authentic reconstruction of a Medieval French monastery set in a park on the northern tip of Manhattan Island. She was respectful, but silent, as they toured the museum. They stopped on a terrace and looked across the Hudson River to the wooded cliffs of the New Jersey palisades.

"Thanks for showing me this," she said.

"No problem," he said. "I enjoyed taking you. I love old and beautiful things. I don't get much of a chance to share them. There's a lot of beauty in this city if you know where to look for it."

Although he was looking off into the distance, he realized that for the first time since they'd met she was looking at him with her undivided attention. Her gaze made him feel vaguely uncomfortable, but he didn't know why.

"I guess I was running off at the mouth," he said uncomfortably.

"No," she said. "I like to hear you talk, but do me a favor.

Please don't call me Mary Elizabeth. Only my aunt calls me that. My friends call me Mary Liz."

He smiled and nodded.

She smiled back and took his hand. He felt his fingers fill with pleasure and send a wave of warm delight up his forearm, but he wasn't sure how to respond. He acutely felt the inadequacy of his inexperience. He gently explored her smaller fingers with his larger ones.

They walked hand in hand to the subway. When they got to her stop, she said, "I've got to say goodbye now." She stood on her toes and kissed him quickly on the cheek. Before he had a chance to return the kiss, she turned on her heels and ran through

the closing doors of the subway car. Mike went to the doors and watched her disappear as the train pulled out of the station. His fingers softly touched the spot on his cheek where she'd kissed him. Mike rode home filled with a self-confidence that he'd never felt before.

Mike was grateful to be out of the motel and back on the road. As he sped across the empty cornfields of Iowa, he cranked the radio up as loud as it would go. Moving to the music made him forget his earlier vow to save gas by driving slowly. He floored the Pontiac. He wanted to take the car up to one hundred miles per hour. It was one of his fantasies about driving cross-country. When he was a boy, he dreamed that the whole family would take a cross-country trip. The high point of this dream was taking pictures of bears in Yellowstone National Park. He was not even going to Yellowstone. It was not on the way.

He figured he could at least enjoy driving fast. He watched the speedometer needle climb from seventy to eighty and then to ninety, but as the needle reached ninety-five the engine began to make a loud, unsettling, clanking noise. He knew he was pushing the car dangerously close to its limits. With a feeling of regret tempered by good sense, he dropped his speed back down to sixty-five.

Mike pulled off the Interstate to get gas. He paid for the gas with one of his precious twenty dollars bills. He'd budgeted enough to get to California and survive until his first payday, but he wondered what would he do if the clanking noise got worse and something happened to the car. He imagined being stranded in the middle of nowhere and began to panic. Two voices inside him became engaged in a heated argument. One voice said, "Going to California is a dumb idea. I'm just a dumb Pollack. I should give up and go back home while I still can."

The second voice said, "If I go back now, I'll never be free. This is my chance to do something really important. I'm not going to blow it by quitting before I start."

"What if I don't make it in California?" the first voice whined.

"So what? At least I'll have tried to do something with my life," the second voice said defiantly.

"There's no point in even trying. I'll never make it. I'm a loser," the first voice said insistently.

"No, damn it, I'm not!" the second voice answered, just as resolutely.

He hesitated a moment at the entrance to the Interstate. One way pointed east and the other west. He hunched his shoulders and turned the car west toward California. After he got back on the Interstate, he started to feel better. When they played his favorite song on the radio, he felt like he could drive the rest of the way to California without stopping. He calculated exactly what percentage of the total distance to California remained to be driven. The calculation made the miles easier, but his mind

started to wander as the hours passed. When he found himself saying things like “only seventy-nine point four miles more to Why-O-Wyoming,” out loud, he began to wonder if he was starting to go crazy.

At about two o'clock in the morning, Mike passed through Rawlins, Wyoming. The effects of eighteen hours of almost continuous driving were taking their toll. The large container of coffee he drank at the last truck stop wasn't doing the trick. He was trying to remember the entire roster of the 1969 New York Mets baseball team when he saw the blinking red lights of a police car in his rear view mirror. A rush of fear surged through Mike's body.

“Do you know how fast you were going, son?” the policeman said in a stern voice.

“Fifty-five,” Mike said as firmly as he could.

“Sometimes you were,” the policeman said, “and sometimes you were down as low as thirty and up as high as seventy-five. May I see your license and registration?”

The crackle of the police radio and the glare of the patrol car's lights jolted Mike into maximum alertness.

“How many drinks have you had today, son?”

Fear began to overwhelm Mike. He had grown up on horror stories of the arbitrary cruelty of small town policemen, but he resolved not to let his fear show.

“None, sir,” Mike answered, making a concerted effort to steady his voice.

“Please get out of the car,” the policeman ordered.

“What for?” Mike objected.

“Just get out of the car,” the policeman's attitude was nasty now.

Mike got out of the car, and involuntarily put his forearm in front of the beam of the policeman's flashlight.

The policeman could see that the kid wasn't on anything, only tired.

“How long have you been driving, son?”

“About fourteen hours. Since Des Moines. I'm going to California. I'm moving out there.”

“Well don't blow it by getting killed in Wyoming,” the policeman said. “It's a real nice state, but not that nice. There isn't another major town for almost a hundred miles. You won't make it. There's a place to make a U-turn about half a mile on the left.”

Make that U-turn and I'll follow you back to the last exit. There's a good little motel there. You get spend the night there, or I'll have no choice but to arrest you for reckless driving.”

Mike knew the cop was doing him an important favor, but he resented the cop for stopping his progress. Mike said nothing, and briefly nodded his head in acquiescence.

At the motel, the policeman said, “Don't be in such a rush. You'll get there.”

When Mike got up late the next morning he felt invigorated by a good night's sleep and the crisp fall mountain air. He devoured breakfast in a local diner and got back on Interstate 80.

In the darkness of the previous night, he could only make out the vague outline of the mountains. Now, in the daylight he saw them in their full glory. They were majestic, snowcapped, and seemingly endless in their domination of the horizon. He'd never seen anything like them before.

He was about to get back in the car, but the policeman's advice about taking it easy seemed wise. He decided that while he might not have time to visit Yellowstone, he did have a few hours to take a hike in the woods. Soon, the forest surrounded him. He was glad that he'd decided to live in the West, where there was still room to be alone. He got back in the car feeling refreshed and happy. He started the car, put his foot on the gas, and made tracks across the Wyoming wilderness for California.