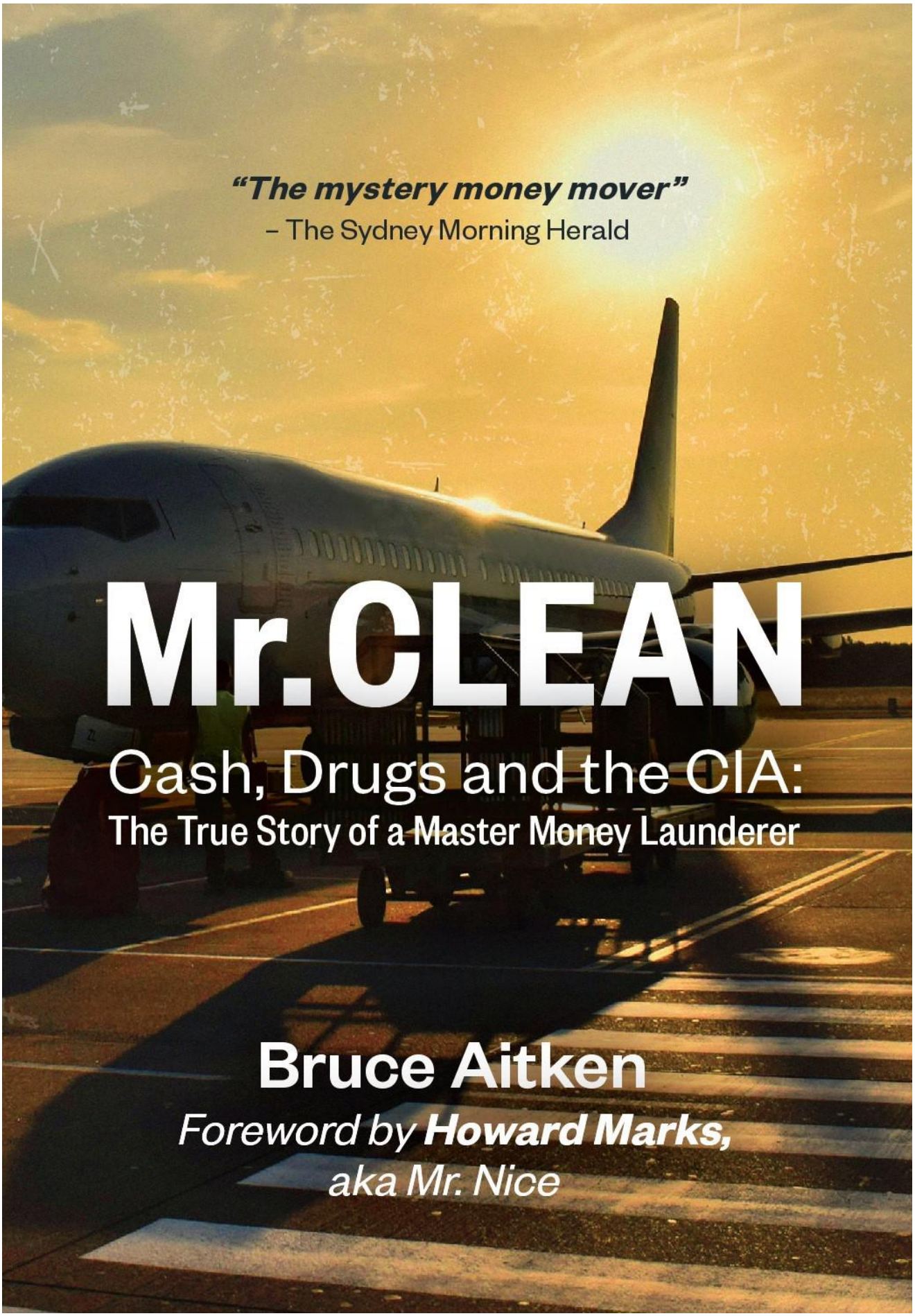
"The mystery money mover"
– The Sydney Morning Herald
Mr.CLEAN
Cash, Drugs and the CIA:
The True Story of a Master Money Launderer
Bruce Aitken
Foreword by Howard Marks,
aka Mr. Nice

CHAPTER 1

Chasing Dreams

MONEY FOR ME always held some fascination, because as a youth it was a scarce commodity in our household. I grew up in a small town — Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, just eight miles from New York City. On a clear day, you could see the George Washington Bridge on the River Hudson.

In the 1940s and 1950s, life there was simple. We never locked our doors at night, and during the hot and humid summers both the front and back doors were left open so you could catch the breeze. Life was beautiful, although we were poor. I look back with particular nostalgia on lazy Sundays; so-called "blue laws" required many enterprises to be closed, but Mom and Dad usually had enough for an especially delicious noonday meal.

The population of the town was about 12,000. We had a corner candy store, a Jewish butcher, a Polish ice-man who delivered ice for the icebox, and an Italian man who sold strawberries. I played baseball from early morning until late at night with other young baseball fanatics, and developed good skills playing in Little League.

Once, after pitching a great game, the father of the pitcher on the opposing team got into an argument with my dad and told him: "Bruce is so damn lucky; if you dropped him into a sewer, he would come up with a gold watch." I never forgot that. The luck of the Irish: I almost felt blessed.

My dad, "Irish" Jay Aitken — his mom was Irish and his dad Scottish — was born in 1893. My mom was born Alice Schonemann, Swedish on her mom's side and German on her dad's. My stern German grandfather had at one time been head waiter at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, while my Scottish grandfather was Catholic and had been a sailor on a ship that frequently came to New York before he settled in New Jersey.

Before Dad met Mom, he had been married to another woman and they'd had a daughter together. Unfortunately, I never met either of them. When Dad took off with young

Alice — a real beauty, ten years his junior — they must have created quite a scandal at a time when going off and starting a new family just wasn't the done thing.

Dad and the other woman never got divorced but the new union proved to be a lasting one — and produced five "illegitimate" children. I grew up with a sister, Honey, 17 years my senior; a brother Jim, ten years older; and twin sisters, Janice and Joanne, two years older. The twins and I were inseparable, partly because we had been born and grew up in a slightly different era than the others.

I made my introduction to the world as a menopause baby in 1945. Story goes that when the neighborhood doctor, Dr. Basralian, found out my mom was pregnant at the age of 42, he was frantic and recommended she not go through with it. Mom replied without hesitation: "Dr. Basralian, you can go to hell!" Dad said it was the first and only time he'd ever heard my mother curse.

As I grew up, our family felt quite ostracized. Dad took to drinking a lot — like a true Irishman in both custom and appearance. His real estate business failed, and he didn't feel welcome in the Catholic Church — he told people the church had declined to give him some painting job he'd wanted, and so out of spite we never went to church. We lived downstairs in a family house, with various aunts and uncles living upstairs. Our small flat had two bedrooms and extra sleeping space in the living room. I was 14 years old and in high school when Dad begrudgingly installed the first shower in our bathroom.

Dad had his talents. For example, he could play the piano by ear — as soon as he heard a song, he could play it. But since we lived next door to Leo's Tavern, his partiality for drinking and playing music created something of a recipe for disaster. Many nights I had to pick him up off the bench outside the house and drag him home.

But I loved him dearly; after all, he was my dad. And besides, he was the one who taught me how to play baseball. Once, he'd even met Babe Ruth, probably the most legendary baseball player of all time.

Both my mom, who looked angelic with her beautiful head of natural white hair, and my dad, were ahead of their times. Not only did they live together unmarried well before that way of life came into vogue, but my mom also had to work to support the family: she was the bread-winner, and worked as a switchboard operator at the Physicians & Surgeons Exchange in Hackensack. She worked like a slave, putting in long hours for a pittance of 40 cents an hour, although in later years she reached the lofty heights of a dollar an hour. She got paid every Friday.

As a consequence, my adorable — though not identical — twin sisters and I came to love Friday nights. By most Wednesdays, we had already run out of food and the cupboard

was bare. So, on Fridays, we would meet my mom as soon as she got off work and head for the Safeway Supermarket. We'd then board the 102 bus to go home and feast.

For my part, I became an entrepreneur early on, and took odd jobs whenever I could: I was a shoeshine boy, sold lemonade with my sisters, cut grass, shoveled snow and worked as a newspaper boy for the *Bergen Evening Record.* Later on, I set pins at the Pioneer Club bowling alley.

Our hero! Dad was a real 'ham'

THERE were times when my father demonstrated extraordinary *chutzpah*, extreme self-confidence. I remember one hot summer Sunday, when Mom had been sick for a week. She couldn't go to work, and we were broke and famished.

Leo's Bar was an excellent restaurant, normally jam-packed with hungry diners on a Sunday afternoon, and it was within stumbling distance. Suddenly, I heard the screen door open, shaking me out of a hot and hungry, sleepy summer trance. Dad came running in, breathing hard, with a huge ham in his arms. The aroma was tantalizing.

"Quick!" said Dad. "Close the doors. Be quiet! No one is home!" My sisters and I ran for cover, but not before each of us grabbed a large chunk of ham which my dad sliced off for us. *Hallelujah, this was heaven!* I quietly rejoiced at the thought that we were going to feast on ham sandwiches for the next two weeks.

Suddenly, Leo — six foot tall, muscular, wearing a snarling face creased with a mean and ruddy complexion — came running out of the restaurant screaming and yelling, "Where is my ham?! Goddammit! Who took my ham?! Who stole my goddamn ham?!"

We froze.

Leo was followed closely by a herd of hungry diners who had been patiently waiting for Sunday lunch. Apparently, the big ham had just come out of the oven and had been placed on the window sill to cool off. We heard banging on our door. My dad finally answered, and found a mean crowd of diners standing there. Despite whiffs of delicious ham wafting throughout our house, Dad mustered up a look of total astonishment and bellowed: "What ham!?"

I was damn proud of my Dad. He was a real character.

Problem was, he just could not hold down a job. He worked mainly as a house painter and eked out a living sporadically. He taught my brother Jim and myself how to paint houses, and Jim eventually went on to make a good business out of it. In fact, Dad actually ended up working for Jim — when he kept off the booze. When he got his own painting jobs from time to time, I would sometimes have to go finish them so he could get paid.

One day he came home and announced he had been hired to be a janitor at the nearby synagogue. We were so happy. He had the keys and all he had to do was keep the place straight. I laughed when he got the job because for reasons I never understood, his whole life had been spent blaming Jews (as well as Blacks, Italians and Puerto Ricans) for all the problems in the world. I can still hear my mom telling him, "Oh Jay, they are not all like that!" My mom loved everyone. Fortunately, I took after her. My best friends have been Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews — all sorts of people.

(More importantly, the neighborhood's Jewish butcher actually saved my life when I was four years old. From his shop window, he saw me riding my tricycle into the path of an oncoming car; he dashed out, and snatched me off the cycle just in the nick of time.)

Anyway, my dad started the janitorial job on a Friday, and immediately discovered the ceremonial wine cabinet. After all, he had the key.

The next morning being Saturday, the Sabbath, the Rabbi and some of his flock arrived early, only to find Dad and a couple of his red-faced Irish friends passed out on the synagogue floor, empty bottles of wine strewn all around the wine cabinet. He was fired on the spot.

Back at home, Dad continued to connive at every opportunity. We kids dreaded the unexpected, and jumped out of our skins whenever the doorbell rang. We were instructed *never* to answer the door — *never* to open it — because it might be a bailiff serving a subpoena to appear in court for an unpaid debt. We normally had the TV on, blasting away, and when the doorbell rang we'd turn everything off and run out the back door, so technically nobody would be home.

The TV and radio were part of a deal we had with Amana, a household appliance firm, that included a freezer and food plan. A salesman appeared one day and we signed up. The deal was that you placed a quarter into the TV and it came on for two hours. We could watch baseball — usually the New York Giants or the Brooklyn Dodgers, whose games were preceded by *Happy Felton's Knot-Hole Gang* pre-game show. We hated the Yankees. When we ran out of money, we listened to the radio. Radio was great. You only had to use your imagination — that gift from God that can take a lifetime to appreciate.

When the big Amana freezer arrived, it was stocked full of food. What a deal. We ate all the food and, when it was gone, my father called the suppliers and told them to come and take the freezer back because we couldn't pay. We were all sad to see it go.

Being poor was often challenging. When the electricity bill could not be paid and the power was cut off, we studied by candle light. When we couldn't pay the heating bill, we froze.

During my freshman year in high school, my aged and senile Aunt Mary, who lived upstairs, suddenly got a wild hair up her butt and decided she'd had enough of us. Since the family house was in her name, she went to court and had us kicked out on the street for not paying her rent.

Rolling with the punches

I WAS a typically confused teenager, confronting all the challenges that teenagers face, although being poor had made me tough. If anyone said anything against my family or anyone in it, there would be a big fight, for sure. As we grew up, we learned not to take any crap from anyone.

I don't know why, but some of the kids in my neighborhood were always fighting. I never wanted to fight anyone, but I fought from time to time. It was all about earning something called "respect."

I was an honor student, but I was losing interest in school. I lost interest in everything, in fact, except maybe girls — and they were a mystery. Sure, I knew I should go to college, but on what — thin air? Where was the money going to come from?

Ultimately, I decided — along with my best friends Vic Dragon, Richie Jaeger, Bob Soel, Phil Stroh, Eddie Geleski and Jeff Draesel — that I should go to the prestigious Rutgers University and become a doctor.

When the mail came one day, Bobby found out he was going off to Lycoming on a football scholarship, while Vic, Richie and Jeff all got letters saying they had been accepted to Rutgers. So I rushed off home and found my own letter waiting for me, also from Rutgers. I was so happy! When I tore it open, though, it looked different than the others. In a few short words, I was told the university was returning my application, and that the check for the admission fee in the amount of five dollars was being returned because of "insufficient funds."

I was so mad. I had given my dad the five dollars I had earned setting up pins at the local bowling alley every Friday and Saturday night.

When I told him, I could see that Dad felt hurt, so I gave him another five dollars and resubmitted the application. Two weeks later, another letter from Rutgers arrived. Yet again, the check had been returned for insufficient funds. "Do not re-apply," was the stern advice. All my friends were going away to college. I felt left behind, alone and lost.

It was a time of deep despair and disappointment.

I knew I needed to get away, and in fact even although I was not of a religious disposition as a young man, I always felt that God had a special plan for me. During the many

times when I felt I had no guidance and had to learn from my own mistakes, I always felt everything would turn out OK. And I prayed a lot. No doubt this was a result of my mother's influence. She always said: "If you don't have anything good to say about anyone, then don't say anything at all." I found out much later than many of her words of wisdom came from the New Testament. She was an angel, for sure.

My greatest dream, however, was not to become a doctor. It was to become a professional baseball player. That was my greatest passion in life, and I followed the games almost religiously on TV or the radio. I had played baseball throughout high school, and you might say that I was a star pitcher, managing a couple of no-hitters and a perfect game.

One day, after one of my last games in high school, I got a call. It was from a fellow named Bob Potts, manager of the Paterson Phillies, a New Jersey baseball team. Bespectacled, rotund and non-athletic in appearance, Bob was a baseball lover at heart and a quiet, nice fellow. He said he had been following my career via the newspaper, the *Bergen County Record*.

"How would you like to pitch for the Phillies this Sunday?" he asked.

This was a massive break. It was one of those phone calls all ambitious athletes dream about, but fear never will come. I was in heaven. First big step into the pros!

"Come to the field in Hackensack at noon Sunday, and we'll have a uniform ready for you."

Sunday came, and it turned out I pitched a good game. We won — and I was on my way. Semi-pro baseball was a great delight. I started looking forward to every Sunday.

(I got to rub shoulders with some real characters in my baseball days. On one occasion I was about to leave for the game in Paterson when the phone rang. It was Mr. Dragon, the father of my best friend Vic. Mr. Dragon was a pretty tough guy who umpired semi-pro games on Sundays. "Bruce," he said, "are you pitching in Paterson today?" I was and he breathed a sigh of relief. "That's great. My car won't start. Can I hitch a ride with you?" As we approached the field in Paterson, Mr. Dragon thought for a moment and suddenly yelled out: "Stop the car a couple of blocks from the field and let me out. I'll walk from there. It'll be a scandal if the pitcher arrives bringing along the umpire!")

The following week, we played in New York City, then in Garfield, New Jersey, the Sunday after. One of the best players on the Garfield team was an outstanding baseball player named Ken Huebner. In both appearance and raw natural ability, Ken — who was one year ahead of me — reminded me of a modern-day Babe Ruth. We knew each other from reading about one another's exploits in the newspapers and we became instant friends. In fact, we would remain friends right up until his passing in 2018.

Ken asked me about my college plans, and he seemed surprised when I told him about my failed attempts.

"Listen," he said. "Let me see what I can do."

Ken had a full baseball scholarship at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida, an excellent college with a great baseball program.

It was mid-July, 1963. A couple of days later, I had just arrived home after painting a house all day when Mom informed me I had received a call from a man named Hal Smeltzly. He turned out to be the baseball coach at Florida Southern College.

I took a deep breath and dialed his number. "Hello, Mr. Smeltzly?"

For over an hour, we talked about my good academic and baseball records. He said I had been highly recommended to him by his star player, Ken Huebner. He said if Ken thought I was a great pitcher, that was good enough for him. An application for admission to Florida Southern would be coming in the mail.

"Fill it out as soon as you receive it, and ask your high school to send me your transcripts. Don't worry about anything, but don't delay! You will be on a full scholarship for four years, half baseball and half academic."

I was speechless.

In late August, 1963, I met Ken at the airport in Newark, New Jersey. I was 18 years old, and it was the first time I had flown on a plane. Always gracious, Ken let me sit by the window. First destination was Tampa, then Lakeland, Florida.

Playing baseball for Florida Southern was a dream come true. Over the four years I spent there, we won the Florida Conference Championships, and I made the All-American College Baseball Team in 1965, with the lowest ERA (Earned Run Average) in the nation. My record still stands at Florida Southern. The highlight of the year was playing against the Detroit Tigers during spring training. I was even called a "college baseball star" by the *New York Times*, in a story about how scouts were looking for new players for the major leagues.

New York Times, Friday, June 4, 1965 / St. Petersburg Independent

College Baseball:
Draft Choices... Guerrant of Michigan, Fred Mazeruk of Pittsburg, Bill Monday of Arizona State, ***Bruce Aitken of Florida Southern****….Terry Craven of San Francisco State, John Fause of Arizona….These are just some of the college baseball stars being watched eagerly by the scouts of the twenty major league clubs which will meet in New York next week to conduct their first free agent draft of college, high school, and sandlot players. Aitken, a right-hander,*

led all pitchers in earned run percentage with a 0.63 mark. He had an 8-2 won-lost record for Florida Southern, permitting only 42 hits in 71 innings. He walked 16 and struck out 61.

In addition, I had been invited to two back-to-back tryouts at the great Yankee Stadium, "the house that Ruth built." I recall pitching on the mound, mesmerized by the aura of the place; and, although it was frowned upon, I scooped up a handful of dirt as a keepsake.

My enthusiasm had me thinking: pro baseball, that's the next step for me, no doubt about it!

Florida Southern College was a great school both academically and athletically. I studied Economics, worked hard, and — to my surprise, at a Methodist school — I even enjoyed the mandatory Wednesday religious hour in the school chapel.

What I did not enjoy was the mandatory Reserve Officer Training Corps drills. By this time, the war in Vietnam was in full rage and ROTC graduates from schools like ours could go to Vietnam as Second Lieutenants. I still recall one of the lectures by a sergeant: "Gentlemen, this is the M-1 rifle. It weighs 9.5 pounds; with the bayonet attached it weighs 10.5 pounds. Therefore, the bayonet weighs 1 pound." There was a lot of laughter over that comment. As for me, I just wanted to get back to baseball.

Hopes shattered

BEFORE I knew it, I had graduated from Florida Southern. I was 22 and still poor as a church mouse.

I returned to New Jersey for the summer to play baseball, expecting to get drafted by a pro team. Ken went on to play for the Kansas City Royals and I was talking to scouts from several major league clubs. I was among the top picks in the upcoming pro baseball draft, and was expected to be offered contracts worth over $50,000, which was a fortune at that time.

Then, one hot New York City Sunday in June, while scouts were in the stands watching, it happened.

I had been pitching a great game, when all of a sudden I felt a sharp pain in my right knee from an old injury suffered in college. Then it locked. I could not straighten out my leg. The pain was excruciating, and so was my panic about potential serious damage. Soon, I was on the way to the hospital. The doctor at the Emergency Room applied enough force on my knee to straighten out my leg and put a cast on it. A month later, the cast was off, but so were the baseball offers. I had thrown my last pitch in organized baseball.

My dreams were shattered.

In fact, it felt like everything was shattered. I had no money and my future prospects looked dim. It was hard to find the motivation after my injury and having been so close to fulfilling my baseball dreams, but I knew life had to go on.

On a lark, I had applied for a job in Ft. Meade, Maryland, along with a good college buddy, George Kerekes. I passed the test and suddenly found myself being offered a job at the National Security Agency, a national-level intelligence agency of the United States Department of Defense, as a cryptographer.

Looking back at it now, and considering my later career of choice, it feels a bit ironic that my first job offer after graduating was from a US government intelligence organization. The training was due to start in September.

As mentioned, this was the height of the Vietnam War, however, and the bloody NSA job was not draft-exempt. In September 1967, just as I was preparing to go to Maryland and start my new life as a cog in the government intelligence machine, I received a notice from the draft board to report to Newark, New Jersey, for the Army induction physical.

I was very much against the Vietnam War and personally regarded it as total madness. I thought to myself: "I'll be damned if I am ever going to shoot anyone. America can go to hell first!" At the time, I was protesting in Greenwich Village and listening to Bob Dylan.

But there we were, my high school buddies and I, all together on the way to Newark to get physicals; and before long we'd surely be on our way to the killing fields of Vietnam.

A couple of hours later, we were on the bus back to Hasbrouck Heights, comparing notes. When it came to my turn, I was able to report that I would not be going to war.

The doctor had moved my knee around and announced: "Torn lateral meniscus, you fail."

This was the first time in my life I'd felt a sense of joy at being a failure. The injury had turned into a blessing. But I still wasn't clear what the hell I was going to do with my life. Because of the draft process, my start at the NSA had been postponed until the following April, seven months away — and I needed to get a job before then.

Salad days

I HAD a 1954 Chevrolet I had bought for $200 and it took me three days to drive it from New Jersey back to Florida, where I still had many friends.

I was taking the Lakeland exit off I-4 when the car shuddered violently and stopped. I got out and looked underneath it only to see that the drive shaft had embedded itself in the blacktop. I only had a couple of miles to go. My friends, Ellis Shaw, a college basketball

player from Coral Gables, and Norm Wolfinger, from Easton, Pennsylvania, were expecting me soon.

After pushing the car onto the grass and removing the license plates, I said good-bye to my Chevy and started to walk down the ramp to hitch-hike the rest of the way. Suddenly, a big semi-tractor trailer blew its horn and stopped to help me. The driver looked the car over, and pronounced: "I can fix it, if you let me buy it."

Happily, I signed the Bill of Sale over to him and took him up on his kind offer of $25 for the car and a ride into Lakeland.

My friend Norm, who was later decorated after being wounded in Vietnam, was destined to become a top lawyer, a well-respected prosecutor for the State of Florida. But in the first summer out of college, in 1967, he drove a potato chip delivery truck. We'd shared some wild times during our college days, and they were about to continue.

Norm turned me on to Colt 45 malt liquor beer and, taking after my Irish dad, I found myself getting drunk with my friends every weekend and chasing girls around in the boondock phosphate pits we called "High Tension" on account of the electricity pylons at the entrance gate. Our Friday night ritual was to wander down to Lakeland to "colored town," as African-American neighborhoods in every city in the South were known. There, we found ourselves treated like honored guests by the "sisters" and friendly bar owners. One time, Norm got so drunk he was arrested for peeing on the nearby Golden Arches at McDonalds.

Years later, as a Florida prosecuting attorney who'd put his wild days to bed, he would go out of his way, as only a true best friend could, to write a letter on my behalf to a prosecuting attorney in support of my bid for freedom from incarceration.

Ellis, meanwhile, went on to Vietnam as a soldier and caught some mysterious illness while on tour. Learning of his death was one of the saddest moments in my life.

My luck turns

THAT same spell in '67, I got a job working in Bartow, Florida — in the phosphate mines. The job title was "dam tender" and it was hard and tedious work.

Long pipes gushed water and built up gravel underneath, and when the gravel came to the top of the pipe, you had to call for another pipe to be connected, otherwise it would back up into the system. That was the job — watching the end of a pipe all day.

It was 40 miles away from where I was living and I had no car. Work started at 7am sharp and ended at 3pm. I really had no choice, though; I had to eat. Every day I woke up at 5am. It was pitch dark.

I started to hitchhike to work. You could still hitchhike in America in those days and with luck I would usually arrive in time. I'd do it over again on the way home.

I soon realized I needed a real job, however. So, after a few weeks, I went to Orlando to see Terri, a girl I had dated in college.

(While spending time with Terry and her family, something odd happened. Her parents were interested in psychic or supernatural forces, and they made an appointment for me to visit a mystic they thought very highly of, to get "checked out." With nothing to lose, I agreed to try it out. The mystic, named Robert Bos, looked me in the eyes; in return I looked into his, which were bright gray. Suddenly, he said: "I'm getting something." What happened next was weird: he told me a few details about my early life that no one knew about, then concluded by saying that — to his amazement — I had 13 guardian angels, which meant I would have a life graced with amazing luck. Almost nothing could go wrong, he stressed. However, he saw something else, too — something not so great. He frowned and I read fear and sadness in his mysterious eyes. I pleaded with him to tell me but he flatly refused. This would bother me for years to come, and I always wondered if one fine day I would find out what he'd seen.)

I started doing random daily jobs in Orlando through Manpower, the staffing firm, and stayed in a cheap hotel near the local "colored town." I was feeling increasingly adrift and knew I needed to get serious about my future, so I paid a visit to the office of a local headhunter and made a detailed résumé. After all, I had a college degree in Economics.

When I returned to the fleabag hotel one day, I found a message waiting. I had an interview the next day for a job as a claims adjustor. If I got it, I'd have a company car — just imagine! This was to be another major turning point in my life.

The next day I put on my only white shirt and a tie, and hitchhiked across Orlando to a small office building: Employers Insurance of Wausau.

"Hi, I'm Ron Langa," said the athletic-looking young fellow interviewing me. Ron wore a brilliant, broad welcoming smile, and a white short-sleeved shirt and tie, formal but at the same time carefree and casual.

In essence, adjusters inspect personal injury claims or property damage to determine how much an insurance company should pay for a loss. And Ron was the only adjuster in Orlando at that time, a one-man operation. A sharp, witty and fun-loving young bachelor, he hired me, and we became instant lifelong friends.

Later, we even attended law school together, and while I lasted only a year, Ron went on to become a top lawyer in Orlando.

By the time I got back from a six-week claims adjuster training course in Wausau, Wisconsin, I had pretty much forgotten any vague ambitions of getting a knee operation and playing baseball — or indeed of going to work for the NSA. I had a decent salary, a company car, and a big South Florida territory to work in. Sometimes I would take off on company business and return a couple of days later, spending Friday in the office doing the paperwork. I soon moved into a nice house with Ron, and on weekends we partied.

At last, I had enough money to eat what I wanted, whenever I wanted — three big meals a day on the road! In less than two months, my weight quickly ballooned from the same 165 pounds I'd weighed when I graduated from high school, to a staggering 203. When I stepped on the scale, I was shocked, and started running. I also switched to cottage cheese and stopped eating like a pig, rapidly returning to 165.

My family was still in New Jersey, and poor as hell, so about three months after returning to Orlando, in the Fall of '67, and after getting my first pay-checks, I sent for Mom and Dad. I rented a trailer home for them to stay in temporarily, and asked Joanne, one of the twins, to drive them down from New Jersey.

Family reunion

A WEEK later, expecting my parents to arrive at any moment, I was staying close to the phone. When it rang, it was Janice. "We are almost there. We just passed Daytona Beach."

"We," to my amazement, turned out to be not only my mom and dad, but my twin sisters and their families, plus Honey and her current wild boyfriend, Lonny. Soon, the whole caravan arrived at our house. All my plans were upset. Ron was equally surprised. All I could think was: *it will take all my salary to support this family*.

Soon, the situation degenerated into an Irish fighting match. The small trailer home was packed. And then, all of sudden, it was emptied of Mom and Dad.

Honey had forced them to move into a room at a boarding house with her and Lonny, and together they were sucking up the little cash I had given to Mom. I was livid. Arriving at their room, I threw a fit: I took Mom and Dad, and, much to their relief, returned them to the trailer.

Back home that night, there was a knock at the door. A police car with flashing red lights was parked outside. Ron answered. I waited, then came out.

"Are you Bruce Aitken?" the officer asked. "Come with me; you are under arrest."

This was the first time I had ever been arrested — although years later I would have a few more of these unpleasant experiences.

"Your sister has charged you with assault," the officer advised me.

Ron was enraged and told the police the truth about what had happened, but the officer insisted: "Sorry, come with me and let the judge decide."

I went to the police station and was formally charged, and ended up posting bail of $100.

"Ok, you can go now," said the same officer.

"Not so fast," I said.

"What is it?"

"I want to file a complaint. Can I do that?"

"Certainly!"

So, I filed a complaint against Honey — for assault. Within an hour, she was picked up and charged and brought to the same police station. I had gone home long before I got the call from Mom bearing the news.

She asked: "Is Honey going to spend the night in the police station? She can't post the $100 bail." The next morning, I dropped the charges.

Honey had a penchant for having people arrested whenever they disagreed with her. It must have been the Irish blood. Years earlier, in New Jersey, she got into a big fight with my brother Jim about who was to pay for the burial of my father when he passed away. My dad, still very much alive, had to go to the police station and bail them *both* out.

Get me out of here

AFTER a year or so, I lost interest in claims adjusting. I was driving down the interstate one day, listening to Glen Campbell's version of *Take Me Home, Country Roads* on the radio, and I pulled into a rest area and looked at the stack of files on the car seat. I just felt I'd come to a point where I couldn't continue doing this job any more.

At heart, I missed the excitement of playing baseball — the sport was still a big part of me. Confused and unhappy, I turned around, drove back to the office and gave my notice.

Once again, I found myself at a loss, albeit a self-inflicted one. Thankfully, Honey had got a job and moved out — all was forgiven on that front. But I had gone and rented a nice little house for Mom and Dad, even though I was constantly broke.

As I joined the ranks of the unemployed, I had about a month's savings in the bank. I needed another miracle. Luckily, one Sunday morning soon after I'd quit my job, fate struck again.

I had one hell of a hangover from the night before, so I got up late. Ron was out of town for the weekend and I was alone in the house. Slowly relishing a second cup of coffee and

feeling quite depressed, I turned to the jobs section of the *Orlando Sentinel.* There, I saw my future in large black letters right there in front of me: American Express International Banking Corporation.

They were interviewing in Orlando for overseas assignments in something called military banking. Of all places, AmEx was looking to send staff to Vietnam. College graduates with a bachelor degree in Business or Economics were "most welcome." My hangover suddenly disappeared and my spirits soared. I could see excitement returning to my life, and for a second I forgot about the horrors and dangers of the war. My imagination rushed. *Where would this lead me to?* Vietnam to start with, but after that? London? Paris? Amsterdam?

Suddenly, the world felt full of opportunities.

Excitement beckons

I APPLIED for the job, got it, and went to New York for training. It was early Fall of 1969 and I was 24 years old. It felt great to be back in the Big Apple and to be employed by a big company.

The interview with Amex in Orlando had gone smoothly. In fact, it seemed like the main requirement for Vietnam was that you had a warm body.

The training class was into its second week when one of the executives walked into our class and dropped the bomb.

"Will the three staff assigned to Vietnam identify yourselves?" he said. "Urgent openings are available right now, for a bonus."

Suddenly, three hands went up — the hands of the poor and hungry; me and two colleagues, Vince and Bill.

"Come with me right now," said the executive. "You'll go to AmEx Travel and make the flight arrangements. You can finish your training on the way at Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa."

Calling my family and friends in Florida with the news, they thought I was totally nuts. "Are you crazy? There is a war going on in Vietnam. You protested it! Don't go!" But the decision was a no-brainer. I felt driven by a sense of fate and excitement. I had to get away.

Forty-eight hours later, I was staring out the window as the plane descended over the mountains on our final approach into Fairbanks, Alaska. Next stop, Japan. Things seemed to be rushing forward at ultra-rapid speed and I was just hanging on as best as I could.

After finally arriving in Tokyo I took a taxi downtown, watching the lights and the crowds. I didn't have much time. I found a bar, chatted with the bar girl, was overcharged,

and felt I'd had my first taste of the exotic Far East. It felt surreal to suddenly be in Asia, on the other side of the planet.

Next destination was the Kadena Air Force Base. The Japanese island of Okinawa had been a critical strategic location for the United States Armed Forces since the end of World War II and the base was a sprawling structure. We stayed off-base and commuted back and forth with other AmEx staff for a couple of weeks. Even in that short space of time, we met a steady flow of staff coming back through from Saigon, Vietnam on military flights. They were full of war stories and constantly telling us to change our minds while we still had the chance.

We were booked into a tiny hotel, the Koza Kanko, and found ourselves suffering from all kinds of culture shock. And yet it was exhilarating just to be out of the USA and in a foreign country. Quite frankly, I didn't give a damn which country it was: I just wanted excitement in my life again. I had also discovered rice. Rice with sauces. We had never eaten the stuff. We ate potatoes, because we had been told rice was for weaklings — "the little people."

There was a street in Koza City — now part of Okinawa City — called BC Street, a seedy, run-down place with lots of bars and girls catering to the US military. It was there that I came upon a row of small shacks linked up together, each about the size of an outhouse. There must have been a peephole for each occupant, because each time I approached one of the shacks, the door would swing open and a woman in her fifties — a *mama-san* — would jump out and, with an alluring smile, offer a menu of "services."

I was surprised and quite horrified. This was my first exposure to the ubiquitous "skin trade" in Asia, and to the availability of women from the world's oldest profession, about which I had been totally naive. This was a new world.

Next stop, Vietnam. There, an ongoing war and new levels of debauchery awaited.

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