

GARRETT'S STORY

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars...

Jack Kerouac

I was born in Indiana during World War 2, while my father was serving in the South Pacific. After the war we moved to Florida where my father took over a family orange grove.

This was not tourist Florida; it was central Florida, redneck Florida. Main features: lakes, swamps, scrub pine, palmetto patches, citrus groves, truck farms, plus a culture of ignorance and racism. I grew up by a 15-square-mile lake full of shore weeds, big mouth bass, little nibbling minnows, water snakes, alligators and snapping turtles. The lakeshore was ringed with natural Florida jungle— trees and vines I could climb up and play Tarzan in. I even made a hammock out of vines so I could lie up there, swinging and watching the lake. It was a great place for a kid, especially when a storm was brewing.

Across the road from our house were more than 2000 acres of orange groves. Five hundred belonged to us. We grew Valencias, Temples, Kings, as well as Duncan grapefruits. We also had a few tangerine trees for home consumption. The groves were another great place to play. I would help my clubfooted dog Prince chase rabbits and sometimes we'd even catch them. I would grab gopher tortoises by waiting near their burrows. I would throw sand at rattlesnakes, coral snakes, king snakes and armadillos. Or snag bull ants by their hind bulbs then drop them down into antlion holes and

watch them get stung to death. These were just the kind of character building experiences you could find out there in the orange groves.

We kids used to catch turtles on the lake and sell them in the “colored quarters.” Blacks and whites were very separate back then. When the water was calm, we’d go out in the boat looking for two black things sticking up out of the water. It would either be the eyes of an alligator or two turtles sitting side by side.

We’d head for that. I’d be on the bow and I’d see them diving down so I’d dive down too and grab them right in front of the back legs. Anywhere else and you’d get bloody hands. They’d scrape at you. Then I’d dump them in the boat and we’d go over to the quarters to the Dewdrop Inn where we’d sell them for 50 cents apiece. Soon those reptiles would be turtle soup.

My mother doted on me way too much and made me a sort of little prince, but my father was not a natural family man nor was he much of a role-model. I got no real training or ethical background from him. So when I hit adolescence, I was searching for heroes and they inevitably wound up being rebel heroes. People like Jack Kerouac, Che Guevara, Marlon Brando, and James Dean. Those were the people I emulated: anyone who wasn’t an authoritarian like my father.

In this way, I formed kind of a rebellious character. I sought out things not to like about any authority. I had a clique of like-minded guys and I was kind of the ring-leader. We got into lots of trouble: expelled three times and arrested once. I was proud of it. Parents punished, teachers threatened, older students snickered, but the younger students worshipped us.

I was a hungry reader too, devouring Kerouac, Hemingway and authors like that. I read whatever literary giants I could find in the town’s only quaint and stale-smelling

library. Beyond that the only solid discipline I had was playing football. If you didn't play football you had no status. I could spiral a pigskin between my legs up to 25 yards with deadly accuracy.

I was a student DJ at W-SEB, a local 1000-watt AM radio station. The manager told me my draft status was going to be 1-A but that I would be exempt because I had an essential service occupation: communications. That meant whenever the Vietcong or the Russians would come over and invade central Florida, I'd be there to tell everyone "the bomb is coming, bend over and kiss your ass goodbye."

Also in high school, I was an air patrol officer, trained to spotting enemy planes. They gave us charts of the planes' silhouettes and I spent many a summer night in the watchtower over the football field holding the chart of demon Russian aircraft. The only thing I ever radioed in, though, were a couple of twin-engine Cessnas. Still, I did my duty and saved rural Florida from Soviet devastation. I kept calling my girlfriend to come join me in the tower but her folks never let her. Her father's favorite word was "never!"

When I graduated from high school, I had to register for the draft. They took me and a dozen other guys of the same age down to sign up. I was the only one who was wise-cracking. The leader there, some sergeant, was clever enough to put me in charge of all the guys. That just turned my rebellion program right around. Now, I had responsibility. So we went down to Miami for testing and I wound up being 1-A. This meant I was going to be sent out immediately, to Saigon or South Korea, or if I was lucky, Germany.

Well, I was damned if I was going. I had some buds that went, guys with room-temperature IQs and a cowboy sense of patriotism. Not me. I had none of that. I had a visceral hatred of Lyndon Johnson. I loved my country but I was damned if I was going

to throw myself into some dumbass capitalist war. I vowed to keep one step ahead of the draft.

So, my father sent me to college, to the Michigan State University at Oakland which was kind of an alternative college for dissident thinkers. It was considered to have an experimental, even radical, curriculum for the times. I appreciated that. Somehow my father decided I should become a diplomat, which was about as far away from anything as I could ever be. Number one, I was a middle-class Southerner and the only diplomats you get are upper-class Yankees. But that was his dream. He was still a believer in the American myth of equal opportunity and upward mobility.

I spent two years at the college, and it gave me a new worldview. I studied cultural anthropology, Western institutions, European and American economic history along with

Freudian and Jungian psychology. Those were my favorites. I ate them like food and they saved me from the draft.

After that, I went to California. I wanted to be the next James Dean so I went to Pasadena Playhouse and I stayed there for a year. That helped keep me out of the draft, but more importantly, it was a great time. I had an older sister in San Diego, living at a beachside cabana with three other girls. Hah! I had a motorcycle; I'd roar down to her place on the weekends. She threw a lot of parties with all these older people and I thought "wooha, cool, cool, cool." I got to water ski on the ocean, drink martinis at swimming pool bars and see some Broadway musicals in local theaters, all for free.

Then all that finished and I was at loose ends. That's when I got another knock on the door from the draft board, wanting to know about my status. Immediately, I enrolled in Florida State University in Tallahassee and did a couple of years there. That's where I

met my future first wife, Rita. Just before I left Florida State, she got pregnant though I didn't know it at the time.

As soon as I finished school, I went to Nashville, Tennessee, dreaming of being the next Kris Kristofferson. I'd written about 20 songs by then and figured that Bob Dylan wasn't the only dude on the block. (Wrong again.) So I went up there and fell in with a bunch of guys who had a bluegrass band, the Cumberland River Valley Boys. We played local gigs, mostly college bars and coffee houses.

I didn't like bluegrass but I could play rhythm guitar. One of the guys was rich and his momma footed the bill for a nightclub. That was how I made a living—I was bartender at this club and I lived there. It was called the Third Floor; we re-did the third floor of a warehouse. Very funky. It soon became the in place for jazz buffs and folkies and it cooked from Friday to Monday.

Then I heard from Rita that she was pregnant. She came up to Nashville with her belly all swollen and we married in an open church. The lead guitarist of Al Hurt's New Orleans band played a Brazilian wedding march for us and the preacher rubbed my wife's belly while saying a prayer of thanksgiving. Then he read some Kahlil Gibran. It was hip.

The wedding and the baby changed my status, made it less likely I'd be drafted. It was something I only thought about when I'd get the notices; anyway, I was pretty good at forgetting fearful things in those days.

My wife and I lived in the catacombs of Nashville for several months—a bunch of old one-story rowhouse apartments much like those in the movie *A Streetcar Named Desire*. We had a lot of adventures but that's part of another story. Then, one day a cop comes in to the club with a bunch of tickets.

He said, "These are for the Policeman's Ball. How many do you want to buy?"

I said, "None."

From then on, cops were swarming all over the club. We were raided time and time again. They couldn't find anything. Then, we had a jazz night and people at one of the tables were smoking pot. They busted us and shut the club down, just like they'd wanted to do all along. So it all broke up.

One of the guys in the band was from Queens and decided to move back home. He told me to come on up, that he had contacts. I thought he would be able to help me get work. He didn't, but by then my wife and I were living in New York. We had our daughter at the Oceanview Hospital in Brooklyn. I got several different jobs, the most prestigious one being at NBC, Rockefeller Center. I was in the videotapes department. It was a simple clerical job but it paid well because one mistake could cost NBC a lot of money. This job too knocked me way back from the draft: an essential service occupation, plus a wife and child. Vietnam was not in my future.

In those days, I was addicted to adrenalin. Danger and adventure, that's what I wanted. I wasn't a worker ant, I was a cricket. I felt bulletproof, I was going to live forever, and all good things would last. So when I was at NBC, I decided I wanted to become a war correspondent.

I worked first in the videotapes department, scheduling commercials. They used videotapes back then and I sat there working with big charts all day. The reason I got that job was that the guy before me made one mistake and it cost the network \$200,000. So I had to be precise. I did the job and they said they were going to kick me up to the news department. Maybe that would have been my opening to be a photojournalist

and maybe it's just as well that it didn't happen; I probably wouldn't be alive if I had become a war correspondent.

My wife and I split child care duties. Rita taught school in Bed-Stuy, which was one of the worst ghettos at that time. Every other day, she'd come home crying. Back then I thought it was just one of life's challenges but now I regret not helping her leave.

We lived on the first floor of a five-story walkup on the East side, a funky neighborhood with a rich mix of hippies, Blacks, Jews, Italians, and Puerto Ricans. But my wife and I had our domestic problems. She was a feminist hippie and I was a chauvinist pig with limited emotional intelligence. I was walking home one day and I saw all my stuff being thrown out through the window on to the sidewalk.

And you know, I don't blame her. She did it because I was a sexist bastard. I didn't realize it then, but in retrospect I can see it. I'd do things like demand that she'd give me a haircut.

One time, she said "No, I'm not doing that anymore."

I told her, "Oh yes, you are."

So she took out the clippers and she gave me a reverse Mohawk right down the centre of my head. I should have known then that she was capable of deeds even more surprising than that, things like throwing all my belongings out on to the sidewalk.

We split up and we stayed split for six or eight months. I went through my little trauma and she took our daughter but we both stayed in New York. A little later, she joined a well-known group therapy workshop.

This was back in the 60s when group therapy was the big thing. All kinds of methodologies were being used. It was crazy and tribal. She invited me to this group

but when I went, I wondered why the hell she'd done it. I was more interested in revolution than emotional healing. She wanted us to get back together but I insulted her. Still, I kept going to this group therapy thing and so did she.

It was run by a husband and wife team. She was the one with the degrees and her hubby Mike was an ex-jazz drummer. He had the ability to bullshit beyond belief. Let's call it charisma. They were expanding and they moved into a five-floor walk up in the upper 70s, close to the Hudson. They asked me to work for them.

I'd left NBC, and was doing any kind of job. Driving forklift in a book warehouse, delivering film on a motorcycle, all the odd jobs and the crap jobs that the poor are apt to do. I got the occasional fashion photo job. Jobs were easy to get back then so I did anything that was new and interesting. I had no specific career plan. I just wanted to experience life and this therapy gig sounded sweet.

So I moved into a garret in this house, into a room overlooking the Hudson. It was one of the best places I've ever lived. Not much pay but free room and board and a lot of opportunities for a lot of different relationships. I was more or less the house boy. Back then, I could type 90 words a minute standing up and I was good on the phone. I was kind of their chosen son and I took advantage of it.

There were a lot of the people there: an Italian film actor, a successful female pornographer, a huge Irish pro-wrestler and lots of people with brains: artists, teachers and social workers, a detective, a violinist, plus a few rich women with no brains at all but a whole lot of outrageous hurts that needed massaging. I guess I was the token redneck. It became like a tribe. Everyone there needed a family.

I quickly learned a lot. I went to every session I wanted. They had 32 different methodologies...straightforward psychology, psychodrama, anger drama... Some of

their clients were studying psychology and later opened up their own clinics using some version of these therapies.

Anna Freud was on the letter head. How they managed that I'll never know; I never saw her. We had B.F. Skinner, Erich Fromm and other heavy-duty dudes, all on the letterhead, all on the board. I never saw any of them. But there was Mike the magic man, the man with the chutzpah, the man who could talk anybody into anything.

He made me vice president of something or other.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it. It doesn't really matter."

So that's the way it went, all done on the fly. But the place was flooded with clients. Lots of wild session, lots of money floating around.

I learned how to bullshit, how to harness female competition. I had no morals at all back then. Whenever I thought about the morality, I'd tell myself I was put on the earth to bring as much happiness to as many people as possible. More pure bullshit from my mentor.

He'd assess the new female clients in his 60s hippy way and decide this woman or that needed sensual awakening. He'd tell me, "I have this lady who needs guitar lessons."

That's when I knew I was supposed to give her guitar lessons, relax her, make friends with her and seduce her. Give her some psycho-sexual therapy. Ten minutes of guitar, some soulful talk, a lush kiss, a slow massage followed by whatever action it took to boom her brains out. That's what I did and I was happy about it.

When I look back, it all seems amusing, but in some ways it was heartbreaking. There was one girl who I'll never forget. One day she came up to me and said straightaway, "I want to make love."

I was kind of taken aback. "Shouldn't we hold hands first?"

"Sure"

As time passed, I saw a lot of her. Every Monday at 11am, she'd show up and we'd hike straight up to the attic and do the deed. She was cute; I liked her but she didn't want to get to know me and I thought it was kind of strange. That's when I realized I was just a stud, for her and maybe for all the others. Later on, this girl went to India and shot herself in the head. The guilt killed me. I wondered if there was anything I could have done. For a long time after that I couldn't pleasure anybody, least of all myself.

By then my wife and I had divorced and I had regrets. Right after our divorce, she found out she had melanoma of the lymph. She took our daughter to a commune in upstate Rhode Island. They were raided when my daughter was with her. The rednecks from that area came into the commune with guns. The state police heard about it, and were right behind them. There was a shootout. I found out later from my ex-wife that a bullet went up through the floor and missed my daughter by about two feet.

So she moved again and took my daughter to another commune in Virginia on the Hardware River, *Walton's* country. That's where they lived till my daughter was about five. She had chemo and started losing her hair. She was wearing a scarf the last time I saw her. Part of her arm had been removed. She stayed there until she died in 1972.

In 1967, I went on a disastrous road trip to California with another woman. We split up as soon as we arrived. To make some money, I posed nude for art students in Berkeley. With a hundred bucks in my boot, I hopped a freight train back to New York. I was

arrested for railway trespassing on the way, and after I got that cleared up, had to hitchhike the rest of the way. Because of this dumb trip, I missed Woodstock, the major cultural event of the decade.

I went back to my job at the therapy place.

When my ex-wife and I were both in New York, we had a babysitter, Jeanette who had two children of her own. She'd split up with her husband so she took care of my daughter along with her kids. At one point she was part of the therapy workshops. She looked like Janis Joplin and we got together. Sometimes I lived in my Garrett overlooking the Hudson and sometimes I lived with Jeanette. It worked out all right because it was kind of a tribal culture then.

One day in 1971, Jeanette said, "Let's go to British Columbia."

I said, "What can I do in British Columbia? I can't speak Spanish."

Well that's how much I knew, how much most Americans knew. Americans are children of the Empire. They don't need to know about the world because they are the world. It's that egomania. So I didn't even know BC existed. I thought she meant British Honduras.

Of course, I knew a little about Canada. Earlier, I'd heard from my cousin who was in the army. He was stationed in Virginia, never went to 'Nam, never saw a firefight. His job was processing body bags that came back. He had stories that were really weird.

Sometimes a bag would come in blown up like a balloon because they hadn't drained the body before they shipped it. Sometimes he'd open a bag and there'd be no dog tags, no ID, just arms and legs in it. Sometimes a torso. Sometimes a head.

They had a MIA chart on the wall, and they'd sometimes just throw a dart at it. It would hit someone's name and they would "ID" this piece of meat as a missing soldier. And then they'd tell the family their boy was dead.

My cousin was cracking up. He asked me if I could do something, so I contacted the American Civil Liberties Union in New York.

They said, "Bring him in."

So he came up to New York and I took him to the ACLU office. They showed me how to take him on the train to Montreal and arranged for someone to pick him up on the other side.

When I came back, they asked me, "Do you want to keep helping us?"

Well, I was still addicted to adrenalin. Here was a chance to work with the underground railroad. It all seemed very "James Bond," all very cloak and dagger and I loved it. They had an FBI photographer across the street from the ACLU, taking pictures of everyone who came and went. After a while, being a piss-ass show off, I'd just turn and wave.

No one who was part of this knew anyone else's name—the less we knew about each other the better. But after my eighth or ninth trip, one of the organizers told me, "Might be a good idea if you disappeared for a little while."

The heat was coming down. Jeanette was trying to get away. I was involved with someone else and wanted to get out of it and this trip seemed like a lark. That's how it came about that we moved to Canada.

Jeanette was taking her two kids away from her husband. He was Haitian and allegedly, he was part of some goon squad in New York who were planning on taking

over Haiti from Papa Doc Duvalier. Most of it was a pipe dream, but he was a violent man and she wanted to get the kids away from him.

So we all took off. We bought an old Mercury roadster with a two-wheeled trailer from a Brooklyn detective. I rode my BMW motorcycle; she drove the car with the trailer and the kids. We came to Vancouver.

There were seven sky scrapers—I counted them—and I was pretty amused. They called this a city? Then I took my bike up into North Van. They had cedar curbs back then. I saw sheep grazing on the hill. I rode my bike into the bush and drank from a river. And I thought, "So this is where God came to live. He's abandoned the U.S."

I was always a Mark Twain freak. Earlier in the 60s, wanting to experience America, I rode my bike to the Mississippi River. I was all ready to dive in. I wanted to anoint myself, to baptize myself. When I got there, I stood on the banks of the river, looking at yellow sludge and raw sewage and junk floating by and I thought, what the hell happened to America?

When I saw this river bed in North Vancouver, I was ready to settle down for awhile.

I had a little trouble getting through the border. Jeanette had money so they let her in. I had to go down near Bellingham and camp out while they were processing my papers.

In the meantime, I was writing and publishing songs in Nashville. One of the songs was called "Signed, Sealed and Delivered." Another was called "Let It Be." I had a commendation my mom had sent me, addressed to L. Garrett. Me.

It said, "Congratulations! This song is number one."

So I had these songs, the commendation and my publishing contract. I was talking to the border guard who was reviewing my papers. When he was looking through them, he saw my commendation for "Signed, Sealed and Delivered."

"How much you gonna make for this?" he asked.

"I dunno...I'm kind of a gypsy wanderer. Maybe a hundred thousand, maybe two hundred..."

He looked impressed. Then he started shuffling through the other papers and saw my song "Let It Be." And he drops his false teeth on the table.

Then it was just sign here, sign here, sign here and I was through the border. Now my "Let It Be" had nothing to do with the Beatles, but that's how I got into Canada.

I met up with Jeanette but soon after I ended up in jail. There was a protest in a park near Coal Harbour, a be-in and a tent city put up protest building on this parkland. I joined up immediately. I made a little teepee out of 2x4s and clear plastic. I played my guitar. There were bonfires, girls dancing around in long gowns and I thought, oh yeah, this is it.

Then the cops came and arrested everyone left and right, including me. They confiscated my bike, with its New York plates. I spent a night or two in jail and then went to court. They fined me \$350.00 and I didn't have it. It was a lot for me and a lot back then.

The judge asked for my address. Jeanette was staying with friends and I didn't want to get her involved. So I told him, "No fixed address."

That was it. No money, no address. They sent me to the Oakalla Prison Farm in Burnaby. I stayed there for about a month. The day I arrived, I had a wine skin full of port, which I was into then. Twenty per cent sweet wine.

The guard said, "Drink up or we'll pour it down the sink."

I drank the whole damned thing.

He said, "Go take a shower."

I weaved my way into the shower room. I was full of nervous tension, looking around to see if someone was sneaking up on me. That's when I upchucked the contents of the wineskin.

Years later, when I saw the series *Oz*, I was reminded of that time. I didn't experience anything like that up close but it went on. Anyone who was there for murder had the highest status. Those guys told you "I'm here for murder" and you just said "yes sir, yes sir." The worse the crime, the higher the status they had.

I was in for six weeks and developed a kidney stone. I was doubled over in pain but the guards didn't give a shit. They saw me walking down the hall bent over and just thought I was faking it. Around that time, I was due to be moved somewhere else.

The guy who was interviewing me told them, "You gotta take this guy to the hospital."

Finally, they did and I was smart enough not to cuss at them. I got to the hospital and saw the first woman I'd seen in six weeks...a nurse in a white uniform. I was awestruck.

They transferred me to the prison wing of the General Hospital in Vancouver. I spent a few weeks there and finally passed the stone. Jeanette was into herbal medicine. She brought me some horrible tasting thing, I took it and I passed the stone, clunk, into the little pot.

Eventually they let me out and I went to stay with Jeanette. That first night she told me, "I'm fertile."

I was cross-eyed at the time so I didn't care. We made our son that night.

Of course by then my draft problem was way on the backburner. Still, I was only a landed immigrant and they could have reached across for me. The US was boss and I was told they could take who they wanted. But I wasn't worrying about that—what I had to worry about was making a living.

I found work on Bowen Island and moved there with Jeanette and the kids. I was taking care of a farm and looking after horses for some rich folk that lived next door. Making apple cider, making beer, making music. Doing the country hippy thing. It was a good time in my life. I had both the kids, I had chickens; I fished, swam, hunted deer, dug for clams and oysters. I was nature boy.

I was also taking care of an old gentleman, one of the old-time settlers on Bowen. He must have been in his 90s. When he read the newspaper his hands shook so badly it sounded like rain. He was always calling me other people's names.

I'd walk with him. Folks in town like to see me with him because they knew he was being taken care of. My son was barely walking and he wanted to help the old gentleman too. So he took the old man's cane and the old guy fell down. There was the old man and the bowlegged little toddler...it's an image that's imprinted on my brain.

The old man had a lot of kids and they wanted to get their hands on his land. I could tell they were just waiting for him to pass on. Finally, they told me they had to move him to a care home in which he very swiftly died.

And so we had to leave. I took another job caretaking at Camp Wallace, a children's camp on the lake in Belcarra. Back then it was in the bush. We had deer, fox, cougars and two bears. We had a Sicilian burro in a pen and the bears used to play with it.

Then camping season came around and I began to worry that a little kid might run in to them. I called animal control and I asked them to relocate the bears but they refused.

They told me, "Those are garbage fed bears; they'll probably spread trichinosis. If we move them out somewhere, the resident bears will either kill them or drive them back."

So we set out a trap. The animal control guy told me how to bait a bucket with salmon and honey. I sat out on our wide front porch and waited until the bear came by. When he was eating, I shot him behind the ear. My neighbours and I skinned and dressed him.

The other bear kept coming around so the guy from animal control set a leg hold trap. One day, I heard this sound. The second bear was hanging there with his arm caught. I shot him through the heart. I hated that. It was execution; it was slaughter. I don't mind hunting, but bears are too close to human beings for my taste.

Still, this life was kind of like the life of my early childhood. Life on Bowen and Belcarra fed my affinity for country life. I'm glad that, in between, I got to experience the city.

By the time I had both the kids, I'd forgotten all about the draft. It was past, it was gone. Then in '75, the roof fell in and we lost the war. The war that never should have happened. Just like the Iraq war, we're losing that one too.

The draft was just one of the cards I'd been dealt. Just one of the things that I had to consider. And in a way, I enjoyed the challenge of screwing the government. But if I hadn't been threatened with it, I don't know that my life would have been that much

different. I would have still been a cricket, gone to San Francisco, New York, maybe the bush.