

Chapter 1 Untethered

The instant my dead-to-me father said, “Your friend got killed,” wind whooshed in my ears. Like my eardrums had been ruptured. Snare drums ragged ripped. I know now that the universe has a trap door. I know now that Jimmy was the only thing tethering me to the earth. The wind in my ears was from falling through space. Through darkness. At times it was louder so I was aware of it, and there were blocks of years when the whooshing was just unacknowledged background noise in my purposeless life.

Fifteen months earlier, in November of his senior year Jimmy Jordan turned 20. Consequently, his birth year put him in the mass of those unfortunate souls whose selective service numbers were drawn out of a large glass urn on national TV on December 1, 1969. I stood in his clean living room with his mother and father and older brother watching the national event on their black and white TV. When Jimmy’s number came up his father and brother both snorted through their noses, turned away, and vacated the room.

Zip. That was it. In February he went for his medical exam, and then he got his Report for Induction on May 20, 1970. The principal of Millstown High and his guidance counselor held a “graduation ceremony” for him and his family in the guidance office days before he left. By February of 1971 he was in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

At the time I was unaware that that day in Jimmy Jordan’s living room would set in motion four decades worth of poor choices and consequences which most of the time made me wish I too was dead.

I went to his house to say good-bye the morning of the day he left. Clear May blue sky and new green foliage. The whole world seemed hopeful. He lived in a tidy nut-brown three bedroom ranch house, almost identical to the one I lived in, except that his spoke of owners who maintained their house. Over the years of my growing up, my house sank and decayed silently just like my father. Haggard and unkempt and uncaring. Take a look, I don't care, it seemed to say. The Jordan residence stood at attention. Proud. The driveway sealed black. The small yard shaven and fine. My house looked lopsided with only one set of black shutters that framed our house's living room picture window. The only thing that seemed amiss at Jimmy's house that day was the storm door—it had cardboard over it where the lower pane of glass was supposed to be. Jimmy smashed it two days earlier when he came home drunk and tried to carry his car's left front fender into the house. The fender met up with a fire hydrant on our way home from a bonfire at the power lines—the high school party spot. The fender was ripped clean off, rocking on the sidewalk like a broken egg shell, so he jammed it into the gaping back end of his station wagon. I just laughed and laughed and so did he. We were drunk. Just like we were on most weekends.

His kind of beat up vehicle was what we referred to in Millstown as a shit box. A 1960 black Buick LeSabre station wagon that looked like a wreck Jimmy bought from a smash-up derby, but in fact, it belonged to a family of nine people. Jimmy purchased the wagon for \$100 and worked weekends fixing it up—changing the oil and the oil filter, cleaning out the distributor cap, cleaning spark plugs, replacing hoses, patching the rusting muffler, and small maintenance like that while I drank Cokes, talked, watched, and handed him wrenches and rags. All of his work did not prevent the break downs, however. The hearse-like wagon constantly crapped out—

simply refused to turn over, sometimes even dying at red lights in the middle of town. These episodes prompted Jimmy to reach under the front seat and pull out the Louisville Slugger which he fondly called “the ugly stick,” beating the car’s flanks for our amusement. He smiled to see us laugh so hard. Unbelievably, after two such beatings the car actually started.

He determined to use the fender as a chair in his bedroom, even showed me where it would be positioned near his bedroom’s window. It was a spot that caught the afternoon sunshine. Who knows what kind of potential in saw in the squarish fender. For the life of me, I couldn’t imagine in any way it would make a chair, and I told him so. Told him he should make sure he had his tetanus shot. He just made a noise which I interpreted to mean, You just wait and see. The edges were sharp. Fran slid a round brown and cream colored woven rug that matched the outdoor shoe rug underneath it so that it would not scratch the shiny wood floor. There were flecks of rust. Maybe he imagined that he would construct legs for it—or a back. Anyway, he imagined that the fender-chair would be waiting for him when he returned from his turn in the war. I suggested he reattach it to the car, but he thought the car looked more intimidating without it.

After Jimmy left, I was truly alone. The neighborhood posse still hung out, but my fun with them was half-hearted. Willie and Ben and I drifted apart. Jimmy was the glue of the posse. I did not go to Jimmy’s house. The news of Jimmy’s death was in our local newspaper, but it came to me via my seeming unsympathetic father. I suppose that his own experience with death necessitated his seeming impartiality.

“Your friend got killed,” my father said one night before he disappeared into his room. He left the newspaper on the kitchen counter, laid open to the announcement.

When I was somewhere lost in the jungle of my high school's halls, Jimmy was killed on his tenth day in combat by friendly fire when US helicopter gunships in support of an offensive raid mistook his unit command post for an enemy unit. He was the only casualty in the snafu. Friendly fire: that term is supposed to make the murder sound not so bad, or at least somehow understandable. He wasn't gutted by a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers, or blown up by a land mine, he was simply put to sleep by his friends. Shot in the back while struggling to find cover. Casualty of war. Expendable. Was that part of His plan, or was that simply random? A horrible death either way. I pictured him face down in the dirt and debris with a look of surprise on his dead face. I never wanted to conjure him bloody and broken. I imagined him just as he looked at the canvas ceiling those summer nights we camped out in the backyard in a tent. His large eyes looking into the unknown, or maybe looking backwards into his life—his big old shit box car that made him laugh, his family, or even me. Maybe he was thinking that he must get me a birthday card as my birthday was coming up. I imagined his uniform still creased and brand new, his helmet no good.

That imagined image of Jimmy hunted me. That big black wagon sat in the front yard of his house, its fender never to be a chair in his bedroom. There was not a funeral. When I drove over to his house to say something to his family, there sat the fenderless station wagon at the end of the driveway, an orange and black For Sale sign taped to the front window with masking tape. The missing fender was in the back of the wagon, just like the night Jimmy brought it home. I saw his father standing there looking at the car and he nodded his chin at me. That time there was no need for interpretation. Then, I chickened out. That nod silenced me. I suddenly had no words. No, I did not go inside. I did not see Fran. Perhaps if I had things might have not turned

out the way they did. I was scared how deep things might go with my surrogate mom—what kind of emotions at such a loss were possible—hers and mine. I stuffed everything down as deep as I could.

I tried to stop myself from thinking about Jimmy and the prospect of a cold death overseas—which made me think about it even more. I dreamed my own death night after night. In one dream my rifle was too heavy to lift, the barrel dragging on the ground, the enemy advancing. In another dream it was my feet that were too heavy, the enemy advancing, and no way to run. In every dream the enemy was always the same. Machine-like beings that paralyzed my will to protect myself. I was always out in the open—some clearing—and they were always in the jungle on the edge of the clearing. In another dream I could hear the helicopters. United States helicopters shooting up the ground all around me. Even in that dream I was in an open field, all alone. And just before I woke, each and every time, the enemy's face transformed into my dad's face, the uniform into his work clothes. I awoke soaked in sweat.

I needed to run.

Then I dreamed up an unoriginal plan: Canada. After all, there wasn't anything keeping me in Millstown, or the United States for that matter. I had no interesting prospects after graduation. I actually never seriously gave my future a thought. My guidance counselor, Mrs. Ressler, never spoke to me about plans after graduation. In fact, she went out of her way to avoid me. If I were walking down the hallway where the guidance offices were and she popped out into the hallway and saw me, she would tuck and turn right back inside. That actually happened. I don't blame her. The folks in the guidance office had to spend their energy on kids who were planning on doing something with their lives, or who might have benefitted from some

conversations about their plans. In tenth grade I received a note to meet with her, a regular practice for all sophomores, and I didn't go. In homeroom we would all be handed a slip of paper with an appointment date and time that we were to meet with our counselor at some point in the semester. That appointment paper served as a pass to be dismissed from the class you were in for the visit. So, I showed the appointment pass to Mr. Morehead before class, and left geometry at the appointed time. I left class and strolled right out of school. The next year I was summoned again, and I did go. I was drunk that day. My appearance in the guidance office fuming of liquor earned me a three-day suspension.

I certainly wasn't going to college and I didn't even have my sights set on a career. In short, my high school years consisted of warning notices, suspensions, and my father's apathy. I was a prime candidate for the draft.

So on June 9th, 1972, a warm, cloudless Saturday morning the day after my high school graduation, hungover from my last party at the power lines the night before, (a local tradition), I packed up my powder blue 1964 Dodge Polara and headed north. When I say "packed up," what I really mean is that I chucked all of my belongings into the back seat. My jeans and tee shirts. My thinning blue denim jacket. My three black light posters of cobras—which I rolled up and placed carefully on the back dash so they wouldn't get crushed. My Jimmy Hendrix, Doors, and Joan Baez records, and my record player. My AM/FM clock radio. My pillow, and my Coleman sleeping bag that I got for Christmas when I was 14 and never used. It was still in its original box with pictures of a happy family at a campsite with a picnic table, a stone fire ring with orange flames leaping up from a camp fire, cooking gear on a picnic table, enormous pine trees shading their site, and of course, sleeping bags rolled out prominently in a large, red, open-doored tent. It

was one of the few tokens that represented a short-lived hope for a relationship with my dad.

Like a couple others, that offering was another false alarm.

I had \$200 in my wallet—my last paycheck from my job at the local golf course where I wiped down and cleaned up the big machines that groomed the wide fairways and closely cropped greens. The house empty, there was no witness to my departure. I didn't even tell Ben or Willie my plan. They both had jobs in town and weren't worried about the draft. I was heading out to find a life.