

## PART II | CHAPTER FOUR

*“Is he not sacred, even to the gods, the wandering man who comes in weariness?”*

—HOMER (from *The Odyssey*)

AFTER EARNING a bachelor’s degree in English Literature from an expensive and well-regarded liberal arts party college, I was soon able to secure a position as a busboy in a Mexican restaurant. After that I labored in the fields as a construction worker for a while, and then in the spring of 1991 I moved back to my home town of Houston. I was broke and needed a job, so I decided to return to my initial career path in the restaurant industry.

One thing I’d learned at my previous position was that waiters made considerably more money than busboys, so I decided to aim high and become a waiter. At first none of the restaurants in the area would hire me because I didn’t have any experience as a waiter, so I came up with a new strategy. Instead of saying I’d worked previously as a busboy, I decided to say I’d worked as a waiter instead. The first time I told this lie, I was immediately hired as a waiter at a Cajun restaurant over by the Galleria.

A few weeks after I got the job, I was talking to my dad on the phone and told him what I was doing. “Well,” he said, “you’re close.”

“Close to what?” I asked. “Blowing my brains out?”

“No, didn’t you say you were going back to Texas to become a writer?”

“Yeah, that was the plan, but it hasn’t quite worked out yet.”

“Well, you’re only one letter away. If you change the “a” in waiter to an “r”, then you’d be a writer.”

Later that day I was standing out back at the restaurant, having a cigarette before the dinner rush started and thinking I'd rather be a writer than a waiter. There was a bucket full of live crawfish sitting by the door, and I knew that before long they would all be boiled alive and eaten. Whether or not they were aware of their impending fate, the crawfish near the top of the bucket all seemed intent on escape.

They crawled over each other, clawing their way toward the outside of the pile, then tried to scale the few inches of wall at the top of the bucket and pull themselves over the edge to freedom. However, each time one of them managed to get a claw grip on the top of the bucket, the others would grab him and climb on him until at last they pulled him back, tumbling down into the seething mass of crawfish. They're just like people, I thought, latching on to anyone with talent or promise or integrity, anyone with the potential for greatness, and pulling them back down into the teaming masses of mediocrity.

I wondered what would happen if one managed to escape. Would the others then honor and revere his memory? Would they memorialize him in legends, build statues of him and write songs recounting his tremendous feat? If so, they would have to do it quickly, because in several minutes they would all inevitably be dumped into the boiling cauldron of their death. As if on cue, one of the crawfish flung himself over the edge of the bucket and fell to the ground.

I stepped in to get a closer look at the fugitive crawfish, to see if maybe he had some distinguishing characteristics that would set him apart from the thousands of others who met their fate that summer in the boiling pots of the Cajun restaurant. As I bent down to look, he didn't make a run for it as I expected, but instead he reared back and raised his claws at me, opening and closing them as if to threaten me. I was at least a hundred times his size. I could've crushed him instantly under my shoe, or picked him up and returned him to the bucket of the doomed, but despite this he stood unbowed, ready to fight against overwhelming odds for his hard earned freedom. I had to admire his gumption.

I imagined that Gods, looking down on humans, might have a similar perspective. Would they prefer the fearful masses, groveling before them with an endless chorus of begging and pleading? Maybe. Or perhaps they

would instead favor the brave and defiant, those who stood up and said, “Go ahead, do to me what you will. Crush me or boil me alive, smash me against the rocks or drown me in the sea. It’s all the same to me.”

I certainly had no way of knowing what Gods might think about humans, or if they even thought much of us at all. Regardless, I was impressed by the courageous crawfish, successfully escaped from the bucket of his peers and ready to battle an immeasurably more powerful force. So I decided to take pity on him, and reward his escape.

I grabbed the back of his shell, out of reach of his flailing claws, and lifted him up. For a second I held him over the bucket, not only to show him that I had the power to return him to that fate if I chose, but also to allow the others to glimpse his glory as he flew away into the great unknown, bound for freedom. I carried him over to the edge of the parking lot where a ditch beside the road flowed with water from the recent rains, and then I set him on the bank near the water. He looked around disoriented for a moment, then he waved his claws belligerently back at me one more time and disappeared into the muddy stream. I stood by the ditch for a moment pondering the fate of the crawfish, and then I went back inside where I would soon serve his boiled companions to the hungry masses.

Obviously, I never saw or heard from that crawfish again, not a card or a phone call or anything. And though I may never know his ultimate fate, I like to think that at least I gave him a fighting chance. I also hoped that in similar circumstances, some powerful divine being would do the same for me.

Many people, including friends, relatives, girlfriends, and numerous great authors, have all inspired me in various ways in my quest to write a novel. Still, from among them all, the brave crawfish who escaped the bucket continuously stands out as a constant source of inspiration. I can still picture him now, standing there on the banks of the creek, waving his claws defiantly before disappearing beneath the surface of the water.