A Spectacular Inheritance:

What I Kept and What I Left Behind

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Prologue

Departure

Early morning, September 1, 1984. The alarm clock sounds at five a.m. My roommate Kathy, true friend, gets up as quickly as I do, prepares mugs of tea, and helps me bring my final items of luggage from our sixth-floor apartment to an alley behind our Connecticut Avenue building. My parents meet us there, and Dad puts the final touches on packing the car, cramming in last-minute bags of almost-forgotten items that press against the roof.

In their late sixties now, Mom and Dad have every right to wish that their thirty-five-year-old daughter, their only child, was providing grandchildren and a sense of completion for their lives, but instead here they are, communicating the gameness for the next adventure that has always kept us going, helping all three of us ignore the strands of disappointment that are woven into this departure.

"Test the wing mirrors, Margaret," Dad instructs, and I take my place in the driver's seat, adjusting the angle of the mirrors so that I can see my rear clearly despite the full load.

I get out again and hug my dad's bony frame. He has never felt quite at ease with hugging, but he squeezes me tight today, and Mom and I grip each other until I draw away and take my place at the wheel.

I point my blue Plymouth Horizon northward. Quickly leaving behind the Washington, DC suburbs, I head up the main artery of east coast USA, route 95, leading through Baltimore, Wilmington,

Philadelphia, New York. I roll down the window and allow the wind to pummel my face. I sing snatches of favorite songs at full voice.

In Boston, a grungy furnished apartment that I rented a few weeks ago awaits me. Having apparently come to the end of the road with the life I have been leading, I have pulled from my deck of cards the hope that has remained hidden and unexamined for so much of my life – to study medicine. I am now leading with this card and have announced this intention in my application to an undergraduate program at Boston University.

There is a certain nerve involved in this apparently confident plan. True, the dream of medicine has been with me as long as I can remember. But obstacles, both internal and external, have gotten in the way. With our frequent moves, including my final five years of high school in Glasgow, Scotland, my parents and I doubtless underestimated my scattered disorientation. I sidestepped university, and, somewhat in the style of my generation coming of age in the 1960s, spent some years in exotic parts of the world – Australia, India, Papua New Guinea. I was twenty-six when my parents bought the first and only home they every owned, in the Washington, DC suburb of Silver Spring, and I returned to the US to help them with this move. Having missed all the formative experiences of my generation in the US – university, feminism, the sexual revolution, the Vietnam war, protest, civil rights – I had scant sense that I fitted in. I spent the next eight years as a secretary, newsletter writer, and event organizer, soaking up the mores and language of this habitat – a new immigrant in my own country.

Overlaying all of this has been my parents' chosen lifepath of dedication to what they call "Christian service," though their form of Christian service – a global operation known as "Moral Re-Armament" – does not closely resemble typical versions of Christian service that the rest of the world understands. We have been treated to a good deal of disapproval, certainly marginalization, because of this life choice. There were also big plusses. Before I was ten, we had already lived on three continents, always in communal arrangements. We rubbed shoulders with dedicated individuals whose interwoven sense of spirituality, history, and politics gave a tone of world-historic

destiny to our doings. We had our share of quirky adventures that my parents usually greeted with good humor, sometimes outright laughter. But our sense of ourselves – my parents' and, therefore, to a great extent, mine – has rested on a serious determination to shun personal hopes and ambitions to follow the divine call.

Some children might have rebelled or allowed all of it to wash over their heads and disappear. I, on the other hand, was completely on board as a kid. I functioned like a coworker with my parents, supporting them enthusiastically when they announced they were traveling somewhere without me and practicing the behaviors that seemed, within the community, to signal a person was on the right track with God. Well into my fourth decade, I was still embedded in my parents' "world-changing" endeavor, occasionally buoyed by sporadic opportunities to do interesting work but becoming inwardly disheartened. Several months before this departure I was reduced to such a severe state of depression that I could not speak. That was when I finally decided I'd had enough.

Later I will admit I had been waiting for this day my whole life, but right now I do not allow myself to embrace this thought. I am propelled forward because I feel no sense of an alternative. I am amazingly fortunate to have a little money, thanks to my American grandfather, even if I am continually forced to look for ways to stretch my resources. In other respects, I am gullible in my belief that my previous life has prepared me for this departure.

I spend the night en route with colleagues of my parents in Connecticut. Even though the packed car broadcasts a major move, they ask few questions about my plans, so we converse as we might have in times past, observing Moral Re-Armament's rituals of good-hearted interchange. I reach the Fenway area of Boston the next day, my thirty-fifth birthday, on a cloudy afternoon. My cousin Tom, who lives in the Boston suburbs, meets me on the curbside and helps me unload the car – my dad's idea, and not one I would have proceeded on if I'd had my choice. Professionally accomplished as he is, I assume Tom looks down on most of my life choices and doesn't have much admiration for this one. But he has come – in jeans and a sweatshirt – and sticks by me as we cart suitcases and hanging bags, boxes of

crockery and cookware, and a few items of furniture, to the dingy apartment. When we finish, he invites me for dinner with his family the next week, then disappears into the Boston traffic.

My first thought as I wave him off is how glorious it feels to be completely alone. I walk up the two flights to my sanctuary and begin finding places for my belongings.

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The truth, even if I don't want fully to embrace it, is that I have lived my life in a closed universe. "We" in the movement claim to have insight about how human beings should live and how the world should change. But I have never had to face these matters head-on personally because they were mediated by the protections of the bubble.

What is "life" when these support structures are removed? My choices have been preordained. I don't know what I care passionately about. I feel unsure how to make friends. I am lost when it comes to asserting my opinions. I am a person adrift, bouncing on the waves, taking cues from random outward signals, unable to put my hand on the rudder of my own existence.

Does this thing I was born into hold water when examined from the outside? "We" have called ourselves a global network of changemakers. We have asserted that personal morality and growth determine social change. The sincerity and reach of the Group can be breathtaking when encountered at full throttle in large conferences or theatrical events. Our vision and reach are broad. How could I possibly throw over this past completely? But I know certain parts have been misguided. And right now I am confused about which parts those are.

But when explaining my situation to new friends, I soon find it is easiest to describe my situation as an escape. Escape is more complicated, I clarify, because the spiritual environment that I have left is unusually compelling and high-minded. It is not easily dismissed. It isn't one of those cults that encourage sexual slavery or pot-smoking orgies in the woods.

In fact, at this moment of departure, the power of the collective still niggles in the form of a contrapuntal voice within, suggesting that

my inability to find my way in the Group's all-consuming enterprise shows there is something wrong with me. But another internal voice insists that in devising this departure I am obeying the call to be true to what I most deeply believe – perhaps for the first time ever.

As time goes on, the story will emerge more clearly as an expedition into the dark and unprotected forest of freedom of choice that defines adulthood. That foray has been delayed for me, or indeed, overlooked, and I don't have any appreciation for it. Nor do I realize that this odyssey will be made harder because core developmental processes have been taken from me in the name of unquestionable goals.

Below all of this is the undercurrent of numbness that has been there as long as I can remember. I have come to a point where I no longer can feel myself in my own story.