Praise for *Grateful American*

"Gary Sinise writes as he lives, and as the artist and actor he has always been: with American authenticity, purpose, and a conviction that is inseparable from his nature."

—TOM HANKS, ACTOR AND FILMMAKER

"No entertainer alive today has visited and performed more for our troops at veterans hospitals and military bases all over the world than Gary Sinise. For years his foundation has built 'smart homes' for our troops that were severely wounded in combat. The book is called *Grateful American*, and I promise that after you read it you will be grateful for what Gary has accomplished and contributed to our country. He's truly one of a kind."

—CLINT EASTWOOD, ACTOR, DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, AND MUSICIAN

"In my four years in the military, fifty years in show business, and over seventy years on this planet, I have never met a more dedicated American than Gary Sinise. Where does this kind of man come from and where did he get this boundless energy to accomplish so much and still put God, family, and our men and women in the armed forces above himself? *Grateful American* is an amazing story about a man who had a midlife 'awakening.' All who read this book will be grateful that such a man lived in our lifetime."

—TOM DREESEN, COMEDIAN, ACTOR, AND ENTERTAINER

"Gary Sinise's book is absolutely amazing and provides a clear road map of one man's journey to selfless service. He uses his personal story to highlight that journey and stirs us all to do the same. Gary is an inspiration to me and to everyone he comes in contact with—his life is the ultimate example of selfless service."

—RICK LYNCH, LIEUTENANT GENERAL, US ARMY (RETIRED),
AUTHOR OF *ADAPT OR DIE: BATTLE TESTED PRINCIPLES FOR LEADERS*
AND *WORK HARD, PRAY HARD: THE POWER OF FAITH IN ACTION*

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"For many years, I was a huge admirer of Gary Sinise's work and the fact that when he was only eighteen he started the incredible theater company Steppenwolf. When I was a struggling actor in New York City, I saw him in terrific productions like *True West*, *Balm in Gilead*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, and his incredible acting was an inspiration to me. Since then, though, Gary has become an inspiration for a completely different reason: he inspires me with who he is as a person. Gary Sinise quietly and consistently brings light and hope to people, serving his fellow man with an attitude of gratitude."

—PATRICIA HEATON, ACTOR, ADVOCATE, AND THREE-TIME EMMY AWARD–WINNER

"*Grateful American* is an incredibly honest and revealing examination of the personal path that each one of us must take to discover our life's purpose. Millions of thankful military personnel, veterans, first responders, and their families have benefitted immeasurably from Gary's journey, and it's been my distinct honor to participate in many of his inspiring initiatives throughout the years. I'm a grateful American for knowing him!"

—GENERAL (RETIRED) ROBIN RAND, US AIR FORCE

"In singing the praises of *Grateful American*, I have the added advantage of having known the author for over forty years. This book is a reflection of someone for whom my admiration by itself would probably fill a book. In reading it you will discover why I've been blessed to have this exceptional man, husband, father, and patriot as my dear friend."

—JOE MANTEGNA, ACTOR, PRODUCER, WRITER, AND DIRECTOR

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Grateful American

A JOURNEY FROM SELF TO SERVICE

GARY SINISE

with Marcus Brotherton



An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

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For Moira, Sophie, Mac, and Ella,
with never-ending love and gratitude

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The nation which forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten.

—President Calvin Coolidge

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CONTENTS

Prologue: Stunned 1

CHAPTER 1: Yearning to Breathe Free 11
CHAPTER 2: Baptism 27
CHAPTER 3: The Start of Steppenwolf 38
CHAPTER 4: The Corner of Hollywood and Love 56
CHAPTER 5: When We Started to Look Beyond Ourselves 70
CHAPTER 6: Glimpses of Glory 84
CHAPTER 7: Steinbeck Country 101
CHAPTER 8: Big Movie Years 116
CHAPTER 9: Darkness and Light 135
CHAPTER 10: Turning Point 152
CHAPTER 11: A Bridge Between Worlds 167
CHAPTER 12: Honor. Gratitude. Rock and Roll. 184
CHAPTER 13: Perfect Timing 197
CHAPTER 14: Helping Children 211
CHAPTER 15: Flurry of Action 228
CHAPTER 16: The Gary Sinise Foundation 243
CHAPTER 17: Why I'm Still on a Mission 261

Called to Action 275
Acknowledgments 277
About the Author 279

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 7 11/29/18 2:57 PM

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 8 11/29/18 2:57 PM

PROLOGUE

Stunned

I am not completely prepared for what awaits me on the other side of the doors.

On this August day in 1994, the wind is blowing hot and humid throughout Chicago. Event organizers have told me more than twenty-five hundred disabled veterans are waiting for me in the air-conditioned ballroom at the Conrad Hilton Hotel. I'm here to receive an award at the national convention of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), an organization whose motto is "Fulfilling our promises to the men and women who served." This is my first time at the convention. I've met disabled veterans before, one or two at a time, but never so many gathered in one spot. I imagine I'll walk into a sea of wheelchairs, crutches, and prosthetics, but I don't really know what to expect.

Organizers have led me down a back way through the clatter of the hotel's kitchen. We've sidestepped waiters and food prep staff and approached the ballroom doors from the kitchen entrance. Now we wait for the cue to come in. I can hear my voice being broadcast throughout the auditorium. *Forrest Gump*, the movie where I play a character named Lieutenant Dan Taylor, has been out for about six weeks, and event organizers are showing clips in the ballroom. At this point in my career, I've been in lots of plays and on a few TV shows, including *American Playhouse* broadcasts of Sam Shepard's *True West* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* I've even

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had a few credited roles in movies: *Of Mice and Men, A Midnight Clear, Jack the Bear, The Stand.* But I've never had a role that's received as much attention as Lieutenant Dan.

It's a new experience. The movie has already exploded in popularity, and more and more I'm getting recognized in public. As a result, the DAV has kindly provided me with a suite at the hotel and kept me away from the crowds.

Lieutenant Dan is a disabled Vietnam veteran who loses his legs in combat. He carries terrible guilt after leading his platoon into an ambush where many of his men are killed or wounded, and he wishes that instead of surviving with his injury he'd been killed along with his men. His post-traumatic stress[1] buries him in alcohol abuse and dark isolation. His friend, Forrest Gump, also a Vietnam veteran, is a good-hearted and simpleminded man who receives the Medal of Honor for saving Lieutenant Dan's life, as well as the lives of other members of their platoon.

Through the ballroom doors, I hear the scene that's being shown. The characters' combat days are over, and Private Gump (played by Tom Hanks) reunites with me, his lieutenant, in New York City in 1971 during the holiday season. Christmas is in the air, and I'm confined to my wheelchair. My hair has grown to my shoulders and is unkempt. I set down my whiskey bottle long enough to probe Forrest with a sneering question:

LIEUTENANT DAN: Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?
FORREST: I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.
LIEUTENANT DAN: [Chuckles wryly.] That's all these cripples down at the VA ever talk about. Jesus this and Jesus that. Have I found Jesus? They even had a priest come and talk to me. He said God is listening, but I have to help myself, and if I accept Jesus into my heart, then I'll get to walk beside him in the kingdom of heaven. [Enraged, Lieutenant Dan throws the bottle, glares at Forrest, and shouts:] Did you hear what I said?

1. Usually, this condition is referred to as post-traumatic stress *disorder*. But I refuse to call it a disorder. Take any person, put him or her in combat, and they're going to experience post-traumatic stress. The result is not a disorder. It's a natural response.

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WALK beside him in the kingdom of heaven. Well, kiss my crippled a**. God is listening? What a crock of s**t.

FORREST: [Quietly] I'm going to heaven, Lieutenant Dan.

LIEUTENANT DAN: [Bitterly] Oh? Ah, well, before you go, why don't you get your a** down to the corner and get us another bottle of ripple.

In the ballroom, I hear dry chuckles from the audience. A clip from later in the film begins. Lieutenant Dan has found his way to Bayou La Batre, Alabama, and goes to work on Forrest's shrimping boat. One dark night, a squall comes up, a real act of God. All the other shrimping boats sensibly return to port, but Forrest and Lieutenant Dan stay out at sea. During the storm's fiercest moments, Lieutenant Dan climbs to the top of the mainmast, shakes his fist at the sky, and yells out at the wind and the waves: "You call this a storm? . . . I'm right here, come and get me! You'll never . . . sink . . . this . . . boat!" In an utter showdown with Providence, he vents his frustration, disappointment, grief, and rage.

In the next scene the storm is over, and the sun is out. Forrest's boat is the only one that's survived the hurricane. Lieutenant Dan sits on the edge of the boat. He's finally let go of the anger, fear, and resentment over what has happened to him. He looks his former private in the eyes and says quietly, "Forrest, I never thanked you for saving my life." After a smile to his friend, he hops into the calm waters of the ocean and floats on his back into the distance, finally at peace, the sun breaking through the clouds as if lighting the way forward. In a voice-over Forrest says, "He never actually said so, but I think he made his peace with God."

As the clips continue in the ballroom, I think about how this character seems to have resonated with a lot of people already, especially those in the veteran community. Shortly after the movie's release, Gary Weaver, a Vietnam vet who worked for the DAV, invited me to the DAV convention so that the organization could present me with an award for "an honest portrayal of a catastrophically injured veteran who served his country." That's why the DAV has brought me to this ballroom at the Hilton—to honor me for my "hard work" on the film.

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Hard work?! Waiting outside the ballroom doors, I stifle a snicker at the absurdity. *Compared to what the people in this ballroom have gone through, my job isn't close to hard work. All I do is find my mark, say my lines. Hard work is being far from home and up to your elbows in dust, crawling along the ground while the enemy shoots at you, wondering when the bullets will stop flying long enough so you can grab an MRE and wolf down your next meal. That's hard work.*

The scene ends. The ballroom doors grow quiet.

"Ready?" asks the organizer. His hand reaches toward the door handle.

I nod. "Ready."

He opens the doors to the ballroom and I walk inside.

The entire ballroom erupts into applause. I choke up immediately. The spotlight is focused on the podium, center-stage, where I'll give my speech. I walk up the wheelchair ramp leading to the podium and glance around. It's a massive ballroom filled with hundreds and hundreds of disabled veterans plus their family members. Some of the veterans wear their uniforms. Others wear civilian clothes with hats that show which war they fought in or the unit or branch of the military they served with. The atmosphere in the room is electric. I see a wide range of ages, wounded veterans from World War II to the present. It's a sea of men and women, many with scars, prosthetics, burn marks, crutches, and wheelchairs—and all wearing the unmistakable look of pride. They're clapping, cheering wildly, whooping, calling my name.

I am stunned. Humbled. The lump in my throat won't go down. *What have I ever done?* Here are all these wounded and disabled veterans—men and women who have sacrificed so much—honoring me for merely playing a part in a movie.

The cheering continues, and I make my way to the stage, clear my throat, and choke out a few words. "I'm not prepared for the emotion I feel right now," I say spontaneously, and I pause again. Looking out at the audience, I realize why they were applauding. Lieutenant Dan has somehow become more than just a character in a movie. To these veterans he has become a symbol of our country's collective awareness of all our injured veterans, especially the Vietnam veteran. Already this character has grown beyond anything I could ever imagine.

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Somehow, I manage to finish my words, and when I'm done speaking, the DAV national commander, Richard Marbes, presents me with the award. Richard is an injured veteran, and due to his time in service he's standing on crutches with his right leg missing up to his hip. The award he presents to me is called the National Commander's Award, one of the DAV's highest honors. I make the mistake of reading the award's wording: "Your superb performance brought awareness of the lifelong sacrifice of disabled veterans back into public consciousness in a remarkably positive way." One word of that inscription stops me cold. But I don't know what to do with it at first.

Still taken aback by that word, I come down off the stage, award clutched in my hand. People make some more remarks. The event concludes. I shake hands and pose for pictures. Scribble autographs and give hugs. Smile and say to as many veterans as I can, "Thank you so much for serving our country," and I'm choked up now for a new reason. That single word has lodged itself deeply into my mind. The word has burned its collective sorrow and shame into me, and it's made me say a silent vow to do everything in my power to overturn all the wrongs it stands for. The one word is *back*.

"Your superb performance brought awareness of the lifelong sacrifice of disabled veterans *back* into public consciousness in a remarkably positive way."

That one word embodies the reality that honoring veterans hasn't always been the norm in America. When our troops came home from World War II, they were given ticker-tape parades, but when they came home from Korea, they were largely forgotten. And when they came back from Vietnam, they were greeted with anger. Spit upon. Called names. Hit with wadded-up lunch sacks filled with feces. There were no welcome home parades for our Vietnam veterans.

When our veterans returned from the first Gulf War, unlike Vietnam, they were greeted with giant parades in New York and a few other cities. Yet even though our country eventually tried to make amends with Vietnam veterans by supporting them as they created the Vietnam Memorial in DC, and with some cities hosting in the mid-1980s a few welcome home parades, now in 1994 I can still sense remnants of this rift in our country,

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this still-open wound for the veterans of the Vietnam War. Little do I know how significant this moment at the convention will become in my life. Seeds are being planted that will grow into a tree with many branches. For it's here that I first begin to ask myself: *How can I make a difference in restoring what's been lost? How can I help make sure our veterans are never treated that way again?*

More than two decades later, on an early Monday morning in 2018 at my foundation's office in Woodland Hills, California, I'm reviewing my schedule for the upcoming week—packed, as usual. A speech in downtown L.A. tonight. Gatherings with donors and veterans throughout the week. Meetings with foundation staff to go over the schedule for the next few months. A tribute concert to give this weekend. I take a deep breath.

It's been twenty-four years since that defining moment at the DAV national convention, the moment when I began to realize what the character of Lieutenant Dan means to many people. I gave everything I had to the role because I wanted to pay special tribute to our Vietnam veterans who never got the thank-you and the pat on the back they deserved. Over the years I've met many people whose lives have been touched by the role of Lieutenant Dan, especially people in the military and veteran community, and I'll always be grateful the role has done much good.

The years since the convention have been good to me as an actor. Today, in addition to *Forrest Gump*, I'm best known for roles in *Apollo 13*, *Ransom*, *Snake Eyes*, *Truman*, *George Wallace*, and *The Green Mile*, and for playing the lead roles of Detective Mac Taylor in the hit TV show *CSI: NY* (2004–2013) and Agent Jack Garrett in *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders* (2016–2017). I've received an Emmy and a Golden Globe, been honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and been blessed to receive an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor for my portrayal of Lieutenant Dan.

Yet my life's work has turned into so much more than what I've done on the stage and screen. Over the years I've grown in my relationships with

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our troops, veterans, and first responders. I've been blessed to visit our servicemen and -women in the distant and often dangerous places where they live and work. I've traveled to visit our troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world, and have performed with my band—the Lieutenant Dan Band—in Kuwait, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, Singapore, Diego Garcia, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, Puerto Rico, Alaska, and all around the United States in an effort to help boost the morale of our troops and military families.

I've seen firsthand our service members' extraordinary skill and dedication, and my life's mission and passion today are to shine a light on those who serve and defend, the true heroes who go into harm's way, volunteering to lay down their lives so we can have the freedom to make something real and good of our own lives.

I'm still an actor—absolutely. But I realize I've become more than an actor. While this is not a term I use myself, I have heard people say I've become "today's Bob Hope"—the legendary Hollywood entertainer who began doing USO shows in 1941 and continued supporting and encouraging troops for the next fifty years. Bob Hope became the figurehead of tribute from an entire grateful nation. Other people—entertainers, reporters, citizens, and even the troops themselves—have compared me to him, I suppose because we both share an ongoing and long-term commitment to supporting and entertaining our defenders at home and abroad. But I never set my sights on "becoming" anyone, or trying to fill Bob Hope's shoes. He set the bar very high in his fifty years of entertaining and supporting our troops. I've simply tried to take action whenever and wherever I can, because I care about the men and women who are serving our country and want to do my bit to back them up.

For this work I've been privileged—astonishingly—to be named an honorary chief petty officer by the United States Navy. The Marine Corps has pinned me as an honorary marine. The New York City Fire Department named me an honorary battalion chief. The Association of the US Army presented me with the George Catlett Marshall Medal, awarded for "selfless service to the United States." I've received the Sylvanus Thayer Award at West Point, given to a civilian "whose character, service, and

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achievements reflect the ideals prized by the US Military Academy." And in November 2008 I received a call from the White House, inviting me to come to a ceremony to receive the Presidential Citizens Medal, the second-highest civilian honor awarded to citizens for "exemplary deeds performed in service of the nation."

The flow of praise feels exactly backward to me. As I travel to bases and military hospitals, it's humbling to see our servicemen and -women grow excited when I show up to shake their hands. I'm the one who's honored to meet them, to thank them, and I'm touched that they would want to turn their thanks back toward me. I've learned the reason they're excited to meet me or shake my hand is not just because I'm visiting or performing with my band, but mainly because wherever I go I carry a message of a nation's gratitude. I'm letting them know that the country they love hasn't forgotten about them.

The experiences of war leave an indelible impact on our servicemen and -women. As our veterans return to civilian life, the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges they face are often difficult. I've come to realize that one of our greatest shared responsibilities as American citizens is to support and honor the heroes who defend our nation. We are all beneficiaries of the freedom and security they fight to protect.

In 2011, I established the Gary Sinise Foundation to formally continue the service work I'd begun years earlier. Today, my foundation has become a rallying point for people everywhere who want to serve, support, and honor our troops, veterans, and first responders. Thousands of individuals and dozens of great companies and organizations have come together to help us. One of my foundation's main initiatives is to build smart homes for severely wounded veterans. We provide these houses and the land they're built on at no cost to the vets, completely mortgage free. Each house is individually designed and equipped with anything each severely wounded vet needs to make life more manageable. Adaptive smart technology, ADA-accessible restrooms, sometimes, if necessary, wheelchair ramps or elevators, whatever can help to restore functionality and independence to the veteran and his or her family. And the foundation does other things to help too.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 8 11/29/18 2:57 PM

The Lt. Dan Band is an important program of the foundation. We perform at bases in the United States and all over the world to support and encourage our troops. We've played hundreds of shows over the years. I don't make any money from these concerts or from my participation in any of the foundation's activities. And at my age, I certainly don't need to be out on the road performing cover tunes over and over again. But I believe I've been given a mission—a mission of service. What I love about playing music and doing live concerts is that they do some good: they bring a little joy, boost spirits, raise funds, and give me a platform to help spread a message of support and appreciation as I speak directly to the men and women who, past and present, serve our country. Seeing the smiles on the faces of the troops and their families is all I need to keep going.

There's a message I want to deliver in this book: I love my country, and I'm grateful to be an American. I know where my freedom comes from, and I do not take for granted the sacrifices of those who provide it. Because of that, I want to do all I can to ensure America's defenders and their families are never forgotten.

I want this book to help spread a spirit of joy, tribute, action, and ultimately gratefulness. In the pages to come, you'll read how a wild kid from the suburbs of Chicago stumbled into theater, how he eventually developed from an actor into an advocate, and why his passionate commitment to support our nation's defenders continually manifests into action.

As I've looked back on this life's journey and seen anew how my story unfolded over the years, what I've seen has surprised even me. There have been any number of ups and downs in my life, and there was a time when I wasn't concerned about too much more than my own career. But slowly things changed. It's my hope that as I share these stories from my life, you will be entertained and maybe even inspired too—empowered to overcome obstacles, embrace gratitude, and engage in service above self.

So let's go. First up: the vineyards of Ripacandida, a trip through Ellis Island, and a man who would have three wives.

Wait a minute.

What did he say?

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CHAPTER 1

Yearning to Breathe Free

Let me take you back to old Italy, to the little village of Ripacandida in the province of Potenza. I want to look at how certain decisions, moments, and events in the past can shape and mold the present—and even the future—in uncanny ways.

While I've yet to travel there myself, I'm told that in Ripacandida you can see lush valleys and large cliffs, bright sunlight on the whitewashed houses. You smell fresh-baked bread and catch in the air the fruity tang of grapes. In the late 1880s, my great-grandfather Vito Sinisi (spelled with an *i* at the end) lived in Ripacandida with his family. My last name was pronounced *Sin-NEEZ-zay.* Say it out loud like a good Italian would.

The land was beautiful, the people vibrant and industrious, yet times were tough for Vito in the old country. So he traveled to Brazil and settled there for a while to try and make a buck working in the coffee fields. He then headed back to Italy, and when he was twenty-three, on January 22, 1887, he married a sixteen-year-old from the village named Anna Maria Fusco. They were happy, but times were still tough. He needed a land of opportunity. He needed a land that welcomed the tired, the poor, the huddled masses. Four years and two children later, in 1891, Vito and his young family came to America. They sailed past Lady Liberty, headed through Ellis Island, and when the American clerk who stamped forms saw the last name, he mispronounced it, saying it softer, like a whisper—*Sineece.*

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Rhymes with *niece.* Vito figured that's how good Americans say his last name, and Vito wanted to be a good American, so the *i* was changed to an *e*, and ever after the Sinise family has said its last name the way that nameless clerk did.

Vito and his family wound up on the south side of Chicago, where he was soon able to buy a little house with a bakery and store out front. He created his own job, running his little grocery store and baking Italian bread twice a day. He sold his bread for ten cents a loaf as fast as he could bake it. Vito had nine children—the first two born in Ripacandida, and seven born in America. My great-grandmother Anna passed away in 1918, and after a period of mourning, Vito met and married Adiela Labriola, who had immigrated to Chicago from Italy in 1910. Adiela went by the more American name of Ethel. Sadly, a little over eighteen months after their marriage, she also died, so Vito returned to Italy in hopes of finding a new wife, this time meeting Maria Lucia Giambersio. They married in Ripacandida on December 30, 1920, and returned to America. Neither Adiela nor Maria Lucia had any other children with Vito. In later years, Vito worked in Rock Island, Illinois, as a crossing watchman, the person who flags automobile traffic when trains run through crossings, then for the city of Blue Island on a horse-drawn garbage wagon before he retired in 1940. He died in 1946, old and full of years in this new country, his family welcomed by the mighty woman with a torch.

My grandfather Donato Louis Sinise was called Daniel by everyone. He was one of Vito's kids born in Chicago. Grandpa Dan arrived in 1900 and quickly grew into a hardworking kid who sold newspapers and peddled bread. He left home at fifteen to work in a glass factory. In 1917, Grandpa Dan joined the US Army to fight in World War I, and at eighteen found himself on the front lines in France in the Battle of the Argonne Forest. This huge, bloody battle saw some 26,277 American troops killed, more Americans than were killed in the entire Revolutionary War (25,324), or about six times the number of American troops killed on D-Day (4,414 killed on June 6, 1944).

After the war, Grandpa spoke little about his battle experiences except to tell one story. He served for a time as an ambulance driver, shuttling

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 12 11/29/18 2:57 PM

wounded from the front lines to the hospitals. You'd think that would be a safer job in a war, but the enemy targeted the big red crosses on the ambulances while Grandpa drove in convoy, and the shells began to whistle in. *Kaboom!* The ambulance in front of Grandpa blew up. More shells whistled in. *Kaboom!* The ambulance behind Grandpa blew up. More shells whistled in. Grandpa braced for the inevitable. But somehow—miraculously—Grandpa Dan's ambulance wasn't touched.

In 1920, during a second epidemic of flu at US Army Facility Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, a young registered nurse named Vesta Lambertson worked at night in the pneumonia ward. Grandpa Dan became night supervisor and met her. Bells went off and they married three months later on April 23, 1920. Whenever Grandpa told this story, he said jokingly, "It was either marry me or else," but he never explained what the "or else" meant. It cost two bucks to get married. He remembered that. A buck fifty for the license and fifty cents to the judge.

In August 1920, Grandpa Dan became a switchman on the Indiana Harbor Belt railway line and a year later was promoted to conductor. He was a hardworking heartland railroad man until he retired, when he gave me, his firstborn grandchild, his pocket watch. On the back he had engraved a simple inscription: "To Gary from Grandpa, June 1969." I treasure that watch to this day.

By the time I knew my grandparents, everybody called Vesta "Grandma Betty." Grandpa Dan and Grandma Betty had three children: my uncles Jack and Jerry, and my dad, Robert. During World War II, Uncle Jack flew thirty missions as a navigator on a B-17 bomber over Europe, while Uncle Jerry, at just eighteen years old, served on a US Navy ship—a landing ship tank (USS *LST-811*)—in the Pacific, arriving just after the battle for Okinawa ended in mid-June 1945. After Imperial Japan surrendered, Uncle Jerry traveled to the Palau Islands to pick up Okinawan families to return them to their homes. Mostly women and children, they'd been used by the Japanese as slave labor. He fed Hershey bars to the kids and on the ship bought them everything he could think of. The children sang for him in return, and years later he still said they were the most beautiful voices he'd ever heard. He spent that summer and fall traveling between

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the islands of Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Guam, Saipan, Leyte, and Tinian, and took part as a member of the occupation force of mainland Japan.

Uncle Jerry was remarkable. He signed up for the military right after high school graduation in 1944 but was told he was 4F because his ears were badly scarred from the scarlet fever and chicken pox he had simultaneously as a child. But Uncle Jerry convinced the recruiters he was fit for service. When he reached boot camp in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, doctors examined him once again and told him to get back on the train and go home. Uncle Jerry refused. He insisted on doing his duty. They let him stay. After the war, he would be discharged in June 1946, only to be drafted back into the navy again during the Korean War. In January of 1951, he began serving aboard the USS *McCoy Reynolds* until being discharged on February 14, 1952.

By the time I was old enough to understand and appreciate what my grandfather and Uncle Jerry had experienced during their war years, their service was long behind them. They also never spoke much about their military days. I did talk to my uncle Jack about his service during WWII before his passing in 2014, but this only came after I was an adult. I regret that I was never able to ask my uncle Jerry and my grandfather more about their service days before they passed away.

Dad was still a young teenager when World War II ended. After he graduated from high school, he tried college for about three months before deciding it wasn't for him. He joined the navy and in 1951 went through boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes near North Chicago. He then trained at Naval Air Station Jacksonville in Florida where they asked him if he wanted to go on a ship or if he'd like to take pictures for the navy. Dad chose the camera, so he was sent to Pensacola for more training, and then to Naval Support Facility Anacostia near Washington, DC, during the Korean War. Dad's job was to develop the film and photographs that came back in cans from the war zone. The film and photos were sent to all the high-ranking generals at the Pentagon for analysis, so Dad had top-secret clearance. This was where he learned the film business.

Dad had met Mom back at Dwight D. Eisenhower High School in Blue Island, Illinois. Mom's name was Mylles Alsip. Her parents had

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 14 11/29/18 2:57 PM

come up with the name Mylles when they combined her mother's name, Mildred, with her father's name, Leslie, throwing out the *i* and spelling it with an artsy *y* instead. We never knew much about my grandpa Les's side of the family, as he and my grandmother divorced when I was young, and we didn't see him much after that. I do know he didn't serve in the military because of medical reasons, but his father, Walter Alsip, served in WWI, as did my grandmother's father, Elmer Percival Blomberg.

After Mom and Dad tied the knot, I was conceived on the naval base Anacostia. A few months before I was born, Mom, pregnant with me, went home to stay with her mother and father on the south side of Chicago because she didn't want to give birth on base. I was born at Saint Francis Hospital in Blue Island on March 17, 1955, eight days before my dad was honorably discharged from the navy. Does that mean I'm a navy brat? Well, just barely, I guess. Mom and Dad soon moved into a rental on the south side and eventually had two more kids. Three years after me came my sister, Lori Allyn, and a year later came my brother, Craig Randall. We called him Randy growing up, though today he goes by Craig.

Having served his four years in the military, Dad wanted to do something different, so right after I was born he went into the film business. Filmmaking was then a burgeoning industry in Chicago, with an entrepreneurial and forward-thinking workforce. The great Bob Newhart started in Chicago. So did Bill Friedkin, who won an Oscar for directing *The French Connection*. And today, the Chicago International Film Festival is the longest-running international film festival in North America.

Dad worked for other people as a film editor before launching his own company, Cam-Edit, when he was about thirty years old. He was the first person in Chicago to have his own editing business, and years later he was inducted into the Chicago Editors Hall of Fame. But in those early days, he edited documentaries, commercials, and industrial films—whatever came to him—and found himself immersed in the real-time *Mad Men* culture of the era: the 1960s, hard-driving, wisecracking, three-martini lunch crowd. Dad left home at seven most mornings and returned late, sometimes at midnight. And he worked many weekends. I knew Dad loved me, but in my growing-up years he simply was not around much.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 15 11/29/18 2:57 PM

My mom's sister, Aunt Nori, married Bill Smith, an army guy. Bill was stationed in Japan, and when I was about five years old, Bill brought back a little army uniform for me to wear. My eyes widened when I saw it, and I put it on immediately. I loved it. I wore that uniform as much as Mom allowed. To the store. To kindergarten. On Halloween. I even slept in it. Whenever, wherever—I wore that army uniform.

When I was just a little kid, I visited Dad in his office where he cut films on the old Moviola editing machines. Dad was working on the World War II documentary series *Victory at Sea* for NBC, and had also been hired by a director named Herschell Gordon Lewis, who shot very low-budget horror films, "splatter films" my dad called them. I couldn't read yet, so Dad told me the titles: *Color Me Blood Red*, *Two Thousand Maniacs!*, *Blood Feast*. Dad showed me a clip of a Lewis movie where a monster came out of a swamp and chased two hunters down the road, and he later pointed out his name on some movie posters. Dad told me once that the film was so low budget they would just run down to the local meat market for some cheap special effects to use for the blood and guts. So I imagined a director yelling at the people around him, ordering them what to do: "We need some more gory stuff—go down to the store and get some hamburger and lots of ketchup! Get tons of ketchup! This movie is called *Blood Feast* for cripes' sake." I looked on as Dad ran the inky film through a machine about the size of a breadbox and pressed a button, and I watched the film on the machine's little screen. He would stop the film often, tamp down on either side of the film, cut it with a blade, and put a piece of tape over it.

"There," Dad said. "That's how you edit film, Gary." I took note and grinned.

Years later, Mom and Dad moved out to California where Dad opened a West Coast office of his new editing firm, then called The Reel Thing. Mom came up with the name. Among the many TV series he worked on were *Miami Vice*, *Hart to Hart*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Baywatch,* and Michael Mann's *Crime Story*, which happened to be the first time I directed episodic television. In 1992, my dad edited *Of Mice and Men* for me.

I think it's very cool that he was so deeply involved in an industry so

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 16 11/29/18 2:57 PM

new in Chicago. When Dad started out, television had only been around for about twenty years—and already the industry was exploding. What's more astounding to me, though, is when I think how Dad got his start in the business by developing film for the navy, which means in some ways *my* roots in film go all the way back to the United States *military.*

When I grew up in Chicago, the North Side / South Side rivalry was as old as the city itself. Depending on who you talked to, the rivalry might be serious or only a chance for some good-natured ribbing. Even then, few people agreed completely on what the rivalry was about. The White Sox came from the South Side, Comiskey Park. The Cubs played on the North Side, Wrigley Field. The South Side of Chicago, where I was born, made its mark in industry. Railroading. The blue-collar working stiffs. The North Side, or northern suburbs, had more money. More white-collar business types. This part of Chicago was right on the lake, so folks from the North Side liked to go to the beach in the summer. The South Side suburb of Harvey, where I first lived, was actually so far south it was south of the South Side. But it was still gritty as could be. The address of the two-bedroom, one-bath, one-thousand-square-foot house my parents owned in Harvey was 14419 Sangamon Street, and my folks beat that address into my brain so I didn't forget. As a kid I was free to roam the neighborhood, and they didn't want me lost.

My grandpa Dan was a South Side man—a big-framed, tough Italian guy who'd been through the war and worked for the railroad. Not a cuddly grandpa at all. He was never mean. He was just tough. And a little scary. As a kid, I was a little afraid of Grandpa Dan whenever my parents took us for a visit. But years later, when I started acting in high school plays, Grandpa Dan and Grandma Betty came to see me in the restoration comedy *Tartuffe* by Moliére. I was playing the title character and had all kinds of makeup on, a funny nose, and a crazy wig, and from the stage I could clearly hear one voice in the audience. Grandpa Dan wasn't the kind of guy who laughed a lot. But I heard this bold belly laugh from the crowd,

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 17 11/29/18 2:57 PM

and I knew it was Grandpa Dan—strong, rich, and vibrant. Hearing his laugh was so affirming. I thought, *Well, if I can get Grandpa Dan laughing like this, then maybe I'm not half bad as an actor. Maybe I'll keep going.*

For first through third grades I walked to school by myself. Every morning, I passed a big mound of sticks, dirt, weeds, and thorns that beckoned to me. I liked to climb that mound and stand on top like a king. One morning I was messing around on top of the mountain and tumbled off. A thorny bush broke my fall, driving a huge thorn into my leg. Bloody, I got to school where they patched me up. My leg healed, and I forgot about it. Two years later, I looked down at my leg one day and saw something sticking out. The tip of a sliver of wood. I reached down and yanked it out. My eyebrows arched in disbelief. I had pulled out a two-inch-long piece of thorn that had lived in my leg unseen for two years. The scar is still there, a little indentation in my left calf muscle, to remind me. Perhaps it was some sort of life metaphor. Something dirty and thorny can live unnoticed in a person for a long time. Little by little, you hope, it works its way out, never to return.

This was the height of the Cold War. The nightly news didn't mean much to me as a kid, but I frequently heard about the tensions between Russia and the United States. In elementary school we had atomic bomb drills where we were all ordered to "duck and cover" underneath our desks. On the news, I heard about the Cuban Missile Crisis, a serious standoff between Khrushchev and Kennedy, and everybody prepared for nuclear weapons to land. I didn't understand all of this, and I wasn't fearful—but all the adults around me sure looked concerned. Even paranoid. *What's the big deal?* I thought. *If an atomic bomb explodes over your city, you just duck and cover under your desk.*

On November 22, 1963, I was walking to school near that same mound with the thorny bush, and another kid was climbing on the mound. He had a strange look on his face, and he chanted something over and over.

"Kennedy's dead. He got shot in the head.
Kennedy's dead. He got shot in the head.
Kennedy's dead. He got shot in the head."

The little kid was chanting naively. I thought he was just sing-songing

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 18 11/29/18 2:57 PM

nonsense. When I reached school, the teachers sent us all straight home again. Now I knew something big was up. We watched the news on our little black-and-white TV on Sangamon Street. Lee Harvey Oswald had shot and killed President Kennedy, and everybody in my family was sad. I walked outside; everybody was sad. We went to the store; everybody was sad. The whole country was grieving. I didn't know anything about politics, but I knew that my president had just been shot. I was sad too.

Not long afterward, Jack Ruby killed Oswald on live TV, and I watched the violence unfold in front of my eyes. As an eight-year-old, I didn't know what to think about what I'd just seen. About all the turmoil in my country.

About all the changes happening to America.

Life wasn't all sad. At the end of third grade, we moved from the South Side to a big old historic house in Highland Park, the north suburbs of Chicago, and in the fall of 1964, I started fourth grade at a new school called Indian Trail Elementary School. For Christmas I received my first guitar. Acoustic. I had no idea how to play, but I loved it. The Beach Boys had become my favorite band. My first record was *Beach Boys Concert*, a live record, and as the songs spun on my record player, I loved to hear the crowd cheering in the background.

We lived four blocks from Lake Michigan, with a park at the end of our street. A lot of neighborhood kids went to the same school, so some of the guys and I grabbed our guitars and formed a band. We called ourselves the Beach Dwellers, an homage to my favorite band. We tacked up cardboard signs around the neighborhood and invited all the little kids to our first concert in my living room. None of us Beach Dwellers knew how to play, but a grand total of six kids came to the show (standing room only for a living room), and we put my *Beach Boys Concert* album on the turntable, wailed away with our guitars in our hands, and lip-synced along with the tunes. By the time we reached "Little Deuce Coupe," everybody was dancing like crazy.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 19 11/29/18 2:57 PM

Mom and Dad eventually invested in guitar lessons for me in fourth and fifth grade. My teacher played an electric and always dangled a lit cigarette from his mouth, and I emerged from each lesson with a headache and reeking of smoke. But he taught me scales and chords, and in sixth grade I formed another band, a real band this time. With a drummer. We played for some kid's birthday party in my backyard, and we weren't lip-syncing anymore. Performing felt fun and cool, and we sounded terrible, but at least we were actually playing. In seventh grade, I realized everybody and his dog plays the guitar, so I picked up the bass instead. As a bassist, you're always in demand. We played the Kinks and the Yardbirds. I took to the bass naturally.

I've always had curly hair, but all the cool kids in school—not to mention my musical idols, the Beach Boys—had straight hair. *Cool* straight hair. I began to hate my curly hair and felt like a dork, so I tried plastering it down with gel. That didn't work. My hair looked frozen like plastic, but it still curled up on the ends. I noticed that after I wore a baseball cap during a ball game and took it off, the hat hair was there, but the curl was minimized. One morning Mom woke me for school and there I was, sleeping with a stocking cap on. I jumped up, took it off, and looked at myself in the mirror. Ha! The curl was gone! I felt just a little cooler at school that day.

In sixth grade I went to another new school, Elm Place, across the street from Indian Trail, and right away earned a name as a terrible student. Every report card I brought home stunk. This had been going on since the first grade. Reading and writing didn't come easily to me, and my handwriting was a mess. In fact, my handwriting remained a mess all the way through my teen years and into my twenties. Today, they'd probably diagnose some sort of learning disability. But maybe I just never learned the fundamentals. Mom was always kind, fun, and loving, but she carried a load at home, not only raising three kids, but also taking care of her mother and her sister, who lived in a couple rooms in our basement. Mom was very pretty, and at one time—while we were living in Harvey and I was still really young—she even worked as a part-time model. I remember seeing her on our little black-and-white television set on a show called *Queen for a Day*, walking out wearing a cute little outfit

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 20 11/29/18 2:57 PM

and displaying one of the prizes, a toaster or a blender or something similar. Dad, meanwhile, was always at work downtown in the city. Our house in Highland Park was a larger house, and I think Dad probably overextended himself financially, and that's why he worked all the time. He loved us as a family. He just always needed to work to pay the bills since moving up to the northern suburbs was more expensive. So with Mom and Dad having their hands full, it was a rare moment that anybody was ever able to sit and do homework with me. At school I had trouble paying attention. I was always daydreaming, looking out the window, but somehow, I kept passing each grade with something like a straight D average.

A big Jewish community lived in Highland Park, and lots of my friends went to synagogue on Saturday and had bar mitzvahs and things I didn't quite understand as a kid. Summers, the older kids traveled to Israel to work on a kibbutz. Israel was less than twenty years old as a state then, and all the Jewish families I knew wanted to be connected to the Holy Land. But I wasn't raised with any sort of strong religious faith. We went to Sunday school until I was about six, but that was it. My great-grandfather Vito Sinise was Catholic and had raised his family Catholic, but when Grandpa Dan married Grandma Betty, she was Presbyterian, which caused a bit of a stir. I don't remember having any big thoughts of God at a young age. God, faith, service—the things that became so important to me later in life—weren't on my radar as a kid.

Halfway through my seventh-grade year, my parents moved us to Glen Ellyn, a western suburb of Chicago. Dad's business partner, Frank Romolo, and his family lived in Glen Ellyn, and Dad and Mom had fallen in love with the area. Dad's business kept growing, and I was surprised to learn the big house we moved into was once owned by the Morton family, of Morton Salt fame. But the move felt rough to me. I was a lousy student in a new school where I didn't know anyone, and I felt very out of place. I found some kids who played guitar, and we formed a band where I played bass, and music helped me make the adjustment. Music always helped me cope, and I played in a string of different bands: the Olde Molde, spelled in the Old English way; Uproot Confusion; and the Dirty Brain, named for a piece of brain coral I found while snorkeling on vacation with my

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 21 11/29/18 2:57 PM

family in the Virgin Islands. I brought it back home as a memento of the trip, and during our concerts we placed the spherically shaped coral on top of our rock organ and shined a spotlight on it. With its grooved surfaces, it looked just like a human's brain, and after thousands of years in the ocean, it stunk like a dead fish.

My future lay in either music or sports. I could have tossed a coin. I loved sports. In Highland Park I played baseball each spring. Winters, they'd freeze over the parking lot at my school, and we all played hockey. I was a huge Blackhawks fan, and Bobby Hull was my favorite player. I also loved football and rooted for the Bears. We organized a local football league for kids and played each other on weekends. I was a fast runner, always the quarterback or one of the halfbacks, and I was usually the kick-off return guy, running for a touchdown every chance I got.

I played football through eighth grade in Glen Ellyn, but I was an undisciplined kid and never showed up for practice, so I never knew any of the plays. The coaches would just put me in to return the kickoff because of my speed—and nine times out of ten, I'd get a touchdown. When I reached high school at Glenbard West in 1969, I tried out for the team but realized every kid was twice as motivated as me—and twice as big, so that ended my football career.

I played baseball in school through eighth grade too. Ron Santo, the third baseman for the Cubs, was my favorite, and the Cubs were in the playoffs in 1969. Even though I was born on the South Side, I've been a Cub fan since I was five years old watching them on WGN on the little black-and-white television in our living room. I dreamed of being a Major League Baseball player someday and wanted to play second or third base. But all that changed during the summer of '69 after my eighth-grade year when I blasted a double into the outfield and rounded first, heading for second. Sprinting hard, I slid headfirst, my arm stretched long. The second baseman saw me coming, and right when I dived into second, he caught the ball and came down hard on my back with his knee. *Thud!* When the dust cleared, I couldn't get up. They carried me off the field, and my dad took me to the ER. I was bruised, not broken, but for weeks it was hard to walk, and I didn't play baseball anymore after that.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 22 11/29/18 2:57 PM

That left music and my dreams of being a rock star. And I figured musicians all needed to be hard partiers—right? *Woodstock! Rock and Roll!* My parents liked to entertain and kept a bar stocked with various bottles of liquor. At the end of eighth grade, I decided to experiment. I had a metal box with a latch on it, so I gathered empty peanut butter jars with lids, cleaned them out, and stashed them in my box. When no one was looking, I sneaked small amounts of liquor out of my parents' bar. Whiskey into one jar. Vodka into another. Vermouth into another. Wine into another. Always just a bit, so Mom and Dad didn't notice.

One Saturday night I decided it was time. Randy and I shared a bedroom, but there was a small attic room connected to our room that was private where I kept some of my music gear. When Randy was asleep, I went into the attic room with my metal box full of jars, shut the door behind me, and tasted the vodka. The whiskey. The vermouth. The gin. The wine. Next thing I knew, I was plastered, sick as a dog, puking into my metal case everything I'd eaten for the past month. My head spun, and I wanted to lie down somewhere, but thought I'd better clean out the box so no one would find out what I'd been up to. I bobbed and weaved down the front stairs, heard the TV on in the other room, and figured the coast was clear. I crept into the kitchen and started dumping the vomit into the kitchen sink. I was dizzy and nauseous, and as I looked up, suddenly my mother was standing next to me, her arms folded. She looked puzzled and concerned and angry at the same time.

"Oh, hello, Mother," I said, my voice sugary. "I'm just cleaning out my box. It was a little messy. How are you this fine evening?"

The room started to go dark, and I realized I was passing out. Next thing I knew, Mom and Dad were wiping off my mouth, putting me to bed. I was grounded for a week. And no more box.

You'd think I would have learned my lesson. But that was only the start for me. The times were changing, and the drug culture had begun its rise. America was exploding in a million different directions just as I entered my teen years, and it felt like the entire country couldn't contain itself. We were at the peak of the Vietnam War, and it was going badly. We found ourselves in the age of revolution, the rise of the hippies. Everybody

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 23 11/29/18 2:57 PM

was anti-authority. Antiestablishment. I heard about Woodstock. The sexual revolution. Pot was everywhere, and by the end of eighth grade, although still on the football team, I felt caught between the athletes and the pot smokers.

At thirteen, fourteen, I went to parties where the drug scene was "happening." Kids sprayed oven cleaner into plastic bags and sniffed it, so of course I figured I needed to try. It's a wonder anyone survived. Kids dumped spot remover onto rags and walked around sniffing wet rags, so I tried that too. Snorting spot remover gave me a crazy buzz. And since older kids were at these parties too, beer flowed everywhere, and the air was thick with pot smoke. But at that time, I stuck to taking a few sniffs on my wet rag and that was it.

For a couple of years, I went crazy. When we lived in Glen Ellyn, this buddy of mine told me how his dad drove his car to the train station, parked, and rode the train to work. My buddy knew his dad kept a spare key inside the engine compartment. So I hiked over to the train station, lifted the hood, found the key, and took the car. I didn't have any particular place to go. Like an idiot, I made a left turn next to a sign that said, "No Left Turn," with a cop right behind me. Red lights flashed in the rearview mirror and I pulled over. The cop came to my window and said in a low voice: "Driver's license."

"Oh, yes sir," I said, my voice as proper as a lieutenant's, and I handed him my license. A fake. The name on the license was Carlos Huizinga. Age twenty. I was fourteen, looking twelve.

"Well, Carlos," the cop said. "This driver's license has expired."

"What? That can't be right." My heart pounded.

"Let's leave the car right here." He opened my door. "We'll go down to the police station and figure out what's wrong."

He took me down to the station, put me in a room, and stared straight through me. Clearly he knew I was full of crap.

"Carlos. Is your name really Carlos?"

"Oh yes, Officer. I had no idea my license was expired."

"Carlos. Can we call your mom and dad?"

"Um. I don't think they're home."

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 24 11/29/18 2:57 PM

"Carlos. What's their number?"

I broke, and my words tumbled out in a rush—"Officer, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That's not my name. It's Gary. Gary Sinise. And that's not my license. It's not even my car. It's my friend's dad's." I was wailing now, my voice cracked and pleading. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry . . ."

They called my dad. Dad came to the police station. Dad drove me home. Dad wasn't happy. I was grounded for a long, long time.

I mean, c'mon. What was I thinking? Did I look like a twenty-year-old *Carlos*?

Not all my shenanigans contained even an element of humor. Dad had a big Buick Electra, and when I was fourteen I regularly lifted the keys, crawled out my window at night, and drove the Electra around town. One time a buddy said, "Hey, my dad owns a music store. We could use some speakers for our band." So one night I sneaked out and picked up my buddy in the Electra. We drove over to his dad's store. My buddy opened it with a key. We stole some big column speakers and put them in the Electra. I dropped him off and took the equipment back to my house. It was five in the morning when I unloaded the speakers into our garage. I'd just closed the trunk of the Electra and was walking into the garage for the last time when my dad came out.

"Gary. What are you doing?" His voice boomed.

"Uh. Oh, good morning, Dad. Um, my buddy was moving. We needed to get the equipment out of his house." I talked fast, caught in a web of deceit.

Dad took one long look around his garage. He didn't ask how I got the speakers from my buddy's house over to our house. He just shook his head and walked back inside.

Eventually I carried the speakers up to my room, hooked them up to my record player, and blasted music through the house. I'd become a thief and a liar and a near-failing student—and as a fourteen-year-old I couldn't care less about any of it.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 25 11/29/18 2:57 PM

Today, I know I was heading down a dark path. My mom had her hands full, and my dad was often gone, so I usually had to figure things out on my own. Sometimes my conclusions weren't so great.

At my best, I developed initiative as a kid. I don't mean by stealing stuff. I mean by forming my own bands, by drawing people together. I was often the neighborhood organizer, and if I wanted to play baseball, football, or hockey, I simply gathered some kids together and we'd play. I developed a mind-set that if something needed to get done, then I needed to do it; otherwise, it might not happen. It's a mind-set that's carried me a long way. If you can think it up, if you can dream it up, then get off your butt and make it happen. Good things come from focus and effort.

At my worst, I learned lessons the hard way. When I look back, I see how I did stupid and even dangerous things like sniffing oven spray and stealing cars (well, *borrowing* cars, just without asking to use them), and I wonder how that stupid kid doing stupid kid stuff ever survived. It's no excuse, but the country itself was going crazy in those years. In the late 1960's climate, if all the tie-dyed rock stars I knew were blowing weed and doing drugs, then it felt easy as a kid to conclude that I'd better do drugs too. That's what was going on in America in those days, and even though for a time I went back and forth trying to avoid it, like a lot of teenagers, I got caught up in all that craziness.

Later in life, I would grow to realize that I'd been born into a land of opportunity, just like Vito Sinise envisioned when he came through Ellis Island and arrived at America's sea-washed, sunset gates. The true freedom I eventually discovered in my later youth wasn't a license to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. The true freedom acted as a force beckoning me to do something meaningful with my life. All I needed to start on that path was a push in the right direction.

But all that would come later. Midway through high school I was still caught. Thankfully, I would begin to channel my energies differently during my junior and senior years. I'd find a new road thanks to an incredible teacher named Barbara Greener Patterson—and thanks to a moment I'll never forget with Bernardo, leader of the Sharks.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 26 11/29/18 2:57 PM

CHAPTER 2

Baptism

It was February 1971, Mom and Dad had moved our family back to Highland Park, and I'd changed schools yet again. All the hippies at Highland Park High School hung out in the "Glass Hall," so named because it had lots of windows and a door that opened to the school's parking lot. Kids used to sneak out that door, go into the parking lot, jump into their cars, and smoke doobies between classes. This winter day the door was closed against the Illinois wind, blowing hard and unsympathetic from across Lake Michigan. I was a sophomore and played lead guitar in a new band, and me, the bass player, and the drummer all slouched against the wall in the Glass Hall. We called ourselves Half Day Road after a stretch of highway that divided our two northern Chicago suburbs, Highland Park and Highwood. We thought we were the real stuff. More than anything I just wanted to fit in at this new school and jam with my new band. But the life I hoped for was all about to change.

She walked straight toward us, a teacher named Mrs. Barbara Patterson. She was a powerhouse of a gal, a tornado of a woman. Blonde hair. Set jaw. The power of poetry running through her veins. She slowed when she neared us, stopped, and gave a diminutive sniff. Our clothes were cool and raggy, and my bandmates and I all wore scruffy jackets. I'd let my hair grow crazy and curly; it sprung out horizontally in a wild mass of thicket.

Mrs. Patterson was the theater teacher. She looked at us and said, "I'm

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 27 11/29/18 2:57 PM

directing *West Side Story* for the spring play. You guys all look like you could play gang members. Come and audition for the play." It sounded more like a dare than a request. Then she was off and walking fast on her way down the hall, and we shrugged it off and laughed, and one of us scoffed, "Who cares about plays?"

We *needed* to display bravado among ourselves, we three boys. Rebellion was the unwritten rule of 1971. None of us had ever been in a play before. But on that cold winter day, a warmer thought began to blow in the back of my mind. The previous year, when I was a freshman over at Glenbard West in Glen Ellyn, the school had put on *West Side Story*. All the kids went, so I did too. And you know what? That play wasn't half bad. All those Jets and Sharks running around, fighting with knives, rumbling in the streets. *Pretty cool,* I'd thought. Me and my ragtag buddies at Glenbard went out and bought jean jackets afterward so we could dress like the Jets in the play.

The bell rang and I didn't move. As a rule, I skipped most classes, but that day I thought twice, sighed, and ambled into history class and slid into a seat near the back. The teacher was saying something about a book I hadn't read. My eyes glazed and I stared out the window, working hard to become invisible. Years later, I came to love history, but that day in the classroom, I was still a horrible student. Yet for some reason teachers kept passing me year after year. I was sixteen years old, and I still didn't read or write well. My sister and brother were both better students than I was, and they were into sports: Randy played football and Lori was a cheerleader. Nothing much made sense to me except the Who; Jimi Hendrix; Crosby, Stills & Nash; *and the fringe jacket I always wore.*

The hour passed. Class ended and school was over for the day. One of my bandmates found me, and I said, "Hey, let's see what's going on at this audition." He said sure, so we ambled over to the cafeteria where the audition was taking place. We didn't know what to do or even what an audition was, but we spotted a line of girls heading into the cafeteria. Every girl's hair was flowing and parted in the middle, and they all wore beads with their bell-bottoms cut low at the waist. The groovy sight was all the prompt we needed to head in there with them. We scribbled our names on the sign-up sheet and found seats.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 28 11/29/18 2:57 PM

Kids packed themselves tight inside the makeshift audition hall. Someone shouted a handful of names, and a bunch of kids went up to the stage and were handed scripts. The first kids read their parts and sat down and another handful of names were called. *Hey, that's me.* I jumped onstage, grabbed a script, and found out which character I was supposed to read. One of the kids in my lineup started reading his character's dialogue. Pages rustled and turned. Another kid started reading his lines. Another kid. Another. *Man, they're really blowing through their lines fast,* I thought, when suddenly dead air blasted against me and silence filled the room. A lone cough echoed off the back wall.

"Hmm-hum, hey there," I said, glancing about me. I was at least four lines behind. "Hang on, *Jason*. I gotta find my place. You guys are going too fast."

The kid who'd just read wasn't named Jason. I didn't know his name, but I'd delivered my retort in such a good-natured nasal twang that my faux confidence cracked everybody up. The kid was smiling. The audience was chuckling. Even Mrs. Patterson grinned. So I ran my finger down the page, found my spot, and read my line. Everything cranked up again as the others continued reading their dialogue. In a flash it was finished. *So that's an audition,* I thought. *Well, that wasn't half bad.*

Next morning in the hallway near the drama department, a list was posted. Everybody crowded around to look. Me too. I scanned down the list—way, way down. I kept scanning but didn't recognize any of the names. *Well, who cares?!* I thought, but kept reading. My eyes kept scanning down, scanning down. Toward the very end, when I saw this, a soft light came on inside my soul:

PEPÉ----------GARY SINISE

Pepé was a Shark. A gang member. He was in the chorus and had to dance a little and even had a couple of lines. The role required an actor's touch. I tried to take in all it might mean, seeing my name on the hallway list. I didn't know anything about acting, and I knew I fumbled my lines in the audition because I couldn't keep up with the other readers. But maybe,

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 29 11/29/18 2:57 PM

just maybe, my ability to entertain the crowd had caused Mrs. Patterson to see I'd taken her up on her dare. Maybe she saw some sort of potential I didn't see in myself yet. Because the words on the hallway list didn't lie.

I was in.

Let's backtrack in time, back before the audition. Maybe a couple months earlier.

I'd come to this new high school and fallen into a pattern of smoking dope and skipping class and smoking more dope, all the while trying to find friends. Just another kid caught up in this American craziness. At Highland Park I tried acid once when my parents weren't home, and I was high for about ten hours. Paranoia stalked me the whole time. I told my sister, and she sat with me for a while. Her face turned into a skull, then into a witch's face. I grew scared, threatened to throw myself into the pool, and never dropped acid again. But I still scored pot anytime I wanted.

There wasn't much to hold any of us together. Culture? That was changing. Morals? What were they? This was 1971. Religion? My family stopped going to church when I was a little kid, and we weren't raised with any sort of faith, nothing to provide an anchor. As a family—as a *nation*—these were tough times. Most days, I was floating on the open sea. Every evening, images of the Vietnam War splashed across our TV screens. It was the first war shown on television, and every night that screen showed only bad news. Since the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, America had been involved in the war in a serious way, and it continued to kill plenty of Americans each day of each week of each month of each year. My folks were scared the war was never going to end. They figured due to the constant bevy of Ds and Fs on my report cards, I'd be drafted within three years and sent to Khe Sanh.

I'd lived in Highland Park years earlier, before all the moves across the city, back and forth to here and there and God knows where else. The last time I'd lived near Highland Park I'd had a couple of friends, but they didn't want anything to do with me anymore, and I didn't know why. Kids

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 30 11/29/18 2:57 PM

don't talk about these things. So I needed to find new friends. As a sophomore, then, I was a bit of a loner in a new high school, lost and wandering and having trouble connecting with new friends. The only thing that ever remotely worked for me was rock and roll. Music at Highland Park High School ushered me into the Zeppelin crowd. We formed our own band, and then I had two pretty good friends in high school. Two guys who shared the love of music.

Every so often during afternoons at Highland Park, I actually shuffled off to a few anti-war "moratoriums," as they were called. Students wore black armbands and noodled away on guitars and crooned Peter, Paul and Mary songs. All over our country at universities and high school campuses these protests were happening. I didn't go to these moratoriums because I actually protested anything. I went because if you told your teachers you were at one of these protests, then it was okay to cut classes. Plus, there were girls there.

High school proved a struggle for me every day. Ravines bordered Highland Park High School. One Thursday I ditched my second-to-last class and climbed down into one of the ravines, hid under the bridge that spanned it, and sparked up a joint. Inhaled it down. Sparked up another. When I came back for my last class, my eyes were bloodshot and my heart rate racing. I felt a strong urge to eat a bag of potato chips.

The next day after school, I went back to the ravine with my two bandmates in tow. Somehow the three of us had laid hold of three bottles of Boone's Farm apple wine, and we drank a bottle of wine each while simultaneously puffing away on joints. We had a gig scheduled in half an hour, and this was what rock and rollers did, man. The mighty Half Day Road was performing at the high school dance, and we had to get loaded before we rocked.

My bandmates and I finished our wine, smoked the last of our pot. We wobbled up to the school and headed up onstage. Grabbed our instruments. I yelled, *"Hello Highland Park!"* and our drummer started banging away on his kit. The bass player jumped in with me and my guitar, and we blasted away on our instruments for a while with the room still good and blurry. The tube top girls in the front row danced with their arms toward the stage. But something wasn't right. I glanced at my bass player, and he

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 31 11/29/18 2:57 PM

glanced at me, and we both started cracking up. We were halfway through our first tune, and it hit us that we weren't playing the same song. We had no idea what our drummer was playing. It might have been a third, completely different song altogether. He never told us.

We laughed about that one for days. A couple of weeks later Mrs. Barbara Patterson met us in the hallway, and I started inhabiting Pepé the Shark. Something genuinely began to change in me.

Play practice was after school every day for five weeks, and you couldn't go to play practice unless you'd been at school during the day. So for the first time in a long while, I started going to classes regularly. I found myself meeting a whole new crowd of folks, theater kids. I discovered they were smart. Cooler than I'd first thought. Funny. Passionate. Driven toward acting with the same drive I'd always poured into music. I noticed that since starting play practice, I was smoking far fewer doobies.

But my old life still pulled at me. Two weeks into rehearsals, somebody threw a huge party. Not a theater kid. Just a kid whose parents were out of town. By the time I rolled in, fifty or sixty teens were already drinking, smoking, dancing, making out in the stairwell. I had a dime bag and pulled a couple of other kids into the laundry room with me because it's good to share. We all lit up my joints, and I recognized four of the kids but not the fifth. He was a strong-looking dude, maybe nineteen. *Must be somebody's older brother,* I thought, but the fact that I didn't know him didn't concern me, because, *Hey, he's at the party—somebody must know him. Right?* He said he was a dogcatcher for the city, and he smoked pot right along with us, or at least it looked like he was smoking. We puffed away, and all told stupid jokes and laughed, and I didn't watch him too closely as the high set in. He brought the joint up to his face again. Puffed. I guessed. Everything was cool, particularly when the dude glanced around the circle and said, "Hey, where can I buy some pot for myself?"

I said in a cool, gravelly voice, "Well, I have some. I'll sell it to you."

He nodded and I nodded, and when all the joints were smoked, I sold him a nickel bag, and he followed me outside the laundry room, outside the house to my car. Followed me all the way. He said, "Man, that was really good pot. Thanks for selling it to me."

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 32 11/29/18 2:57 PM

Why's he following me? "Sure, sure. Okay," I said. And I brushed him off and went home.

Man, the things you don't realize when you're stoned.

An hour later I got a phone call from a buddy who'd been at the party. He sounded worried and he talked all jumbled, breathless, like he'd been running. "Dude. The police raided the party. Came in with a real show of force. Rounded everybody up."

"What are you talking about?!" I said. Then it clicked. The dogcatcher wasn't lying about what he did for a living. It was just slang. He worked for the city all right—the police department! And I'd gone and sold pot to the dogcatcher. I was the source of the weed!

"Yeah." My friend's voice dropped on the phone. "And they're looking for *you*."

I hung up, totally freaked out. As the night wore on, I paced around my bedroom, trying to think up a plan. I didn't sleep. Early the next morning I went over to my new girlfriend's house. We lurked around in her basement together, then a knock sounded on the front door. She climbed the stairs, and I heard the front door creak open. Words. I strained to hear. Two policemen. They were there to get her, to take her down to the police station so they could question her . . . about *me.* My heart thumped.

She came downstairs to get her coat, her face white as a ghost. Looked me straight in the eyes, didn't say a word. Left. I hid out downstairs for ten minutes, made sure the coast was clear. My car sat around the corner out of sight, and I ran to the car, jumped in and drove to the train station, bought a ticket on the Northwestern, and headed into the city. I caught another train and headed out to Glen Ellyn, where I used to live. I knocked on the door of an old friend's house and asked if I could lay low for a few days until the heat blew over. Saturday passed. Sunday. I kept calling classmates who'd been at the party to ask what was happening back home. Word was the police were questioning everybody. They knew who I was. It was the height of the drug culture, and police were busting people left and right. I was a fugitive hiding out in Glen Ellyn, and the police were hunting for me. *Holy crap! I'm actually on the lam.*

By Monday I realized I couldn't hide forever, so I took the train home

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 33 11/29/18 2:57 PM

and admitted to my folks what had happened. They looked relieved when I told them. Even glad. I began to suspect they were aware I partook of cannabis from time to time. We talked for a long time and concluded that the best course of action for me was to turn myself in. Mom and Dad drove me to the police station, to the juvenile department. To Officer Rash. Yep—his real name. Officer Rash wore a black trench coat and had dark hair and glasses. A known commodity among teenage pot smokers, he was the guy keeping an eye on all us youngsters who struggled walking the line.

Officer Rash sat me down under the hot fluorescent lights, and I told him a bit of my story. I was honest. I told him about the moves to new schools, about my struggles to find new friends. He knew marijuana was everywhere, and I told him how a year earlier, before I'd ever taken my first puff, a friend and I had actually walked into a police station and asked for help in avoiding marijuana. We'd sincerely wanted to know what to do. Well, that really worked. A year later I was a full-on pothead selling dope to a narc. But I wasn't a delinquent—at least, I didn't think so—and the play was the clincher. I told Officer Rash all about *West Side Story.* We still had a couple of weeks to go before performances, but already I felt like things were turning around for me. I was trying harder. Feeling better about school. Staying out of the ravine.

"The play's really important to me," I said. "Really, really important. Please don't bust me. Please."

Yes, I was begging, but it wasn't a line. The play was truly important to me. I didn't want to be busted, because I genuinely wanted to appear in the play. *West Side Story* seemed to be all that was saving me back then. It was the only thing showing me a clearer path forward.

Officer Rash gave me a stern talking-to. I would have a mark on my record, he said, and I'd better not do it again. I nodded profusely. Then, by some unexplained near-miracle, I was free to go.

I never sold pot again. I smoked it once or twice—well, maybe more than once or twice—but I never sold it again. And the show was still on.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 34 11/29/18 2:57 PM

Teachers noticed this genuine change in me. In English, Mr. Allison knew I sucked at taking exams, but one afternoon he gave me a protracted sidelong glance and asked me to tell the class what had been happening in play rehearsal. I didn't normally speak up in class. Ever. But on the spot I opened up and told everybody about the play. My words were enthusiastic, my voice clear, and I was surprised later when Mr. Allison handed me a solid grade for "giving an oral report," as he called it. That grade helped me pass his class that year.

Lots of kids in *West Side Story* had appeared in plays before. Many were seniors, two years older than me. But Jeff Perry, also a sophomore, had landed a lead role in the play—Tony, the former Jet who falls in love with Maria. I quickly pegged him as a leader: supersmart, a hilarious goofball, obsessed with theater, and an incredible singer. When we weren't rehearsing, I noticed that although I walked down the hallways with my hands stuffed in my pockets, his arms were loaded with books. And not just textbooks he needed for class, either. He read Shakespeare for fun, Chekhov—a Russian writer I knew nothing about—for kicks. I'd never met anyone like him, and he fascinated me.

A senior named Jeff Melvoin played Bernardo, leader of the Sharks. Jeff Melvoin came from a superacademic family. Later, he graduated magna cum laude from Harvard, and much later he became a Hollywood producer and writer for the hit TV shows *Remington Steele*, *Northern Exposure*, *Alias*, and *Army Wives*. Even in those high school play rehearsals, Jeff Melvoin was solid. He became someone to look up to, to emulate. This was important because with no experience or training, I needed to throw myself into *West Side Story* by instinct only, acting on intuition. I was totally raw, with nowhere to go but up.

After five weeks of rehearsals, it was showtime. The house lights came down, the curtains parted. Two star-crossed lovers from opposite sides of the street, Tony and Maria, fell hard for each other, and just like Romeo and Juliet, they were meeting in secret, avoiding their familiar friends. The play is shot through with hate and passion and rage. Chino shoots Tony, and Maria holds Tony in her arms as he takes his last few dying breaths. We presented four shows only—and we hit every line on Thursday and Friday

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 35 11/29/18 2:57 PM

nights, nailed it completely on Saturday, and on Sunday night blew the house wide open. And then it was all over. The show. My new community. Me.

The lights came down. The audience burst into applause. As one of the Sharks, I was part of the gang that carried Tony's dead body offstage. We Sharks set down the body behind the curtain, and Tony came to life again as just good old Jeff Perry, a high school kid who was quickly becoming one of my best friends. Jeff gave me a huge hug, and I burst into tears, and in glorious pandemonium offstage everybody was hugging and slapping each other on the back, with no chance to blow away the snot because it was time for the curtain call.

Out in the auditorium, the audience continued their applause, cheering, shouting, whistling their congratulations, and all the supporting players and chorus members came out onstage in a pack. Including me. As a member of the chorus, I stood far in the back of all the people on stage, and we all took our bows while the audience continued to pound their applause. And then the leads each came out one by one and bowed. They stood at the front of the pack. Tony. Maria. Bernardo. Riff. Chino. Anita. The decibel level in the auditorium notched higher with each lead. Everybody stood to their feet. A standing ovation. The leads all took their bows together. I still hung far in the back. Sobbing harder than ever. My eyes scrunched tight against the tears. Then, in the midst of all the commotion, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Opened my eyes.

The hand was Jeff Melvoin's. Jeff the senior. Bernardo the Shark. He reached back, grabbed me. Pulled me up toward the front of the pack where the six leads stood. He shouted in my ear to take a bow with all the leads. So I did. Me, this sophomore screwup. Still bawling my eyes out. I stood at the front of the pack, and the audience was still standing, still applauding. Cheering for all of us. I took one long, glorious look around, trying to wipe my nose with my sleeve, and we all bowed again, all together, and I suddenly realized I'd fallen in love with this new community of students. With this new life of theater. It was almost too much to take in.

Later that night, back in the quiet of my room, I flopped on my bed and wondered if maybe Jeff Melvoin had seen far off into the future, to the person I had the potential to become. Because he'd grabbed me on

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 36 11/29/18 2:57 PM

impulse, I was pretty sure, and I doubted if the audience ever knew the fuller story of why he'd pulled this crying sophomore up to the front of the pack. In the last couple of schools where I'd been enrolled—including this one—if I was known by anyone, I was known as a kid who smoked a lot of pot and struggled to find his way in school. But in the past five weeks this play had morphed into a tent revival of sorts. Theater had pointed me toward redemption. The performers in the play had drawn me toward the river, plunged me under, pulled me up, and pushed me forward. Dripping and new. I'd been handed a fresh start, and I felt hopeful.

Grateful.

I realized theater had become my second chance at life, and this second chance caused me to understand I had a lot to be thankful for. A wide-open future. Boundless opportunity. My newfound buoyancy made me want to do something far more with my life than I'd been doing.

Ah. But here I was on my bed, exhausted. Poured out. The morning after I couldn't move. I felt like I was in the valley now, after standing on the mountaintop, and I was a wreck. I'd told my mom I didn't feel good and asked her if I could stay home. She said okay, so for the rest of the day I moped alone in my pajamas on the sofa in front of the TV. Occasionally I would get up, go to the record player, and put on the record from *West Side Story*—and it just made me sad. So I'd take it off and go back to the couch. I was brokenhearted that the play was over. This life-changing moment in time. I felt completely emotionally spent.

Later that afternoon, Barbara Patterson came over to my house, along with some of the kids in the show. They cheered me up, nudged me in the ribs, told me to knock it off and get to school tomorrow. There were more plays ahead, they reminded me. I couldn't help but buck up and grin. Their love felt so wide. Their support so broad. My first play and the lead guy had grabbed me, one of the chorus guys, to take a bow with the stars of the show. That entire cast had seen who I was before the play and what had happened to me during those five weeks. Now I had so many new friends. It was powerful. Something had really changed for me. I was going forward again. I had been baptized.

My life of purpose had begun.

GratefulAmerican_content.indd 37 11/29/18 2:57 PM