

*John Williams*

# THE JOURNEY



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# THE BIRTH

In the autumn of that year, the first chill of winter was felt in the air.

In the autumn of that year, veterans remembered with horror, or tried desperately to forget, the battle that had been fought.

In the autumn of that year, a boy was born.

An innocent life was awakened on the western slopes of this great southern land. The hand of providence gifted the freedom and joys of life to this newborn child, and spirit and imagination were poured into his beating heart, as his life began.

The winter frost lay white upon the land. A horse's hoof prints alongside a small boy's footprints were the only marks on the early morning canvas. The rivers and the creeks flowed cleanly, brightly, the water giving life to his world.

There was so much to do in the days that passed, as this boy of the western slopes grew. The bicycle that made possible the exploration of his country town and going to school was the symbol of adventures yet to be experienced. The horse, ridden sometimes without a saddle, was a daily reminder of the carefree joy of his life, his freedom. Spirit and imagination grew.

Here in this great southern land.



Soft and searing summer tar stretched across the main street in his country town. He preferred the feel of his bare skin connecting to the earth, and resisted wearing shoes.

The main road held many fascinating things for this boy. The people. The cafe where ice cream was sold. The shop windows where things he'd never seen before were on display, inviting him to ever more new experiences. There were people, busy with their daily activities. Farmers parked their trucks outside the hotel, and horses were hitched to railings. Boys, soon to become men, strolled around town or seated themselves on benches next to girlfriends.

He would be one of them soon. The dreams he had for his future were bright, his possibilities endless, his dreams vividly beckoning to him from just around the corner. There was no reason to believe they would not be there, waiting for him like a long-lost friend, when he turned that corner.

The saddle shop sat at the far end of town, heavy with guns and saddles, with all the requisites of men. He would need them, too, one day, when he became a man. He saw his dream, and not knowing how to fund the path that lay ahead, with all its adventure and excitement, did not matter. There was still time. For he was only five years old.

His body grew strong from the local meat and milk and produce that grew everywhere he looked. He built a raft for the dam and dreamed of the faraway lands to which he might someday sail. His sharp eye searched the sky at night. He'd seen the man in the moon smile down on a world full of life.

'Man in the moon, I see you, too.'

Santa Claus was larger than life, and another cause for joy, a huge presence of love who brought presents and set them

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down near the fireplace on Christmas Eve. The summer heat made coming down the chimney less dangerous, the boy thought, than if he had come in the throes of winter, when all would be ablaze. How, though, did he manage to squeeze down the chimney, the boy wondered? Magic. He drank the beer that was left for him and gave gifts in return. That's how the boy knew he had been and gone.

There were pine nuts on the trees in the park. Enough to eat. And blackberry bushes with sweet berries that burst in your mouth like sweet sunshine.

He ran with the horses, their manes blowing in the southern air as they galloped across the paddocks with the freedom of the wind. Although he couldn't match their pace, he felt in his heart that he was one of them. He revelled in their spirit. This world of his held all the life he wanted and needed. And he was right, for love and spirit are all a young boy needs. The hand of providence had given to this boy all that he needed.

In the coming years, countless times he would recall with longing those carefree days, his games, his freedom, his friends, and his aspirations. How many times would he journey back into the past to find the answers to questions that had been explained in the genesis of his formative years?

At the far end of town was a picture show house, where celluloid heroes would play out their stories every Saturday afternoon. Cowboys with fast horses riding trails through America's Wild West only served to reinforce that a life of wonderment and excitement lay ahead, a life of promise everywhere he looked.

His Sunday school God gave him further belief in the power of love, as did the eucalyptus and the peppercorn trees that blew their scents across the verandah at night as he slept. They whispered to him, "These gifts are for you,

young boy of six. Remember them well, for they will stay with you always and keep you safe’.

Three years later, a new adventure took hold and the boy moved to a metropolis far away. But he kept his memories of the great southern outback tucked safely where he could always reach them.

The city and the people further opened up the mind and the imagination of this young impressionable boy of nine. Even more was to come. The ocean, with its wide expanse and its waves, fish, and sea birds, filled the young boy with dreams and fascination. He could ride the waves like horses and, if he couldn’t swim above the sea, he would swim beneath it. The depths of the ocean brought the silence of another world. In these new surroundings, he found again the hand of providence giving him yet more joys of life. He was so very fortunate. This further moulded his body and his mind. This is my home, he thought with pride, this great southern land.

The halls of the city increased his knowledge and gave him many new people and places to visit and explore. The maze of passages, lanes, and streets brought to him new visions of the city people, and new friends.

This was a time when right and wrong were understood, but youthful exuberance could leave a boy searching in the darkening hours for newfound friends and places where the heart was free to roam. This was a time when forces in wisdom choose a place to harness young boys and their dreams. And so it was that this step, too, was to be a new adventure, one into the maze of life.

With the hand of providence firmly on his shoulder and the thirst for knowledge and adventure writhing inside him, he became committed to a new phase in his life of learning, this boy of twelve. Maybe now, the visions present all those



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years ago, when he would look and dream of turning into a man, would come to fruition.

As the timepiece of fate turned its hands, the die was cast. The force of fate, with all its complications, would be met with all the life this boy had already faced.

This boy of twelve.

I was that boy.

# THE FACTORY

The day had come, a day, forever etched in distant memories, of The Factory that turns boys not yet in their teenage years to men.

It is a story of a boy. Far removed from BB guns and teddy bears, and boys who, with their infant knowledge, follow their childhood wishes and pursuits and, in their hopes and aspirations, become men. Far removed from little boys whose natural, loving, living embers of youth move them on their way to manhood. This boy now leaves the joys of life behind to join The Factory.

The Factory was a place where the wealthy and influential left their young, impressionable boys to be moulded into leaders and lawmakers. My father was neither wealthy nor influential, but, because of his love for me, he sacrificed to give me this, the best education he could afford. Little did he know what I was to learn. I was now a young man and my responsibilities for this gift weighed heavily upon my shoulders. I vowed to make my father proud, and it was pride that would be the first thing The Factory took from me.

Shiny, expensive cars drew up to the gates and I stared in awe. Reluctantly, I left my teddy bear in the back seat of

my father's Ford and watched him drive off. Teddy bears belonged to my past, I reminded myself, and tried not to feel so alone as I watched these boys, brimming with confidence, stride up the steps, safe in the knowledge that their lives were charted for them, navigating unhesitatingly with their parents' wealth and influential contacts. I only understood the ocean, the freedom of the western plains, and my desire to learn the things that had been promised would turn me into a man.

Boys were running everywhere. Adults in stylish, expensive clothes, their precious gems and metals glinting in the sunlight, were greeted warmly by the headmaster, as I looked on in wonder. How, I wondered, would I find my place among these, the privileged? I made up my mind to be the best and to exceed in every new trial. I would make my father proud of me.

The teachers and the masters seemed very strange to me. Many had stiff accents, and didn't speak their English in the way of this southern land. Their faces were pasty, as if never having been exposed to the sun, and their bodies showed signs of neglect. None of them spoke or carried themselves in the way my father did. I pushed these observations aside. I was ready for the challenge.

As days moved into weeks, I discovered the real challenges I faced – punishment and physical pain, lessons that would turn me into a man, they said. I was stoic, silent. The die was being cast around my soul.

The boys in charge were familiar with their cause, for they had started young and, through the maze of rules, tradition, and blind ambition, had risen to the rank of 'brownshirts'. They now were leaders in this place, my prison. They were in control.

The place reeked of tradition and values, forgotten and

useless in these times. On the walls were pictures of the boys, now men, who had gone before, changed to worthless souls, forever holding onto goals unattainable in this modern world. With their lost childhoods, they, too, sought the natural transition from the boy into the man in this place, The Factory. It was in these circumstances that my father had unwittingly placed me. I was too young to understand. But I would soon learn.

The food at mealtimes was doled out by the brownshirts. They ate most of it, greedily, as did the old men, and gave what little remained to the young boys.

This place was devoid of art and imagination, with restrictive rules to crush the boy who dared to fly, to dream. The beltings and the rules was the only life the brownshirts knew. I understood. They must have begun as I did, and, though they knew it was a faulty system, their spirits were crushed by cowardice. Their spiteful and sadistic ways, their way to survive, flourished in this cruel place, The Factory. My ideals were now confronted and my understanding of my world was changing. I was adapting. I retreated to the safety of silence.

The Factory made the man by squeezing the boy into a mould, a mould so defective and so long in its embrace that the boy had no alternative but to conform to its shape in order to survive. The beatings made him well attuned to the rules.

Like the others, I was whipped with rolled up, sodden towels, belted with shoes filled with lead-filled socks tied tightly with a cord. If we cried, the brownshirts were delighted. This gave them pleasure. I did not cry. If a boy can control his pain, as I did, he holds on to a little of himself. I learned to sever this sting from my mind and not let it control me. I was determined to be free.

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The boys cried for their mothers. Convinced my mother and father could never save me, I was alone. With that thought, I could chart my own course.

That was when I experienced an entirely new kind of pain. They sensed my loneliness and sated their desires with my innocent body. Betrayal had led to betrayal. A door was opened when I asked for guidance and a brownshirt showed me unprecedented kindness. The door slammed shut, with me locked inside. My need to speak and find answers to my questions had bolted me inside this cage. It would be a mistake I would never forget. I would not ask for help again. I had nowhere to go.

I took the violation of my body at first as an act of initiation. I was now marked for the other brownshirts to use and also the filthy old men who ran The Factory. Not all young boys were picked for this ordeal, I discovered, and I felt relief for them. I was stronger than many of them.

At first, this practice made the loneliness disappear. Fear took its place, a feeling I had never known before arriving at The Factory. It ran through me like a circling, speeding train. The ocean and the freedom of the western plains drained away. I was empty.

The acts grew more violent and my body responded to the assault by bathing my wounds in blood. I was now truly alone, cast far from the comforts and reassurance of my loved ones. I could never speak of this to anyone. Ever. I had been warned. Other boys who endured the same could be heard through the locked doors. I knew well the punishment they were receiving but I was unable to help them anymore than any of them could help me. I took refuge in dreams of faraway places and the poetry I occasionally glimpsed and the music that sometimes emerged from a nearby radio. I heard their screams, but I, myself, did not cry. A part of me

would fly away each time the men touched my body. The pain of these confrontations changed my soul, and any love I had inside withered away, like the petals of a flower dying on the vine, falling one by one to the ground to be trod upon by the thoughtless feet around me.

Shut off as I now was, I felt myself disconnected from this Factory. Then, it happened.

A boy was being belted for some minor infraction. It was nothing unusual, but suddenly I found I could no longer turn away. The small ember, burning unnoticed in my heart, burst into flame.

In one swift move, I slipped the knife from the leather pouch attached to the brownshirt's belt and rammed it down with both hands into his thigh. It drove into the muscle like a diver through water, and I forced it in as far as I could. The brownshirt screamed. On his journey to the ground, I brought my knee up to greet his face with all the power I could. I felt a crunch as his jaw broke. He shrieked in pain.

It was surprisingly easy for me, this boy who had never laid a hand in anger on another soul before. But then, he had never felt this anger before The Factory. They had taught me well. Any fear I had felt was gone, consumed in this blaze of anger. I had found power in violence and, although it saved me, I felt no satisfaction in it. He lay writhing in agony and so I stopped. I had done my job. I sat in quiet contemplation, turning over this new knowledge that pain and hate, the very things The Factory provoked in order to control its subjects, no longer had the power to hurt me. I felt no pain and I felt no fear.

A crowd of brownshirts took me away but, instead of a beating, they offered me a place as one of them. They handed me the shirt from the boy I had knocked down. They also gave me his steel blade, complete with a leather

pouch, to attach to my belt. They applauded my violence and believed me to be one of them. They saw me as hard and tough. They admired me for my ability to inflict pain. I had proved to them I would be useful to them, both here in The Factory and in their ruling world outside.

The brownshirt I knocked down was dragged away, crying and bleeding. I would be his replacement. I was, in their eyes, one of them now, but they lacked vision. I was now admired and commended for my ability to fight and protect myself but I was still, inside my heart, the same boy who fought against them. The scent of the eucalyptus trees and the freedom of my youth came back into my heart and I did the only thing that my free bird inside instructed me to do.

I rebelled.

‘I do not wish to be seated with the rulers of this Factory. Your understanding of who I am is exceeded only by your ignorance of life. I want no part of this Factory. I am neither slave nor ruler here. Your fear is not mine. Your vision belongs to the bastard tribe who are forever held as servants to their past rulers, and to the limitations of their feeble spirit. Your courage is non-existent. Your uniforms only display an outward conformity to an age long forgotten, when men performed noble deeds and on which you now ride their coattails for protection. You hide in their shadows, neither commanding nor deserving respect.

‘Your intolerance to change and your slavery to the pageant make you piss holes in the snow and steal your moral soul. This is who you are and who I will not be. I will take my leave and walk away. My blade, still sheathed upon my belt, will cut the throat of any bastard here who thinks to make me stay.’

I walked to the door, kicked it open, and walked outside.

No one followed. Their faces were frozen in fear and terror. I relieved my bladder on the cornerstone of The Factory and was amazed at the peaceful silence in my head.

A bird sang his song, the sun warmed my shoulders, and I was on my way to somewhere in my dreams. I was now a man. I knew what I needed and what I didn't, and now had to find a new way to survive. I felt sad leaving my father, but I could never tell him the degradation I had endured. My choice was clear. I felt again the flow of the ocean through my body, waves forming in my core and flowing outward into my extremities, the soft water touching my skin. Memories of my childhood drifted into my mind, as if aloft on the incoming tide.



Meanwhile, The Factory invented a story of how I had disappeared, that they feared I had fallen into the fast-flowing river that ran alongside the property, and had been carried out to sea. How true that was. This man, now fifteen years of age, vanished into the ether of life. I would go on alone, on my own, no one beside me.