

My Long Journey (Part Four)

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After leaving the Keys I wandered up and across Florida more or less randomly, avoiding the major freeways and staying on secondary roads which were by and large more scenic. I ran out of money eventually but I found many of the mom and pop restaurants along the highways and byways were often happy to give me a meal for a couple of hours of washing dishes. There were also soup kitchens run by local churches or charities where a meal would be provided if you were willing to sit through a sermon. To be honest I only went to those places a couple of times. I never liked the idea of a handout and preferred to earn my keep.



Somehow I eventually ended up in Clearwater Beach, a long strip of land surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico adjacent to the city of Clearwater. Clearwater Beach was a wonderful place back then, still very much rustic and undeveloped with beautiful white sand beaches which stretched on endlessly.

After I got dropped off at the center of the town by some hairy, sweaty guy on a motorcycle I walked up to the back of the first restaurant I came to and knocked on the screen door. A lady appeared in the doorway. I asked her if she needed any help and she asked me if I could cook. I said yes (it was a lie but I was desperate). She brought me into the tiny kitchen, gave me an apron, and pointed to a colander full of lettuce sitting in the sink and said "wash them". I tied up my apron, walked over to the sink and turned on the hot water until steam came out. I picked up a head of lettuce and started to put it under the facet. The lady grabbed it out of my hand at the last minute and exclaimed "I thought you said you could cook!" She must have liked me though because she hired me on the spot as a dishwasher.



The lady's name was Jennifer – the J in CJ's Steak and Spaghetti Factory where I now found myself employed. Jennifer was beautiful, proud, and haughty yet I always felt she had a soft spot for me. Perhaps it was because she sensed my loneliness and isolation; for she was, in her own way, lonely as well. CJs became a second home for me, and Chuck and Jennifer to some extent my surrogate parents, though both of them – and especially Chuck – were anything but role models. Yet it must be admitted working at CJs was like being crucified over and over again. There were so many girls around to haunt me; girls I could not possess; girls I was forced to treat in a standoff way to avoid anything that came close to intimacy. Chuck, Jennifer's husband, who was as much a satyr as anyone I've met, was always on me about my "neuroses". Yet it was in a playful way. For all of his faults Chuck had a proverbial 'heart of gold'.

A couple of days after I started working at CJs I was sitting in the back booth reserved for employees when a very odd character walked in carrying a stack of notebooks and manila folders stuffed with papers under his arm. He sat down at a booth and ordered a medium pizza and a pitcher of coke. He then opened one of the notebooks and started scribbling furiously. I was immediately drawn to him. There was something about his intentness which suggested to me he was doing something important, something worth doing. I walked over, still wearing my kitchen apron, and asked him what he was writing about. The next thing I knew I was sitting across from him and he set off on a discourse. It took less than five minutes for me to know I was in the presence of some kind of super genius. He talked nonstop for about an hour and every word that came out of his mouth went right over my head. Finally I said I had to go back to work (which was a lie). He asked me if I wanted to visit him where he lived and talk some more, and for some reason I said ok. He wrote down his name and address on a scrap of paper torn off from one of his notebooks and handed it to me. His name was Norman Miller and what I was to learn from him over the next couple of years would revolutionize my life.

When I met Norman Miller that day, what I saw was a short, pudgy man who reminded me somewhat of Humpty Dumpty. He was wearing a short sleeve dress shirt lined with pens that looked as if it had been slept in. His trousers stopped two inches above his ankles and he was wearing white socks with black dress shoes. His glasses were smudged and bent out of shape, his hair was disheveled. Obviously he was little concerned with his outward appearance. Nonetheless there was an air of contagious enthusiasm about him, like a little elf jumping for joy as the Christmas season rolled around. He often spoke in a

conspiratorial tone, his voice just above a whisper, as if he were sharing some profound secret of immeasurable import.

We had agreed to meet the next day at his place. He lived in a small house owned by his father in the gated community of Mandalay Shores at the north end of Clearwater Beach. I was living not far from there in a dilapidated hotel that was a haven for hippies and transits. When the time came for our meeting I rambled over towards his place. Before I did however I dropped LSD. I reasoned I would need to expand my awareness to the fullest extent possible if I were to be able to keep up with him.

I arrived at Norman's house about 10 am on a brilliant sunny day. The side door looking into his kitchen was open and I could see Norman through the screen. He waved me in. Norman was sitting at an enormous table in a t-shirt and boxer shorts (he didn't believe in air conditioning) surrounded by stacks of papers and notebooks. The kitchen sink was piled high with dirty dishes and there were empty sardine cans and coke bottles lying around everywhere. Yet the table he was sitting at was a masterpiece. Its borders were hand carved with the figures of animals intertwined with fruit trees. It was an absolute wonder to behold and I couldn't take my eyes off it.

Norman took me on tour of his home and it was, especially under the influence of LSD, nothing less than mind-blowing. The main living area, by far the largest room in the house, was buried under stacks and stacks of books and classical LPs. Norman had made a series of narrow paths through the stacks so he could get from one room to the other. The walls and furniture were populated with original works of art – sculptures, paintings, carvings -- done by his father Edgar, once a renowned renaissance artist who had made his mark in the Chicago area. Here was a home literally permeated and infused with culture! The contrast with my own life could not have been greater and I felt like a starving man who had just been invited to a banquet. The overwhelming presence of so much culture opened within me a hunger for knowledge that still has not been satiated. Nor do I believe will it ever be.

Photos: the beauty of Clearwater Beach; Clearwater Beach in the 60s; Norman Miller when three years old sitting with his parents, his father Edgar's art in the background.