

From A Left-hander on Route 66
By Michael Lund
third in the Route 66 Novel Series

Prologue: "Points of No Return"

Scene: The Missouri River Valley.

Time: thirty to forty years ago

You don't know about me unless you happen to have read a work by Mark Landon called Growing up on Route 66. In that book Mark was recalling a particular version of childhood a generation ago, remembering an almost magical neighborhood called "The Circle," where he grew up close to fabled Route 66. But even if you'd read his story, you might not have noticed me among all those future babyboomers.

You might even say I was "outside the Circle" anyway, for I didn't live on his street and never belonged to his social set, try as hard as I might to be accepted by America's rising middle class. In the Midwest in the 1950s there were many undistinguished figures like me filling in the background of the typical scene, dark figures missed by the bright light trained on the few who stood in the foreground. We lost souls weren't traveling down main roads (Route 66 was "America's Main Street," remember) but instead, if we were remarked at all, stopped, deer in headlights, wandering onto those throughways.

My name is Hugh Noone, and while Mark was trying to make time with Marcia Terrell on a high school hay ride one fall evening in 1960, I really was making hay on the wagon right behind his. But, ironically, while Mark's failure to go all the way now makes him look noble, my success in achieving union confirmed me as socially second rate. Too, while this moment of non-climax was pivotal for Mark on his journey toward sexual maturity, the same date is not actually very important in my story. I was really just passing time on that Youth Fellowship outing, it turns out, waiting innocently until my life would suddenly take the shape it has now.

I say "suddenly" because I have become convinced that for each of us there is a single critical instant, a moment of choice and chance that fixes our individual history. And I will need to talk here about an event which occurred two years after those several dozen of us teenagers were taking a moonlit ride on the Roper farm. In the later event, the town of Fairfield, Missouri, where I grew up, suffered a calamity. I did not cause that disaster, but I was a party to it. And, as critical as the moment came to be for many citizens of our small town through the next three decades, I learned that my life too hinged on the moment when Billy Rhodes raced a hundred-car freight train to the Kingshighway/Route 66 crossing. That's when my life veered further from the "Mother Road" on a detour that ended in prison.

I have been obsessed with such turning points, those moments when a specific history, long toiling up some prominent hillside of causality, is at last propelled over the peak to race down the other side. Points of no return, I've called them--steps in grand processes after which no turning back is possible, where an inevitability settles over all those concerned as they move, often swiftly, toward an inescapable outcome.

I will want to consider that communal point of no return for the small town of Fairfield, known to adolescent wags as "Cross Rhodes." But I need, too, to focus more narrowly on the private turning point of my own little life. I found that moment, where, along the continuum of hours from birth to the present, things conspired to direct me to the place and condition I now endure. But sometimes I am not sure it all didn't start earlier. Much earlier. It may have begun in the womb.

I'm left-handed, you see, a fact that places one in a certain relationship to the rest of society. Humanity is, I have read, about 90 percent right-handed. But a consistency of handedness was even more evident in the remarkably straight, white, middle-class world I grew up in. In fact, so rigid was convention in those days that there were no left-handers! We'd all been made into regular right-handers by our parents, our teachers, and our employers.

I've learned recently that left-handedness occurs in the advanced development of the brain, that is, late in gestation. The left hemisphere of the brain is dominant in most people. And it controls the right side of the body. Sometimes, however, the brain is more symmetrical, whether through inheritance or through unknown factors involved in fetal growth. In such individuals the right hemisphere tends to dominate, and the person is left-handed.

Now, as a group, left-handed individuals tend to exhibit more varied traits than right-handers. Some think such variety is good, but I say that's why we don't fit in so well. Left-handers have too many rough edges to match up neatly with stereotypes. And rough edges tend to irritate.

Post-World War II left-handed selves were, as I said, gradually erased from view beginning even in infancy. We all had to go down our roads, like Route 66, in the proper, prescribed manner--on the right. If I tried to eat Pabulum with my left hand, my mother would transfer the tiny spoon to the other side. My natural instinct to throw a ball southpaw was sharply criticized by my father (my stepfather, actually--I'll get to that). Other lefties found themselves tearing colored construction paper with scissors made backwards for them, sitting on their preferred hands as they tried to copy onto third-grade tablets script letters from blackboard models, coloring outside the lines because precision ran along paths foreign to their perspective.

It didn't take long for all the left-handed selves of those days to be disguised by right-handed toys (bows with arrow guides on the right side), hidden in conventional positions (on the third-base side of the plate at bat), lost in schematic diagrams (sixth-grade square dancing, for instance) of standard movement (grab your partner, do-si-do). But, of course, they were never destroyed completely. Some lingered out of sight and out of mind until certain moments of destiny when they would leap out and demand recognition. It happened to me. It happened at that moment I want to tell you about.

Modern science is beginning to recover those left-handers, I read, as psychologists and sociologists are taking the old meaning away from "sinister" (dangerous, but deriving from the Latin for left-handed). Soon left-handers may get to be themselves.

If you had pictures of infants in the womb, you'd find that some of us can be seen sucking our left thumbs. It's natural; it's ordained. That's an image of me you have in your mind's eye right now, in fact. The real me, Hugh Noone unshaped by right-handed norms, all happy potential to become a self I never did become, at least until today.

I'm in jail right now, by the way--one of the reasons I have plenty of time to research matters like handedness. And I've been given, by the state judge hearing my appeal, the opportunity to write down this account of my past, a confession of sorts.

The way I see it, a right-handed version of me, convicted of a crime I didn't commit, has put the left-handed me behind bars. I believe, with my lawyer's appeal (she's another left-hander), I'll be out of here very soon. But in the meantime I have some things to say to you as well as to the judge, all the world's right-handers and all the world's left-handers masquerading as right-handers. That story proper begins in the next chapter, and it may in the end prove that the world isn't completely rigged against left-handers. They too might somehow follow Route 66.

There is, however, a preliminary event from my early childhood to consider, a moment which I remember as emblematic of my lost identity. It is a brief appearance of that shadowy womb self, the real me.

By the way, I have also sometimes wondered if I'm not a twin, the left-handed self of a right-handed brother (or sister) who would have done so much better in the world. He or she might have been lost somewhere in development, perhaps not long after we (once one cell?) divided into two organisms.

Again, a picture at one time early in our mother's pregnancy might have shown the pair of us, perfectly

balanced in amniotic fluid, a yin and a yang making an ambidextrous wholeness. It would be no wonder I've had a hard time since, that perfect companion lost and my left-handedness coming on so strong without him/her.

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. . . to be continued.