

Bucky's Book

Chapter 1

As the noon hour approaches, those in attendance familiar with the traditions of Hampston College glance at their watches and listen. For as long as anyone could remember, the ringing of the noon bell in North College signaled the start of the commencement exercises. Some said it was a tradition that went all the way back to the founding of the college, as well it might have, for the old North Tower with its ivy-covered belfry was said to be one of the original buildings. In the old days, when timepieces were less accurate, townspeople would set their watches by the sound of that noon chime. You used to be able to hear it from just about anywhere in town, but apparently not any more. Dr. Ross in Physics claimed that it was because of the many more tall buildings and trees than in times past, whereas Prof. Alvini in Music argued it was because of the higher level of pervasive background noise. Probably both.

In recent years, commencement has been held in the Yard, weather permitting, for lack of adequate space anywhere indoors. The gym was now used only as a last resort. In anticipation of a larger than usual attendance this year, the grounds workers were hastily setting up every available folding chair. Even a blind person could have told by the incessant loud clatter that they were the old wooden kind, likely the same that were used when some in the audience graduated a generation earlier. The seats were taken as fast as they could be set up. Those arriving late either stood in back or sat on the library steps across the Yard.

As the much anticipated sound of the noon chime echoed and faded away, some administrative assistant who looked young enough to be a graduate student promptly sprang to the podium and spoke a few words to get things started. Most of those in the audience were of course still milling around and were caught somewhat by surprise. How many public events ever start when they are supposed to? But punctuality had long been a tradition of the administration at Hampston. After waiting a minute for the stirring crowd to settle down, he delivered the usual short welcoming speech and then announced, "Dr. Roger Van Stone, President of Hampston College, will now introduce our commencement speaker."

Despite his recently acquired fame of sorts, Chauncey Comins rarely made public appearances, much less speeches. He reluctantly agreed to do so this time only because of his long-time association with the college and cordiality with Roger Van Stone. He was known to some in the audience as the author of a mysterious recent book. Mysterious because none of them had actually seen it, but rather only excerpts published in the Hampston

Quarterly. And that did not contain much in the way of a biographical sketch. Equally odd, his surname Chauncey was nowhere mentioned. The author was given as Bucky Comins, which sounded more like a flippant penname. If the audience was expecting to hear more from President Van Stone, they were certainly disappointed. Roger was a man of few words, a rarity among college presidents. He stepped to the microphone and said simply, “Our commencement speaker is Chauncey Comins.”

The audience, caught somewhat by surprise, paused for a moment before taking the cue and applauding politely but not very loudly. Comins came to the podium quickly, you might say even spryly for a man his age. The bright sunlight accentuated his nearly full head of fluffy white hair, blowing in the slight breeze. Those topside features reminded some in the audience of Robert Frost, who had spoken a few times from this same podium in years past. But there the similarity ended. Comins was rather slight of build, and with softer features and a pleasant smile that came naturally. Like Frost, he used no lecture notes.

Several in the audience made a recording of his talk, which was later printed in the Record Weekly and elsewhere. The following is an abridged version that appeared in the Record, reprinted here with permission and with annotation added:

Greetings. Thank you for coming. I hope none of you will be too disappointed by what little of import I have to say. (pause and fake grimace) So, here we are. (glancing at the graduates) Many of you, I suppose, are relieved to consider your schooling finally finished after what—sixteen boring years? (smiles and a few chuckles) Well, I have news for you—it has barely begun. Most of what little you have been taught in your schooling, if it was anything like mine, either will soon be forgotten or will prove to have been irrelevant at best. Can any of you remember a single thing you were supposed to have absorbed in Chemistry I, or History II, or Math III? There, you see? (Some of the faculty smile, perhaps even knowingly, while others shake their heads and scowl in disapproval.) Don’t misunderstand. Your teachers and professors, dedicated and knowledgeable as they may be, have tried their best to educate you. I suppose their abject failure to penetrate much beyond the left half of your immature brains and into the right half is just inherent in the nature of the process. Or to put it figuratively, beyond your heads and into your hearts. But be not discouraged. It was truly time well spent. I expect that many of you will be able to look back someday and remember at least a few inspiring moments in class that made you to yearn to learn. You are free to start now. That is precisely why we call this commencement instead of

graduation—or (muttered softly aside) some other silly term. (long pause)

Brace yourselves. You have a long way to go. A recent survey found that nearly half of all college graduates in America still do not fully accept the concept of biological evolution, for whatever baffling reasons, even when it can be seen taking place before their very eyes. An amazing number of you accept on blind faith the notion of eternal life after death, whatever that bizarre self-contradiction is supposed to represent. But have you ever stopped to consider that life in paradise might become just a trifle boring after the first trillion years? (laughter) And with the same spouse? (more laughter) Or spouses! (even more laughter) Just pause for a moment in your busy lives and think about things like that, for Christ sakes! (pause)

Many persons, especially those who can least afford it, make voluntary contributions to government by purchasing lottery tickets while at the same time making every effort to reduce what they regard as excessive income tax levy. How many of you are among those morons? Three hundred thousand of our citizens, including those on government welfare, ruin their health by consuming junk food and too much alcohol, and smoking tobacco, while the rest of us not only pay for their much needed extra health care but even subsidize the purchase of their junk food, booze, and cigarettes.

But for the ultimate in mass lunacy, consider our proud legacy of government by the people. When our leadership casually decided a few years ago that bombing and invading a harmless but oil-rich foreign country would be a splendid idea, especially since God is on our side, the ghastly carnage gains the enthusiastic support of over two-thirds of the American populace, plus of course the manufacturers of military hardware and their many thousands of shareholders and factory workers. But after a few hundred thousand casualties of innocent civilians and children, millions more displaced, parts of Iraq lying in utter ruin including ancient historic sites, and our own treasury bankrupt, at least some of these same citizens are sure to decide: Oh well, perhaps wasn't such a good idea after all. But then after a short pause, will vote to support yet another foreign invasion! (applause)

You see, here is the problem. We all behave basically like wild animals, because that's what we were until quite recently and partly still are. It's embedded in our genes, and it's going to take a while longer to work it out of our system. We can no longer depend on evolution to do this because evolution is presently running out of whack in reverse, and pretty swiftly at that. That's where the right side of our amazing brain is supposed to kick in. This is no easy thing. It

doesn't come automatically. You have to work at it. If you do, and if you live long enough to see some results, it could be rewarding.

I have serious doubts that many of the world's major problems are going to be solved by more classrooms, more teachers, longer hours, or even more money, as many are now calling for. More effort and money is already spent on education in the United States than any in other place on earth, but look at the results. Read the headlines of any newspaper and observe that our really big-time mischief makers tend to be the intelligentsia. Plato made somewhat the same observation two thousand years ago, so things appear not to have changed all that much in the meantime.

I see that many Hamp graduates now go on to a career in law. Since that is a preoccupation I know something about firsthand, I will offer some insight. Forget about accident claims and probate. The top salaries for lawyers now go to those who defend corporate clients against accusations of fraud, tax evasion, collusion, insider trading, and the like. As for those of you who will enter public service, an even better deal awaits you as a member of Congress. You pass laws favoring those same companies, especially those selling products that kill or injure thousands or that conspire to inflate prices and stifle competition, in return for payment of bribes. Oops, sorry, I should have said campaign contributions. One must be careful. But by far the best deal right now is with defense contracts. You push for those big ticket items that sometimes even the Pentagon does not want. After spending a few years in government, all the while collecting bribes, you have already arranged to be hired by one of those same companies as a consultant and paid millions for doing absolutely nothing. After you have made your millions and are basking smugly in this early retirement, consider doing something good for a change. If you can't think of anything truly worthwhile, thanks to your abysmal lack of education on such matters, try taking up oil painting or writing poetry. That way at least you won't be doing any more harm. You might even try writing a book. Something straight from the heart. You never know, good things might come out of it. Thank you and good luck. (enthusiastic standing ovation, at least by most of the graduates if not everyone)

Chapter 2

Good morning, Mr. Comins. Thanks for coming. I'm Julie. I have a table reserved in back where it's quieter. (they go to the table) Coffee?

No thanks. Tea would be just fine, plain.

Let's start with the jacket of your book. We're all curious to know where the name Bucky comes from? Nickname?

Well, yes. When I was in Boy Scouts, we all wore sheath knives on our outings. Back then we called them buck knives. Mine was the largest and nicest. Six-inch blade, hollow ground, with teeth on the back. For scraping off fish scales I suppose, although I don't recall using it for that. It came from L. L. Bean. That was back in the days when Bean's sold mostly hunting and fishing stuff. The spring catalog always had a patent watercolor of a fly fisherman playing a leaping trout, that is if you could honestly call it playing, especially from the fish's point of view. In the fall it would be hunting wild game. Again, what a strange choice of word. Game! Hey there Mister Pheasant, want to play some games with my shotgun? Have you seen their catalogs now? What a difference. More like an upscale Wal-Mart, but with a cover more like *Fashion Today*. Times change. So anyway, that where I got the nickname Bucky, little realizing at the time that it would stick. I guess that's often the way it often is with nicknames.

What did you use the knives for?

Oh, lots of things, some of which I would rather not mention. Back then it was just we kids having fun. By the way, as a writer yourself, have you noticed how the subjective case is going out of style? Now it's us kids. It must be more frustrating than ever trying to teach English these days, when anything goes.

Yes, I know what you mean. Getting back to your book, there isn't much in the way of a bio on the back cover. Your idea or the publisher's?

Mine, for I am the publisher. And look at the front cover. Have you noticed in the racks of paperback novels sold everywhere these days, the author's name is always in larger type than the title? I suppose it's done for sales, but it always strikes me as vanity misplaced. I am not a famous author, never expect to be, and don't even want to be. I never expected or even intended for it to be widely read, but my original thinking was to get at least a few copies into the right hands.

I had hoped to bring a copy for you to sign, but I could not find it in the campus bookstore or even on the Internet. How come?

I printed only ten copies a couple months ago. I gave one of those to Hampston, a couple others to friends, and I still have about half a dozen left. That was about all I could afford to print and bind. But there is another more important reason. In the several years that I spent looking for a

publisher, or at least thinking of looking, I kept making constant revisions. And now that it is printed, I already see things that need to be changed. I think I may end up doing a revised edition.

(pause for tea break)

Your commencement talk certainly made news. It was even mentioned in The Globe. Did you expect that?

No. I may have got a bit carried away. It happens sometimes. I hope I did not offend anyone. Might have if I had ranted on a little longer. Now there's a funny expression—a little longer. Is there such thing as a big shorter?

Wow, I don't think so. We all thought your speech was great.

I make an effort to offend every group equally, so that none will think I zeroed in on just them. For example, I could have mentioned the number of big gas-guzzling cars I saw today in the college parking lot belonging to those who smugly call for more government regulations to protect the environment. Or with religious trinkets and other trash dangling from the rear view mirror and obstructing the driver's view, while they call for more traffic safety regulations. In my state those dangling trinkets are illegal, but apparently not so here. I wonder how many accidents they cause every year. But I left that out.

Do you remember anything about your own commencement?

Oh yes. At that precise moment, I was on a troop ship headed for Korea to shoot at the Chinese Communists. Do you know why we shoot at opponents on the battle field and have been doing so since ancient times? (pause) Precisely because they are shooting at us. (another pause, this one more inquisitive) I was hoping you would ask why they shoot at us.

All right, why do they shoot at us?

Because we shoot at them. That's what war basically is, at least at the ground level. Many soldiers will tell you that. Perhaps there is some higher purpose we don't understand but the generals do, although I often wonder. I don't see you writing all this down.

It's all right. I have it all on tape. I can edit out anything you wish.

No need to. So far it's all good stuff. The Secretary of Defense can take it and shove it for all I care. Oops, better leave that out.

Was your own college education really as bad as you made it out to be?

No, I'm sorry if I gave that impression. It wasn't really at all bad, just irrelevant. My main problem was that I majored in Engineering. At a recent class reunion, I took a survey of my classmates to see how many of them had ever used anything learned in their EE or ME classes. Almost none. For example, we spent an entire boring year with Professor Rose in Engineering Math IV solving differential equations, and not a single classmate has seen the need to solve a single one ever after. I went from college straight into

computers, as did some of my classmates, but guess what, the computer was nonexistent in our schooling. Times change so fast these days.

You mentioned Plato in your talk. Some of us are curious where that came from. We asked Professor Rand in Humanities, and even he did not know.

Not too surprised. It was in Crito, but interpreted rather loosely by me. Plato worded it in the inverse: The multitudes can do neither good nor evil, for whatever they do is the result of chance. In other words, the truly monstrous evils are perpetrated by persons in the upper levels of our social structure that ought to know better, then and now. A related proposition might be that the most intelligent are capable of the greatest stupidity.

When might you be writing the revised edition of your book that you mentioned?

Not right away. It took me many arduous years to put *If I Were*—together. It was exhausting, physically and mentally. I did some research recently on popular writers. The most prolific have all cranked out paperback fiction by the several hundreds. I believe the record was Mary Faulkner's over 900 novels. Some of them turn out about one a month. Hell, I couldn't even write or type that fast.

Have you read many of them?

I have tried a few, recommended by friends, but I never get beyond the first few pages. I always end up asking myself why I am reading this, life is so short. How much substance can there be in an author's hundredth book? My friends tell me one does not read them for substance but rather for escape. I suspected as much. But I wonder, escape from what? I have nothing to escape from, at least that I am aware of.

Any favorite books, or authors?

Well, for a start, the complete works of Henry David Thoreau, Robert Service, and of course John Greenleaf Whittier. I have fond memories of reading a lot of London, Hilton, Llewellyn, and Kipling, way back when I was in college without much to do evenings other than neglecting my studies, which by the way I now very much regret. But discovering a really good book is something you never forget. How lucky we are to have our lives enriched by such treasures. Perhaps that would be a good note on which to end this. Thank you for your interest in my ramblings.

Thank you Mr. Comins.

Chapter 3

The scene is that same coffee house that we visited earlier, but now crowded with students no longer casually sitting around and chatting but rather all busily engaged with their laptop computers. The name has changed to Ecoffee Haus in keeping with the revised menu, for now every item on it purports to be organic and eco-friendly.

Hello again, Mr. Comins, and thanks again. I wasn't sure you would remember. It's been over ten years. Let's sit over here by the window. Have you noticed, it is a bit quieter now, but just as crowded.

Chauncey now gets around with the use of a cane, which he says he doesn't really need, but it helps especially going up and down steps. His fluffy white hair is thinning out, but except for a few more wrinkles he still appears quite fit for his age. And he still goes around with his backpack.

Shall we start with the news in the paper that you were invited back here this time to be awarded an honorary degree, and that you declined it. If I may ask, what is all that about?

Well, I already have two PhDs, and didn't really need any more. In fact, I have some reservations about those two. The first was from MIT in Electrical Engineering. I thought it made me smarter than just about anyone else. Indeed, I was pretty smart in my chosen field, which was instability of non-linear closed-loop systems, but alas not elsewhere. The other was a PPOL from Harvard Kennedy. Oh yes, sorry, that's a PhD in Public Policy. Wow, I thought that really made me smarter than ever, a very common attitude in the Harvard community it seems. Which reminds me: Remember my book that we discussed at our previous meeting?

Yes, I was intending to ask you about that.

Well, I did indeed discard the few remaining copies, and now I have put together its replacement. Would you like to see my only copy?

Of course.

(Chauncey pulls it out of his backpack and hands it to Julie. The title has been changed from "If I were..." to "If only...")

Ah yes, I see, nothing but blank pages. Well, I'm not as surprised as you might think. You see, I've been doing a bit of research on the Internet about your recent doings.

When we last met, I was already beginning to undergo an epiphany of sorts, and now it has blossomed forth. The older I get, the more I question all of my long-held beliefs and attitudes. For example, we now find ourselves in the throes of another presidential election, and I don't know whom I ought to support. In the past I often used to waste my vote by casting a blank ballot. That was until I discovered that the Town Clerk routinely discarded them, so instead I would vote for almost any third party

candidate. But now I am finished with all that nonsense, and I want to do the responsible thing for a change. I even find myself uncertain about the upcoming referenda on gun ownership and abortion. I suppose all that is anathema in an ultra-liberal college town like this, but I just don't know.

(And this is as far as I got, so consider it the end of my story – STC)