

# *The Man on TV*

A Memoir

by

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“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage – to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness.”

— Alex Haley

“Wars don't end when peace treaties are signed. They echo through the lives of our children.”

— Tim O' Brien

“Sometimes I look around my living room, and the most real thing in the room is the television. It's bright and vivid, and the rest of my life looks drab. So I turn the damn thing off.”

—Michael Crichton

## **AUTHOR' S NOTE**

When my birth father died, I became his ghost writer.

That wasn't the plan, of course.

According to Jimmy Godwin, every time he told his stories whether it was in group therapy at the V.A. or in the waiting room for his chiropractor or psychic, people told him, "You should write a book."

He'd always present this suggestion as if it were a burden, but I knew he liked the idea. That's why, in 2007, I suggested that we collaborate on a book and he agreed. I did this partly because we'd never worked on anything together, but also because I hoped it might keep him alive. Jimmy had a staggering collection of health problems, including severe chronic pain. I wanted to give him something to look forward to, but it didn't work.

Jimmy died a few months later.

At first, I wasn't sure what to do about our writing project, because I knew he would want me to finish, just like I knew that the story we would have told together was as much his as mine. I went through all Jimmy's letters and emails. I found an unfinished short story he'd once written and told me was true. I remembered that I had tape-recorded him telling many of his most significant stories.

The chapters (or episodes, as I call them, since we have a TV motif) written from Jimmy's point of view are based on those sources as well as my own memory and interviews with people who knew him. Many of those people, I should point out, remember the details of events depicted here differently – sometimes *very* differently – than Jimmy did. I made some efforts to discern objective facts from Jimmy's own personal mythology, but in many cases, there was no way to know for sure.

Partly because of the unfinished nature of Jimmy's contributions, I employed the various

devices of memoir writers: time compression, amalgam scenes, recreated dialogue, and the use of imagination to provide details in places where research and recollection fell short.

A long time ago, I realized that if I wanted to understand Jimmy Godwin, I didn't have to accept as pure fact every word of his stories; I just had to accept that these were his stories.

I ask the same of you.

– *Graham Thomas Shelby, 2017*

***SEASON***

***ONE***

## **EPISODE 1: *The Man on TV...* (Pilot)**

According to the A.C. Nielsen company, in the spring of 1983, the *CBS Evening News* had a nightly audience of about 10 million people.

On Monday, May 30<sup>st</sup> of that year, I was one of them, only I probably watched that newscast more intently than else anyone in America. I was twelve and spending the first few days of summer vacation with my grandparents, who lived on a small farm near the town of London, Kentucky.

We'd brought dinner trays into the den and gathered around their 27-inch wood-paneled Magnavox. This is where I spent much of my childhood, watching super-hero cartoons and detective shows like *Perry Mason*, *Murder, She Wrote* and *Magnum, P.I.*

My grandparents and I were studiously not talking about what we knew made this edition of the *CBS Evening News* unique. It wasn't anchor Dan Rather, whose confident Texas baritone told us about Ronald Reagan and Yasser Arafat, flooding in Utah and tension with the Soviet Union.

We watched four commercial breaks in the first twenty-two minutes. Sponsors included Tums, the American Egg board and Post Shredded Wheat. When the final break began around 6:49, my grandmother, a tea-totaling retired school teacher, reached down and took my hand. "Look at those fingernails," she said. "Just like mine. Flat as a skillet." She said this as if discussing a family legacy, like the Rockefellers might discuss the Plaza.

I laughed to reassure her. My grandfather adjusted the footrest on his recliner and crushed tobacco into his pipe. "You two," he said, "you won't do."

I spent countless weekends and school vacations at their house and we'd had this same

exchange many times, but this was different, because they were trying to make me feel normal and I couldn't.

At 6:51, I figured that the story we were waiting for had to be next, and realized that I wanted - needed - to watch it by myself because I didn't want to worry about their reactions.

Without a word, I took my tray and dishes to the kitchen and kept going until I reached the little room at the back where my grandparents slept in *Ozzie and Harriet* beds. I sat on the end of my grandfather's bed and turned on his twelve-inch black-and-white RCA.

Dan Rather returned right after a commercial for Ex-Lax. "And finally on this Memorial Day, the tale of two friends who fought side-by-side in Vietnam. Only one came home. Correspondent James McManus has the story of one family's search for the meaning of life, another family's search for the meaning of a death, and how both came to find peace of mind years after the agony of war."

The screen filled with men in jungles, only the pictures looked faded and grainy. That was how I knew they were real, because it looked fake compared to a movie or a TV show. Huge guns belched smoke and fire into the trees. Soldiers, lean and raw, dashed across a compound. A sign rested against the wall of a makeshift building:

AIN'T NO DANGER

NEVER WAS

A 239

DUC LAP

The reporter, McManus, his voice stiff and earnest, said: "Duc Lap, Vietnam, the winter of 1969. Jim Godwin remembers his best friend, Dutch Schnably."

Soldiers carried a wounded man to a helicopter as I heard Jim Godwin voice for the first

time. “We had taken about five hundred rounds of incoming mortars and rockets. Dutch said, ‘You know, I’m not really afraid of dying at all.’ We were afraid of being forgotten. About three o’clock in the morning, we’d finished our talk and we stood up and shook hands and he said, ‘Never forget.’ And I never have.”

The reporter went on, “Green Beret Captain Donald F. Schnably died at Duc Lap. Sergeant James Godwin came home a shattered survivor.” The screen showed an old photo of Jim Godwin, lean and cocky. He wore his Green Beret and a dark uniform with colorful emblems. In the picture, he was standing in front of this, my grandparents’ house.

James Godwin – or Jimmy, as my mother called him – was my father, a man I had never met.

I couldn’t put words to whatever feelings I was having just then. All I could do was watch and listen and try to record the whole bizarre sequence in my mind, like the first sight of him. Moving. On camera. His face full, a little jowly, but not fat. He had this expression that was hard, but pained, proud and thoughtful. In my imagination, Jimmy had been vague, but infinite. Looking at him on the screen made him seem small. Small enough to be filmed and shown on my grandfather’s TV. Small enough to live in a house in Ohio. Small enough to be real.

I studied the curve of his jaws, his eyes, nose, mouth and hair. I searched for traces of myself, for evidence that I was connected to someone in that undeniable way of the body. There was some resemblance, maybe, in his chin, pointy like mine, or in the shape of his face, though that was hard to tell as his cheeks melted into his neck with no hint of a jaw line. His long hair touched his collar, with glasses and a mustache further obscuring his features. He actually looked like a taller, stouter version of Edmund Shelby, my stepfather, the man I called, “Dad.” This made me feel cheated somehow. For whatever reason (my mother’s weakness for intense,

nearsighted men?) in terms of physical resemblance, my two fathers looked more like each other than either of them looked like me.

I imagined Mom and Dad watching this about eighty miles away at our house in Lexington.

“The real battle was after I came back,” Jimmy said. “I had a lot of problems adjusting. I’d always blamed myself for his death.” The reporter again: “For thirteen years, Donald Schnably’s mother searched for someone who knew how her son had lived – and died – at Duc Lap.”

Dutch’s mother, Mrs. Cutlip, looked about my grandmother’s age and, like my grandmother, spoke in clear, careful syllables. “We did receive a paper saying that he had been killed in the mortar pit, but I wasn’t sure that that’s what had happened. And as the years went by and I didn’t hear from anybody, I presumed that nobody had survived.”

But in a small town in northern Ohio, Jimmy had survived, and he eventually realized what he needed to do. “I had to write that letter,” Jimmy said. “It took me three days. It really hurt. I yelled and screamed and cussed and stomped. But I’d say that, in retrospect, was the best three days of my adult life, because I not only helped me, I helped this lady who really had been searching.”

My mother had only shown me two pictures of Jimmy. One came from their wedding, where his face was out of focus. Another showed him sitting in a recliner, his head cocked to the side, a sly, skinny man-boy. According to my grandmother, one day when I was just old enough to talk in sentences, I reached into a drawer filled with old photographs. I pulled out a picture of Jimmy, showed it to her and asked, “Is this my daddy?”

On the screen, two boys, a little younger than me, tossed a football in the yard of a big

house. An American flag the size of a bedspread hung from the porch behind them. Mom told me that Jimmy had remarried and was raising his wife's children from her first marriage. I wondered if that was who these boys were: Jimmy's other half-sons.

Since reading Jimmy's letter, Mrs. Cutlip said, "When I go to sleep at night, I don't wonder anymore. I feel peaceful. I feel that I can sort of put that at rest." She and Jimmy had met earlier that year for the first time and she'd invited Jimmy and his current family to her house for Memorial Day weekend. "Don didn't get to come home alive. Now, we're just real excited that his best friend is coming. We're going to treat him like family and we've prepared a homecoming."

On the screen, Jimmy then emerged from an enormous American car. He walked up to Mrs. Cutlip and smiled at her. "Aw, James," she said, cupping his face in her hands.

*Shut up, old lady,* I thought.

A quartet of tow-headed little girls in white skirts held up a sign that read, "Welcome Jim, Eva, Adam and Aaron." I found it jarring somehow that his wife and sons had actual names. I imagined an alternate universe where that sign read, "Welcome Jim, Anne and Graham."

Dutch's family and friends hosted a barbecue for their visitors and later Jimmy and Mrs. Cutlip read from his letter. "I am writing this in loving memory of your son," Jimmy began. "Dutch and I were comrades, friends, brothers."

Mrs. Cutlip continued. "He told me how you raised his brother and him. He really loved and respected you. He was what you would have wanted him to be."

"It's very seldom you hear something nice about a Vietnam veteran," Jimmy told the reporter. "And not that it's so nice about me, it's nice about this warrior, you know. Because the war was bad but the warriors were not."

The tall man and the old woman stood together in front of a single headstone. Long grass waved in the breeze behind them. They hugged. Jimmy looked relieved, like he'd found something he wasn't sure he'd ever have. As they let each other go, they dissolved into Dan Rather's face.

“And that's the CBS Evening News for this Memorial Day. Dan Rather reporting tonight from Los Angeles. Good night.” Theme music. Closing credits. I turned off the TV and stared at my own shadowy reflection in its blank, gray face.

Something had just happened. Or not happened. I couldn't tell. What I felt just then was the emotional equivalent of sensory overload. I had wanted answers from the broadcast, had hoped that the mystery of Jimmy Godwin would end that evening in the kind of tidy, satisfying resolution I'd come to expect from television.

Instead, the answers I'd gotten from the broadcast (what Jimmy looked like, where he lived, how he sounded when he talked) had given way to new questions. As I saw it, the man on TV had been a soldier – a warrior. He had fought for his country. He had fought for his friend. So why hadn't he fought for me?

Suddenly, I had to be outside.

In the den, the giant console TV still sang. I ran past it, past my grandparents and their silent inspection. I ran to the field behind their house, to my preferred play spot near my grandfather's tool shed.

I ran up a hill of sawdust, spread my arms out wide and jumped. I landed and kicked an imaginary super-villain in front of me and karate-chopped one to the side. I was returning to one of my favorite fantasy escapes. The one I acted out sometimes when nothing good was on TV: I was the son of Superman and my father was on a mission in space. This left me all by myself to

battle his enemies from the Phantom Zone.

I jumped and punched and kicked the air until it got dark and my grandmother called my name. “Better come in,” she said.

I could see her silhouette in the light of kitchen door. She looked from side to side and I realized she couldn’t see me.

“Okay,” I said.

My family knew more about Jimmy than any of them wanted to tell me, but I also sensed that they didn’t know his whole story themselves, and that there was much more to it than anything I’d seen on TV.

As I headed toward the house, I decided that I wasn’t going to tell my grandmother or anyone what I thought of all this, in part because I didn’t really know, myself. What I did know was that one day, I would stand face-to-face with Jimmy Godwin and solve the mystery of what had happened to him and why, even if it meant that I would have to be the detective.