



An excerpt from *Wade Thruitt's Greatest Hits*.
The Collected Wade Thruitt
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I never found steady work playing my music in Laredo, and I didn't have poker to fall back on like I did in Vegas, so times grew lean. I sold my car, then when the money from that ran out I went to work as a dogsbody in a burger place. "Apprentice" was my official job title, but dogsbody was a word I ran across one night while looking through a dictionary for something to rhyme with "nobody." I was writing a song about my new career. My duties included dishwashing, grill scraping, and bathroom sanitation. Pretty much the definition of a dogsbody.

But then I got promoted on account of a robbery. What happened was, a drug-addled teenager jumped the front counter one afternoon and popped open the drawer of the cash register. He grabbed a fistful of bills and took off for the back door, but he hadn't done a very good job of casing the place. He didn't know about our floor.

The tile in the back of the restaurant was always coated with a film of grease, and we slid on it rather than walked. You would aim yourself wherever you wanted to go, shove off in that direction and then slide maybe a foot per second until you reached your destination. Unfortunately for the robber he didn't know that. He slipped and fell when he started for the door.

I pushed off from the grill and was sliding towards him when I saw in his amphetamined eyes that he'd analyzed my method of travel and decided to use it himself. He sprang to his feet, planted them flat on the floor and pushed away from the register in the direction of the back door. I made a ricochet course correction off the bun warmer, and

the race for the door was on.

We slid like statues, rigid except for when we reached out to push on tables to gain speed. It was touch and go for a while, but then he opened up a big lead as he passed over the slick spot in front of the deep fryers. I could see he was going to reach the door first unless I got creative, so I grabbed a squeeze bottle and squirted mystery sauce on the floor in front of me. The sauce lubed my path and I shot forward. I tackled the kid just as he laid his hand on the doorknob. The other employees slid up and helped me hold him down until the cops arrived.

The manager praised me for my quick action and problem solving abilities. He also promoted me to Assistant Manager Trainee. The promotion meant more responsibility (keeping count of the condiment individipacks became one of my jobs), but I didn't get a pay raise, so before long I began to feel put-upon. Maybe that's what led to me having a life-changing experience.

One night I was chasing a cockroach that caught a ride back to my room in a pants cuff. He disappeared into the nightstand by my bed, and when I opened the stand's drawer I was dazzled by the sight of the Gideon's Bible. It wasn't like I'd never seen the book before, but I'd never seen it like *that*. The thing seemed to be alive. It pulsed like it was breathing, and the lettering on its cover burned with a warm golden glow. I stood basking in the radiance for a moment, and then I heard Jesus say, "Concern thyself not with individipacks, but with thy immortal soul. Get ye to the highway."

Of course I couldn't argue with Jesus, so I quit my job and prepared to leave Laredo. But first I took a couple of days to reassess my music. I didn't feel it would be appropriate to continue singing corrupt songs if I was to be a Servant of the Lord, so I went through my repertoire and eliminated any pieces that might be of questionable

morality. I got rid of tunes about drinking and sexing, and I adjusted lyrics to remove anatomical references that good Christians might find offensive. Which meant no more singing about nipples, navels or brains.

That didn't leave me with much in the way of material, so I wrote a new song called "Throw off the Shackles of Your Shekels," and then I hit the road to begin the period of my Wanderings.

I played street corners as I went from town to town with my guitar and backpack, but no one wanted to listen to The Word, so I rarely got enough together in the way of tips to rent a room. Mostly I slept behind dumpsters.

Lots of other people haunted those dirty alleyways along with me, and I remember one night I witnessed a theological debate between two winos. They were trading punches to emphasize their points about the true meaning of Christianity. The guy who won the fight claimed the meaning was to love thy neighbor.

I studied my Bible as I wandered, and I engaged in debates of my own. The most memorable one took place in the mountains of West Texas, with a group of monks of some kind. I was walking past their monastery on a dirt road one day when The Lord told me to stop and seek sanctuary. The monks agreed to let me spend the night, then that evening over a dinner of armadillo tamales I learned they were dead wrong on the subject of The Beast of Revelations. I told them so, too, and for the next three days I outargued them on point after point after point. Even if they *hadn't* taken a vow of silence I would have won the arguments.

Jesus suggested I resume my Wanderings when the monks started collecting wood to burn me at the stake, and I asked, "Howfore willst thy provide for me, Lord?" but I needn't have worried. He gave me places to lay my head and set suste-

nance in my path. I sucked down more than one meal of aerosol cheese spread while pretending to shop for groceries, and once when I was *really* hungry I went into a restaurant advertising an All You Can Eat buffet. I ate until I passed out at my table, then the owner of the place made me wash dishes when I told him I couldn't pay. But it was all according to Jesus' Plan because I made some converts back in the kitchen area. My new co-workers weren't Believers, so I laid into them with The Truth while I started to work on the dirty dishes. An hour later they went to the owner and described visions of hell they were having, and I remember thinking how God works in mysterious ways as I was chucked out the back door.

Another time, in east Texas, it must have been Satan who lured me into a buffet, because the owner of *that* restaurant wasn't willing to let me atone by washing dishes. He called the law on me and a judge ordered me to render thirty days unto Caesar.

The local jail didn't have room for me at the time, so I was hauled to the next nearest containment facility—a state hospital for the mentally ill. The police had a key to one of the dorms and locked up behind me after they tossed me inside.

I learned later that I was in what was called a dayroom. It had only one window, high up on a wall, and with just four fluorescent tubes out of a dozen working overhead, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust after the sunlight.

The room was about forty feet square and there were fifty or so men in it. They were all dressed in pajamas and shambling around in a big circle with their heads hung forward and their arms down at their sides. Some drooled and others gibbered. The gibbering sound reverberated off a floor of cracked brown tile and cinderblock walls shedding big scales of institutional green paint. Broken furniture was scattered here and there.

I asked a couple of the passing men where the staff were, but they didn't answer. One lifted a heavy arm and seemed to point, and when I looked I saw a rat sitting in the bowl of a water fountain mounted on a wall. I shuddered and said, "Not *rats*, brother, *staff*. Where are the *staff*?"

As if in answer to my question I heard a jingle of keys and saw a man coming out of a closet. He had a broom in one hand and a key ring in the other. I headed for the closet.

I didn't know it at the time but the hospital I'd landed in was financially strapped, and the staff were having to do double duty. The nurses tended the grounds, the cooks took care of the plumbing, and the janitors stood in for the psychiatrists. I learned about the janitor/psychiatrist situation pretty quickly after I approached the man locking the closet. I set my things on the floor and tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around in surprise.

"Who're *you*?!"

He was a short Hispanic guy, about forty, with black hair that ran down to thick sideburns. According to the patch on the chest of his dirty blue coveralls his name was "Tomás."

"My name's Thruitt," I said. "I just arrived here through the Inscrutable Will of the Lord Thy God."

Tomás went from surprised to tired-looking and hooked his key ring to a hammer loop on the side of his coveralls.

"You just got here?"

"Yes. I guess I need to check in with a doctor. And while I'm at it . . ." I waved an arm around the dayroom. "While I'm at it, I want to complain about the condition of this place. It needs attention."

Tomás nodded his head and tugged at one of his sideburns.

"Attention," he repeated.

“Well, sure. Rats, the furniture, the . . .”

Suddenly the roar of a flushing toilet filled the dayroom. I looked around and saw another janitor emerge through an arched doorway that led to the crapper. The man zipped up the front of his coveralls as he walked over to join Tomás and me. The key ring at his side ka-chinked in time to his steps.

The second janitor was in his early twenties, sandy-haired and tall. And he was full of nervous energy. When he reached us he did a jittery little dance-in-place that kept the jingly sound of his keys going. The patch on his coveralls identified him as “Tinker.”

“Hey,” Tomás said to him, “You didn’t tell me we were getting a new admission today.”

Tinker said he didn’t know anything about an admission, then he asked me what my symptoms were.

“Symptoms?”

“Yeah, dude. Voices? Hallucinations? Do you see or hear anything that’s like . . . strange?”

“Well, I see and hear you, but . . .”

The next thing I knew I was facedown on the floor with Tinker and Tomás on top of me. They stuck me in the ass with a syringe and then remained where they were until I began to feel warm, then fuzzy, then . . . gone.

I came to sometime later dressed in pajamas, and I had joined the group of men milling around the dayroom. I saw Tomás, shuffled over to him and tried to speak, but all I could do was mouth a few vowel sounds. He asked if I was trying to tell him something, and when I nodded my head in the affirmative he whipped a hypo out of a pocket and sent me back to lalaland.

No telling how much time passed before my brain reopened for business, but when it did I saw that I was still in the dayroom. And I saw Tomás again, but I didn’t stop to talk. I just shuffled on

past him with the milling crowd.

An hour later my head felt clear of whatever they'd doped me with, and I knew that if I wanted to avoid the shots in the future I would need to keep quiet around Tinker and Tomás. I wouldn't be able to appear too alert, either, so whenever they were near I cut loose with the drool.

I spent one week, then two, milling during the day and sleeping on a cot with a thin mattress and dirty pillow at night. It seemed that Tinker and Tomás were always there, either alone or as a pair. The only other staff I saw was a nurse who passed through once while she was taking a break from mowing. She watched us all mill around the dayroom for two or three minutes and pronounced us healthy.

The second week dragged into the third as I perfected my shamble. I also did a lot of under-the-radar proselytizing. Sometimes, conditions permitting, I would lean close to one of my co-shamblers and whisper, "God loves you" or "Jesus is your salvation." I rarely got more than a gibber in response, though one time a man beside me answered, "Peace." I thought I'd found a fellow Believer, so I said, "Peace be unto you, brother." We were on the inner part of the milling circle and I knew the staff wouldn't hear me if I kept my voice down. "Do you acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" I asked. "Peace," he said again, "peace 'n sheet." I looked down and saw that his pajama bottoms were riding low in back, and there was a slick trail like a snail's behind him. I moved to the outer edge of the crowd. A little later Tinker led the guy off to the showers, and Tomás diverted traffic around the inner lane with yellow cones so he could mop.

But occasionally I would encounter someone with a little more snap than the peace 'n sheet man. Like the old guy that Tinker and Tomás called The Space Case. They believed he thought of him-

self as a space alien, but they were wrong. He was convinced he was from another dimension. He told me so one day when he came out from under his drugs, shuffled up beside me and said, "I am a pluton from dimension ten, quib sector. Are you an intelligent species?" I knew I was taking a chance on being overheard, but I decided to humor him. I whispered, "We're called humans, and we've developed television, automobiles and atomic bombs." He sighed and said, "Oh, well, the search goes on." Tomás heard us talking and got busy with the ass-jabs. The pluton went back to the tenth dimension and for all I know he took me with him.

From then on I rarely spoke during the day, and if I said anything that made sense in my sleep Tinker and Tomas never noticed it. Until I had a crisis of faith.

I slept in a huge, barracks-like bedroom, lullabyed by fifty men gibbering, snoring and farting. The muzak of the human condition. It got so I drew a kind of comfort from the sound, and slumbered peacefully in it, but then one night a deep voice shook me awake.

"Knock, knock!"

I knew immediately who the voice belonged to. God. The Big Guy, not his son. And he was speaking to me. I gulped, took a deep breath and whispered, "Who's there?"

I'm not sure how long I waited for a reply in the burbling darkness—two hours, three—but gradually I came to realize I was waiting in vain. God wasn't going to answer me, not then or ever. He would never reveal himself and never explain the joke of forsaking me among the mentally scarred and broken.

Sleep finally reclaimed me, but it brought no peace. At least not at first. I tossed and turned, wrestling with wild, disjointed images, but then I began to fix words to what I saw. Then came an ordering of the words, followed by a heartbeat

cadence, and before I knew it I was writing a song.

I'd composed pieces in my sleep before, and sometimes I sang the lyrics out loud while I did. I sang that night in the booby hatch. Words lined up end to end on a string of melody, and I could hear myself warbling faintly in the real world as I wove the melody through a fabric of chords in my mind's ear. It was wonderful. I relished every beat and rhyme and wanted the process of building to go on forever, but then the song was finished. I felt a momentary dejection, followed by euphoria. The piece was wholly formed and I couldn't wait to sing it through from the start. I sounded out the opening chords in my head and began my re-warble.

"Hold him!"

I jerked awake in semidarkness, facedown on my cot. Tinker and Tomás were on top of me and hog-tying my hands and feet behind my back.

"What are you doing?!" I screeched.

"We're restraining you for your own safety," Tinker said, his key ring ka-chinking as he wrapped my ankles and wrists with a piece of cotton rope.

"But that's not fair!" I yelled.

Tomás let go of my legs. I twisted my head around and saw him pick up his flashlight from the floor. He pulled a hypo from his pocket, removed the needle cap with his teeth and shined the light on the target of my ass. After he spit the cap away he asked me why I was talking.

"Talking? Oh. Well, uh..." I put a slur in my speech, hoping to get my dose of zombie juice reduced from the full buttload. "Wuzzz uh talkin'?"

Tinker laughed. "Good try, man." He finished trussing me up and took a step back from the cot. All I needed was a honey glaze and I would have been ready for the oven.

"We heard you singing," Tomás said.

Tinker nodded. "Yeah. And you were *into* it."

That reminded me of the song I'd just written. I knew my brain was about to be merged with my pillow, and I needed to do what I could to save the lyrics.

"You're right," I said. "I wrote a song in my sleep. I know it sounds crazy, but sometimes I do that. And you gotta help me out here, guys. Please. Can you do me a favor?"

They glanced at each other.

"It's not a trick," I said. "Just get some paper and write down some words. You know I'll sleep like a log after the shot, so write down the song. Please. I won't remember it later."

They put their heads together and conferred, then Tinker left and came back with a legal pad and a pen. Tomás shined his flashlight on the pad while I dictated:

One day up in heaven
Way out in the blue
The Creator was yawning
He had nothing to do
He sat on a beach
Dug his toes in the sand
And his gaze it was fixed on
The drink in his hand

Now the drink he was holding
It's called the Universe
And every now and then he just
Gives it a little stir
Oh it's like a bolt of lightning,
God's mighty swizzle stick
And when he's stirring up some action
You better hope you don't get hit

Whenever *I* get bored
I just beat on my guitar
But whenever *God* gets bored
He beats on me

Now when God began to thump me
With his mighty swizzle stick
I figured he must hate me
As I took those painful licks
But then I came to see that
He didn't really care
And then I came to wonder
If he knew I was even there

Whenever *I* get bored
I just beat on my guitar
But whenever *God* gets bored
He beats on me

So if you're ever sitting
By your fireplace in the night
And you're sitting there and smiling
'Cause everything seems so right
You'd better listen for the tinkle
Of the ice against the glass
'Cause when that swizzle stick is busy
It can mix your life up fast

"I hope that's all," Tinker said, flexing his writing hand.

"That's it. Except for the chords. Can you write them at the top of the page, please? They're A minor, G, F and E seventh. And it's in A minor. That's the key, A minor."

"Okay, dude. Wrote it all down, whatever it means. He's all yours, Tomás."

Tomás had been standing by my cot during the whole dictation process, holding the flashlight for Tinker and waiting to stick me with his syringe. So when I finished with the song I wondered why he didn't get to work jabbing. I craned my head around and saw him looking at the legal pad that Tinker still held.

They both read silently. Tomás moved his

lips and tugged at a sideburn, then he sucked air and made the sign of the cross over his chest.

“This *song*,” he said, giving me a wide-eyed look. “It makes you sound like you have a death wish.”

He was right, but the rope was tight and I couldn’t get my hands on him, so I just said, “I think you have something there, Tomás. And Tinker, put those lyrics in my backpack, will you? Wherever it is.”

Then Dr. Tomás stuck me, handed Tinker the flashlight and walked away. Tinker remained by my bunk and scanned the lyrics to “God’s Swizzle Stick.” He did a jittery dance-in-place as he read, and his key ring ka-chinked.

Thirty days after I was locked up they released me (with a diagnosis of paranoia and dirty grout), and the page from the legal pad was in my pack. It took me awhile to remember the intricacies of the song, but I finally did and it was a good one. I still play it but I have to be careful when I’m picturing the words the way that Tinker wrote them out. He had lousy handwriting and sometimes I sing about God’s *sizzle* stick or try to play the song in A minus.

