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THE FUGITIVE'S PARADOX

HOW DO YOU write a true story when everyone in your story is telling a lie? Maybe not even just one lie, but many lies? In fact, maybe everyone in the story is simply lying all the time. Not because they didn't know any better. From everything one can discern they are capable of distinguishing between truth and lies. Indeed, they have, in the past, seen themselves distinctly as "truth tellers." So no, they didn't seem outwardly like liars, whatever that would look like. But they are. What one discovers in this peculiar circumstance is that they are living inside a place that I never knew existed. It needed a name, so I gave it one: The Fugitive's Paradox.

The ethic of my profession as a documentarian requires that I seek the truth; that I dig until I emerge with a story that is true. Well, maybe not the whole truth. But rather, a story that uses actual people woven into a narrative using real-life events. The story isn't a recitation of those events and the facts about them - that's what journalists do. Rather, the documentarian molds a narrative around the core of an emotional truth, one that reveals something insightful about the human condition. A parable emerges that speaks to something greater than the actions of the individuals themselves. They are true stories with a point of view.

In all the stories I've told in my career, I've felt reasonably confident that I held fast to the dictates of my profession. Except once. And that "except once" is a big one. It involves a story that has preoccupied me for the better part of my adult life.

The story is about a man. His name is Howard Mechanic. He was a 30-year federal fugitive from justice. I have known him since I was 12 years old. I have spoken to him many times and now even consider him a "good acquaintance" of sorts. I have interviewed Howard for hours and have spoken to dozens of people who have known him. I have found thousands of government documents about Howard and have fact-checked as much of his story as is conceivably possible. And yet, as steadfast as those efforts have been, capturing the truth of Howard and his existence has eluded me. How can that possibly be?

Here's what I have learned. Howard was locked in The

Fugitive's Paradox: the place in which truth and lies merge as one. The lies are not apparent, sometimes not even to their creator. Sometimes those lies are intentional. Sometimes they are simply outgrowths of the lies that preceded them. The lies spread insidiously, like methane gas: undetectable, ubiquitous, and deadly to the truth in their effect.

SO MANY CONTRADICTIONS

Howard Lawrence Mechanic, aka Gary Raymond Tredway, aka Gary Robert Tredway. He may have had other names and other IDs—driver's licenses, passports, birth certificates—all in names that did not resemble Howard Lawrence Mechanic. Perhaps he was Eugene Murdock, but then again, maybe not. Each alias has a story. Gary was an orphan, but Howard was not. Gary had an Aunt Rose and an Uncle Bud whom Gary resembled quite closely and whom Howard, in his youth, always called "Mom and Dad." Howard has a sister, Marilyn, who was known to be Gary's cousin. Howard's family never saw him after he went underground. But Gary, Aunt Rose, Uncle Bud, and Cousin Marilyn vacationed together regularly. Howard had an identical twin brother, Harvey. He and Harvey could never be together for fear of exposing Howard. But Howard's young son immediately identified Harvey and Gary as twins because they stayed in the same hotel. If you're having trouble making sense of all this, not to worry, so did I.

Howard was on the run for nearly 30 years, and yet, he ran nowhere at all. Or at least that's his story. What I uncovered in over a decade of my documentarian's quest for the truth about Howard is that, at some point, his life had become enshrouded in aliases, intended obfuscations, and unintended ambiguities that he simply chose to accept. The elusive truth of his existence and its larger meaning came to bedevil me. But worse, that shroud came to cover everyone he knew. Everyone became his accomplice. Perhaps even me.

THE BACKSTORY – The Fire

My involvement with Howard began on the night of May 4, 1970. He was a 22-year-old senior at Washington University in St. Louis. I was 12. That night, Howard attended a riot at which the Army ROTC building on the WU campus was burned to the ground. Earlier that day the Ohio National Guard had shot and killed four students at a protest at Kent State University. Immediately, campuses across the U.S. exploded in anger: buildings were burned, students were arrested, and Howard Mechanic was just one of hundreds rounded up by local law enforcement. My father was a civil rights attorney and Howard became his client.

Howard was not considered by anyone who knew him as a “revolutionary.” He was a middle-class Jewish boy from Shaker Heights, Ohio. He was a good student and had already received a full scholarship to Boston University Law School. But it was 1970 and so he, as many college students, wore his hair long, grew a scruffy beard, smoked copious amounts of pot, had as much sex as possible, and regularly protested the war into which he feared he would be drafted. Then May 4, 1970, happened.

On May 5, Howard was arrested by local police for having violated an injunction prohibiting him from protesting on campus. He knew about the injunction so he might well have expected that. He was arraigned and let out on bail. No big deal.

But then the oddest thing happened. A few weeks later he was arrested again, this time by *federal* law enforcement, the FBI. He was charged with violating a little-known provision of the 1968 Civil Rights Act known as the “H. Rap Provision,” named for a leading figure in the Black Power Movement. The statute precludes protestors from impeding the activities of firefighters and police in the conduct of their duties during a protest. A witness to the riot identified Howard as having thrown a cherry bomb (a large firecracker) at a policeman. He hadn’t burned the ROTC building, and no one ever said he did. But he also denied ever throwing anything at the police, much less a cherry bomb.

Now Howard faced federal charges. That could mean hard time. My father was baffled. No other student from anywhere else in the country was subject to such harsh punishment. But this was St. Louis, Missouri and that fact of geography turned out to be important.

Howard and most of America's youth saw the riots of May 4, 1970, as a natural, passionate outpouring of anger in response to the killing of four of their own at Kent State. The federal government saw it differently; for them, it was an opportunity. Unbeknownst to the students at Washington University, the Missouri justice system had, for years, been girding for retribution against the long-haired hippie outsiders who had been causing trouble in their state. At the federal level, the Nixon Administration believed that stringent federal sentences would deter students from around the nation from political protest in the future. Together, they forged a partnership in the pursuit of a finely-tuned test case. And there sat Howard, squarely at the epicenter of this law-and-order vengeance.

THE BACKSTORY – The Flight

First, Howard and several WU students were sentenced to six months in prison for violating the injunction against protesting. It was a sentence in keeping with most of the other punishments meted out in a now war-weary nation. They were sent to a rural jail in Outstate Missouri; a place called "Gumbo." Howard said that the guards segregated the protestors from the other inmates who were mostly black and poor. He reported that prison officials worried that the students would indoctrinate their fellow inmates with radical ideas that would foment racial discord. Then, Howard said, they separated the students one from one another. Now they could be harassed at will. Howard recounts that one guard said he'd shoot him in the head if he had the chance. The naive Jewish boy from Shaker Heights, Ohio lived in a constant state of terror.

Howard served four of his six months and was released. That was it for him. He always said that it was his experience in Gumbo that made him decide he would never serve another day in jail. But his federal

trial was coming up.

Absent solid corroboration from a variety of credible witnesses, my father didn't see how Howard could possibly be convicted. It was dark during the riot. There had been a mob of 3000. A building was ablaze. It was chaos. Howard said he hadn't thrown any cherry bomb. End of story. Except it wasn't.

Howard's trial was scheduled to last two weeks. It lasted only four days. The US Attorney called nineteen prosecution witnesses. Only one, Donald "Dick" Bird, testified under oath that Howard had thrown the cherry bomb. But oddly, Bird's statements had changed from the time law enforcement had interviewed him immediately after the riot, to his current courtroom testimony. That didn't matter to the jury. They deliberated less than hour. "Guilty." A week later, Howard was sentenced to five years in federal penitentiary and a \$10,000 fine.

Having committed himself to not serving one more day in prison, Howard returned home to Cleveland, sold his belongings, amassed a nest egg of \$3000, and wrote to his parents a note saying he'd "be in touch." He got on the bus going west as Howard Lawrence Mechanic. He got off in in Tempe, AZ as Gary Raymond Tredway. Lie Number One was beginning to take root.

THE DOCUMENTARIAN'S QUEST

"Something wasn't right," so my father said. The loss of Howard's case vexed him. "How could this be?" There was literally no evidence of his guilt save for Dick Bird's ever-changing testimony. Nowhere else in the country had students been brought up on federal charges—not in Madison, Ann Arbor, Berkeley, New York—nowhere that he could find. "What the hell was going on?"

For nearly 30 years, these questions became a refrain in our home—on holidays, on the anniversary of May 4, and whenever there would be retrospective news accounts of the riot that lived as a public reminder of Howard's disappearance. Sometimes just out of the blue my father would say, "Whatever happened to Howard Mechanic?" Howard's

flight bugged him. And it bugged me too. After years of hearing these seemingly unanswerable questions, I was grown up, had chosen my profession, and now thought, "I'm a documentarian. I can figure this out. There is probably a great story about truth and a miscarriage of justice here for me to tell."

On September 11, 2010, I filed my first Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. I requested the FBI files on my father. I wanted to know what the government knew, or thought they knew, about my dad. The government responded with a lie: they had no files on him. Well, we know that's not true. They had files on everyone who challenged the status quo during J. Edgar Hoover's nearly 50-year reign at the FBI. I filed an appeal.

I started to file more FOIA requests—for Howard Mechanic and other St. Louis defendants in the May 4 trials. I filed FOIA requests for places like "Washington University in St. Louis" and events like "May 4, 1970, St. Louis." I filed FOIAs for files for which I only had file numbers and didn't even know what the files were for. By the time I filed as many FOIA applications as I thought could be relevant, I had made 358 separate requests; the government calls these kinds of filings a "behemoth." Nearly every single one of them was denied by the FBI. I filed appeals on all of them. Those were denied. So, I sued the Federal Government in what became known as *Seavey v Department of Justice, et al.* The "et al" in this case was the FBI, the CIA, and the National Archives. It took three years, but I won that lawsuit. And the documents started to flow in, nearly 150,000 of them. I combed through, carefully annotating them each one and compiling a timeline of what happened, when it happened, and who said what to whom. A carefully set trap in St. Louis came into focus. The revelations were stunning. And disturbing in ways that I hadn't anticipated.

At the same time, I started interviewing people in the inner circle. I spent two days interviewing Howard, who, by that time had finally come up from underground. Donald Bird was dead. My father was dead. But I interviewed the other defendants and witnesses. I found

news articles and radio and television reports of the era that helped fill out the story. I began to find that narrative that documentarians love to locate so that we can create our parables about real people and events that illuminate a truth larger than the circumstances themselves can offer.

I always found myself in sympathy with Howard. He was my protagonist. The documents proved he had been ensnared in a well-orchestrated conspiracy. Even though he had allegedly thrown the cherry bomb, the government had made an example of him. Every other student around the country received a slap on the wrist or a local sentence of the kind that Howard and others had served at Gumbo. But five years in federal penitentiary? It was unthinkable. Except in St. Louis. Howard had been set up.

Needless to say, the government and federal and local law enforcement were my antagonists. It all seemed to be fitting together nicely. Then things got more complicated. As did my view of Howard.

TRUTH AND LIES

The first lies I found were from the federal government. This didn't surprise me. It is well-documented that in 1970 nearly every large federal government agency had a domestic security program of some kind. The most well-known was the FBI's COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program). But many other agencies had intelligence and subversion efforts on college campuses as well: the CIA had Operation Chaos, the Department of the Army had Operation Garden Plot, The NSA had Operations Shamrock and Minaret, the IRS had Operation Leprechaun; there were named and unnamed programs in the Department of Naval Intelligence, the Secret Service, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the long list goes on. Indeed, the extent of the government's infiltration into the student movement led the nation's leading evening news anchor, Walter Cronkite, to conclude, "There were so many spies on college campuses that, at times, spies trailed spies."¹ All that surveillance was bound to create mythologies and mistaken assumptions that bore even

¹ CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, March 25, 1971.

more questionable analyses that begot lies and falsehoods that kept the whole domestic security machine rolling forward.

For years, the FBI visited my father in the belief that he had helped Howard to flee. My father was an officer of the court and would never have done such a thing. I discovered that the FBI knew this fact not long after Howard's flight. On June 22, 1973, not long after Howard's disappearance, an FBI Confidential Informant (CI) reported a conversation he overheard at a cocktail party between my father and a friend of Howard's. My father asked the friend what had happened to Howard Mechanic, where had he gone? The friend replied noncommittally, "I guess he's still around. I haven't seen him in a while." This CI report led Special Agent William Ahler, Jr. in the St. Louis Office of the FBI on August 17, 1973 to conclude: "It is obvious that GILDEN is not aware of MECHANIC's location ..."² It didn't matter. For years, FBI agents regularly visited my father's office and home, hammering him on Howard's whereabouts. They tapped his phone, sent CIs to infiltrate his private social engagements, and they reported on his everyday activities. The IRS audited my father annually in what was a favored use of the tax system to harass citizens, especially during the 6 years of the Nixon Administration. It was all just one big assault predicated on a lie. That said, it was the federal government, so perhaps that was to be expected. What I hadn't expected were the lies from Howard to me. But perhaps that was naïve.

TRUTH FROM LIES

Documents can lie because it's always possible that the author of that document is a liar. In looking at my 150,000 pages of documents I always asked myself, "What's the content of the document?" and "Who is the author of the document and what's this person's stake in the content?" In Hoover's era, agents' activities were closely monitored personally by the Director. Harsh rebukes were entered into personnel files if an agent was not regularly delivering Hoover's desired results. Hence a lot of information was created to meet quotas and expectations. But some

² Special Agent William J. Ahler report of Investigative Period 7-16-73 to 7-20-73. Title of Case: Howard L. Mechanic, Fugitive, Case File 100-21339 Sect. 2.

documents simply recorded observations for which the informant nor the agent had an intended outcome, nor any reason not to tell the truth. Those are the best documents. And it was in those kinds of reports that cracks started to appear in the story of my protagonist.

For example, while in Gumbo prison Howard asserted that he and the other convicted students were separated from the prison population and from one another. His vulnerability in isolation gave rise to his commitment never to serve another day in prison. Yet, I found documents of Howard's daily routines from his main prison guard, Otto Moore. The reports document Howard regularly playing basketball in the prison yard with the other inmates and offer observations about how athletic and well-liked he was. They record how he did yoga and engaged in long discussions with Moore himself who had been a Green Beret. They note how Moore and Mechanic had found some common political ground. And then I found reports from a cellmate with whom Howard had become close, a Black activist named William Canty. Canty recounts Mechanic's stated intention to go to California to work in the "underground."

What do I make of all this? Well, some of it has no reason not to be true. The guard's observations were just that, reporting on what he saw while on duty. So maybe when Howard talked to me about being "isolated" from everyone in the prison, he was speaking metaphorically. He still might well have been threatened with a bullet to the head by a prison guard or maybe that threat was something he felt more about his being incarcerated and his potential for harm more generally. Fair enough.

When I showed Howard these documents, he expressed pleasure at the idea that someone thought he was "buff." He told me he doesn't remember any William Canty although the documents further attest to contact Howard had made with Canty after they were both released from jail. I pressed Howard further on that relationship and Canty's recollection that Howard was headed to California to join the "underground." Howard changed the subject. Maybe the motivation and

path for his flight was more complicated than the creation myth he had repeated for nearly 50 years? Maybe he was more of a revolutionary at the time than anyone had thought. Maybe. Maybe not.

Admittedly, some of my concerns felt based on supposition. But some of what began to gnaw at me was decidedly less opaque. For instance, there was the matter of his aliases and all that went into the formulation of Howard's "new self." That reinvention was a complicated piece of business. Howard credits "a friend connected with the underground whose name he does not remember"³ in helping him with documents forming his new identity as Gary Raymond Treadway. Howard's identity purveyor assured him that the birth certificate was "clean," and that the Social Security number was unassigned. Yet several years into his new life, government notices began to arrive reporting that someone else was paying taxes under that same Social Security number. In fact, Gary Raymond Treadway wasn't dead, he was alive and well and living in St. Louis using his own Social Security number. As was Howard/Gary.

Howard/Gary had a choice: he could use a back-up alias, Palmer Richards. That would mean leaving Arizona, abandoning the small businesses he had built, and walking away from the life he had settled into. Or he could make a plan. This is what he says happened next:

I had access to the employee records at [a company owned by a friend] and I knew one guy who was working there who was about my age. And so, I start talking to him. "How long you been working here?" and he said, "Well I been working here about 5 years." And I say, "Where are you from?" He said "LA." "Were you're born in LA?" And he said, "Yeah, well, I was born in LA." And that was the information that I wanted: where he's born so I got that out [of him]. I knew his birthdate from the file. So, I wrote a letter to Los Angeles County asking for a birth certificate, his birth certificate. I wasn't gonna live as him. I was living as Gary RAYMOND Treadway. I figure well let's try Gary ROBERT Treadway. Then I wouldn't have to change my name. I told Social Security that my name is Gary Robert Treadway, and my birthday was February 18th 1948 in Los

³ Howard Mechanic Interview with the author, October 30, 2013.

Angeles.⁴

What ensued was a crazy quilt of events involving the purchase of a vintage typewriter that could replicate the font on a 1940's birth certificate, a hippie who owned a printing press, a forger who was paid in six packs of beer, and the creation of 100 copies of Gary Robert Tredway's birth certificate—because apparently once you started a printing press in the 1970s, it was hard to get it to stop.

No one had really known Howard/Gary's middle name was "Raymond" to be begin with. Whenever he used a middle identifier, he usually just used, "R." So Robert, instead of Raymond, worked just fine. Everything was all fixed. Except it wasn't. Really.

Think about it: Howard stole the identity of one of his closest friend's employees, conned the unwitting employee into giving him his personal information, forged a new birth certificate, lassoed two petty criminals into what now was a major felony, hoodwinked several government officials, and scammed the Social Security Administration — all in the name of "making things fine." That's a lot of lies. But Howard didn't think twice about it because, as he says, he had no choice. Here's what Howard said about this and other illegal acts:

You gotta weigh the negatives and the positives ... and that's just one of the negatives. I was just forced to do it ... that's just what I had to do. It wasn't hurting anybody. I mean it wasn't like I wasn't a nice kid still. I was still a nice kid. It wasn't like I was doing anything bad. As far as I'm concerned, I never did anything really bad so that wasn't a problem.⁵

Over time, Howard believed he was making up for these lies by doing "good works" and being, in general, "an honest and good person." Perhaps that made sense in his larger philosophical view of life as he created his new "fugitive moral compass." Or perhaps, Howard had simply found a convenient path to rationalization—lies he had to tell and misdeeds he had to perpetrate, because he felt he had no alternative. Expedience became necessity.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

It was that moral relativism that began to give me pause. Just how often had Howard used this “balancing test” as a way of avoiding the moral quandary between right and wrong? What had he simply forgiven himself for—or perhaps forgotten about entirely—because his lies had been usurped in his mind by his otherwise-perceived “good works?” And how much had his compromises derailed my own search for the truth, my efforts having been predicated on trusting his accounts as my protagonist?

Perhaps, I began to worry, I had been unrealistic to think I could separate the liar from his lies. They were too simply too closely aligned and even in the most seemingly honest person, as I thought Howard to be, the will to survive transcended a commitment to a story truthfully told. There were always shards of truth, of course. But they were random and disconnected, and not necessarily coherent enough to make sense of it all. Several years into my work, that now seemed a frightening prospect. I, as the documentarian, still needed to find a core truth so that I could construct a parable around it. Instead, confronted as I was with *The Fugitive’s Paradox* I was headed towards “lie as you must, leave your conscience at the door” as the moral of this decade-long work. That seemed a questionable outcome to me. There must be more. So, I took a different tack. I would broaden the concentric circles of Howard’s world. Someone else would tell the truth.

I began to unravel the various facets of Howard’s life and became acquainted with those who had been involved with him over the years. There were obviously many who never knew Howard’s true identity for the nearly 30 years he was Gary Tredway. But soon I came to discover that among those who did know Howard’s background, his moral and legal quandaries ensnared them too in ways they never could have foreseen. For example, when I asked Howard’s friend from college and Gary’s two-decade business partner, Ben Zaricor, about his complicity in Howard’s double life he said,

We never confided who Gary was or that he had something in his past to a single soul. In those 27/28 years not a soul knew, or

suspected Louise [Ben's wife] and I knew, who Gary really was. We never speculated about him with others ... we never discussed the subject of his fugitive status with anyone. It took discipline but was made easier with the passage of time. It became easy so long as we followed that simple protocol, "no discussions with anyone" and when we would speak to each other we were the only ones within a thousand feet of us. So long as we practiced that we did not have to be concerned and even thought about it as a game or sport.⁶

Howard's own family, however, was less "sporting" about his fugitive status and their secret involvement with it. But they, too, became wholly complicit in Howard's Faustian Bargain. Yes, they knew from early on where Howard was. Nevertheless, his father, Bud, went on *Dateline NBC* in 2000 with a teary lament, "When I see someone begging on the streets, I always wonder if Howard was in that same situation."⁷ As lies go, that's a whopper. Howard's family knew exactly where he was, vacationed with him regularly, and were doting grandparents to Howard's son Ari (although they were initially known to him as Aunt Rose and Uncle Bud). And even Ari, by age 12, knew his father's real name and his true origin story; related with the invective "Don't tell anybody!"

Howard's sister Marilyn later summed up her family's conflicted emotions when they were asked about Howard's whereabouts by friends and neighbors:

I just said I hadn't heard from him. And I always felt they were very sympathetic and felt bad for me and especially for my parents because they knew my parents were never the same. My parents never celebrated the Jewish holidays after [Howard fled]. They didn't want to be with family at time when everyone else was rejoicing.⁸

The family was awash in a sea of lies. They lied to their friends, to their extended family, and to the FBI. The one, certainly true, unfortunate outcome of his flight was that Howard was unable to attend his mother's

⁶ Email communication between the author and Ben Zaricor, February 17, 2014.

⁷ *Dateline NBC*, "The Fugitive," Reported by Josh Mankiewicz, September 5, 2000.

⁸ Interview with Marilyn Mechanic Goldfein, Episode 6, *My Fugitive* podcast. Pineapple Street Studios and Seavey Media, LLC, 2021.

funeral; there were federal agents hovering in the background waiting to see if the fugitive would arrive.

And then there was the matter of Howard/Gary's love life. As insular as Howard could be, he was never long without a love partner. He married and divorced and had at least one other long-term relationship. His wife, Ingrid was only 18 when she met Howard in 1977. She was an independent daredevil in overalls on a motorcycle. She knew of Howard's past but chose to ignore it—his soft-spoken Birkenstock-clad self not being anything like the “armed and dangerous” wanted posters that hung in the post offices. Ingrid saw in Howard the same person I did: a quiet middle class Jewish tree-hugger from Shaker Heights, Ohio who didn't fit, in any way, the profile of a criminal. But appearances can be deceiving. His fugitive life was shaping the contours of “his truth” whether that be the truth in fact.

He didn't tell his other long-term relationship, Janet, about who he really was until over three years into their relationship. Even so, when they met, she immediately intuited that something was amiss. After their first date Janet confided to a friend, “I met this guy and I think he's “the one.” And the only issue that I can tell is that I just he just doesn't feel like a Gary to me.”⁹ She was right. And yet, even after years of him not having revealed to her the truth about his identity, she too, simply proceeded along as if there was nothing unusual about being in love with a fugitive.

Only one girlfriend, Susan, a fellow student from Washington University with whom he became more deeply involved in the 1980's, had a different reaction:

I was living in Chicago and then he invited me to come out there to visit him. I went out and you know we spent a lot of time together and I started getting involved a little bit. . . . He wanted me to move out there [to Arizona]. I actually considered it for a while and then it suddenly dawned on me: What am I doing? This guy is being hunted by the FBI. And what if I'm found with him, if I get caught

⁹ Interview with Janelle Anderson from Pineapple Street Studios for *My Fugitive*. May 31, 2021.

with him? I could go to prison for being an accomplice. I didn't realize how deeply I'd gotten involved.¹⁰

Susan was the only one that I could find in Howard/Gary's orbit who ever considered the serious moral and legal ramifications of being closely involved with a fugitive from justice. Remember, it's not as if Howard's friends and relatives were, in any other discernable way, living at the outer edges of the law. Ben Zaricor and his wife Louise became the founders and owners of the highly successful Good Earth Tea Company. The Mechanic family was a traditional, middle-class Jewish family from the Cleveland suburbs. Gary's long-term love relationships were average everyday women who just happened to be involved with a felon. Only Susan had a hard time putting on the blinders that would allow her to accept an uncertain future living inside of *The Fugitive's Paradox*.

THE FUGITIVE'S PARADOX

I realized that sometime in my ten years of research on this project, that there was such a litany of lies, half-truths, and rationalizations from every quarter that it all became difficult to parse out what to believe. The question persisted: how to tell a story when, by the time you're constructing the narrative, everyone has a vested interest in not telling the truth? How do you coax the truth from the lies? Is there a key to unlocking *The Fugitive's Paradox*?

Once the snowball of Howard's lies got rolling downhill, it just got bigger, consuming everyone and everything in its path. The government lied, that's no surprise. But the lies and vagaries that I uncovered about Howard felt more, to me, like a personal betrayal. In my early conception of him, Gary/Howard was my father's righteous client, my protagonist. Later, he became my main character in whom I came to have doubts. What an odd irony for me, as the story's author, to navigate.

Whenever I tell this story, I find that audiences empathize with Howard's plight and commiserate in his fate. I do as well. But it's more than empathy that I require as the storyteller. I needed Howard to come clean, be honest, to perhaps tell the truth as a way of settling up for a

¹⁰ Interview with the author, July 10, 2019.

lifetime of lies. As a documentarian I look for “transformation” in my characters, especially my protagonist. But is all that I could surmise from Howard’s life that he had become a callous, or perhaps oblivious, liar? For his part, Howard believes he has nothing to atone for. His “good” on the scale had outweighed the “bad.” Perhaps he didn’t even recognize the truth anymore. Or maybe he’s just not that deep and failed to appreciate the complexity of his circumstance. So, he just didn’t think about it.

Therefore, as I studied Howard and how he came to reconcile the moral complexities of his fugitive existence, my expectations had to be tempered. The simple fact is that Howard Mechanic was a federal fugitive from justice. Everything I knew or assumed about him had to be filtered through a sieve of his fundamental criminality, if not in his own self-perception as least in the eyes of the law. Embedded in his daily existence was an unending nexus of falsehoods that protected his identity, activities, and whereabouts. Then again, what had I expected?

I suppose I expected a certain kind of truth. Maybe not the whole truth because, as a documentarian my charge is to locate the emotional truth—the parable that transcended his fugitive circumstance. As I poked and prodded, I looked for an essential truth: a kind of “fugitive code of ethics” that was less morally compromised. Perhaps I could locate that overriding existential truth if I simply worked hard enough and asked the right questions. I had to believe so because telling the truth is my job. And therein lies the crux of the paradox: I seek the truth from someone who had committed himself to a life of lies. The Fugitive’s Paradox can be an impenetrable one.

Howard resolved his inner conflicts by balancing his bad acts on one side of the scale and the good ones on the other. Having tipped that balance on the side of good, he believed his transgressions to be absolved. And he did, indeed, do many good things: he ran a food co-op, became a community activist on behalf of clean elections and sustainable environmental growth. And then in 1999, he even ran for the Scottsdale City Council. It was that peculiar decision that forced Howard out into the open after 30 years of living as Gary Tredway.

But then there was the dark side. Many of Howard's lies were adopted by necessity and he saw those as a kind of "collateral damage" on the "bad side of the scale." He accepted the fact of their existence but not his responsibility for them. Perhaps some of those lies had become so engrained over time that he could no longer distinguish between what was true and what was not, or even what was right and what was wrong. The truth wasn't as important as expedience. From his perspective, there was nothing more to be gained from delving deeper into it.

As a documentarian, I don't share that perspective. No matter Howard's benevolent deeds and good works, they were built—by choice or necessity—on a foundation of lies. I became committed to finding the truth in that web of deceit; all the while pulling and tugging to locate the underpinnings of Howard's existence and its emotional core. Ultimately, I only found myself even more tangled in the grey areas of his concocted story. I had become victim of The Fugitive's Paradox in a way that threatened the basic tenet of my profession—find the emotional truth, give it a point of view.

Maybe in ten years of investigating "Whatever happened to Howard Mechanic?" I never had even begun to know Howard Mechanic at all. Perhaps, I simply became his accomplice like everyone else. Because that's what he wanted.

EPILOGUE

The one thing we do know about Howard was that he had told the truth when he said he didn't throw that cherry bomb on the night of May 4, 1970. In that same *Dateline* interview in which Howard's father told the world he hadn't known where Howard was for all those years, another student protestor came forward and admitted that it was he, not Howard, who had thrown the cherry bomb at the police.¹¹

¹¹ *Dateline* NBC, September 5, 2000.