

Chapter 4

Assuming His existence, If you don't believe that God has a sense of humor, consider how He picks His help. Who did Jesus choose to be His disciples—educated, refined, already spiritual types well-suited to establish and grow a major world religion? Hardly. Witnesseth that, Simon Peter, the crude and hardy foul-mouthed fisherman, would be the first Pope of the Catholic Church. You'd think He would've waited just a couple more millenia to get some Harvard graduates and Madison Avenue marketing people. Nope; those people usually go across the street and work for His *competition* (much better salaries and *short-term* benefits package).

It seems, then, that *talent* is not an issue with God. Think about it, assuming He's the *Source* of everyone's talent to begin with. Talent? He doesn't need people with talent, He needs people with *heart*. In words ascribed to Him, *My power is made perfect in weakness.*¹

So when Elwood Blues says, we're on a mission from Gaad, and George Burns picks John Denver's² character of a hapless grocery clerk to spread His message, it just might be more *truth* than *fiction*—go ahead and laugh.³ Having Chuck and Lyle as the *two messengers of God*, then, would only be natural for Him;⁴ His *modus operandi*, in fact.

Neither Chuck nor Lyle had much going when they met in November, 1987. Chuck was playing piano and singing songs, like *That's Amore*, at the Napoli Restaurant in Astoria, Queens for meals, drinks, and tips.

Lyle was a member of that army in white, known to children everywhere as The Good Humor Man.

He and Chuck had both depleted their savings, and badly needed a break by the time they met Marty Freed. At ages 42 and 40, neither had yet gotten *anywhere* as

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:9. Don't worry, I won't be asking for donations.

² Ok, I won't pick on him. I *like* his music. But, then again, I also like *Rogers & Clarke*.

³ That way, people who see you reading this will think it's *actually* funny.

⁴ I know some of you are getting annoyed at my gender-specific identification of the Creator. What am I supposed to do, Ms. Smarty pants? Him/Her? S/He? Ok, alright, when I get down to editing this manuscript, I'll replace all the *Hims* with *Hers*. Are you happy now?

songwriters. Time was passing them by. Alas, where did the time go?

To Aaron and Judith Clarke, the time, indeed, had seemed to have vanished. It seemed only yesterday. The date was July 29, 1945, and Charles David was born into the Clarke family at 1025 Sylvan Drive in Forest Hills, Queens, NY.

Young Charles took a liking to his mother's beautiful voice; She was always singing songs to him not nursery rhymes so much, but *popular* songs. And she even encouraged him to *make up* little songs, silly little songs about *anything*⁵. He did. Nonstop. When one speaks of *Early Chuck Clarke*, the reference is to Chuck's *early*, unpublished work: *I Love My Thumb*, *Afraid to Poop in That Thing*, and *Why Does Uncle Walter Smell Funny?*

While Aaron and Judith had high hopes for Charles, he was always bored in school. Though he was kind of a loner, he was *quite* friendly to the girls. And, despite his being a bit shorter than the other boys, the girls seemed to like his handsome looks. Moreover, he had begun piano lessons, and found that he could get girls' attention by singing for them. While other boys tried, in vain, to get girls with tough talk about cars and sports, Chuck charmed them with silly love songs he'd make up:

*She looks so pretty in the fog,
Sweeter than holiday egg nog.
I wanna check out her braces,
When we connect our faces.
But her dad is meaner than a junk yard dog.*⁶

At the insistence of his mother, young Charles continued his piano lessons throughout his teens. Judith had hopes that Charles would develop a love for classical music, and someday be accepted into the renowned Juilliard School of Music.

As fate would have it, Chuck was more interested in music as a vehicle to get girls and be cool. However, he *did* appreciate good music; otherwise, he would have never aspired to be a songwriter. He would have done what most guys do—let his piano, and his talent, collect dust in the corner. But, while other kids were hanging out together, listening to Elvis and Chuck Berry, Charles preferred the solitude of his room, listening to his mom and dad's Big Band and Swing records. After all, the Clarks were not particularly social, and Chuck was sheltered from much of what went on outside. So, it

⁵ Let this be a lesson to you young mothers and fathers.

⁶ Yes, that is a Jim Croce phrase, but remember, Chuck said it first!

followed that Chuck's tastes would be influenced by his *parents*, rather than his peers. He also took a fancy to the vocal stylings of the era's popular singers, of course, those singers *expressly approved* for listening in the Clarke household⁷ Frank Sinatra, Johnny Mathis, and Tony Bennett. Showtunes were also on the menu.

Young Charles Clarke, while musically inclined, lacked the grade-point-average to gain acceptance into Juilliard School of Music. So, Judith suggested, Why don't you go to Queensborough Community College? It's a short drive up to Bayside, and you could commute, couldn't you, Charles?

Chuck would have rather hit the road as a traveling musician. He had this romantic vision of playing piano in nightclubs—the hot flashing lights streaming color beams in the smoky air, the libation, the cool jazz, the applause, *the women* . . . (savors the thought)

But, he was just a kid who had never even *played* to an audience—a *real* audience. He would have to break into the music business somehow.

Chuck could major in music at QCC, thinking that it would augment his already formidable talent, and turn him into another Paul Anka.⁸ At the insistence of his father, Chuck took some business courses as electives.

In the fall of 1963, Chuck entered Queensborough Community College, and found that the academic pablum dispensed did little to nothing to inspire any songwriting, as he had hoped.

He did meet a drummer named Klaus Marcinko, who at the time, had a combo called The Vic Radnor Trio. Its founder had since left the group, and the business, but had no objection to the others continuing under the name. Given their popularity, it was a blessing. But, with a lineup of guitar, bass, and drums, the group sorely needed a pianist. After class, on one November day, Klaus approached Chuck.

Hey, Chuck. My band needs a piano player. Would you be interested auditioning?

Uh, . . . I don't know, Klaus. . . I mean, I don't really know the kind of stuff you guys are doing. I'm into the classics, you know-- Sinatra and that kind of thing.

Aw, this stuff is *easy*, Chuck. Mostly three chords.

Uh, yeah, I know. I'm just not really into all that stuff.

⁷ Marty Freed would someday regale him for hours with stories about these guys.

⁸ Without the annoying *havin' my baby* songs.

Well, you think about it. We get thirty bucks a man, all our drinks, AND LOTS OF CHICKS.

Chuck froze. . . . We re practicing tonight.

What time? asked Chuck, being cool about his reversal.

During the next few months with the new Vic Radnor *Quartet*, Chuck had played gigs every weekend, to packed houses that danced to the band s covers of *Splish Splash*, *Good Golly Miss Molly*, and a tune that featured Chuck on vocals The Diamonds hit *Little Darlin*. He was having a great time. Everything Klaus told him on that cold November day had been true.

On the way to a gig in Woodside one evening, the band members, all crowded in Klaus s van with the instruments and equipment, were talking about their image.

Barry, the guitarist suggested, You know guys, it would really be cool if we had, like, *stage names*.

What s wrong with our names? objected Duke, the bass player.

Klaus chimed in. Nothin , but *you* already have a cool name, and Barry s right. The rest of us need one, too.

Ok. conceded Duke. Let s see. . . . Klaus, you re Cloud Nine. . . . Barry, you re The Barbarian. . . . And Chuck, you re. . . hm.

Duke was stumped.

Meanwhile, Chuck, who could care less about stage names, was trying to clear from his nose and throat the dust in Klaus s van. Chuck was used to his mom s nice clean house, and as such, had dust allergies. H-h-h-k-k! H-h-h-k-k! Chuck hacked.

I know! blurted Cloud Nine. *The Hawk!* Chuck is The Hawk.

Chuck wasn t aware that his stage/nickname had *nothing* to do with that brave bird of prey. He fancied himself a street warrior who, with his blood, had earned the name in gang wars. But, the closest thing Chuck ever came to a street battle was an argument with a bunch of nuns over a parking space.⁹

In the spring of 1965, Charles David Clarke was awarded a degree in Fine Arts, with a minor in Business. Now what? One option he had was an offer from his Uncle Lou to work in his music store.

⁹ Score: Nuns 1, Chuck 0.

Lou Marhofner, was from a musical family of nine. His sister Judith had once aspired to sing and dance on Broadway. Lou was a gifted saxophonist who had settled down after the war, and opened a little music shop. He never married – it was rumored he was gay. He was quite fond of his nephew Chuck, and was delighted to hire him.

Working at Lou's Music Emporium was a great experience for Chuck. He practically ran the place. Chuck's talents were put to work selling pianos, giving lessons, and doing the books.

For the next twelve years, life at the music store would be good – routine, but uneventful for Chuck. He did learn how to play several instruments in the process. Besides piano, he even gave lessons on guitar, percussion, upright bass, and harmonica. Then, one day in the summer of 1977, Lou died. He had been under the care of a cardiologist for several years. But, Lou had prepared for this contingency; he had made Chuck his sole heir. The store was his.

At age thirty-two, and now the owner of Lou's Music Emporium, (the name kept in honor of Uncle Lou) Chuck decided the time had come. He moved out of his parents home and got an apartment near the store. Other than that, little would change. Chuck had already managed all aspects of the store, as Lou had little time or energy for it in his latter years.

Chuck's 39th birthday, on July 29, 1984, began what was to be a pivotal year for him. As he looked back and took inventory of his life so far, he counted those things that were missing in his life. He hadn't married, though he had known many women. And, he had no children. But, most importantly to Chuck, he never had become the songwriter he once aspired to be. Uncle Lou had wanted to have *his* own orchestra, and Judith had wanted to sing and dance at Radio City. What happened? Perhaps, one could say they had the *good sense* to give up all such foolish notions, and settle down to worthwhile pursuits, such as tending to business and family. Yes, one could say that – but not Chuck.

As Lyle would tell him years later, Most guys would be *ashamed* to have nothing at your age. But, you just say the hell with it. You'd rather have nothing than settle for less.

It was time for The Hawk to fly. He would sell the business and devote his life to songwriting.

With the \$120,000 after-tax proceeds from the sale of Lou's Music Emporium now in Chuck's bank account, he could sleep late, write songs in the afternoon, and hit the clubs at night.

During one of his piano-bar gigs, he met a lovely lady, ten years his junior, named Carol Wolcott. She was charmed by Chuck's pseudo tough guy, and *ladies man* act. For the next three years, Carol would chase Chuck. She would've married him in a heartbeat, but he could not bring himself to commit, for he was about to meet his *partner*.

Kersey and Edna Rogers moved up to Ponder, Texas from Houston in the summer of 1947. Given the sheer size of the state of Texas, Ponder, being in its northern plains, was blessed with climatic seasons, more so than Houston. Kersey had grown up here, and he wanted to raise his family here, as well. They now had a brand new baby boy, Lyle Joseph, born on May 2nd.

Kersey had been a successful land procurement agent for Texas Oil whose lucrative career was interrupted by World War II. He was a Navy pilot who saw quite a bit of action, being based in the Philippines. Being shot at gave Kersey a whole new perspective. He realized what was *really* important to him not his big job at Texas Oil, but his wife Edna, and the family they would raise. So Kersey vowed that *his* son would get all the love and attention he deserved. He would play ball with him, take him hunting and fishing, and teach him all about cars.

After Kersey and Edna settled in, he bought the Sinclair gas station outside of Ponder. *This was the oil business* he had always wanted to be in. Getting his hands in the stuff, tinkering with engines doing what a *real man* does. No more traveling from town to town, trying to cheat ranchers out of their land, and wheelin'-n- dealin' with the local politicians. No sir, he was going to be home at six-o'clock every night, and Edna would have supper on the table.

Young Lyle grew up in a very conservative and traditional rural Texas household, so much so, that the blessing for the evening meal always ended in the words, . . . and God bless Texas. As everything in Texas, he grew up big; He even started school at age 5. Lyle was kind of an *All American Boy*, with plenty of wits about him, an athletic ability, and a modest amount musical talent. The latter was his mama's gift. While his daddy may have insisted Lyle not miss football practice, his mama charged he should not miss his piano lessons, either.

So, on Saturday mornings, Lyle led the Ponder High Panthers football team to victory, and Sunday mornings, his piano accompaniment led the local Methodists to Calvary. It was during those glorious high school years as Ponder's Quarterback, that his attention was split between the players on the field, and the fair Willa Johnson, on the sidelines leading the cheers.

On November 22, 1963, Lyle was among the Ponder High students on several buses heading for Dallas to see President Kennedy's motorcade. Lyle was a senior, and had just finished his last season as the Panthers Quarterback. From his seat, he could see the beautiful Willa. He was mesmerized by her every move, as though she were in a world of slow-motion. Her silky blonde hair, fair skin, and luscious lips inspired Lyle to write his first song, *Hot Fudge Love*, about being in a fantasy world of cherry-ripple kisses.

Despite his size and strikingly handsome looks, girls didn't give him all that much attention. It was as though he had some sort of impenetrable shield, or aura about him.

He was, indeed, only focused on *one* girl. This was *his* girl. For Lyle, there were no others.

Willa was a popular girl who had dated several of the boys from Ponder High. She had noticed Lyle's glances, and even confided to her friends she thought he was cute.

In Dallas, the Ponder students had just stepped off the buses, but were quickly reassembled when a chaperone told them the news: Students, get back on the bus, now! Something terrible has happened. The President has been shot.

Some of the students stood there in disbelief, and some wept openly. Willa was in tears and needed a shoulder. Lyle was close by, and offered it. Though he, himself was profoundly stunned by the news, he couldn't believe that Willa was in his arms. Talk about mixed feelings. Something prompted him at that moment in time to gently lift her face to his. She yielded, and in an instant, their lips met. . . . People, places, and events just vanished, as they shared a timeless moment.

They were in love, and even planned to marry in June 1965, right after Willa's graduation. But in the early months of 1965, Willa's grandmother was not well, so they decided to move it up to April, instead. It had been Grandmama Johnson's wish, since Willa was born, that she would someday see her walk down the aisle.

So Lyle, who had been working as an apprentice mechanic at his daddy's gas station, married Willa, and settled in a rented cozy cottage on the outskirts of Ponder.

Life was sweet for the newlyweds. Lyle would come home from the Sinclair station to find his lovely Willa working in the garden. After supper, they retired to the small living room; she would quilt, and he would play the piano. He would regale her nightly with her favorite songs, including one her daddy sang to her, *The Yellow Rose of Texas*.

Lyle started getting bored with playing the same songs every night. He picked up new sheet music every now and then, but it wasn't enough for him. Willa, on the other hand, would have been perfectly content hearing the same songs night after

night. So, Lyle began *sneaking* in little ditties, things he'd compose. He would even change the words of the beloved classics to make them funny. Lyle's little experiment did not sit too well with Willa, but she quietly endured it, thinking that this *phase* would pass.

Up to that point, Lyle was indifferent to the pop music explosion, spearheaded by the Beatles. Although, he *did* acknowledge the Beatles' talents, they just weren't *his* cup of tea. But, when he heard Simon and Garfunkel's *Sounds of Silence*, his interest was aroused. Man, these guys are great! Listen to those harmonies, and those lyrics! he marveled. Do you like 'em too? he asked Willa.

Willa just shrugs. She was old-fashioned, as traditional as they come—never wanting to try anything *new*, and slow to warm.

Even early on in their marriage, Willa began to wonder if she really *knew* Lyle, after all. Her mama reassured her, Pay no mind to his fleeting fancies, darling. You have to let a man have his way, you know. Your daddy loves golf—and I hate it! But, I let him have his fun; that's *important* to a man. Don't worry, Lyle's a good boy, sugar.

So, Lyle and Willa would live contentedly in that little cottage for years to come. The only real disappointment they suffered was their inability to have a child. Doctors told Lyle and Willa that *neither* was at fault, but together, conditions interacted which caused their sterility. Nevertheless, the Rogers accepted the news that it was likely they would never have children. It was difficult, but they remained supportive of each other, and undeniably in love.

The years had rolled on. Life was good, but uneventful for the Rogers. It was December 15, 1986 when Lyle got a call from his mother telling him Kersey had died.

At the wake, Lyle looked at the face of his father, noticing a look of contentment.

Daddy died a happy man. he thought to himself. He did what he wanted; he wasn't ever afraid to take a chance. He could've stayed with Texas oil and become a rich man, but that wasn't what he wanted. Lyle began to reflect on his own life. I wonder if that were me, in that coffin, would I be contented too? Have I done what I wanted to do?

These questions would continue to haunt Lyle well into the new year. His evening sessions on his portable Casio would seem to become more and more strange to Willa. Lyle would sit there with the keyboard on his lap, downing beer after beer, tapping out chord progressions over and over, and scribbling lyrics onto a notepad. She became increasingly uncomfortable with his behavior.

Chuck Clarke would later validate Lyle's feelings by ripping-off Thoreau.

Most men lead lives of *quiet desperation*. Chuck, the charlatan philosopher, said.

Oh, is *that* ever true. remarked a naive Lyle.

Lyle had become obsessed with Simon and Garfunkel. He dug out his old albums, and searched for books and articles on them. He concluded that if he wanted to be a songwriter and *sell* his songs like they did, then he and Willa *must* go to New York. Lyle knew it wasn't going to be easy to convince Willa, but she reluctantly agreed to go. He wasn't going to be stuck in Ponder for the rest of his life, no sir. Lyle would do what Kersey had done. He would say, the hell with it, and follow his dream.
