

# **The Streetlight Chronicles**

**A Gutter Story in Twelve Steps**

**by David Hanley**

# Stuart Cline “Foreword”

by **Stuart Cline, MA, LPCC, LPAT, LADAC, MAC**

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Every day, I meet people who wonder if change is still possible for them.

They’ve tried, failed, and felt the heavy whisper that says, this is just who you are.

I know that voice well; it’s one of the cruelest lies addiction tells.

That’s why this book matters so much.

David writes from the inside out.

He doesn’t hide the wreckage, and he doesn’t hide the hope.

He takes us step by step through the hard terrain of recovery, from self-loathing to maybe,

from maybe to the quiet bravery of showing up,

from secrets to amends,

from searching outside for answers to finally finding God alive and near.

Reading these pages is like walking with someone who has already faced the night and isn’t afraid of yours.

The language is raw and beautiful—streetlight honesty wrapped in poetry.

It’s a story you can lean on when your own words fail.

If you are early in recovery, this book will sit beside you like a steady friend when shame feels loud and hope feels small.

If you've been sober for years, it will deepen your gratitude and call you to keep growing.

And if you love someone caught in addiction, it will help you see their struggle with new compassion.

In a world full of quick fixes and shallow slogans, David offers something rare: truth that stays, grace that waits, and a path that anyone—no matter how many false starts—can still choose today.

I am honored to introduce this work.

May it remind you that no one is too far gone, no story too broken, and no heart too late to turn toward healing.

**Stuart Cline**

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This book is a work of memoir, drawn from lived experience. Some

names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy. Events and conversations are presented as accurately as memory allows. This work is not intended to provide medical, psychological, or professional advice. Readers seeking guidance related to addiction, recovery, or health should consult qualified professionals.

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## **First Edition**

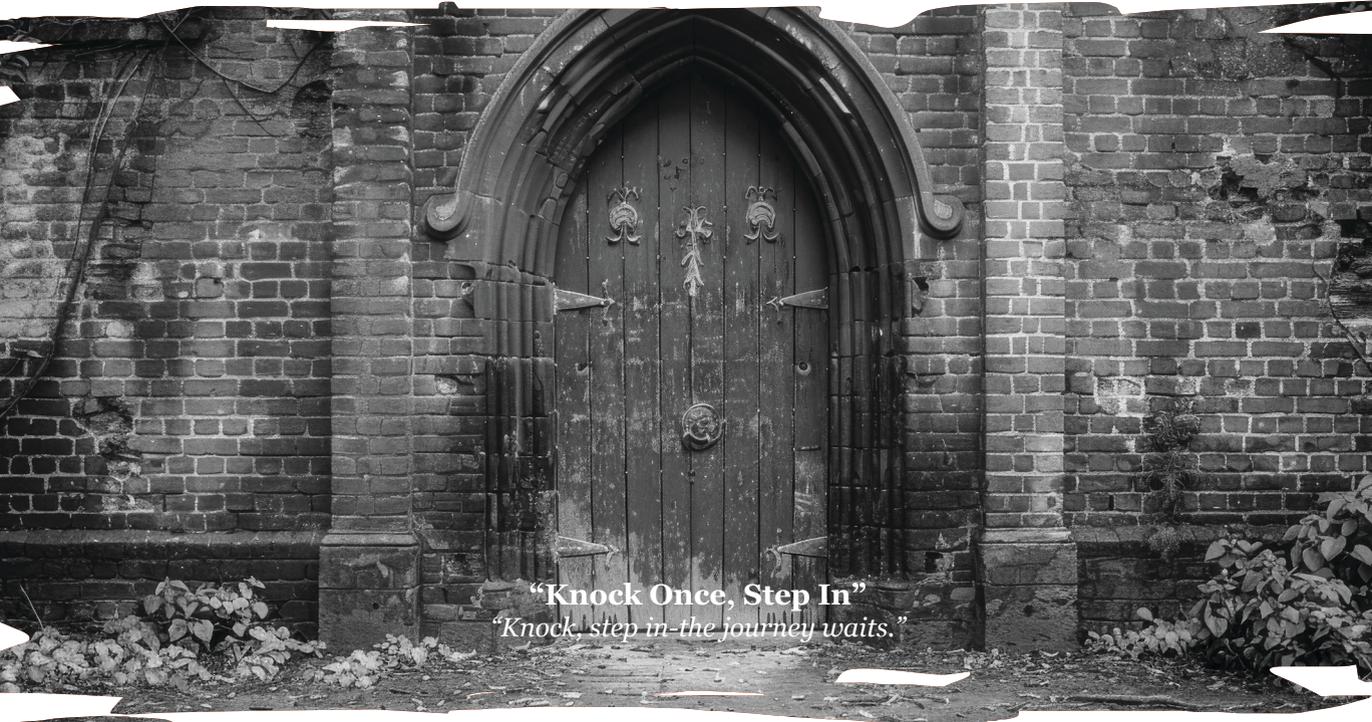
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 979-8245582986

# Contents

Stuart Cline “Foreword” .....	2
Copyright & Trademark Notice .....	4
Author’s Introduction.....	7
Chapter Map .....	9
Prelude: The Author .....	12
Chapter 1: <i>The Art of Falling</i> .....	18
Chapter 2: <i>The Barstool Prophet</i> .....	32
Chapter 3: <i>The Mirror That Didn’t Lie</i> .....	46
Chapter 4: <i>Ghost Inventory</i> .....	64
Chapter 5: <i>Confessional Booths &amp; Coffee Shops</i> .....	90
Chapter 6: <i>Offering the Ashes</i> .....	103
Chapter 7 – <i>Whispered Grace for a Lesser Me</i> .....	121
Interlude .....	139
Chapter 8: <i>The List I Swore I’d Never Write</i> .....	144
Chapter 9: <i>Making Peace with Ghosts</i> .....	161
Chapter 10: <i>Daily Wreckage Report</i> .....	177
Chapter 11: <i>Streetlight Prayers</i> .....	195
Chapter 12: <i>Carriers of the Flame</i> .....	210
The Streetlight Sober Scroll .....	223
Author’s Closing Message.....	241

# Author's Introduction



**“Knock Once, Step In”**  
*“Knock, step in—the journey waits.”*

*“This isn’t your typical recovery memoir.”*

*Streetlight Chronicles* was written in real time, at the beginning of my recovery, during one of the most vulnerable periods of my life.

It comes from the places most people don’t dare to go — the isolated rooms, the dark corners, the nights so long and quiet you start bargaining with the ceiling. The nights when you’re not sure if waking up is a blessing or a threat.

The places where an addict’s mind turns dangerous, and the truth finally steps out of the shadows.

This isn’t a gospel, and I’m not offering redemption wrapped in poetry. This is a gutter story, the record of a man breaking, bending, and learning to rise again beneath the glow of streetlights that never look away.

This book moves as a modern interpretation, a street-level rendering of the Twelve Steps through personal journal writings that reflect how the Steps are lived and understood over time. Each chapter follows a step as it unfolds in real life—through resistance and return, relapse and reckoning, silence and surrender. The Steps take shape here through moments: conversations that linger, nights that don't end cleanly, and mornings when simply standing up counts as progress.

Each chapter follows a step as it's experienced, not as it's polished. Not the perfect, ready-for-approval version. The real one — shaking, stubborn, exhausted, and still trying. The kind of step you take when your voice is cracked, your hands won't stop trembling, and your excuses finally lose their charm.

These stories weren't born in chapels or classrooms. They were scraped together in silence and aftermath — in the long pause before you pick up or put it down. They came from nights when the world felt two sizes too big, mornings when breathing hurt, and moments when I wasn't sure if getting up counted as courage or punishment.

I don't promise answers here. I don't promise transformation. But I do promise truth, unpolished, uncomfortable, and sometimes ugly. And I promise you won't walk through that truth alone.

If you've ever felt too far gone, too tired to try again, or too ashamed to say the words out loud... this story is for you.

This is the street.

This is the wreckage.

This is the rise.

**Welcome to the Chronicle.**

*David E Hanley*

# Chapter Map



## **Chapter 1 — The Art of Falling (*Step One*)**

The poetic collapse. Bottoming out in silence. The first honest breath after the last bad decision. A floor, a ceiling, and the first truth: I can't do this alone.

## **Chapter 2 — The Barstool Prophet (*Step Two*)**

When belief crawls in through the back door of someone else's survival story, the Prophet appears, half-mad, half-holy,

offering “maybe” as a bridge to sanity.

### **Chapter 3 — The Mirror That Didn’t Lie (*Step Three*)**

The long stare inward. Handing over control while the ego kicks and screams, a surrender made in motion, under endless highway sky.

### **Chapter 4 — Ghost Inventory (*Step Four*)**

Old ghosts. Whispered sins. A flashlight into the haunted closet of who we were. The ledger of fear, resentment, guilt, and the things we’re finally ready to name.

### **Chapter 5 — Confessional Booths & Coffee Shops (*Step Five*)**

Truth spoken aloud, over burnt coffee or bare-knuckled tears. The power of not being alone in it, and the relief of hearing, “Me too.”

### **Chapter 6 — Offering the Ashes (*Step Six*)**

Standing in the wreckage, hands open. A quiet act of willingness to let the worst parts burn away, even when you don’t know who you’ll be without them.

### **Chapter 7 — Whispered Grace for a Lesser Me (*Step Seven*)**

A cracked-heart plea. Humility not as shame, but as freedom. Meeting Grace in the alleyway, asking not to be made perfect, just better.

## **Chapter 8 — The List I Swore I'd Never Write (*Step Eight*)**

Cataloging the collateral damage: names, wounds, apologies rehearsed and feared. Remembering the dead, honoring the living, and facing the ghosts by first names.

## **Chapter 9 — Making Peace with Ghosts (*Step Nine*)**

Showing up. Facing what we left behind. Not for redemption, just for grace. Knocking on doors, standing in driveways, and finding that amends are a living thing.

## **Chapter 10 — The Last Door You Open Is Your Own (*Step Ten*)**

The mundane miracle of daily self-inventory. Micro-truths, tiny lies, and keeping ego from wearing a halo. The Prophet returns with a warning and a blessing.

## **Chapter 11 — Streetlight Prayers (*Step Eleven*)**

Prayer without polish. Mumbled hope under flickering lights, unedited faith. Meditation for the fidgety and wounded. Learning presence, even when prayer isn't answered.

## **Chapter 12 — Carriers of Flame (*Step Twelve*)**

From the stillness of the foothills to the open road ahead. *Not Normal, Never Was*. The Ghost and the Gas Station. What I Carry Now. A final street prayer of gratitude, love, and service, passing the flame to the next one still in the dark.

# Prelude: The Author

*“The Gutter Story Begins”*



## The Gospel In The Gutter

*“Truth doesn’t rise from pulpits—it leaks from the gutter.”*

Before there was belief, there was bruising. Not the kind that turns purple on skin, but the invisible kind—layered over years of self-inflicted wounds. I didn’t arrive at that barstool clean. I was a battered manuscript, pages torn out by rage, soaked in liquor, stained by regret. My story was written in relapse and rewritten in silence. And before any prophet pulled up a stool beside me, I was the author of my own undoing.

Every line I wrote came from a trembling hand. Every chapter ended with a bottle, a brawl, or a blackout. I didn’t write in sentences; I wrote in screams. Every *“I’m fine”* was a plot twist I barely survived.

Every drink, every pill, every lie whispered into a cracked mirror added footnotes to a story I was too ashamed to read aloud.

I wrote myself into corners.

There were years I survived on poison and pride, insisting I was immortal even as I faded. I turned chaos into a kind of altar and found meaning in destruction. I called it freedom, but it was just a cage I decorated with rebellion. I chased liberation across state lines and zip codes, thinking that if I moved again, I could leave myself behind. But the ghost in the closet followed me every time.

I chose silence over truth, afraid of standing out in my youth. Even in crowded rooms, I felt the heaviness of quiet gloom. I was misunderstood and pushed aside. In my young eyes, they saw a threat—not the person I truly was. I longed for love but wore fear like a second skin, wishing the world would come closer, yet pushing it away.

I turned to lies and liquid peace, chasing a calm that wouldn't last. Craving love, yet wrapped in fear, wishing the world would get close. The pain—pain so deep in my veins, a silent scream, a ghost with chains. It curled around my breath and bones, a shadowed weight I carried alone.

The boy who wept behind closed doors and begged the sky for something more now walks in truth, head held high, no longer asking why it wasn't him. That boy was me, and now I reclaim the voice once drowned in silent shame. I do not chase the world's applause; I breathe in peace and live because I've learned the cost of hiding pain and found my voice in falling rain.

Self-pity became a meal I ate in the dark. My mind lied to me in my own voice. *"This time will be different."* *"You've got it under control."* Relapse was just denial rehearsing for the real fall.

The relapses came like clockwork. So did the ER visits. ICU monitors beeped like broken lullabies. I'd sign out against medical

advice, saying I had places to be, as if my next mistake were an appointment I couldn't miss.

I romanticized ruin.

You see, I believed pain made me interesting. I thought madness was the currency of art. But all it earned me was silence—long, suffocating silences in the middle of crowded rooms. Loneliness masked as bravado. I wore my suffering like a tattoo; I dared the world to read it.

Counselor after counselor listened to my story and watched me nod along as if I believed in recovery. I knew what to say, knew how to cry at the right moments. I graduated from in-house rehab programs like they were college degrees I never used. I'd walk out clean, refreshed, full of promises—then trip over the same lie I planted.

*“Just one more.”*

The precious time, though it slipped away, was not a loss but a teacher's guide. Each mistake shaped the path I walk—a journey lived, not abandoned.

I was the unreliable narrator in every relationship. I scripted apologies before I even made the mistake. I said I'd quit after this bottle, after this binge, after this bender. I edited the truth to fit the fiction I needed to survive.

I burned the ending before it could be written.

I, the Author—that bastard alter ego I became—never stopped writing. I spat out excuses like ritual. Turned trauma into punchlines. I was clever. Charismatic. Deadly. I knew how to light up a room, only to go home and drown in darkness. I made pain poetic. I made suffering seductive. I never told the truth.

I never said, *“I'm scared.” “I'm sick.” “I don't want to die, but I don't know how to live.”* I'm a secret man, terrified of life itself. And

maybe, just maybe, if I don't wake up tomorrow, it'll finally be quiet.

And still, I kept writing.

Until one day, the pen slipped. The pages remained blank. The words stopped coming—not from a lack of creativity, but from pure exhaustion. I was tired of hearing my own voice.

Tired of performing pain as if it were the only song I knew. Tired of falling back to the bottom of the hill with each climb. Tired of the script. Tired of myself.

This isn't a redemption arc. It's a record scratch—a line in the dust that says: here's what broke me, and maybe what didn't.

So, I walked, then stumbled into a dive bar with ghosts in the walls and smoke thick as memory. And there he was—the Barstool Prophet. Not a savior, not a priest—just another man with burn marks and a story.

He didn't ask me to rewrite anything. He just pointed at the page and said,

“Maybe don't end it here.”

For the first time, I—the Author—put down the pen and started to listen.

So, if they ask me who I am today, I say:

I am the storm and the scar—the boy who crawled through the dark, the man trying to make sense of the morning.

And when they read this story's end, I hope they just see someone who finally stopped running long enough to tell the truth.

*David E Hanley*



**Surrender**

*"The street that swallowed me."*

# Chapter 1: *The Art of Falling*

*“Surrender ain’t weakness, it’s the moment the storm inside you finally shuts the hell up, and you can hear your soul whisper, ‘Now... we begin.’”*

## **Prologue: The Streets Don’t End**

I was still drinking when I felt the cracks begin—spiderwebs spreading across the windshield while I kept running red lights in my mind, as if I had somewhere better to be. But the streets never stopped. I just kept running down them, drunk and panicked, trying to outrun the echo of my own name, spoken with disappointment.

I wasn’t chasing anything anymore. I was running from the memory of the kid I used to be—the silence that took over when everyone else left.

I believed I was in control. I created spreadsheets tracking my descent. I camouflaged my breakdown with charm and wit. I told people, ***“I’m just tired.”*** I reassured myself, ***“It’s not that bad.”*** I pleaded with the bottle, ***“One more, then I’ll stop.”***

But the truth is, I was already gone. Inside, I was dead. I didn’t care about anything or anyone, except my best friend: alcohol—clutching that bottle like it owed me love.

I wasn’t dead yet, but I felt hollow. Empty. Done running. Scared of the dark, I drank to escape. Scared of the light that might reveal what I had become.

***And the worst part? I thought I was flying—but I was just free-falling.***

Then came the whispers. The memories I couldn't drown. The ghosts who knew my middle name. The trembling hands that couldn't open the next bottle fast enough.

I ran until the pavement blurred, until the liquor warmed me up and the nights grew cold, until even my shadow didn't want to walk beside me.

And then, I fell. Not gracefully. Not spiritually. Not into the arms of some saving grace. I hit the ground like a truth I couldn't drink away—too tired to get up, too honest to keep lying.

And amidst that chaos—face down, breath shallow, heart pounding like a warning bell—I finally asked the only question that mattered:

***“What now?”*** This is where the story starts.

## **Opening Scene: The Floor**

It is now 5:37 A.M. It began with a week-long binge and a face pressed against linoleum. Not a white light, not divine revelation—just cheap, cracked tile shaped like a lightning bolt. My cheek pressed against it, as if I were trying to listen to something buried beneath. Maybe I was.

My heart was humming. My pulse thudded in my ears. I wasn't dying—not exactly. But I wasn't really living either.

No one is shouting. No police pounding on the door. Just the silence that comes when a man stops fighting a war he knows he's already lost. And somehow, that felt even worse.

I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid there was nothing left of me worth saving.

Outside, a train wailed past as if it knew something I didn't. I

had arrived—wherever the bottom was supposed to be. And the wildest part?

It was so quiet.

My breath fogged up against the tile. Linoleum—that’s what it was. Not even real wood, just the kind of floor that remembers every cigarette burn, every spilled bottle, every shoe scuff from pacing nights.

I blinked slowly, half expecting blood in my vision. But there wasn’t—just dirt and a dull pattern. My ribs ached as if ghosts had tackled me.

I didn’t reach for my notebook. I didn’t even have one yet. That would come later—after the meetings, after the wreckage was laid out and counted like poker chips in a losing hand. No, I reached for the bottle I thought I’d left half full. Found it. Gave it a tilt; it was empty.

That felt biblical somehow, as if the universe itself had exhaled and said, “**Enough.**”

The quiet pressed in, not peaceful but static in my ears—the kind that says nobody’s coming. Not this time.

I remember thinking I should get up. I even moved my hand as if I meant it. But I didn’t get up. I just let the floor hold me. Somewhere outside, a streetlight hummed—that thin electric buzz I could feel through the wall—like the world was still awake and watching, even if no one else was.

I let the shame wash over me like a second skin.

The scent of sweat, old booze, and something sour—something else—hung in the air. It wasn’t death. But it wasn’t far off.

The truth? I didn’t want to die. But I also didn’t want to keep living like this. There’s a difference, and that difference is where recovery starts. Not in church. Not in rehab. Not even in a meeting.

It starts on the floor. Face down. Breathe shallowly, with no more stories to tell myself.

That's where I first noticed a flicker of honesty. Not the full truth. Just enough to whisper, "***I can't do this anymore.***"

And for the first time, I didn't mean tomorrow. I meant right now.

## **The Morning After**

It's now 6:00 A.M. I feel like shit. I'm shaking. I'm so weak I can't even lift my head to see if the bottle's still within reach. It was too quiet to be peace—the kind of silence that doesn't calm; it accuses.

The sun hadn't even shown up yet. Just a faint blue haze slipping through the curtains, as if it were embarrassed to see me.

The first sound was the hum of the fridge, low and steady, as if it knew everything I did last night and didn't approve but wasn't surprised. Then the pipes groaned like old men in pain, with metal knees and tired lungs, complaining under the weight of another morning.

***"They sounded like me".***

Somewhere within the walls, mice whispered, scampering like little prophets in the plaster, reminding me that I'd sunk low enough to share space with scavengers. And they still looked more alive than I did.

Then the crickets, faint and rhythmic, like a clock I'd ignored for too long. Not music. Not a threat. Just time, reminding me it was still passing, even if I wasn't.

No sirens. No yelling. No breaking glass. Just stillness with teeth. And beneath it all, my breathing. Heavy. Reluctant. Each inhale a

question, each exhale a confession.

Then came the sound I wasn't expecting:

***“My voice.”***

Raspy. Cracked. Too dry to lie. A single word that didn't seem like much but held everything.

***“Okay.”***

Not said to God. Not spoken to anyone. Only to the ceiling. The cracks. The mice. Myself. It wasn't a prayer. Not yet. It was a truce—a white flag in a room with no war, just aftermath.

And in that moment, with my head pounding and my soul curled up in the corner, I realized something: I wasn't done drinking. I was just done pretending I had it under control.

## **The Fight Against Surrender**

***“I fought it like fucking hell.”***

I wasn't fighting to live. I was fighting not to lose my best friend—the bottle.

No one discusses that part. They jump right to the white light and redemption arcs, skipping the slow suicide of pride—the silent war you're losing but won't admit you're in.

Surrender doesn't come in gracefully. It arrives ugly, kicking the door in with your face. It's like claw marks in drywall and whispering to a God you laughed at two hours ago—begging Him not to let you die in your own filth.

Because pretending I was in control felt safer than admitting I was bleeding out. But control was just fear wearing my face.



**I am Not Okay**

*Alone under the streetlight, I finally said it."*

I didn't want to quit drinking. I just wanted to fake trying. So, I made promises with expiration dates. Just weekends. Just beer. Maybe wine if I was feeling fancy and down. Like switching to IPAs somehow made me a fucking monk.

Moderation became my imaginary girlfriend; she'd take me back if I cleaned up, shaved, and said the right lies. I wasn't recovering—I was rebranding.

I romanced the illusion of control. Wined it, dined it, let it tie me up and call me ***“functional.”***

Because the truth? Saying ***“I'm not okay”*** would've meant dropping the act. And I'd worn the mask so long I forgot it wasn't skin.

You don't surrender until every exit sign you trust points back to the same locked door, until every lie dies in your mouth like ash. Until not surrendering becomes the very thing that's killing you.

There was no final scene. No dramatic crash. No call to Mom. No fist in the sky. I didn't throw a bottle. I didn't collapse into tears.

***“I just... stopped.”***

Not life. Just the game. The grift. The hustle. The fantasy that I could outthink this disease with charm and logistics—and one more fresh start in a different zip code.

The moment itself was almost nothing. Just a breath that felt different. Just a thought with no response.

***“I can't do this anymore.”***

No screams. No tears. Just the quiet voice that had waited years for a crack in the noise. And for the first time, I listened.

## The Coffee Stain Map

There was a coffee stain on the motel dresser. Honest to God, it looked like South America to me, with jagged coastlines and inland territories drawn in brown rings of old caffeine and regret. I studied it like a cartographer, running my finger along its borders as if I was tracing an escape route to anywhere but here.

It was the first time I had truly focused on something real in weeks. That stain became my atlas, not of where I was headed, but of what I had to leave behind. In its tributaries, I saw every barstool I had ever claimed as territory, every bridge I had burned crossing toward nothing. Every lie I had told to get through another night.

And somewhere across those coffee-dark continents, I almost heard my father's voice—or something that sounded like it.

***“You don't need a ticket to leave. You just need to stop staying.”***

## The Myth of Rock Bottom

They sell it to us like it's a moment, a big, cinematic breakdown. But rock bottom isn't a scene. It's a decision. It's when you stop digging, not because you can't go lower, but because you realize the shovels are in your hands.

Some people never reach it. Some die along the way. Others hide it in silk sheets, with \$800 bottles of whiskey on the nightstand.

To me, it was a cracked floor. No audience. No narrator. No rescue. Just me. My breath. And a whisper that didn't seek attention, only action. Then came that voice I had been running from all those years. A thought that didn't knock. It just appeared, like graffiti scrawled on my brain.

***“I need help”.***

That was the first honest sentence I’d written in years. That was the real surrender. Not quitting. The admission that I couldn’t fix this on my own—that I was no longer the guy with the plan.

It arrived without shame. Without self-loathing. Just clarity, like hearing a song you used to love and finally understanding the lyrics.

## **The Cost of Denial**

An empty bottle rests in my hand. I’d cleaned the mirror thoroughly, scrubbing away every last white speck, because dignity doesn’t matter when the withdrawals are louder than your conscience.

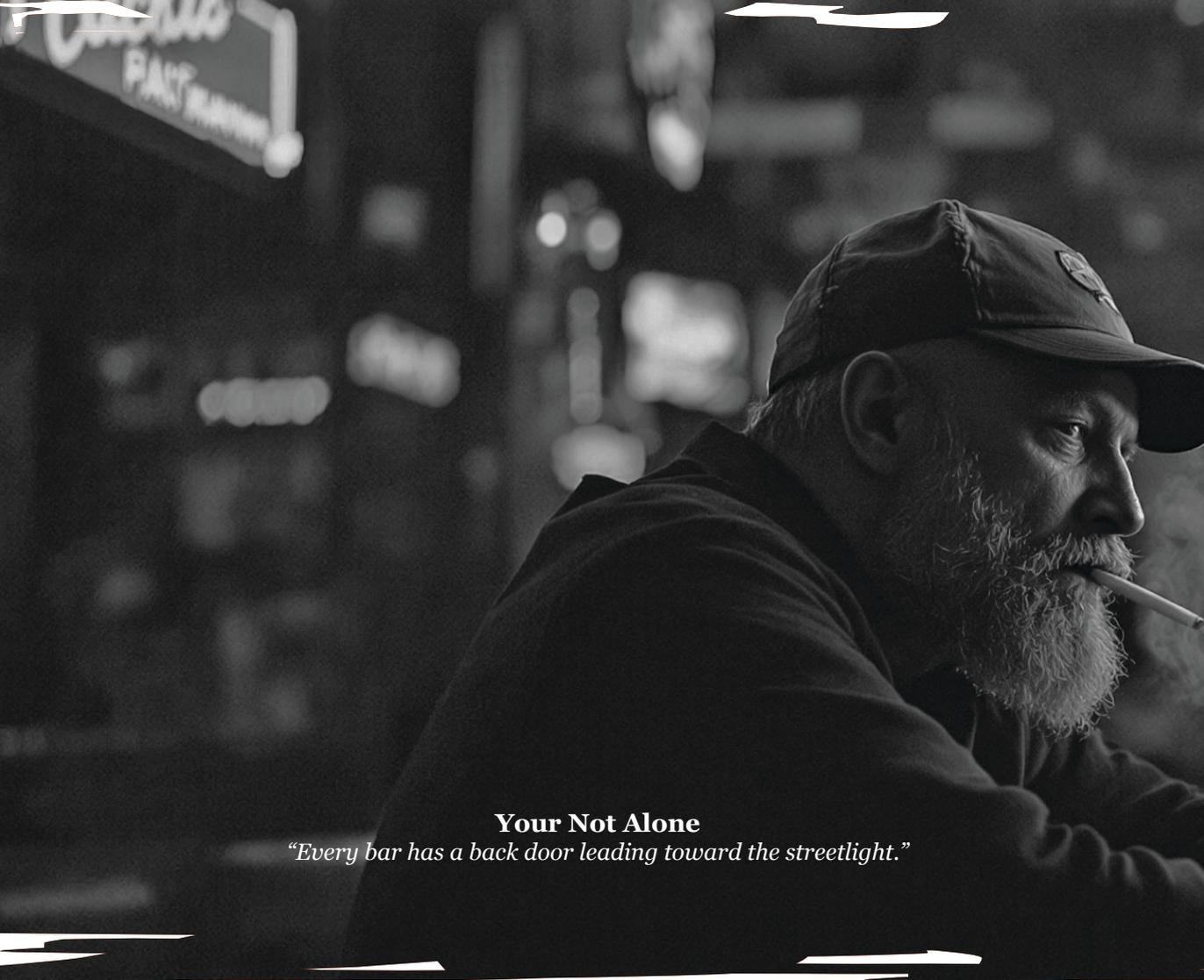
My mask was strapped so tightly that I couldn’t see the truth and could barely breathe in reality. Every time I muttered ***‘I’ve got this,’*** I was giving something up—another piece of my soul, another honest moment, another chance to be seen.

It was never just one thing; it was all the little funerals I held for myself while pretending I was still alive.

Denial doesn’t tap you on the shoulder. It robs you blind and expects a thank you when it’s done. It doesn’t charge interest—it takes your soul upfront and laughs while you try to make change with regret.

I didn’t just lose things. I gave them away—time I can’t get back. ***“Trust me,”*** I said, unable to meet your gaze. Moments where I was physically there, but spiritually a ghost.

Denial isn’t passive. It’s a hustle—something you sign up for every damn day, shaking hands with a devil who always comes to collect. The cost was everything that once made me human.



### **Your Not Alone**

*“Every bar has a back door leading toward the streetlight.”*

### **Light Through the Curtain**

Morning slipped in through the torn motel curtain, casting stripes on the wall like prison bars or stained glass. I stayed still. I didn't need to move. Nothing around me had changed. But I had.

I didn't say a vow. I didn't say a prayer. I just exhaled. And with that breath, a new sentence began. Maybe even a new story. One word—whispered not to God, not to anyone. Just to myself.

***“Okay.”***

And for the first time in a long while, I truly meant it. Not like a resolution. Not like a promise I would break by breakfast. I meant it like a drowning man needs air—with my whole chest. With my last



thread of strength. With no guarantee. Just hope.

At that moment, the light from the motel sign outside sliced through the curtain, casting a strip of amber on the wall. I thought about closing it, but I left it open to see if I could handle being seen.

There was no applause. No peace dove. Just truth. And after so long lying to myself, that truth felt untouchable. It was the crack in my hard head, the whisper before the roar.

And I knew that if I could hold onto this moment—just this moment—it might be enough to keep me from lying again.

## **When the Shovel Broke**

Surrender didn't fix me. It didn't lift me out of the pit, but it kept me from digging deeper. It gave me stillness—the kind that doesn't require a plan, only being present.

And from that stillness, I started to hear something deeper than shame. Not answers. Not solutions. Just one quiet truth:

***“You don't have to do this alone anymore.”***

I didn't know what the fuck was coming next. But I knew I wasn't going back. I sat up, lit a cigarette, and whispered it again.

***“Okay.”***

Not the end. Just the beginning of finally letting go of who I thought I had to be.

## **Invitation to the Reader**

If you're on the floor, unsure if you can do this, you're not alone. This isn't the end; it's the beginning. Not a clean start, not a noble one, but a real one.

It begins with breath. With honesty. With surrender whispered into silence. With that first 'Okay,' that doesn't promise anything except presence.

And if you're wondering whether it's worth it, whether there's something on the other side of that surrender, let this be your sign:

There is. There's life. There's healing. There's you, still here, still breathing, still capable of rising.

And no matter how far you've fallen, there's a hand reaching back. Maybe it's mine. Maybe it's yours. But you're not alone. Not anymore.

### ***Gravity Wins (Poem)***

I wore the weight like a badge of pride,  
grinned through storms I couldn't ride.

White-knuckle saint, barstool priest,  
feasting on pain like a Sunday feast.

I didn't break; I just sank slowly,  
a rusted ship with nowhere to go.

Erosion dressed in cologne and gin,  
smiling wide while caving in.

I whispered lies in echoing halls,  
scratched confessions on bathroom walls.

Thought I was running from the heat,  
but it was silent beneath my feet.

The bottom wasn't fire, but velvet darkness,  
a hush that held me and left a mark.

Not wrath, but rest, where stories cease,  
not punishment, a fractured peace.

Chains on my soul, rusted and tight,  
screaming alone in the echo of night.

***“I am alone! Please help me! I surrender!”***

The cry of a man, broken and tender.

So, I gave up like a man who grew tired,  
not broken, just uninspired.

And gravity, that patient friend,  
became the hand that helped me bend.

*“Ready to name the first crack in your armor? See **Streetlight Sober Scroll, Chapter One (p.222–223)** for a way to map your own fall and first surrender.”*

## Chapter 2: *The Barstool Prophet*



### **The Barstool Prophet**

*“Out of the shadows came a voice of scars, sketching a map out.”*

*“Belief didn’t come in a beam of light. It stumbled in, drunk and bleeding, whispering, ‘If they made it out, maybe you can too.’”*

### **Prologue: When the Floor Didn’t Answer**

The morning after I surrendered, I didn’t feel saved. I just felt

gutted—hollowed out, as if something had crawled inside me and devoured everything that used to pass for a soul.

Not the kind of emptiness that screams for another drink. The kind that happens when every lie you've lived by bleeds out on cheap linoleum, and you're left staring at the stain.

The floor didn't whisper wisdom. It didn't give me purpose wrapped in spiritual bullshit. It simply held me as I bled out what was left of who I used to be. And somehow, that honesty felt more sacred than anything I'd touched in years.

I sat there for hours, too sober to lie, too broken and hungover to hope. Just me and the echo of my own voice saying "**Okay**" like it was a sentence I didn't fully understand.

But one thought kept circling, quiet and relentless:

I expected surrender to come with instructions. It didn't. It came with silence. With stillness. With a thousand questions clawing at my ribs and not a single fucking answer in sight.

And in that silence, the road ahead didn't reveal itself. No signs. No map. Just the unnerving realization that standing still had finally become more terrifying than moving forward.

If I don't want to die like this... then what now?

I didn't trust God. I didn't trust people. Hell, I didn't even trust the air I was breathing. But I cracked just enough to let in a sliver of possibility. Not a miracle. Just maybe.

That was the seed. The crack where something I wasn't ready for slipped in — a voice. Not divine. Just human. Rough as gravel, real as the scars on my knuckles.

A man at the end of a bar with eyes that looked like they'd seen the inside of hell and came back with souvenirs.

He didn't offer salvation; he offered a seat. And sometimes, that's the story that resonates.

## **Opening Scene: A Conversation in a Dive**

There was this bar. Not the worst I'd ever been in, which is saying something. Smoke clung to the walls like regret, curling around the amber light over the bar. The jukebox wheezed out a song nobody was really listening to.

It was the kind of place that made you question your life choices just by walking through the door.

The stool was sticky with years of spilled bourbon and broken promises. The kind that wobbles just enough to remind you that nothing in your life is steady anymore. Every surface felt contaminated, as if the whole place was infected with other people's failures.

Neon buzzed like it had a migraine, casting sickly light that made everyone look like corpses.

And that's where I first met him.

He wasn't a preacher. Hell, he looked like he'd been kicked out of every church from here to Hell. Just a man who'd crawled through fire and come out charred, carrying burns like badges and stories like weapons. When he looked at me, I felt as if I were x-rayed. Exposed.

He didn't say I looked tired. He said I looked like I was drowning in a room full of air. Not the kind of tired that sleep can fix. The kind that devours you from the inside until there's nothing left but the noise.

Then he spoke, not like a preacher, but like a man who has seen too much and survived just enough. His mouth opened as if he was about to say something casual, but what came out silenced the noise in my head: ***"You have to listen to me."*** He lit a cigarette, exhaled as if he'd been holding that breath for years, and said:

***You don't need to believe in God tonight. Just believe you don't have to keep dying like this.***

His voice lacked judgment, only familiarity. As if he knew exactly where I'd been because he had stood in the same dark hallway, trying to find the doorknob.

## **The Cult of Maybes**

Recovery doesn't begin with faith. It starts with desperation disguised as maybe. Maybe I won't die today. Maybe I won't wake up choking on my own vomit again. Maybe this stranger with dead eyes knows something I don't about staying alive.

You join the cult of maybes because hope is a four-letter word you can't afford to believe in. Certainty was the needle that poisoned everything: ***"I've got this," "I'm fine," "Just one more won't kill me."*** But it was killing me. Slow and steady, like carbon monoxide in a closed garage.

***"Maybe it's desperation's prayer."*** It's the small crack in the coffin lid that lets in just enough air to prevent suffocation.

I lived with maybe for years, each one a tiny rebellion against the death wish that whispered in my ear. Maybe I won't score today. Maybe I'll call that number before I overdose. Maybe I'll stop running before my legs give out. And the maybes started stacking, one on top of the next, like sandbags against a flood. Not hope. Just the refusal to drown.

## **Why You Trusted Him**

He didn't promise salvation. He didn't sell recovery wrapped in bullshit clichés. He didn't shine because the light had been beaten out

of him years ago.

He told me about the night he found himself screaming at a gas station pump, blood on his knuckles from hitting the concrete. About the time he pawned his wedding ring for pills that no longer touched the pain. About how he used to fake recovery meetings, nodding along while planning his next score.

He told me about waking up in the hospital restraints, about the friend who didn't make it past detox, and about the needle he found in his daughter's backpack.

He was me, but with more scars and fewer teeth. He didn't flinch when I spoke because he'd heard worse. He didn't blink at my wreckage because his pile was larger. He listened as if death were normal. Like surviving was the miracle.

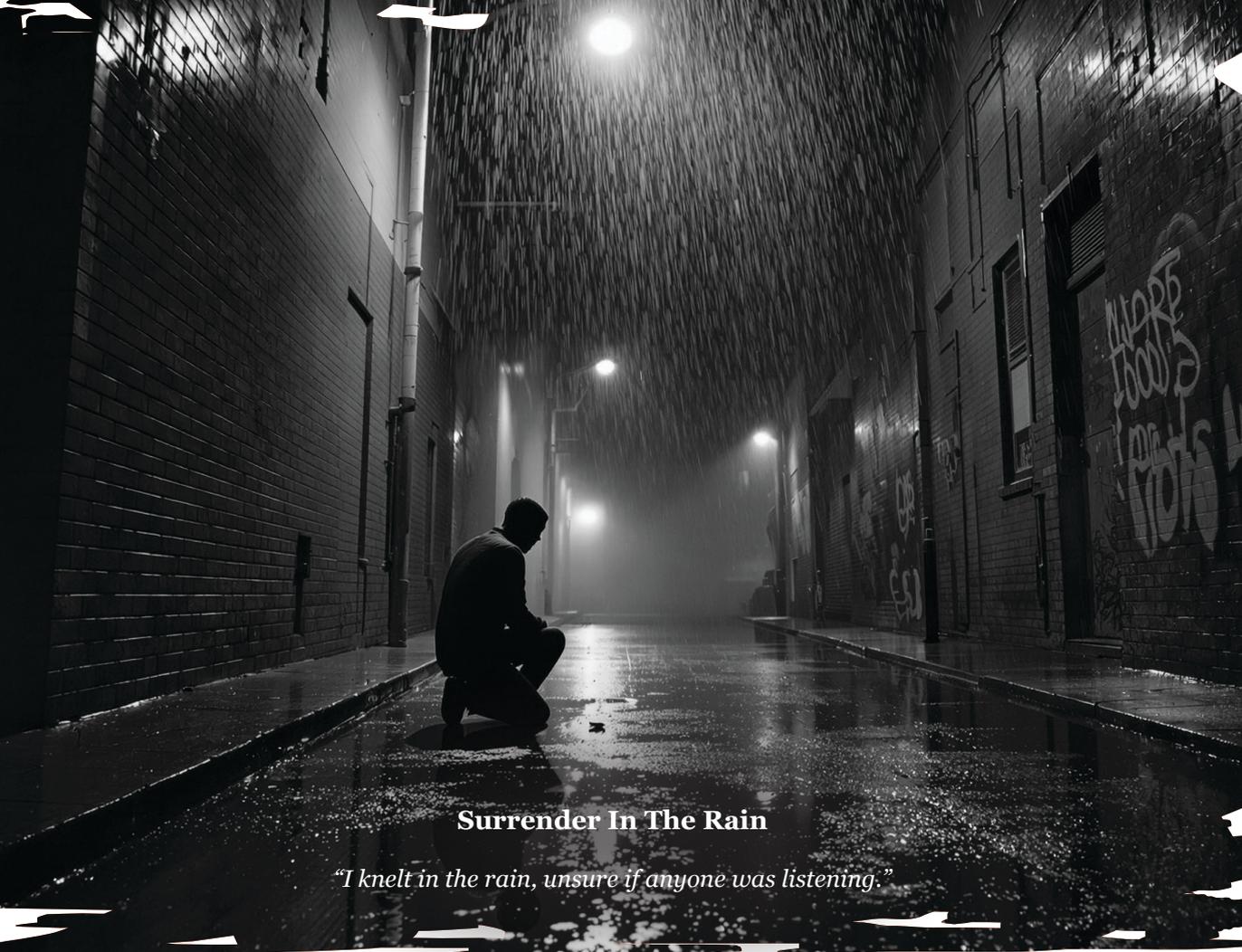
And he was still breathing. Barely. But he was breathing. That made him worth listening to.

## **The Church of the Doomed**

We all have our altars. Mine was built from empty bottles, shame, and lies soaked in blood I pretended wasn't mine. We gather around them with others like us, creating rituals from the wreckage, communion with broken glass.

I worshipped control, pleasure, and the sweet lie of invincibility. I prayed to numbness as if it were salvation, and it answered every fucking time—until the day it didn't. Until the day it left me exposed in fluorescent light, trembling like a junkie in withdrawal from my own delusions.

But that other church, the one with stained glass and people clutching hope like a life raft, I had long avoided. Not because I didn't believe, but because I knew I'd burst into flames the second I crossed



### Surrender In The Rain

*“I knelt in the rain, unsure if anyone was listening.”*

the threshold. Because I thought grace was currency, and I’d spent every last dime on poison.

***“I thought grace was something earned, and I’d gone bankrupt buying my own destruction”.***

Still, somewhere deep, in the space beneath the ache, I wondered if there was a place at the table for someone like me. If maybe I could walk through that door without bursting into flames. If maybe grace wasn’t reserved only for the clean.

### The First Flicker of Faith

I haven’t prayed yet, but I started listening.

That man's voice seeped through cracks I had sealed with scar tissue. He didn't preach salvation. He offered survival—the kind that leaves you breathing but scarred. He said he hadn't used in two years, but some mornings he still woke up choking on phantom guilt, checking his pulse to ensure he was still alive.

That felt real. That felt like something I could maybe hold onto without it cutting me open.

Maybe I didn't believe in God, but I believed in his scars. That belief, shown through yellowed teeth and eyes that had seen hell, sparked a fire in my chest. It flickered with my doubt's wind but refused to go out.

Maybe faith isn't about light breaking through darkness. Maybe it's about finding someone else still breathing in the same suffocating night and realizing you don't have to choke alone.

## **The Barstool Prophet: The Poisoned Well**

My storyteller, the Prophet, said: ***“There was a man,”*** swirling the dregs of his coffee as if they might confess something, ***“who kept drinking from a poisoned well.”***

He paused, lit a cigarette with hands that had seen too many last calls, let the silence drag out like a death rattle, then continued. “Said he loved the taste. Said the sickness? That was the point. Every hemorrhage, every convulsion, every night spent pissing blood, just proof he was still alive. Folks begged him to stop, showed him the corpses piling up around that well. He'd spit in their faces.”

***“Pain is honest,”*** the man would say. ***“At least I know what's killing me.”***

But then one day, the Prophet leaned in, his voice barely above a graveyard whisper, ***“the well ran dry.”***

And that's when the man realized something that didn't just break him; it fucking destroyed him. He hadn't been thirsty for twenty years. He was just terrified of water that wouldn't kill him slowly.

He looked into the black tar at the bottom of his cup as if it held his own death certificate.

***“That’s how it is for people like us,”*** he said, exhaling smoke like a dying prayer. ***“We don’t just drink poison. We become it. Pain isn’t just our language; it’s our religion. So when something clean appears, something that won’t leave scars, we don’t just reject it. We try to poison that too. Because if we can’t suffer, who the hell are we?”***

## **Letting Someone In**

It was one of those nights when the air felt thick enough to choke on. Ashtray overflowing with dead soldiers. Coffee gone cold hours ago, bitter as regret. Nerves frayed to the bone, twitching like live wires in a puddle.

I told him the story I swore I'd take to my grave, the one that tasted like blood and rust just thinking about it. The memory that woke me up screaming some nights.

The day I got drunk at my godson's baptism. Not just buzzed or tipsy—obliterated. Face-first in the gutter, shitfaced. Too far gone to stand without swaying. Too twisted to even fake tears during the prayers. When they called my name to speak, to say something meaningful about this innocent kid, I just stared at the floor like it held the meaning of life, hoping the earth would crack open and drag me straight to hell, where I belonged.

Someone else took the mic. A relative with real human decency. I don't know who. I only remember the silence that followed my collapse. The kind of quiet that screams ***“failure”*** in a language

everyone understands.

That shame? It didn't just follow me like a junkyard dog hounding me. It moved in and took up residence in my chest, like a tumor with teeth. Every time I tried to laugh, shake someone's hand, or pretend I was still salvageable, it was there—gnawing, reminding me.

***They don't realize what you're truly capable of. But if they did, they'd flee.***

So I told him everything. No buildup. No softening the edges. Just dropped it on the table between us like a severed limb—bleeding, ugly, and impossible to ignore.

He didn't flinch, blink, or reach for the therapy handbook, nor did he start spouting recovery slogans like some broken jukebox. He simply sat there, took a long drag of his cigarette, and said:

***“Yeah. That sounds about right for someone like us.”***

Not cruel. Not pitying. Just the brutal honesty of acknowledgment.

And something within me—something that had been rusted shut for years, something I believed was dead—shifted. Not a breakthrough. Not a Hollywood moment. Just a crack. Just enough space to release the poison and maybe, maybe, let something else in.

It wasn't forgiveness. It wasn't absolution. It was simply witnessing. Someone hearing your worst shit and remaining in their seat. Not fleeing. Not judging. Just staying.

That was the first time I understood what grace truly looked like: not a beam of light from heaven, not a choir of angels, but one broken man refusing to abandon another when the truth became too ugly to hide.

## **The Barstool Prophet: Hunger in a Crowded Room**

***“You don’t hit bottom when you’re alone,”*** he said, ash falling like gray snow between his fingers. ***“You hit it surrounded by people who don’t know you’re drowning. That’s the loneliest kind of silence. The kind that makes you want to scream just to hear something real.”***

He tapped his cigarette against the bar as if keeping time with a funeral march. The jukebox wheezed out blues that sounded like regret in a three-piece suit.

I used to be the motherfucker who lit up every damn room, he said, eyes fixed on something I couldn’t see. Had them laughing until their ribs hurt, buying rounds, slapping my back, calling me the life of the goddamn party. King of the bar. Master of the show.

His voice lowered to a whisper that cut through the smoke.

Then I’d go home alone. Empty as a gutted church. Sit in the dark like a king of ashes, wearing a crown made of bar tabs and lies. You know what I’d do? I’d practice my smile in the mirror, getting ready for the next performance.

He looked at me with eyes that had witnessed too much light fading.

***It turns out, charisma is just a disguise for people who are desperately suffering in public. We’re not entertainers. We’re dead bodies who have become really fucking good at dancing.***

### **Barstool, Empty**

I came back a week later. Had to. Like a junkie needs one last hit from a dealer who’s already gone. I wanted more of what he had.

The bar was the same—same jukebox wheezing out songs

nobody remembered, same bartender who looked like he'd been dying behind that counter for decades, same light bleeding through blinds thick with nicotine and broken dreams.

But he wasn't there.

No note. No goodbye. No forwarding address to whatever hell he'd crawled back into. Just an empty stool that still smelled like cigarettes and the kind of wisdom you only find at the bottom of bottles you can't afford to buy.

The stale smell of his last cigarette lingered in the air like a ghost that refused to leave. As if he knew I'd come back, searching for more—answers he never said he would give.

I sat in his spot anyway. Ordered coffee that tasted like it had been brewing since the last time I was here. So I stayed. Not because I believed anything would change, but because for the first time, leaving felt like the bigger lie.

And I whispered to myself, ***“Maybe it's enough for now.”***

Because maybe was the first word I didn't have to lie about. And in that fragile moment, something moved inside me. Not lightning. Not fire. Just a flicker. The faint, trembling beginning of belief.

And I wondered: Who was he? Was he real? A man? A myth? A prophet in denim and despair? Why me? But the stool remained empty. And the silence responded as only silence can:

***Because you were finally willing to listen.***

## **Believing in Maybe**

He spoke like a hymn with a cigarette's rasp, wore his damage like a crucifix clasp. No choir behind him, just the ghosts he fed, preaching sermons to the half-alive and nearly dead.



## **Believing in Maybe**

*“Behind the cracks, a word survived-maybe.”*

His stories didn't come from pulpits or pews; it crawled out of alleys, bruises, and booze. And he gave me one word.

***“Maybe,”***

It wasn't weak. It wasn't vague. It was prophecy, handed down like a crooked bridge, burned at both ends. He wore it on his face like a scar, carried it in his lungs like smoke. And that night, the word clung to me like ash I couldn't shake.

He limped from battles you couldn't see, but his voice carried calm like a shipwrecked sea. I didn't trust angels. Didn't trust fate. But when he spoke, shame loosened its weight.

It wasn't salvation, or even peace; it was just silence that didn't demand I believe. Not the church-style grace with rules and golden lights, but the gutter-born kind that appears at night.

So I followed him, not with faith but fatigue, into the fog where pain and hope bleed. And in the smoke of his last drag, I glimpsed something that didn't make me gag.

Not a promise. Not a cure. Just a flicker that said, Endure. And in that cracked and holy glimpse, I saw the map out of the dark. Because maybe it is a seed buried in scars. Maybe it is the prayer whispered in bars.

Maybe it's the last breath before you break, and the first one you don't have to fake.

So, here's where I leave you, lost in the thick fog, with his words lingering like stale smoke on my fingertips.

No redemption. No glory. No flame.

Just a question that won't leave me the same.

If this were you, battered, still wheezing, would you believe in this thing called Maybe?

### ***Believing in Maybe (Poem)***

He spoke like a hymn with a cigarette's rasp,  
wore his damage like a scar that clasps.  
His gospel wasn't steeples or golden scars,  
it came from nights under broken stars.

He said maybe it's a bridge, crooked but true,  
built by the bruised for the desperate few.  
And though he limped from the fights he chose,  
his voice held calm, as if he already knows.

I didn't yet trust angels, sermons, or fate,  
but I heard him speak, and it cracked my cage.  
Not the church kind I ran from in shame,  
but a whisper of love that called my name.

He didn't preach fire or promise flight,  
he offered his shadow, his mess, his night.  
In his broken cadence, I found my song,  
not polished, not perfect, but where I belong.

So I followed that man into the haze,  
where truth walks slow through trauma's maze.  
And maybe I found, in his flickering light,  
a reason to crawl out of the night.

*“Want to hear the whisper beneath the chaos? See **Streetlight Sober Scroll, Chapter Two (p.222-223)** for a practice in listening for something greater than yourself.”*