



THE 30,000 DAYS

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To all of the Graduating Classes- each and
Every one of them.

“I am I, plus my circumstances.”

Ortega y Gasset

Chapter 1

Tommy Roche felt another wave of cold, clamminess coursing through his body and skin. At the moment- this terrible moment in what was most likely to be the very last, scared, absurdly bizarre moments of his life, Tommy sat, in an awkward position- on his haunches- his shins, kneeling down, and, he had good reason to feel the way that he did. Who wouldn't feel uneasy, nervous, what with the proverbial sword of Damocles hovering terribly close to one's vulnerable neck. ©©In short, Tommy's neck was about to be severed into two parts- one part consisting of his head, and, the other, would consist of his left behind body. In other words, Tommy's head was about to be cut off.

Roche had been for the last ten years, a high tech person- an engineer with a huge conglomerate from the United States that was stationed in Israel- in the northern part of that small mid-Eastern country.

How he got there- how he arrived at this horrid moment in what was, in all probability, the remaining few moments of his life, is another story- this story. But what mattered to him, was that, in just a brief moment or two, Tommy's life would, in all likelihood, be over. He prayed, he said a few novenas, a few prayers indigenous to his religion- that of Catholicism- he did what any sane man might do in his position of ultimate vulnerability- he fucking prayed to whatever God might answer him- it could even be Buddha for all that he cared- anyone or anything that could save his neck at that moment. It was 2001, Spring, and Tommy Roche was very likely going to die. Why, oh why did it have to be this way? What was the point of it all- how could life come to this, he thought to himself. He was in a room, with his insane captors, and now, he had to face the simple, horrid reality of it all- death by decapitation. And, all he could do was to reflect upon his life- it did have a movie like quality- that last second reflecting on one's existence- it happens to many in this situation- and, Tommy was no different. Life was funny that way- you didn't think about it until there was a real chance that it was coming to an end- and so it was for Tommy, in April, 2001.

Chapter 2

“Tommy!” - a short little demented kid screamed from a few feet away. Tommy, who was just doing nothing at the moment, turned to see what the screaming was all about. It was July, 1963, summer, and that meant days filled with nothing but just screwing around, having fun, and also possibly wreaking whatever havoc Tommy and his pals could conjure up.

Tommy, nine years of age, had a gang- a group of kids with whom he hung out. And he, Tommy, was the anointed leader of this gang. It was a group of young boys- all between the ages of 7 to 9 years of age. All day long, during the summers, way back then, the early 60’s, Tommy and his gang would just walk all about the neighborhood- a nice little suburban area located on Long Island- Nassau County. It was a time of suburban expansion- this particular neighborhood was still quite young- the houses having been built in the early 1950’s. Back then, kids could spend whole days just screwing around- doing nothing in particular. It was a different era back then; a kid could, and would, just get up, say at 7 a.m., get dressed, eat a little breakfast, and then just “go out”.

Such “going out” was signaled by a kid saying loudly, “bye mom”- and that was it, sometimes for the entire day. Parents didn’t seem to worry so much as they do these days about the hows and whys of what their kids were doing. It was just fine-great- that kids back then could simply “disappear” for much of the day- only to return many hours later, for lunch, or perhaps not even until dinner. And, it was the happenings of the day that mattered- the kids’ days-all of the little kids of the neighborhood.

The screaming kid was one of Tommy’s buddies - Jimmy, age 8, who lived down the block- just a few houses away from Tommy’s house. Jimmy wasn’t screaming about anything in particular- he just wanted to catch Tommy’s attention, which he did. Tommy, and Jimmy, and Chris, and Charlie, Kevin, Mike, Patrick, Bob, and Joe- these were some of the kids who made up the Tommy Roche gang. In fact, these were the core – the really important members of this informal group- this gang. Tommy and the guys would spend entire days just scooting around the neighborhood- walking about, scrambling around, hiding, looking for action. Climbing trees, screaming little epithets at passersby, throwing eggs at cars- just doing all of those things that made up the days of young boys who had nothing else to do- but screw around, and, now and then, cause trouble.

This July day, the gang had assembled at the street corner. Tommy’s part of town consisted of several long blocks, or lines of houses- about fifty houses running in a long line from one main road at the north end- called Old Country Road, and proceeding south to another semi main road, known as Stewart Avenue. Running east and west were smaller blocks of houses, and it was at the intersection of the north running blocks and one of the east-west blocks, that Tommy and his gang met this July day, 1963. It was a really beautiful day, sunny, blue skies, trees fully in bloom. And, there was a summer heat that was in the air- not too oppressive- not too humid, as could happen at this time- really, great humidity occurred more often in August- but this was July, so the air was still nice and dry. The gang had gotten together pretty early- it was only 9:30 in the morning. Most of the parents- at least the fathers,

were gone for the day- out to work- most likely at some manufacturing plant, or as firemen, or cops, or some other workingman's job. For that's what this neighborhood was- a "working class" neighborhood. The religion of this area was ninety nine percent Christian- a mix of Protestant and Catholics, and here and there, only very rarely- very infrequently, was there a Jewish household.

That's not to say that there were no Jews anywhere around. For, only about a quarter mile away- no more than a few easily walkable blocks, there was a neighborhood - an area, that was almost exclusively Jewish. This area was also made up of blocks of houses, as are most suburban areas. The houses in this area were a bit larger than in Tommy's area. In fact, in this Jewish part of town, the houses were made of brick, and they were almost all split level in nature- big, nice houses. In Tommy's area, the houses were quite nice- very well maintained, but they were not quite as large- not made of brick- and just not as "nice" as the houses in the Jewish area. This Jewish part of town was as Jewish as was Tommy's area Christian. That's just the way it was. There were no signs posted- no "keep out" signs- no water fountains labeled "Christians only", or "Jews only". It's just that everyone knew what area- what neighborhood they belonged in. For instance, Tommy's gang did not normally go roving around the Jewish area- even though, as mentioned, it was only a block or two away from Tommy's neighborhood. And, likewise, the kids in the Jewish area didn't normally recreate in Tommy's neighborhood. It's just the way things were.

Chris chirped out, "Hey, why don't we go to the lot and see what's doing". This seemed to get everyone's attention- most of the gang was present that day- July, 1963. The "lot" that was referred to, was a large vacant plot of land that was located on Old Country Road- the main road that bordered Tommy's neighborhood, at the north end. This road was a main road, as mentioned, and it ran for a good ten miles in both an eastern and western direction. Years later, this road would morph into a rather large road, with a considerable amount of traffic being driven upon it every minute of every day. Even back in '63', it was a busy road. But there was this vacant lot- and it attracted the attentions of a good number of kids. And not just the kids from Tommy's neighborhood, but also, those from the Jewish area. Yes, in a fashion somewhat akin, somewhat parallel to the manner of Tommy's area, these kids from the Jewish area also had days to spend- days to just roam around and do all of those things that young kids do- very similar things to those done by Tommy and his gang. And sometimes, on very rare occasions, these two groups of kids, and their respective worlds, collided.

Chris and Patrick, Joe and Jimmy, and Bob, and Mike, and, of course, Tommy, got it into their young skulls, to amble over to the lot. It was no more than a quarter mile away, and there was always something to do there- something to see. Years later, this lot was to be the location for a huge carpet warehouse and retail outlet- but back then, in the early 60's it was just a big, bad, vacant lot. Oh, there was a little old dumpy "shack"- located at the west end of the lot. The entire lot was about 200 yards in length, and some 75 yards wide- bordered at one end, the north end, by Old Country Road, and at the other end- the width's end, by a row of houses- their backyards. These houses were in the Jewish area. So, the big lot was directly in back of the Jewish houses. And often, kids from the Jewish area would go out from the backyards of their houses, and, through a wooden fence that ran all along the back of the lot, and, these kids would enter the lot- and play. They would do all sorts of things- like dig holes- that was a favorite activity. These Jewish kids- sometimes in groups of 10, would dig very deep holes- sometimes as deep as 8 feet, and they used

buckets, and shovels, and other tools to assist them in their digging. And sometimes, they would make forts- sturdy structures, with wood boards that served as protection- protection against the rock throwers- sometimes thrown by their own group, while playing "war"- and sometimes, the forts served as real protection- against the Tommy Roche gang.

Tommy and his gang were at the lot- at their end of it- where the lot met the end of their block- and Tommy – who was as usual at the head of his gang, could see that something was happening at the lot. He could see activity occurring, and he signaled to the other kids to follow. They fanned out, in a semi-militaristic fashion- they were a real army, in their own minds, and they saw an opposing army- they saw them now quite clearly- they saw the Jews. The Jewish kids were busy digging one of their stupid holes, and building one of their stupid forts. Tommy didn't much like all of this type of activity. What Tommy really liked, was to go into that little Shack at the west end of the lot- and fuck around in that Shack- sometimes even with some of the neighborhood girls- not the Jewish girls, of course, but some of the girls from his own neighborhood. They were only 8, 9, and 10 years of age- but the 10 year olds were already fucking around- in some fashion or other. Of course, that didn't happen with the Jewish girls- "they" didn't fuck around until they were at least 14.

This day though, Tommy wasn't interested, at least yet, in going to the Shack. No, Tommy, and his gang were much more interested in seeing about the Jews. The gang was about 50 yards away from the Jewish kids- who were way too busy to notice the encroaching, fanned out gang. There was a real sort of danger here- the gang, if they caught one of the Jewish kids, could put a small degree of hurt on him. Usually, it would amount to shoving, or some other slight physical abuse. Not that the Jewish kids didn't fight back- there were some pretty feisty kids in that group as well. As a matter of fact, there had been some pretty good brawls between these groups of kids- but no one had ever gotten hurt really bad- a couple of bloody noses- that sort of thing. But there was a kind of terror associated with some of these interactions. And each group- even at their young ages, KNEW that they were quite different from each other. They really didn't know exactly what it was- oh yeah, there were the labels- Jew, Catholic, and the like. But to these kids, all they knew was that they didn't belong in each other's neighborhoods, and that, for all they knew- and from what they did know, their respective worlds were totally different. It was, in some ways, as if they were from two different countries- and these countries didn't always get along- they didn't like each other all that much.

Tommy stayed at the center- he didn't fan out. He was the commander of sorts- he was in charge of his gang- and he did receive a very high degree of loyalty from the gang's members. Tommy was a natural born leader- he had a definite charisma- a stage presence, and in this case, the stage was life itself, and the world of people and events. Tommy, at 10 years of age, was in the center of things- of activities, of his friends and fellow gang members. He was the star of the show- at least the show that emanated from his side of the block- the tracks, so to speak- the Christian side of town.

Chris started it off- he saw that these other "kids" did not see either him or the rest of the gang. Chris signaled to Tommy that they were in surprise attack mode. Patrick had run to the other side, on the left, and was hidden behind a small bush. The Jewish kids had no idea what was happening just outside their senses. Not every one of the kids were Jewish- there was one Catholic kid who was very much part of this neighborhood, being good friends with one of the key members of this neighborhood's own group. The Jewish kids, and this one Catholic boy, Eddie, were

not thought of as a gang, but rather as a club- a more civilized version if you will, of the Catholic kids group, or gang.

Suddenly, Don Weinstein, one of the Jewish kids, screamed out, "kids"!- which was the general sound of alarm when any kids from the "other neighborhood" were around and lurking. This shout of Don's sent all of his group scurrying behind the fort that they had built- they were now all congealed into one condensed group- behind the fort. There must have been something like eight kids behind and in that fort- Don, Eddie, Brad, Hal, Barry, Mark, and a few other kids. They were not about to run from Tommy's gang- no, these Jewish kids liked to stay and fight. In fact, they initiated the attack, by firing off a round of dirtballs- such ammunition being very at hand, very accessible, as the entire floor of the vacant lot consisted of dirt (soil) and a lot of little plants. The kids went into immediate action- Don gave a couple of swift orders- "Eddie, make a lot of dirtballs- Hal give everyone a few of the dirtballs, then wait". Apparently, Don was the self appointed leader- at least for that particular moment. Don was a very outgoing, almost obnoxiously verbose and aggressive little kid of 9 years of age. The kids got ready to fire.

Tommy and his gang were unaware of what was happening behind the fort's walls- and so they began to encroach upon the fort. They figured they had the Jewish kids bottled up- ready for the slaughter. But just as Tommy, Patrick, Chris, Jimmy and Robert were about to fully surround the fort and all of its occupants, the kids inside attacked.

"Fire"!- cried Don, and in that moment, a hail of dirtballs came from within the fort, and went forward at a high rate of speed, hitting and otherwise pelting and covering Tommy and his gang. Before the gang could recover, another volley of dirtballs was already on the way, and Tommy and his gang immediately turned tail and made a hasty retreat. "We're gonna kill you", Tommy screamed out. This sent a bit of fear into Don and his little pals. There was, in their minds, always the thought of what would happen if the dirtballs didn't work- if they didn't scare away Tommy's gang. Tommy's gang and its kids just seemed bigger and badder than Don and his club. Maybe Tommy's gang was very slightly older- by a half year. Or maybe the Christian kids WERE bigger and badder, and just meaner than the Jewish kids. It's hard to say, but there seemed to be a greater fear on the part of the Jewish kids- like the outside world, the foreign world as represented by Tommy and his gang, was the "other"- the alien world of the "goy", or non- Jew. It wasn't quite thought of in those precise, sociological terms, but each group of kids knew and felt a definite sense of "differentness" from each other- they knew, quite well, that their respective worlds were totally separate in many ways- totally different, and that when those world's clashed, well then, often times, fireworks began.

Chapter Three

1967 was a formative year for Tommy. He was in his first year of high school- freshman year. The school that Tommy attended was quite large- there were in fact about 550 students in his grade, and the school was very large, in that, it consisted of grades 7-12. It was a junior and senior high school in one building. Back in those days, there was no such thing as “middle school”, which is where sixth through eighth grades are segregated in one area of the building. No, back in the 60’s and the 70’s, there was just one big amalgamated flow of students. When the bell rang signifying the end of a class, there was always a mad rush of literally thousands of students milling around in the hallways- students ranging in age from the youngest, 12, to the oldest senior of 17. Things just weren’t done to protect younger students back in those days.

Tommy had never needed anyone’s protection anyway. He was a tough kid, and he had a lot of friends- stemming from the days of his gang. All of his buddies- Chris, Jimmy, Robert, Patrick and the rest, were still there- still his buddies. And, they still hung out together, on the streets. From time to time, Tommy and his buddies would intrude themselves into the Jewish neighborhood, usually on the Jewish High Holidays, such as Yom Kippur, or Rosh Hashanah- the day of Atonement, and the Jewish New Year, respectively. On those days, Tommy and his buddies would more often than not, kick over a few garbage cans that were in front of some Jewish person’s house, or, perhaps, more interestingly, they would throw eggs at the Jews houses. Of course, not every house was owned by a Jewish person- as a matter of fact, there were some non-Jews there- usually an Italian family- an Tommy and his buddies would sometimes unknowingly pepper a non Jew’s house with the eggshelled bombs. But, details like that were not particularly important to Tommy and his buddies. They just liked to be involved in some mayhem. Generally, they did not really hurt anyone- they just liked to introduce a bit of chaos into the otherwise ordered world that seemed to emanate from the Jewish neighborhood.

But, a lot of these activities abated a bit when Tommy was into the middle of his freshman year. At the high school and junior high, all of the kids from both the Jewish and non-Jewish areas attended. Percentage-wise, there were far more non-Jews- the ratio of non-Jews to Jews being about 75% non-Jew, 25 % Jewish, or thereabout. And, there was no segregation of any kind. Plenty of non Jews were friends with Jewish kids, and vice versa. But there was still a definite undercurrent of anti-Semitism- but it wasn’t terrible. Usually such feelings were most palpable on the various sports teams, such as wrestling, football, and to a lesser extent, baseball. For some reason, Jewish kids didn’t try out for such activities, although there were a few Jewish kids on the wrestling team.

The high school was further divided, socio-politically along other, more unique lines. There were the “jocks”- those who liked and/or participated in sports, and there were the “greasers”- those kids who just hung out, and liked to just bullshit the day away, smoking cigarettes, and, from time to time, getting into general trouble. Then there were, as in all schools, those kids who actually studied, and cared about their futures, from an academic standpoint. A lot of these kids actually strove to be in the “honors” classes, and to get the best grades that they could. Often, these were the

Jewish kids. There was, to say the least, tension between all of these three groups, and there were other, less visibly demarcated groupings, but these were the three main sociological entities.

Tommy was a "greaser"- that's where he best fit in. He smoked cigarettes- he usually sported a pack of Marlboros inside the upper part of his shirtsleeve- left arm. He did this even inside the school, although there were some teachers with whom he did not want to tangle- and these were the teachers who insisted that Tommy not wear his cigarettes. There were some very tough teachers back then, and they would not hesitate to show an errant student just how tough they could be. In Tommy's high school, there was a tough teacher, who was in fact, the captain of the lifeguards at a major beach located at the south shore of Long Island- an ocean lifeguard. No one at the school- greaser or jock, ever messed around with this guy.

Then, one day, Tommy's world changed, in a way that he probably would not have thought possible. Tommy had been messing around with girls since he was 9 years of age. He had "made out" with girls at that young age, and he had done more at the age of 10, and more at the ages of 11 and 12. By the time Tommy was 14, he had several full sexual experiences with girls. These were things that didn't seem to happen to the Jewish kids, but they did happen to Tommy and some of his buddies. It seems that a good number of the girls "put out" in Tommy's neighborhood- at a very young age. Of course, all of the girls that Tommy knew were non Jews- that followed as a matter of course, since there were very, very few Jewish girls in his neighborhood. And, in his high school, Tommy simply didn't hang out with any Jewish girls- or any Jews at all for that matter. But things can change, even for Tommy.

One day, just after the school day ended, Tommy was hanging out just outside of the gym, which was situated at the back of the high school. The gym was quite large- as a matter of fact, at that time, 1967, it was the largest gym in Nassau County, Long Island. It was November of 1967, and it was a sunny day, and at 2:36, which was when school let out, it was still warm, although being a mid to late fall day, there was a hint of a chill in the air. Tommy was leaning against the brick wall which was the exterior wall of the gym, and he was just hanging out, feeling good, bullshitting with his friends. He already had lit up a smoke- he had a full pack of Marlboros in his sleeve. Tommy liked to hang out for a good 20 minutes after school- there was never any particular rush in getting home. He always walked home, since he lived only a few short blocks from the school. Tommy was rapping to Chris and Jimmy, with Patrick just a few feet away. Tommy was a good five feet eight inches- a tall young man for 14 years of age. He was lanky, and his freckled face did have an air of life about it- he was not, by any means, a dumb young man. Tommy was an energetic kid, and despite his past, what with the "gang", he didn't walk around with any real rancor or hate against anyone. He really wasn't a bad kid at all- he just liked to hang out and have fun. Although he was quite able to mess someone up, Tommy was not, ultimately, a vicious kid. He had begun to turn out fairly normal. Some of his friends though, were still rabidly anti-Semitic, and of course, hated other minorities, such as blacks- although there were none of them at the high school. Back then there were simply no blacks at all in attendance.

There was a lot of activity, suddenly, outside of the gym. Apparently, some of the kids on the football team were going to the football field to get some extra practice in- it was informal- just a few players getting together on the field. This field was located directly behind the gym, and so, these football players- six of them in all, were passing right by Tommy and his buddies. Tommy barely took notice of these guys-

he knew who they were- most of them were right from his neighborhood. He nodded to a few of them as they went by. There was just a buzzing of activity- young people living life and following their instincts- doing what they do. Life was good, and school was over that day.

Suddenly, there was a commotion going on. A somewhat large boy was yelling-"hey, watch where you're going, bitch"! Tommy's attention was now drawn to the scene- he didn't often hear a male refer to a female student in that rather coarse manner. It instinctively rubbed Tommy the wrong way, but he listened and watched, from a short distance away. There was now a young girl- a ninth grader in fact, who was sprawled on the ground- her books scattered in every direction. Apparently, the young girl, a pretty brown haired girl, with a nice figure, and nice brown eyes, had collided, unintentionally with this large football player. But instead of helping the girl up, the irascible young man seemed to be verbally abusing the girl. And, the girl had a companion- a young man, who Tommy recognized immediately, as Don- the same kid who Tommy used to have scraps with back at the vacant lot. A few years had gone by, and Tommy always recognized and remembered Don, and vice versa. The two young men had remained as distant foes, but they had somehow developed a respect for each other in the few intervening years. At times, they even nodded to each other in the school's hallways.

Don immediately sprang to the girl's aid- picking up her books, and yelling back at the football player- "why don't YOU watch where you're going- asshole." At this, the football player became a bit incensed, and some of the other players started to gang up on Don. Don was a feisty young man in his own right- not large by any means, but he was not the sort to be afraid- even Tommy had seen that back in the days of the vacant lot. The girl, her name was Sandy, urged Don to just go, and get out of there. She didn't want any trouble. But trouble had found her- and Don. And, it was three against one- three football players- and they were now pushing Don around. And Don did not seem to have any friends around, nor were there any teachers around to prevent further abuse.

One of the players pushed Don forcibly against the brick wall- just about ten feet from where Tommy and his buddies were. Then, the player who had bumped Sandy, causing her books to fall, well, he went beyond normal- he grabbed Sandy by the shoulders and did something totally outside of any semblance of civility- he ripped Sandy's shirt- a nice blouse in fact, and she was now partially exposed. "You mother fuckin' son of a bitch", Don cried out, and he went to hit the guy, whose name was Kevin. Sandy was crying a bit, moaning in fact, and she also was trying to cover herself up. Don was now being pushed around, rather forcibly by these three somewhat tough football types.

Unexpectedly, a voice intervened- "Pick her books up"- the voice said- and it was directed toward Kevin. Abruptly, Kevin stopped pushing Don, and a quiet settled in the air. Kevin looked at the person who had uttered the command- the voice had come from none other than Tommy Roche. Don looked around and saw, for the first time, that Tommy, his old nemesis, but lately respected distant acquaintance, was just a few feet away. Don noticed the other familiar faces- the friends of Tommy Roche. It was almost like a bizarre reunion of gangs, in a very unlikely setting. But, now, Don actually felt a sense of relief. Very strange, but true. Don went to Sandy to see if she was alright- he tried to cover up her semi-exposed chest area.

"Didn't you hear me"? - I said, pick 'em up." Kevin faltered for a minute- his ego was on the line- and his four other friends- the other football players got behind

him as a sort of back up. "No way- I ain't pickin' up that Jew bitch's books". Then, Kevin noticed a sort of icy stare in Tommy's face- a glare of animalistic energy that spelled only one thing- trouble. And, Kevin's friends did not make any moves- because, quickly, Tommy's friends- his old gang, had immediately backed him up- they were there- and even the four football players did not want to mess with the gang. Tommy was a known quantity- you just didn't fuck with him or his friends. Even tenth and eleventh graders stayed away from Tommy and his buddies- the greasers- you generally gave them a wide berth. Reluctantly, Kevin did begin to pick up the books of the now teary eyed girl, Sandy. She had been quite shaken- and abused. Who knows what might have happened- where this might have gone, had it not been for Tommy?

Then, Tommy did a strange thing. He himself bent down and started to pick up Sandy's books. As he did so, he said, quite brusquely to Kevin and his friends, "Get the hell out of here- but first, apologize to this girl- what's your name?- Sandy". Kevin, embarrassed quite a lot, blurted out, "sorry"- he was red faced and really mortified in front of his pals, but he was too afraid of Tommy. Tommy went further- "look at her- and remember- stay away from her or him", referring to Don. Kevin was forced to look directly at Sandy, whose tear stained face was red and wet- but she did look back at Kevin. Tommy finished picking up her books, and he gave them to Don. "Now, get out"- he gestured at Kevin, and he and his pals left, with their tails between their legs.

Tommy was there, with Don and Sandy, and Tommy's friends were still there too. It was quite odd, this unlikely group. But Don extended his hand to Tommy. The two young men had never really TALKED to each other- they had always, in the past, yelled- screamed- at each other, and, at each other's friends. But now, Don said in a clear voice, loud enough for Tommy and his friends to hear- "thanks- you saved us- I won't forget that". And, in a very unusual but fitting gesture, Sandy leaned over to Tommy, and she kissed him lightly on his left cheek. Tommy noticed, quite clearly, that she was a lovely girl- he hadn't really noticed that before. Her brown eyes were glistening from crying, and Tommy felt a chill go through his body. Tommy looked at her- he was frozen by the kiss, and he saw her ripped clothing- and he said-"you better get home and fix that"- referring to her blouse. She blushed a little- Tommy couldn't help but be his blunt self- but he meant well- and Sandy knew that- more- she FELT that. She fixed her eyes on his face, and for a very brief moment, Tommy and Sandy were the only two people in the world.