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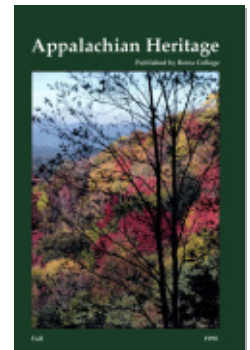
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My True Self

Richard Sears

I'm the most normal member of my family. What am I saying? I mean, I'm the only normal one of the whole shebang.

My mother's the worst, although she doesn't think so because she's so tolerant: she bends over backward for everything that's weird, like my brother and sister. She's an old hippie, you see, a real old-fashioned hippie. She still irons her hair, which reaches below her waist even though it's gray, and bakes foul-tasting brownies with pot in them. She buys her stash from the same dealer she had when she was in high school; every two weeks, regular as clockwork. She thinks I'm really a sad case because I don't enjoy getting stoned. All the rest of the Connelly family will take a hit now and then, but I'm a real disappointment to her. Something about marijuana kinda makes me sick. Nothing moral or anything like that, but whenever I smoke—just a few times—I get this feeling like I'm floating out over a big canyon and when my high's over I'm going to fall, fall forever maybe in this thick, sickly sweet haze—and never, never see anything definite again.

My mom has stayed a hippie so long she's about lost all her costumes and equipment. She broke the string on her love beads and they fell into the garbage disposal, where they made a godawful sound every time you turned the damn thing on for weeks. Else she'd still be wearing them and her bellbottoms, seventeen pairs, which she had made into a quilt when they started to turn to rags. But you don't need beads or the peace symbol or the head bands or anything to keep your tolerance. And she's done that. Laid all the way back, for everyone but me.

For a big example, she puts up with my sister, who is just plain crazy, except when she's in the house in neutral. Let me explain: my sister Jane has had this identity crisis going on for several years now, so she keeps trying interesting new selves. When she came home and told my mother she was becoming a nun, Mom was pretty happy at first, because she loves having her tolerance tested. Then it turns out my sister meant she was becoming a Buddhist nun, with a shaved head and

Richard Sears teaches English at Berea College and has had several books published about early blacks at Berea and their connections with the college.

a saffron sheet to wrap around; then she had to go down to the bus depot and the train station and stand barefoot outside the main entrance in all kinds of weather. So she gave that up. Then she became a topless dancer at this all-night sex joint for the raincoat brigade; she was real popular at first because with her shaved head she looked like that Irish singer that denounced the Pope on tv. Only with bigger breasts. The customers thought that was really sexy, I guess. But she gave that up too, because she said it wasn't her true self.

I think her true self is when she's staying at home, where I've never seen her do anything but sleep and eat and lie on the couch barking orders about the tv because she's too lazy to reach for the remote.

But Mom tolerates it all. She even applauds it. She says Jane is on the only worthwhile mission in life.

"What's that, Mom?" I was once fool enough to ask.

"Why, searching for your true self, J. H."

"Mom," I said, "Jane ain't searching; she's laying there like any other couch potato."

"Searching for your true self, Jimi Hendrix Connelly," Mom said, all in a huff. So I dropped it—she's pretty upset whenever she uses my full name like that.

Anyway, Mom also sponsored my big brother's trip out of the closet. He's gay, and I guess I knew it before he told everybody. I mean how could I miss it when I walk into his bedroom and catch him and Wally Jones, this kid from down the block, in a "compromising position," like they say. I would have sworn it was physically impossible. Anyway, I didn't consider it any of my business, but when Joey told Mom he was gay, she was happy as a lark and had a coming out party and invited all her relatives and friends. To show Joey she's behind him, she said. He's straight-acting and all: I mean he really isn't weird at all, in one way, but she made such a big deal out of it he about had to be. And he cooperated for awhile, bringing home various "specimens of gay manhood" he picked up or vice versa, which is what Mom asked him for. We had every kind of drag queen and leather king in our kitchen guzzling beer and eating pot-brownies. But Mom was on cloud nine.

Then Joey got married. He and Steve seem very happy, but they're not working on weird anymore. They almost never go out; they take turns cooking and washing the dishes and they both have very high-paying jobs in the management of Wal-Mart. They're both developing little pots, and they dress real conservative in identical dark blue suits. So they sometimes get mistaken for Mormon missionaries. But they go

to the Baptist Church where Steve sponsors a youth group, plus he's a cub scout pack leader. They really disappoint Mom, I think, Joey and Steve. She was so excited when Joey was really up for grabs and hustling and you never knew what would come out of his bedroom next. Mom thought of it as a life of freedom and adventure—and, you know, antiestablishment. Counter culture.

That was before AIDS made lots of people change their act. When Joey was waiting to see if he was positive or not, even then Mom was trying to act like life's just one big EXPERIENCE and death too. She said that. But he was negative.

Now Joey says he expects to live a long time, but when he dies him and Steve are both going to leave their whole fortune to whatever kids I have, if I ever have any. And that's great. The little fuckers are welcome to it, if I live long enough to have them. Which is what I am beginning to doubt.

Mom was never so tolerant with Dad when they were married, but she really tried. He's a defense nut or self-defense or something. Body building and all the martial arts, one after another, and then his own personal arsenal. I didn't know the names of any of his guns but they were all over the house, and if he wasn't cleaning and loading these semiautomatics he was standing in front of a full-length mirror that no one else was allowed to stand in front of because it was his muscle posturing spot. He'd come dashing from anywhere in the house or yard—suddenly and without warning—to stand there and flex something. Mom loved having to put up with all this, to a point; but his target practicing during her meditation period (she does yoga in the backyard) finally led to a breakup.

They're divorced, but he still comes over. In fact, he's at home more than he used to be and Mom seems to like him better now that his guns are stored in his new house across town.

She's not the only one either. One of my brother's guests really fell hard for my dad, but he never got to do more than stroke Dad's beautiful muscles. And Dad would only permit that in public, like a performance for everybody in the kitchen; never in private. In front of (1) my mother, (2) my sister, (3) my brother, (4) two other homosexuals and (5) the cat, and me too, of course, this guy begged my father for one night alone together, promising him unique bliss.

Dad turned him down, not embarrassed or anything, just pleased as punch that somebody lusted after his pecs. Then my helpful brother asked this guy, "How about J.H.?" pointing at me and the guy says, "Not unless there's more there than meets the eye." And my whole

family laughed. Then my mom said, as if to comfort me, you know, "J.H., honey, just stay as straight as you are," and kissed me. You see, that's the kind of household I come from. And that's what makes it so hard for me.

My own mother can take everything in stride but me. She says it was from birth. She's convinced that my character was set by the position of the planets (something about Mercury being in the cusp of Venus, or something; What is this cusp business anyway? If it's what I think it is, she should shut up about it) and my trip down the birth canal. Anyway, I came out straight, unimaginative, normal and intolerable for my mother.

I spent a lot of time in high school trying to keep her from going to see my teachers (once she wanted to take her tarot cards to show this one English teacher that I was fated for a better grade) or talking to anybody who knew me—and one day I guess I really objected too hard. She wanted to go to some Christmas party or something, and she was planning to take some of these native American crafts ornaments she'd made with her to sell or give away, I don't know. She's not native American, but she claims her great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess so this is all authentic stuff, beads and feathers and leather bits and crap. Oh god. Anyway, I said, "Oh, Mom, please don't. The kids will think I'm a freak." Maybe I had never put it quite like that before, because she stopped talking and looked at me, came close and stared into my eyes, real cold, like she was looking into my soul.

"You're ashamed of me, aren't you?" she asked. "You're ashamed of your family. Well, you should be ashamed of yourself."

"No, I shouldn't," I said, and my heart beating so hard like I'm having a heart attack or something. "No, no." And then I start to cry. "You're all crazy."

"But you're not," she said. It was like contempt, you know, from my own mother.

Let me tell you what I'm like. I enjoy wearing a green John Deere cap, a comfortable tee shirt and worn bluejeans, no patches, just holes. I listen to country western music and Billy Ray Cyrus is my favorite; Dolly Parton, if I have to take a woman, but mostly for her shape. Something else! I have a pickup which I bought and paid for with my own money from working at Kroger's as a stock boy. I made Cs in everything but shop in high school. I hate English class and I'd rather take a beating than see a foreign film. I don't want to see anything you can't call a "movie."

Then there's my girlfriend, Mary Jo, just about the walking definition of normal. She has this big hairdo that takes her hours every day: blond and a little streaky and fluffed and sorta twiggy-looking. Mom says she thinks Mary Jo looks like she found her hair under somebody else's bed. See, she's not tolerant of normal at all. But Mary Jo's hair is just like thousands of other girls' hair. I know because from the back I'm always mistaking some other girl for Mary Jo. She has nice buns and big boobs, and we've been making it for two years, but she always acts completely inexperienced, so I have to start at the beginning every time. Which is kind of irritating, but in another way, it's what I want.

She is hot (I should say was hot) to get married, and I'm—you know—so-so about it. But we probably would have gone ahead with it, double-wide trailer and all, if it hadn't been for my crazy family. Usually me and Mary Jo like walking around the mall and taking in a Stallone flick (or Schwarzenegger, except he reminds me too much of my dad) or a good softcore show, which makes me crazy in the pickup afterwards. But she gets to insisting after so long going with one another that she has to meet my folks and see my home. All of which I'd kept real quiet about for a long time.

Well, that did it. Mom served her famous brownies and introduced my brother and his wife right out, and my father was doing a very personal flex in front of his mirror and my sister—well, nevermind, you get the picture. Mary Jo, who is exactly the kind of person I want to spend my life with although I'm not sure why, walked out on me, threw my class ring down right there in the living room at my house and yelled at me. Never wanted to see me again, hate me forever, should have told her, etc., and so on. "Go on, then," I said, "and see who cares!"

Mom watched all this and came right up to me to give me consolation. "Don't worry about it, dear," she said kindly, patting me. "She seems like a very limited person. I don't think she'd bring out your potential."

"You damn right she's limited, Mom. She's limited to ordinary. Which is what I want out of life. And it doesn't look now as if I ever will get it."

So about a week later I'm in the mall eating my heart out because Mary Jo won't even answer the phone if she knows it's me and her blasted old mother makes sure she knows every time. Well, I had been through so much shit I was ready to flip out, you know, what with being alone, not getting any and not being able to talk to a single

NORMAL human being. Everybody I know should be joining WACKOS ANONYMOUS. My mom is telling me to go with the flow, and she means it, and my brother hints around that his "sexual orientation" doesn't cause near as much trouble as the other. He means mine.

When I saw the new Mary Jo in the mall that night, it was just about the last straw. I mean she was upset and all about us breaking up, but she did it herself, and here she is; she's dressed in a hot pink leotard with some kind of a brown poncho thing over it, so that part of her looks like Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. And she has done or redone her hair in a whole new way, building this big pile up on top like an atomic bomb cloud only she's dyed it purple.

She is accompanied by three men about my age: two are a matching set of leather jacket punks who walk like their motorcycles are still between their legs, and it takes me awhile to notice one of them is Mary Jo's brother Sammy Ray, and the other is some black dude with a red stocking cap over what must be a whole lot of hair and a muscle shirt that shows off a development my father might envy. Mary Jo seems to be in charge of them.

But I run up to her—after goggling at her, not sure who in the hell she is, looking so much like Mary Jo and not looking like her at all—I run up. And she goes, "That's him," like there's a plan for me already. These three sidekicks of hers give me the eye up and down and start cracking their knuckles and such right in the mall traffic. Several old ladies in sweat pants have to detour around them, making real good time.

"Mary Jo," I say, "what are you up to? C'mon out to the pickup and let's have a talk."

"Nothing to discuss," she says, tapping the sleeve of the nearest leather jacket. Three pair of eyes keep right on me, but she never gives me a glance.

"Mary Jo, you must be losing your mind."

"No such a thing," she snaps.

"Did seeing my family do this to you?" I ask, because I always have been afraid it's catching.

She gives some kind of signal to her boys and they come up around me, take hold of me, not too friendly, and start talking in whispery voices: "You giving this girl a hard time?" "Hey, weirdo." "His brother's a fag, his mother's a hag; his sister is bald and his father is. . . ." But they didn't have any rhyme for bald, I guess, so they changed it to: "His sister is bad and his father is mad." All three of them got started singing this crap in my ear. And dumb as it sounds, that's when I knew they were crazy enough to kill me.

"Mary Jo," I said, "who are these guys? I need to talk to you."

"These are my brother and his friends," she said. "Ever one of 'em as straight as a string. And they wouldn't insult me the way you do."

"What have you done to your hair?"

"I have made a mistake with my hair," she flared up. "But who are you to criticize, with your brother a fag and your sister bald as an egg?"

"Let's take a little trip behind the mall, buddy," one of the singers suggested, and they took me back there. Not a soul in sight. Some shoppers hurrying to their cars in the distance, but they wouldn't look up. I knew I was a goner unless Mary Jo called them off, but I couldn't get her to even turn her eyes in my direction.

When I started to talk to her, this black guy hit me in the stomach and knocked the breath out of me. Then when I could say something again I was just mad about his reasons. "You're beating ME up because my big brother's gay and my sister's bald?"

"Yeah, cause he's a fag and she don't have no hair."

"That doesn't make any sense, man. Think about it."

So two of them hit me.

And after a while I whispered, "It's too weird. What do you care about my brother and sister?" All three of them hit me.

"You guys are crazy," I said, drooling blood now.

"Like hey," the black guy said, shrugging and all. Then he socked me in the eye.

And that's all the reason I'm ever gonna get: "Like hey." Mary Jo finally stopped them before they killed me, but just barely.

In my two months of recuperation I had plenty of time to think it all through. When I was a kid I began to find out my folks were not like all the other kids' folks, and they weren't like tv families and they weren't like people in schoolbooks; the teachers never talked about people like mine. Finally, I concluded, I remember my exact thought: "Man, my folks are weird!" And decided right then it wasn't for me. Now where I was wrong is I thought I could just AVOID weird, like if I was ordinary and, you know, just a plain reasonable guy WEIRD would stay in its place and I would stay in mine.

But with those bandages on my face and the girdle-thing around my broken rib I couldn't think the same way. Man, weird is out to get us all and the only way to fight it is to fight. I mean get out there and do battle with it. I laid flat there in my hospital bed and I thought to myself I was too much like my mom and not enough like my dad. He got ready to go to war and he was right. Weird, but right.

The next question was how? Well, that was decided in a very peculiar way. So peculiar it makes me feel a little sick to my stomach, you know, or dizzy or something about how it happened. I'm at home, see, home from the hospital and everybody's made a fuss, and there's a big meal for me downstairs, but I have to get up and leave right in the middle of it. Because I just can't put up with this shit anymore: each one of them is doing their own thing, four or five different conversations are going on all at the same time and there's only six people at the table, for God's sakes, because every damn one of 'em is just talking to themselves. My dad is going on about getting ready for the apocalypse and my mom is making a long soothing speech to nobody at all, and my sister is speculating about her next big trip outdoors when she will be in some kind of masquerade, you know, she couldn't ever just go put her usual clothes on and take a walk, oh no, it's got to be some big deal identity experiment, and my brother and my brother-in-law are whispering sweet nothings to one another, which I don't care about really, but isn't there a time and place for everything? I mean Steve is tonguing Joey's ear and his eyes are rolling back into his head. Give me a break.

So I went upstairs to my room and stood in front of my dresser and looked in the mirror. That is not my bag, you understand, I don't do the mirror thing, not for flexing (of course I have nothing to flex) and not for identity crises because I really do know who I am.

My face didn't look like my face at all. I mean I was somebody I had never laid eyes on; my nose was the wrong shape, my eyes looked all wrong—and it wasn't just that I'd been hurt and was still healing. It was something else.

I was so frustrated I went over the top. I started beating on that old dresser, hurting my hands (about the only part of me that wasn't hurt already) and yelling. Just yelling at first. But then I said, "JESUS H. CHRIST! Who the fuck is that? Who the hell am I?"

Then I had my answer. When I went back downstairs I knew what I had to do.

"I have an important announcement to make, folks," I said, loud enough to get them all to shut up for once and even look at me. "Here it is." Got their attention. It's funny; you know I am just not used to much attention—it gave me sort of a shot in the arm. Adrenaline for the big push. I mean I had a hardon—it really surprised me. I came out with it.

"Yes," I said. "It's about my true self. I'm the Second Coming."

My mother stood up, looking really embarrassed or something. "Such a way to talk," she says. At first I was mystified, then it occurred to me that Mom had misunderstood me big time.

"Mom," I said, "I don't mean that. I'm Jesus."

"You're. . . ."

"That's right. I'm Jesus H. Christ. See, that's how I figured it out. I was upstairs and it just came to me: Jimi Hendrix Connelly. See what I mean?"

I swear I was just giving them a big dose of their own medicine, fighting fire with fire. How was I to know they'd all believe me if I just said it? All I did was say it.

Mom comes up to me real slow with an expression on her face that nobody could describe. She touched me on the forehead the way E.T. touched the kid and said, "Peace and Love." Then she was off in a little dance of her own, hugging herself and saying the same thing over and over.

My father took it in much quicker really. Of course, he's a churchgoer, if you can call that gang of his a church. "It's the End Times," he said solemnly. "We have to prepare. Oh, oh, oh." He seemed really moved, you know, ready to cry or something. I mean, this is embarrassing, but he did cry, shaking and sobbing out, "We have been waiting for you, and I never dreamed it'd be my own son in my own house. Well, your house, Lucille, but, son, I am so proud of you." Then he gave me a big hug and kissed me again and again, all wet and sloppy with his tears, and none of this can happen, I mean it just does not happen, and then he started telling me how we had to all go together to join his group and we'd buy us a compound and set up some real equipment for the war that surely would be coming now that I had appeared.

I am not ready for any of this.

My sister, meantime, has a dreamy look on her face and she's marching around the table like a zombie, muttering to herself. "I know," she says, "what I'm called for."

"What is it, Sis?" my brother asks.

"Mary Magdalene. It makes so much sense: a saint and a—well, you know. I feel like all my contradictions are resolved."

"Hey, J.H.," my brother said. "Excuse me, I mean 'sir,' maybe you could do something about how Baptists think about gays."

"He might even get us in the military," Steve suggested.

"Well, who wants that?" Joey asked. "What do you think? What do you think, J.H.?"

I think that I live in a lunatic asylum.

And so there was this movement with my whole family and their groups and things spreading the word, while I sat around letting my hair and beard grow. They took turns writing down my "utterances,"

which was my father's idea. I'd be having a beer in front of the Super Bowl and some fool is working at a stenographer's pad setting down all my cussing and such. The world is a crazier place than any of us think.

My father's group has set up the compound, and we all visited it one day to inspect where we would spend the last days; it's an armed camp all right; if we hole up there, it'd take a pretty big bomb to get us out. Would we be safe? I don't know. My father claims we would. He's so proud and he says it's like he now knows the point of his whole life, the muscles and the training and the guns, so I can't tell him it's all a joke, all a joke, all my idea of jarring him and my mom and Mary Jo and everybody back to normal. God, they won't go in that direction. He still starts to cry whenever he looks straight at me, and Mom has a whole troupe of friends that dance her "Peace and Love" number with her every day.

My mother and sister have turned out to be great fund raisers, so the sky's the limit, my dad says. They got on this local tv interview program and there's no stopping them now; they're aiming for Geraldo or Oprah. Or both. And my brother and Steve are practicing with the guns and all, right along with Dad. They really seem to love their uniforms and they can hardly keep their hands off one another when they're dressed that way.

But I saw this girl among my followers, over at my mother's house; she's really, really pretty, dark hair and eyes, definitely not my type. She's a real Looney Tune, as it turns out. Of course, she would have to be to be one of my disciples. Still I had to get to talk to her because she gave me a boner just to look at her. I asked her to go into the side porch with me and of course she went because my every wish is everybody's command now that I'm Jesus.

She was prepared to be reverent, bowing down like in church, not raising her eyes to look at me. Hell's bells, what can I get out of an approach like that? "Honey," I said, "it's a joke; it's not . . ." The way she looked I knew right then I couldn't go at it that way.

"Thank you, Lord," she said. "I have been singled out for--"

"Something special," I said, trying to look sexy.

It doesn't work; she kissed my hand, or rather my class ring. Why shouldn't I wear it now that Mary Jo has thrown it back? This kid has the most beautiful neck and her hair seems really natural or something, falling down around her face. If only we could be real people for five minutes.

Later, I found Elizabeth (that's her name) and asked her to walk with me. She was going to take the utterance notebook but I put a stop to that. "Off the record," I said. "C'mon, just a guy and a girl, all right?"

She looked very doubtful like she doesn't believe me unless I'm playing God or whatever these maniacs expect. "Do you mean we have to be together to form the whole which is our Second Coming?" she asked.

What could anyone reply but "Huh?"

"I understand that there must be union at every level to form the God who will set us all free from our earthly life, and now I am called to be the other half of God. Yes, I will be your girl."

Well, that much I could catch. "Elizabeth, please," I said, "I have to explain to you."

"I'm ready," she said, all atremble and everything.

"I have to tell you about my true self, Elizabeth. I'm not Jesus Christ. Really, I'm not. I'm just me, I'm just ordinary. I'm just Jimi Hendrix Connelly, because my mother went to Woodstock. We're all crazy, but I'm just me."

She gives me this glazed-over look that means everything I say is like water off a duck's back. I have seen this look thousands of times before; on my mother's face and my sister's face, and so on.

Then I grabbed her, I'm out of my mind with this shit, everybody out of touch with the world, I mean isn't there a real world? everybody pretending until they really believe themselves, and now I know a little bit about how it can be done, everybody helps you be anything but your true self. Isn't that true? Well, I wasn't going to help her anymore. I shook her hard and yelled right in her face, "You were born like anybody else, you went to grade school, you played with other kids, you went to high school, your name is Elizabeth Grundy and that's your true self! You're not the other half of God!"

She gave me this little half-smile like she understands what I say before I say it. And it really turns me on.

"C'mon out to my pickup," I said. "Let's get acquainted."

She nodded. "Can I meet your true self?" she asked. Real cute.

"If I can meet yours." I can be cute too if that's what she wants.

We're on the way to my rig and it comes to me that she's really serious about me; she really thinks I'm the Messiah thing and only she can bring me out. What I want to hear as flirting she just means straight out. That's what I'm afraid of, that and the fact that maybe we're all going over this deep end together. Once you leave normal can you ever get back? much less take other people with you. I'll fall in love with her and she'll want me to be Jesus and—God knows what will happen, but I don't.

That's the way it should be, right? God knows, but I'm not God, so I don't know. Not even who I really am. When I'm in my pickup with Elizabeth, who will I come out to be? ■