



Justin as Sinbad the Sailor, 7th Grade

What would happen if...
a memoir by Justin McGonigle

Dedicated to Jesse S.

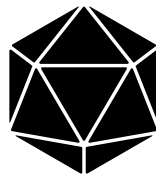
From the Author

The following 15 stories are based on actual events. These are the top 15 things that have happened to me that I feel represent who and what I am. They may not be the most cherished memories that I have but I feel their impact on me as a person is profound. With few exceptions, the names and places have been changed to protect the innocent. They are in their order of occurrence. From first to last.

-JM

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The Dead Cat by Justin McGonigle

The smell was of sweet and sour chicken mixed with vinegar and motor oil. A deep rancid smell. I smelled it for 3 or 4 days before I found its source. Did anyone else notice that one of our cats is missing? When I was a kid, my family had a lot of pets that didn't last long for one reason or another.

I found it dead in a little cubby at the top of the barn stairs. It was my first time finding a dead cat. I'm not sure we had this cat long or if it was even part of the family yet. One day I noticed it missing and then I found it dead.

It was half rotted, in the corner with the darkest shadows. It was lying on its side and it had a smile on its face. It was made of grey clumps of fur, forming the shape of a cat.

I didn't want to touch it and disturb its peace. I walked away, wondering how long it would take to decompose.

I don't remember telling anyone about it. I do remember going back later to see it, but by then it was almost gone and didn't look like a cat anymore.

Kung Fu Comb by Justin McGonigle

I'm not sure how I acquired a switch blade comb. One day I just had it. It was small and made of plastic but the comb popped up just like a blade. I thought it was funny to whip it out, hit the button and see the look on someone's face when they realized it was just a comb. My 10 year old brain loved it!

One day I thought I'd bring it to school. I couldn't wait to surprise someone with it. I was walking into lunch when I saw my first victim. He was a teacher. "This will be my masterpiece!" I thought. I was giddy with anticipation.

I crept towards him, he was standing outside the lunchroom door, pulled out the comb, hit the button, and yelled: "I got ya!"

Before I knew what was happening, he grabbed my arm, twisted it behind my back and pushed me up against the lunchroom window. He took the comb from my hand and held me in place so that he could inspect it.

Once he realized that it was just a toy, he spun me back around and said something like: "Don't do that again" and he sent me on my way.

I didn't stop getting into trouble or stop watching Kung Fu movies but I never did that again.

Mugga's Beating by Justin McGonigle

I wanted to see how serious Mugga was. She told me that if I did anything else, I'd be in big trouble. Mugga was my neighbor. She had 3 daughters and a husband who could make sounds like a duck and a motorboat. I was at their house a lot. They lived right down the street from us. I was 10 at the time.

"Do anything else and you're in trouble. I'll be right in the house, so I can see you." Mugga said to me. Me and Mugga's girls were horsing around outside in the driveway. Their house was a long, one story structure that always smelled of goats. They had goats and would insist that I try goat's milk, which I did one day and it wasn't bad.

This day, however, there wasn't much to do. I think the game I was playing was 'see how much fun I could have throwing stuff' or something like that.

I picked up a piece of bark from the ground and threw it at the youngest girl. It was a bullseye, right in her face.

Before I could laugh, out came Mugga from inside the house. She had the look of a crazy person and a thick leather belt was in her right hand. She came straight for me.

I dogged her and ran into the house. My plan was to run from one side of the house to the other side of the house and jump on my bike, which was leaning on the big maple tree outside.

I ran for my life through the dark house, a house that was always dark, even on a sunny day, and headed for the bright screen door on the other side of the damp living room. Mugga was on my heels.

I made it outside and to my bike, but before I could get on and ride away, she landed the first blow. Wack! Right on my back. Seconds later, another blow. Thwack! A direct hit. Before she could land the third blow, I was on my bike, heading home, which was only a stone's throw away.

I ran into the house to get my parents and I dragged them outside to show them what Mugga had done. I lifted my shirt. My back was covered with fresh welts and had grown numb and stiff.

"See what Mugga did." I said to them. Surely there would be some justice now!, I thought.

"Oh, that looks terrible. What did you do to make her do that?" My Father asked.

"Do?" I said. "Is there anything you can do?"

"Well, it's not really our business." They said.

"Oh." I said, and said nothing more. My parents went inside and I began to cry.

I remember feeling helpless and hopeless. It stuck with me for a long time. There wasn't much to laugh about after that happened.

I called Mugga many years later. I still remembered the phone number. I asked her if she felt that what she did was wrong and would she do it again, given the chance. She said no. I said OK and hung up. I called her early on a Sunday morning, I knew she'd be up.

Peeing on the Fire
by Justin McGonigle

If you play with fire, you will get burned.
-Proverb

I'm not sure whose idea it was to build a fire but I do remember who suggested the gas. I remembered seeing old boards, laying on the ground, down by the side of the barn. "And then we can pee on it," I said. "Yeah," someone else said. "We could build a fire and pee on it to put it out," I said, as we walked down the dark, old, splintery barn stairs.

I remembered seeing a red gas can days earlier beside some of my Father's tools. I knew that gas started fires. I poured some into a small, plastic cup and threw it onto a dry pile of boards. I lit it with some matches I had taken from the kitchen. It poofed up into life. A small, red and orange flame burned brightly on a section of one of the dry boards. It wasn't a large fire but I figured with time, it would grow and then we could pee on it. I watched satisfied, staring into the small flame, when I saw Dale, Dale was younger than us, pick up the gas can and pour gas onto the fire. I watched as a yellow, orange flame climbed up the stream of gas, into the can, and onto the small amount Dale had accidentally poured onto his pant leg. It was chaos!

"Fire!" I shouted and ran to the pile of dry boards and started beating Dale's leg with one of them to help put out the fire. I didn't know what else to do and there was no water! The fire was soon eliminated. Dale was in tears and screaming in agony. We gathered ourselves and picked Dale up and walked him up the stairs and towards the house. I ran inside to get my Mother and I pulled her outside. She grabbed the hose and began to spray Dale's leg. He screamed and cried : "Don't tell Mom!" over and over. His Mother was known to be strict and he was terrified to get into trouble.

His leg had suffered third degree burns. He stood there, best he could, as the water from the hose bounced off of his newly burned skin. Moments later, his brother brought him home, which was right down the street.

We never really talked about what had happened that day but I did see Dale's leg some time later. It looked like he had suffered a lot.

As far as fires go, we never did stop making them but I don't think we used gas anymore.

Running Away From School and the Gym Show
by Justin McGonigle

I'm calling him Mr. Ape because he looked and acted just like an ape. He had hairy arms and was always in a bad mood. His classroom was the place other teachers would escort us to if we were in trouble. I knew that staple on the wall, the one I was told to keep my eyes on or else, very well. This day, Mr. Ape was filling in for our regular gym teacher, who was absent.

Mr. Bird Face, our Principal, didn't look much like a bird, but I'm calling him that because just like a bird, he would peck at us until we were ripped apart like a pile of birdseed. He was always there, hovering around us. Keeping an eye on everything, always, until the end of time. I hated him.

Standing in a corner of the gym, Mr. Ape began watching over our gym class. I was in the 6th grade. This day, we were playing floor hockey.

Floor hockey was one of my favorites. I had become quite good at playing hockey. Every winter I would play on the nearby ponds. This particular day, before class ended, I was up to 19 goals. By then, I had talked mad trash and Mr. Ape had told me that if I didn't settle down, I'd be in trouble. I didn't take him seriously. What I didn't realize, was that Mr. Ape had had enough.

Trying for my 20th goal, I took a strong slap-shot, almost hitting someone. It was strong enough for Mr. Ape to remind me that I was still on thin ice. I muttered something under my breath like: "Go screw." Well, that was enough. Mr. Ape quickly escorted me out into the hallway and in front of a plaque hanging on the wall. He said: "Memorize this plaque, and when I come back right before class ends, if you've not done what I've asked, you're in big trouble, young man." He went back into the gym and I found myself alone staring at a plaque on the wall.

I felt humiliated. Part of me believed that Mr. Ape was going to award me for all the goals I scored. And maybe join in, man to man, in some of my trash talking. But instead, I found myself staring at 20 words on the wall that I had to memorize in 5 minutes and if I didn't, God only knows what would happen. I was already in big trouble with Mr. Ape and with half the faculty. I was often insubordinate.

I evaluated my situation. Behind me, were the double set of doors, leading outside. They were right next to the gym. I turned around and went through each set of doors as fast as I could. I was free! I started running home. It was about a mile or so away. I ran half way home when Principal Bird Face appeared in his car. Some tall hedges were between him and I, when he began to speak to me, saying: "Justin, I can see you. Why don't you get in the car so that we can go back to school? C'mon Justin, get in the car." When I passed the last hedge, I bolted for my house. My plan was to run into the woods and sit in a tree and hide. As I entered the grass driveway, that led to the woods, I saw Bird Face pull into the main driveway. We were neck and neck.

I made it to my tree and sat in it until I felt that Bird Face was gone. My Father, who worked 3 days a week, was home. I figured my Father and the Principal would talk for a while and then I'd go up and speak with my Father and figure something out. I couldn't stay in the tree forever. After a little while, I made my way up to the house. I spoke with my Father and we both decided that I should go back to school. It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I thought for sure, the school would reward me for coming back or at least be easy on me.

My Father drove me back to school. I remember how nervous I was. He dropped me off in front of the school and a teacher walked me back to my classroom. I sat there stupefied until I was called into the Principal's Office. He told me that my punishment would be that I couldn't be in the Gym Show. I was devastated. I had trained for it all year. I was really good at vaulting. I could vault over 4 people doing the splits and bounce off my head the long way. It was going to be the culmination of all my hard work. Most of the town would be there. It was a special night. I couldn't believe that I wouldn't be a part of it anymore.

I did go the night of the show. I don't remember much. I remember mostly someone climbing a rope really well and someone doing a floor performance. I don't remember the vaulting.

Years later, I found out from a friend, he was a few grades ahead of me, that he too was denied the Gym Show for his insolence.

7th Grade Mixer
by Justin McGonigle

My Father taught me how to shave and tie a tie the night of my 7th Grade Mixer. It was my first big dance and I felt like I was becoming a man. "Would you show me how to shave and tie a tie?" I asked my Father. I fully expected him to say no. He was always busy. "Sure," he said. I was excited.

He stood behind me in front of the bathroom mirror as he tied the tie around my neck. "Take the tie and make it long, with the thicker end towards the bottom," he said. "Now take the skinny side and wrap it around twice and up through the hole it makes at the top." This part confused me but I finally got the idea. "OK?" He said. "OK." I said. "Now I'll show you how to shave."

He took some shaving cream and put it on his face. He took the razor and with the blunt side, ran through a little of the shaving cream making a path like cutting the grass. "Like that," he said. "You try." I took some cream and put it on my face. I then took the razor and did what he did. "Good," he said. I felt like I was well on my way.

Next was the picking out of my outfit and a shower. I chose a green and white checked Wrangler long sleeve dress shirt with snaps for buttons. It was one of my favorite shirts (I was going through a Rhinestone Cowboy phase). For the pants I chose tan chinos and for shoes, brown topsiders. "I was gonna look slick," I thought.

I then took a shower. This time I used both shampoo and conditioner. I couldn't stop thinking about all the new girls I'd see. This was a new school for me. 7th Grade was part of a Regional High School so a bunch of new people from other towns were now in my class. I wanted to make a good impression.

I then got to work on shaving and seeing if I could tie my tie. I shaved this time (or pretended to anyway) with the razor side of the blade. I did cut myself once, but then I got to put a little piece of toilet paper over the cut making it a red dot on my face. I thought it looked cool and manly. I saw it once on T.V..

I then got dressed and was able to tie the tie. I was all set. It was the first time I really ever looked in the mirror. I thought for sure I'd knock 'em dead.

To be honest, I had more fun getting ready for the dance than I did at the actual dance. I remember for most of the night, all the girls stood on one side of the cafeteria and all the boys on the other side. There really wasn't much co-mingling going on. I talked and horsed around most of the night with the kids I already knew. I do remember one of the cooler kids did dance a little but other than that there wasn't much dancing at all.

Later on in High School we had a dance that we needed to ask someone to. That was fun and I definitely did dance at that one! Later still, I attended several proms (I ended up going to three different High Schools) and they were all a blast.

Sinbad
by Justin McGonigle

“What would happen if?” I thought. “What would happen if I really tried?”

My 7th grade teacher said that we could dress up in costume for our book report. “I’ll ransack my Mother’s drawers and closet and find the perfect outfit for Sinbad,” I planned in my head. “Sinbad the Sailor has a fancy wardrobe: head gear with pants and shoes to match. His jewelry is abundant and he has a big sword.” The aluminum foil and cardboard sword came out great.

As I went through my Mother’s wardrobe, the morning of the presentation, I was giddy with excitement. “I’ll surprise everyone,” I laughed to myself. “It’s going to be so funny.”

I found everything I needed. I found head gear, a shirt, pants, shoes, stockings, a scarf, jewelry. Everything. I stuffed it all in a bag and quickly got to work on the sword. I cut out a sword shape from a big piece of cardboard and wrapped aluminum foil over the part that would be the blade. I left the handle bare. I was able to hide my haul well enough to avoid detection going to school.

There I was, first period, in the bathroom, putting on my costume with my fake sword next to me. I think the teacher knew what I was up to when I asked her to go to the bathroom to change. She gave me a look. I don’t think anyone else had caught on.

I was all decked out. My 2 inch, high heels, clicked and clacked as I walked up the long hallway towards my classroom. I was both nervous and excited. I opened the classroom door and closed it behind me. I smiled and held up my sword. Someone was there to take a picture (it might have been the teacher). My friend sent me that picture years later (I almost fell out of my chair when I saw it. It had been 40 years).

I don’t remember much from my presentation, but I got an A and I was proud of myself.

I retained my love for performance and later on I joined the chorus and was in several plays. Now it’s mostly singing Karaoke and singing every year at Christmas.

The idea of “What would happen if?” never left me. To this day, I still use it to keep the gate open between me and the impossible.

The Day I Was Jack “the Shot” Foley’s Ball Boy
by Justin McGonigle

We were horsing around on the shed next to the basketball hoop. I was waiting to see who would jump off the roof first, me or my brother. We tired of this game quickly and my brother and the Foley boys went into the house. I found myself alone, standing there.

A car pulled up. It was Mr. Foley. I thought right away that I was in trouble. Jack was a cop in town and I was terrified of him. He never spoke to me.

He looked straight at me and started walking towards me. I thought for sure, this is it, I'm done, my goose is cooked.

He said: "Hey, throw me that ball". He wore a plaid shirt, jeans and work boots. His feet were about a size 11 or 13. I quickly ran to get the ball. My teenage arms were like lead throwing the ball back to him. I knew something special was about to happen.

Jack "the Shot" Foley began to shoot the basketball, moving around the yard in a semi-circle pattern. He lifted the ball high and behind his head, making it impossible for even Wilt himself to block it and then threw it as a line drive into the basket from about 30ft away.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. He never missed. Slowly and methodically he moved around, on the rocky ground, as if he'd done it a thousand times before. And each time a perfect swoosh.

One by one he knocked them off. Most of them rolled back to him, some I had to retrieve. He shot about a dozen or so, going from one side to another or 'round the world' (in basketball lingo).

He then stopped and walked into the house. He was satisfied.

I stood there watching him walk away in disbelief, clutching the basketball, wondering how does someone become that good?

My bother and the Foley boys came back outside. I don't remember what happened next, but I bet it had something to do with basketball.

In his three seasons as a [Holy Cross] Crusader, [Jack Foley] scored so many points that his nickname, "the Shot", was what he was commonly referred to. Wikipedia.

First Night of Drinking by Justin McGonigle

Someone had the idea to get drunk. At the time I didn't care much because I had a sleepover to go to. I would see my favorite Adult Film star Seka on Cable T.V.. I knew nothing about getting drunk. It would be my first time. I was 14.

The drink was Midori Melon. My friends and I gathered in a room at the bottom of the barn. I had seen a game called 'quarters' on T.V. and suggested we play. Someone had a shot glass. We didn't have a quarter but we tried with a super-ball. It didn't last long. We each took a few shots of the mysterious green liquid. I felt it almost immediately.

I felt like a rocket ship that had just had a million gallons of rocket fuel poured into it. I was fired up. I suggested we all go uptown to see about getting some snacks. At this point, all I wanted to do was to go outside into the world and see what kind of trouble I could get into.

We were at the store for a bit when this creeping feeling of worry started to come over me. Still drunk, I began saying every 5 minutes that I couldn't stay long because I had a sleep over to go to. Honestly, I don't think anyone was paying attention. We were all pretty tipsy.

After about 20 minutes or so, satisfied, we left the store. At some point, I found myself alone, wandering around town getting into trouble. At one point, I was on top of the war monument. At another, I lost my shoe and found it, after destroying someone's mailbox. I was a mess.

I looked for my friends but couldn't find them. I had a sleep over to get to anyway. I needed to see Seka!

I started to walk the mile to my friends house when I passed a house I recognized with a bike owned by someone I knew laying on the lawn. I took the bike (I figured my friend wouldn't mind) and began to ride drunk to my sleepover.

I finally made it to my friends house. I was beyond excited. He thought that I was acting strange but didn't seem to mind. I settled into one of his chairs and began to watch T.V. waiting for that golden moment when I would see my blond angel. A thriller was on. I knew it well. It was at the part when someone says: "Do you want to see something REALLY scary?" and he turns into a monster and eats his friend's face. I soon fell asleep. The combination of excitement and alcohol and now a recliner was too much for me. I was out.

Moments later, my friend woke me up and said the Police were outside. Something about a stolen bike. My friends house was on a main road. Someone must have reported the bike stolen and the Police saw it in my friends driveway. I wasn't too careful with it. I kinda just threw it on the ground.

I went outside and there was a cruiser in the driveway. The Police Officer on duty was Mr. Foley. He was also a Basketball Coach at the High School. He was known as Jack 'the shot' Foley because he scored so many points in college. I was good friends with 3 of his sons. We didn't interact much. Although, I got to be his ball boy for about 10 minutes once. That was really cool.

Mr. Foley asked me about the bike. I told him that I was just borrowing it and that I knew whose it was and that I didn't think that my friend would mind. By then I had sobered up.

He told me that he would bring me home. I told him that my parents weren't home and that they were at a party. I suggested Mugga's house down the street. Mr. Foley knew Mugga. We pulled into Mugga's driveway and Mr. Foley got out. He knocked on her door and proceeded to explain the situation. I walked into her house, over to the couch and passed out. Moments later, I woke up, rushed to her bathroom down the hall and threw up uncontrollably all over it. I threw up on everything. The floor. The toilet. The wall. The sink. Even the laundry. In some small way, I felt like I was getting back at her for all the times she either hit me or tried to hit me.

It was enough to have her rush to the door to see what was happening. She couldn't believe what she saw. "Clean it up!" She squawked. "I will," I said. She got me a bucket, a mop, some towels and some liquid soap. I did the best I could but not very well. I didn't feel very well. I still felt terrible. I went back to the couch when I heard Mugga yelling: "What the? Come back here and finish the job!" She wasn't satisfied with my work. I got up from the couch and did as good a job as I had done before. This time she let it pass. I think at this point she was tired of looking at my face. After that, I noticed Police lights coming from my driveway up the street. I began to walk home.

As I entered the driveway, I noticed not only Mr. Foley standing there, but my entire family: my parents, my sister, and both my brothers. As I passed them, they just stared at me and shook their heads in disgust. I was ashamed.

I walked inside and climbed into bed. My Mother came up and put a wet washcloth on my forehead. She told me that I'd have to help Mr. Foley with the mailbox that I had broken. Someone saw me and reported it. I said OK and fell asleep.

The next morning Mr. Foley came and picked me up to fix the mailbox. I did the best I could but not very well. I was never great at carpentry.

What I didn't know, was that in less than a year, my family would move a hundred miles away to the big city and that my life would never be the same again.

My Goal Under the Lights by Justin McGonigle

I was both nervous and scared. My Father drove me to Soccer Tryouts at my new High School in the big city. Half of me wanted to crawl into a hole and hide. However, my love of soccer was too great. I had played it ever since I could remember and I did very well on the soccer field. When I was in the 3rd or 4th grade, a group of kids would chase me around on the playground and try to take the ball away from me. None of them could. Eventually, none of them wanted to play with me, so I'd tell them I wouldn't try so hard. Sometimes it worked.

Today was different. I had no idea what to expect. Maybe my country ways wouldn't be up to snuff in the big city? There were nearly 4,000 kids in my new School. During my tenure there, I saw a new face everyday. My old High School had only 900 kids, 7-12 and everybody knew everybody.

My Father dropped me off and he went and talked to the Coach for a minute letting him know that I'd be trying out. At the same time, I put my cleats on, sizing up the other players out of the corner of my eye, wondering how well I'd do. I was beyond excited.

I said hi to the Coach and to the rest of the players and then we began to play. I did what I'd always done, played a game that I loved to the best of my ability. I did well too. I did well enough to impress, and I became the new starting Right Wing for J.V., Division I Soccer for a big city High School. It was my Sophomore year, I was 15 and I was on top of the world!

My new High School was big enough to have lights on the field. Their stadium was shaped like an oval with bleachers on both sides, one side for the Home Team and one side for the Visiting Team. When the lights were on, it was like standing inside of a dream. I couldn't wait to play.

My night game finally arrived. I would be under the lights! I took to the field as I had done so many times before with butterflies in my stomach, feeling like I had to pee.

The game progressed and then suddenly I found myself alone with the ball facing the Goalie. It's a feeling I won't ever forget. It feels like I'd rather be some place else but no where else but

here, right now. Knowing that I could either blow it or taste the glory is over whelming. All of this decision making is within less than a second of time and experience is usually the key for success.

I had found myself alone many times before in front of the Goalie hoping to score. I decided to do what I had always done in this situation. I kicked it as hard as I could on the ground to the Keeper's left, requiring him to twist, bend his knees and bend down, all at the same time. It's difficult for any athlete, but done correctly, knowing that the grass is also slick from the evening dew, it can be quite effective. It went in. I had scored!

A feeling of pure ecstasy came over me catapulting me to the top of Soccer Mountain. Gym show, plim show, I was now a soccer star!

My soccer success continued on that season in full throttle. I scored 19 goals and I was invited to play States at the end of the regular season with the Varsity players. I substituted into every game and I even had 2 assists!

The following year, my luck would soon turn when I was savagely attacked and stabbed, essentially ending my soccer career. I would quit that big High School and go to a much smaller High School in the next town over, where my Mother taught English. She was also an English Teacher back at my old country High School. I couldn't play soccer though, because I had quit High School (a rule states that you can't play the following semester if you quit) and I had to repeat the 11th grade. I wanted to graduate in 1987 (that was my graduation year), so I took Night School for my Senior year and at the same time I went to School during the day for my Junior year. It was double the work but worth it. I barely graduated.

I got worse from there. I partied way too much, stole money for drugs, ended up in rehab and was going to AA meetings with peers twice my age. I was 18 and lost. I tried to recapture that glory that I felt that night under the lights but failed. I wound up capturing a different kind of glory. A glory just as sweet. I would discover the world and my place in it.

My First Time by Justin McGonigle

Trudy would lean on her elbow and stare at me for minutes on end in the middle of class. When I'd catch her (she sat right next to me), she'd look away and stop, pretending to do something else. She wrote JM + TT all over her notebooks. This was a new school for me. My hometown had a Regional High School. I had never met Trudy before. It was the 7th grade. We were 12.

I knew Trudy for 3 years before my family and I moved to the big city. We were friends but never hooked up. She had other boyfriends and I had other girlfriends. We were always friendly to each other and she was very nice. We moved to the big city the summer before I entered the 10th grade. I was 15.

During my semester of soccer glory at my new big city High School (I had one of the best seasons I ever had my Sophomore year), and long before my denouement the following year (I was brutally attacked and stabbed by a fellow classmate, resulting in me becoming isolated, quitting school, going back to school and graduating but ending up in rehab for 7 weeks, less

than a year later), my twin sister had a group of her girlfriends down to our big city house for the weekend. Trudy was one of them.

I was a virgin. Trudy wasn't. Trudy went with an upperclassman but had broken up. Trudy and I hooked up. I was now officially a man. Trudy said that she was impressed with my skills. I couldn't tell her that it was because of all the hours I watched my favorite Adult Film star, Seka do her thing on the screen. I just smiled.

Shortly after, one of the girls from my sister's friend group had a party of her own back at our old country hometown. I was there. Trudy was there. She had hoped that we would hook up again, but I ended up with someone else. Trudy seemed hurt. I felt like a shmuck.

Many years later, Trudy bought one of my paintings. She said that she felt sorry for me. I must have seemed hard up.

Swimming Where the Whales Live by Justin McGonigle

I never went to college. I graduated from High School in 1987. I was accepted into Art School after all the dust had settled after going to rehab and AA meetings the year after graduation, but I didn't go because I was told there was no money. Seems like a small reason looking back on it now, over 30 years later.

Instead, I traveled around the country, by bus, living in the Pacific Northwest and in the center of the country where the mountains are high and where the air is thin. I had a series of low level jobs and I did my best to build a life for myself. I did that for almost 2 years.

I was now tired of the road and back at home, seeing my umpteenth therapist, taking an anti-depressant, and riding back and forth on my bike from the big city to our family's cottage by the beach about 20 miles away. I was tan, in shape and high as a kite on youth and vigor. But I was alone, with no direction.

One day my Mother let me know about this opportunity about a tall ship, The Crusher, looking for a crew to help it sail to Africa.

I jumped at the chance. I had been sailing since I could crawl around on my Grandfather's boat up on the beach and jumping off of it into the water. I needed to come up with an idea of how I could stand out during the interview. I remembered reading about Photographers and Artists onboard expeditions to record their surroundings. Because I was always good at art, I told them that I'd be happy to record the trip on The Crusher with drawings, watercolors, etc.. They loved the idea and said yes!

We set sail, after making ready for a month in port, and after getting delayed and having the project temporarily fall through, full of excitement. We were headed for the Azores, off of the coast of Africa, for The Crusher's 100th Anniversary of bringing the Portuguese immigrants to the big city where I lived.

At one point, we were 2 weeks out to sea. We were halfway to the Azores. Someone suggested we swim. Someone watched for sharks while others jumped from the rigging into the water.

I jumped in. I could see forever in every direction except down, which was as black as tar.

Under the water, the color was aqua blue and the sun broke through the surface of the water making it look like stained glass. The water was not cold and I did it several times.

One night, not long after, I was in my bunk for my 4 hours of sleep after my watch, when I began to hear whales. They made clicking sounds and they sang to each other. It seemed like at one point one was feet away from me and my bunk. My bunk was below the water line. It felt like I could touch the whale. It sang to me and I fell asleep.

My time on The Crusher was brief. A combination of a large storm (later known as 'The Perfect Storm') and almost getting into a fist fight with some of the crew (they pooped in the sink and put a boot in the stew!), we were pushed down to Puerto Rico and I was asked to leave. They asked where I'd like to be flown to, I said to be with my sister, who was living in the southern part of the U.S.. I called her ahead of time to make sure it was OK. It was.

And so began my journey living in the South. Where the people melt your heart and the sun bakes your brain.

My Night of Death Drinking in the South by Justin McGonigle

I had been living in the South for about half a year, with my twin sister, when I got an idea in my head about getting plastered one night.

I drank a pint of schnapps and peddled to the restaurant/bar where I worked as a dishwasher on the bmx bike I traveled around on. I still didn't have my driver's license. I never thought I needed it. Most of the places I lived in had public transportation or I could walk or ride a bike from place to place.

Tonight was hot and I was buzzing pretty hard already when I got to the restaurant 3 miles away. I stashed my bike and flew through the doors and headed straight for the pool table where I thought I'd mingle for a little while and then mosey on over to the bar.

My time at the pool table was brief. I didn't know anybody. I headed over to the bar, where I knew the bar keep, and consumed 4 Tequila Sunrises while I chewed the fat and pontificated about God knows what.

About 90 minutes later, someone offered me a ride home. I got up from my seat, after saying my goodbyes, opened the door to the outside, stepped out into the warm air and immediately didn't feel well. I was plastered and the hot air shot through me like a canon ball.

We loaded up my bike into his truck and we started towards my apartment on the other side of town. I began to feel sick and I threw up out of his truck's window while we were still moving. He asked if I could wait until I got home to get sick. I said OK.

We arrived at my place and he helped me with my bike and with me (I could barely walk) get into the apartment. He got me in and said farewell.

For the next 2 hours I was wrapped around the toilet seat fading in and out of consciousness. Most of it was dry heaves and I felt like I was dying. I must have had alcohol poisoning. I was weak and couldn't move. All I thought of was how foolish I'd been.

My sister found me on the bathroom floor. She brought me next door to our friend's apartment where she said I could sleep it off. I remember how safe and sound I felt, lying there in the soft bed, no longer sick from the previous night and glad that I didn't die.

I lived down South for nearly a year. I worked mostly as a dishwasher and made lots of paintings on cardboard and canvas paper. I'd spend all night sometimes making art listening to Led Zeppelin on my portable cassette player. I sold my first painting while I lived there for \$32.

My sister and I eventually drove back up North together, she had her license, back to our big city home. We both said our goodbyes to the South.

What I didn't know at the time, was that soon, what I had done my entire life, making art, would be what I did full time. A whole new world would open up for me and for the first time in a long time, I would feel complete.

My Big Art Show by Justin McGonigle

Little did I know, that one by one, some of my dreams would come true.

I became a full time artist in my early 20's, after my time in the South and after living in another big city for almost a year. I asked my parents if I could live with them and see if I could be successful as an artist.

At the same time, there was an Art Gallery opening up in my big city home, called Gallery Q. It was made up of people similar to me: creative with a need for direction and involvement.

At Gallery Q I shined. At my first group show, I was called a genius and a great artist. My heart soared like an eagle. I felt as if I had finally arrived. I was now officially an artist!

Shortly after, I was planning to move to the Art Capitol of the World, New York City, when the phone rang. God had other plans for me. What I didn't know then, was that my future was on the other end.

The phone call was for an interview for a position, I had applied for earlier, to work as a First Person Interpreter at a 17th Century Living History Museum. I had visited the museum earlier and fell in love with it and thought that it would be something I would enjoy. Here was my chance and I took it.

I got the job. I was 25. I worked there for 7 years. There, I met the woman that would become my wife (she worked in the Wardrobe Department). We were married 2 years later and our daughter was born 2 years after that.

What I did the entire time I traveled from place to place was make art. I never stopped. I would occasionally sell art or have my art in a fancy store or be part of a show; it's what I did and I loved it!

A few years into my family life, I rekindled my relationship with Gallery Q (it had been 6 or 7 years since my debut there). I would soon be part of a 3 person show. I couldn't wait. By then, my work was strong and well received. I was confident that my group show would be a big hit.

The night of the show was electric. All night I was treated like a star. My reception at the show couldn't have been better. Lots of people came up to speak with me, including old friends. I also had some interest from a patron who wanted to purchase some of my work. I still have the painting he wanted to buy. It was out of his price range. It's one of my best.

I still live this way. I'm 57 now (2026). At one point in my 30's, I did go to College. I received my Associates Degree in Web Design and Media Arts. I worked in the business casual world as a Web/Graphic Designer for 10 years. I cashed out after 10 years and brought my daughter to Europe. 5 Countries in 20 days. We went there in 2016. It was amazing!

What I didn't plan for, was that, a year later, my past would catch up with me and I would find myself leveled. I never dealt with my past problems and I was carrying them around with me wherever I went. It affected everything I did and often with poor results.

I would soon find myself at the bottom of the sea of life. I had a nervous breakdown. In the end, singing is what finally saved me.

Karaoke (How I Got My Mojo Back)
by Justin McGonigle

That's what you get for pretending the danger's not real.
- Pink Floyd

It was 2017, and there I was, in a strange bed, in a strange city, with not enough blankets and a street light coming through the window and straight into my eyes. Only a few hours earlier, I had had a breakdown at my home and here I was to get evaluated, cold and annoyed.

I was glad to be here. I was at the end of my rope. My untreated mental illness had finally caught up with me. I needed a break. I needed to hit rock bottom before I could go up. I needed Modus Interruptus.

My stay wasn't long and after a few group sessions and after 4 days or so, I was brought home, 90 minutes away, during a snow storm. With me in the back seat, my driver and I, in a Subaru, flew past everyone on the highway in about 2 feet of snow. I felt like I was being reborn. I arrived home and so began my journey of recovery.

I began out-patient group therapy, started a mood stabilizer, and almost had another episode. What saved me the moment that the episode was about to take effect, was that I started singing. I was able to clear the air. I felt different. I felt that something big was happening. I went home for lunch that day in a daze.

My time at out-patient therapy was brief. I left in good stead, after about a week or so, and I began to take Audio Therapy. My specialist used gongs, sound bowls and crystals to realign my molecules. The sound enters through the top of the head, and reorders the atoms in the body, into patterns, much like sand on a metal sheet after vibration is applied to it.

When I finished Sound Therapy (after a few weeks), I began CBT (Cognitive Behavior Training) to begin to help rebuild me as a person. I felt lost and unsure of where I fit in. CBT helped me target 'who I am' and helped me share myself with the world.

This is when I began my Karaoke channel Uncle Krusty's Karaoke Hour. I devised a way to film myself singing Karaoke, while I followed along with the song on YouTube. I would then upload the video to YouTube under the heading: Uncle Krusty's Karaoke Hour. There was also a website component, where visitors could request a song for Uncle Krusty to sing. Uncle Krusty is what some of my family call me. As of now, and having made my last video about 2 years ago, I'm up to nearly 50 Uncle Krusty's Karaoke Hour videos.

My singing Karaoke at home led me to singing Karaoke in public. By the time I realized I was singing Karaoke in public, I was a person again. I was good and people liked me.

Along with singing, I had a position as a caretaker of farm animals for private parties. I loved it and the tips were great!

And then Covid hit. I was able to collect, and then after a year and a half, I landed a job in the manufacturing field. Good times.

I continue to care for my mental health everyday and I strive to do good in the world.

Currently, I'm working on a painting series exploring the nature of the 'still life'. I'm also thinking about my next writing project.

If I could change one thing in my life, as of now, 2026, I wish I had made more of a fuss about going to Art School all those years ago. I think Art School would have been good for me at a crucial time in my development and I think that I would have really enjoyed it. What would happen if I went to Art School now?

Justin McGonigle, is a full time creative person. He spends his time as a semi retired person, living with his wife and their 3 cats. Besides his writing, he's currently working on a painting series exploring the nature of the 'still life'.

