

*Bill W., A Strange Salvation*  
by Paul Hourihan  
Excerpts from Chapters 1, and 13  
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## 1 The Rupture

He never regretted his place of birth in the valley hamlet of East Dorset, folded closely in the Green Mountains of southern Vermont, a womb of a village where life like a fable—among dwellings shaded by sugar maples and bounded by blue-veined marble sidewalks fashioned from the nearby quarries—could magically flower.

But there were signs of other realities at work. They spoke to him a cryptic legend: that everything was interconnected.

In the Wilson house, a popular inn at the center of the village, operated by his grandmother, the widow Wilson, he had been born—in a room next to the bar.

Did that mean that drinking was to play a role in his life? Strange, for he had been warned about it, reminded that alcohol had caused trouble on his father's side of the family.

It almost seemed that even from the first hours he was being watched.

Then, his birth. His mother had suffered terribly, her protracted cries on that wintry late November night in 1895 alarming to hear. She never forgot that night. Upon delivery, she found him almost dead.

Some power, expressed through his mother's agony, did not want him in the world? The idea frightened—and thrilled him at the same time. Or *she* did not want him? This, too, frightened and dismayed but, in a way he could not fathom, intrigued him.

Was his life meant to be something special?

Mark Whalon thought so.

Ten years older than himself, one of the few in the Dorset villages with a college background, and a stubbornly independent thinker, Mark never forgot that night, and always referred to it over the years in the same tone of wonder and conviction:

“—A bitter stormy night—not one to be born in! And what with your mother’s cries, which went on and on and really frightened me, I couldn’t help but feel that something odd was going on. Even though I was only ten I thought that whoever was getting born in that room wasn’t going to live a life like other folks but had some kind of *destiny* to fulfill—someone who was to hold high office or become a prophet or a great leader of some kind, and it was as if I was being commissioned to keep it in remembrance, never to forget it, perhaps to kind of watch over you. I thought of tales of ancient times, when heroes were born and Nature was *convulsed*. It was like that—”

And Mark had half-grinned, grimacing in an exaggerated way, all the time looking at him with a peculiar, fixed expression.

Was Mark right? He *did* feel even in those early days that he was meant to do something special in the world—but what, exactly? Mostly the feeling was like a great store of hidden energy or power that rose up to consciousness from deep within him, making him feel strange to himself and at the same time almost invincible.

How *strong* his feelings were, how *sensitive* he was to everything!

He believed he had lived before and would again; did not yet know why, but knew he would find out some day. Meanwhile the conviction, never talked about, hovered over him like a presence.

East Dorset, cradled among the mountains, was like a stage in a theater, where a new life-drama was taking place and where the playwright mysteriously left signs of his intentions.

Life itself was the mystery and he accepted early the challenge to find out what it was, why we were here, why things were the way they were—and why he was the way he was, *different* from most of the people around him.

His emotional nature, to begin with: composed of extremes, strung with wires that could convey the slightest nuance from the most turbulent to the most sensitive. Often he was carried away in its powerful oscillations.

His capacity to *feel* was his central rhythm. Life itself *was* feeling. Without it you didn't really live. Everything moved him. But he had to find out how to control his responsiveness, the better to learn the secret, find the undiscovered chord playing unheard behind the scenes. He was sure it was through feeling he would find it.

Or lose it?

Sooner or later he had to find a way to *handle* his emotions.

Until then, hoping it would be only warm and comfortable emotions that filled him, he remained aglow with feeling, like a bee on a flower, burning like a firefly in the night-fields.

Even as he made himself endearing to everyone in the two-room country school and to his neighbors, and adapted to whatever the rules were ... standing apart from others through *an excess of soul*, through his acute *feeling* nature—which he knew early he must protect from the world.

And from himself ....

## 13 The Moment at Towns

What occurred at Towns that night in December—the moment of his life—did not happen spontaneously. A process was at work, initiated long before. Both spiritual and mundane factors were linked as a prelude. Prior to the otherworldly moment there were this-worldly elements involved—naturalistic, relevant, and logical. There was a sequence of forces at play.

His reading, for one thing. For at least two years preceding he had been attracted to self-help books of all kinds, from works that

promoted regimens of self-worth by autosuggestion (“Everyday in every way I am getting better and better”) to the Christian Science textbook, *Science and Health*, which he read from cover to cover at least twice, typically while unshaven, dressed in pajamas, seated at the kitchen table in the Clinton Street house, nursing drink after drink of gin through the long, lurid hours.

Works on alcoholism intrigued him as well, drawing him in the vain hope of finding through rational inquiry an answer to his problem. Only another alcoholic, he brooded, could come close to providing such an answer but none of *them* were writing books.

Then there was the Silkworth warning to Lois about the inevitability of being locked up, the looming *necessity* of it. His brain, he told her, was damaged, his life hanging by a thread. There was nothing further he, Silkworth, could do for him. Nothing anyone could do.

So, while the terror invaded him, and while there was still *some* time, or seemed to be, he read and reread his self-help books, or the alcoholic studies, like a man searching a map for an escape from some impregnable prison; and finding no way out, with a sense of greater bondage than ever.

Integral to the sequence was the November 1934 visit, after the unexpected phone call of an old drinking companion, a deep-dyed alcoholic, Ebby Thatcher, whom he had not seen in five years. Thatcher had heard about his problems on Wall Street and resolved to bring to his door the good news of his own recovery from their common enemy. He brushed off the suggestion of a drink to celebrate their reunion in the Clinton Street kitchen.

“I don’t need to drink any more,” he said. And when pressed for an explanation, answered simply that he “had got religion” through the medium of the Oxford Group.

This was a well-known, evangelical, and proselytizing movement marked by crusading zeal and high, ethical principles. It did not concentrate its efforts on alcoholics but at the same time did not exclude them from their organizational embrace. Ebby Thatcher had found that embrace warm, nourishing, transforming. They had taught him

the necessity of being honest with himself and of the vital role of prayer as the chief means to liberation from sin and vice.

Prayer would be answered, they had told him. Ebby the drinking skeptic had doubted them, but had tried, and it had succeeded. In a short time he looked and felt like a new man and was, above all, happy in his sobriety.

And convincing, with none of the convert's passion diluting the impression of truth and sincerity.

In the light of remembrance he recalled Ebby's later reversion to drinking, getting sober over and over—never quite winning, never quite losing. But during the encounter at Clinton Street all he knew was that Ebby Thatcher, once a sodden addict as hopeless as anyone he had ever drunk with—more afflicted even than himself—was a changed and happy man, and in a final analysis prayer was the power that had salvaged him.

He might regret that, but he could not deny the evidence of his senses.

All the more persuasive because of the vise of fear and terror that held him.

The Towns experience at the end of the year seemed to signify that the life he was living was an outer manifestation of some mysterious drama of the Secret Self where everything was first perfected in a hidden realm of transcendental Intelligence before appearing in the deceptive garments of a "Life."

The experience was indescribably single and solitary, giving him a sudden glimpse of that secret world in action, revealing itself to his mind never before so unmistakably.

There was the self and its consciousness ... then there was everything else.

Life as a Dream...