

FENDER BENDER

By

Jim Landwehr

Willie's fret work cut searing notes on Agatha, his prized Fender Stratocaster. His fingers moved fluidly, with skill and mastery. He bent the strings to carry the notes to new places, resonating from the Marshall amplifier out to the small crowd gathered at Anodyne Coffee in Milwaukee. It seemed a paltry crowd, but he was grateful for anyone that showed up to hear him, especially on a cold Wednesday in November. For a part-time guitar and vocals hack, he played pretty good for a guy in his early fifties. His music crossed three genres, blues, country, and rock, but nothing that couldn't be done with a single guitar, a kickin' amp and a set of good pedals. Most of his love was for the electric guitar but he also used a six-string Gibson acoustic to keep his repertoire fresh.

His preference for electric over acoustic stemmed in part from the Stratocaster itself. Willie had it signed by both John Lee Hooker and Bonnie Raitt and had named it Agatha. It was the name of an old girlfriend he'd never quite gotten over. He was a big fan of B.B. King and his guitar, Lucille, so Willie thought he'd do the same and name his. It would help him carry memories of Agatha with him through the years. His friend Stephon booked bands in the Milwaukee and Chicago circuit and had inside connections to periodically get backstage passes for a show here and there. When he hooked Willie up with one for John Lee at a small club in Milwaukee, and Bonnie Raitt for a gig at Summerfest, he lugged his guitar with him in hopes of an autograph. Both stars were gracious about it and scrawled their names in low-contact areas of the guitar body.

The Stratocaster whined and howled as he sang,

*“Judith Lee keeps showing up around here,
breathin' fireworks and smoke and flames.
She eats all my food and drinks all my beer
And keeps on rollin' just the same.”*

Willie's music was built around a life he'd never known. He had a knack for writing about the rambling, traveling lives of lost souls, drunks, and vagabonds. His songwriting allowed him to go to distant places in the country without ever leaving the state. He was a dyed-in-the-wool local. Born and raised in Milwaukee, he never ventured too far from southeastern Wisconsin. Some of his shows took him to La Crosse and Green Bay, but they were the exception. He preferred the local Milwaukee and suburbs scene.

When Willie was young, his parents dragged him back and forth across Wisconsin to Hudson on holidays to see his grandparents. Between the smothering smoke and the nauseating sway of the Olds Delta 88, he'd puked his guts out on several occasions with bouts of car sickness. His parents' twisted way of dealing with it was to bring a generous supply of plastic bags and told him to use them as needed so they wouldn't have to stop. These death trips of his youth had stripped away any love of travel for him. Even into adulthood his thought was, the less driving, the better. Willie liked the familiarity of home best.

Willie met Jaime while they were both attending the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The two had started out young and hopelessly in love. He majored in communications, and she was a linguistics student. They married eight months after graduating, and for the first several years they were smitten. She came to some of his gigs, mostly small affairs in backroom bars, but occasionally bigger venues like a side stage at Summerfest.

Though not everything was perfect between them. His drinking was a constant sore spot with her. Willie grew up with a father that was a drinker with a temper. He'd never told Willie he loved him and on nights he was on his benders, he was a mean cuss to both his wife and Willie. Willie's insecurities about his self-worth and his poor self-esteem led him to a drinking problem of his own. He was different from his father in that he was a happy drunk, but a drunk, nonetheless. When he played the bars, liquor was always around and for him as a musician, it was usually free. He'd regularly come home wasted on those nights when Jaime wasn't at his show. She suspected he was drinking more at home too on nights she had to work, as he was often asleep when she got home from waitressing at 9:30.

Bigger than the drinking issue though was their disagreement over travel. Jaime longed to get out of Wisconsin and see the country. Willie was evasive about the subject and kept telling her to make a girls' trip out of it.

"I don't want to travel with them, I want to do it with you. You know that whole build-your-life-together thing we agreed on at the altar? Yeah, that."

Willie stood his ground despite her sarcasm and occasional zingers. She never understood his dislike for long drives, and it became another unfortunate source of tension between them. Eventually, their differences ended in an amicable

split that Willie chalked up to one of those curveballs that life throws at you sometimes. He'd written a song about it titled, "Done Burnt Down," which pretty much tells it all.

Willie's reverb hung in the air for a few seconds as he finished out the set. The crowd clapped in approval, including a few whistles and hoots. He'd played gigs at the Blues Estate on the East Side of Milwaukee and always appreciated the crowds that patronized the place. They were true, hip music buffs who appreciated his musical wandering across the various genres. A small, but musically cultured following.

He took off his guitar and set it on the stand in the wings of the stage and headed to the bar. While he loved performing, there was a part of him that loved the post-performance celebrations almost as much.

"Hey, Cristina, can I get a whiskey and sour?" he asked. Cristina was girl-next-door cute and had a sass to her that fit the bartending role well.

"You got it, Willie."

Cristina poured heavy-handed drinks for the regulars, especially the musical guests. For her, the sour in a whiskey sour was strictly for color. She'd seen Willie close the place enough to know that he could take what she delivered. Four cocktails later, she started closing up. Willie was pleasantly buzzed and made his way over to pack up his equipment. These endings were his least favorite part of playing gigs. It meant returning to his reality, his job at his landscaping company.

After graduating he discovered that there weren't a lot of jobs for a communications graduate, so he'd started landscaping to see if he could be his own boss. He built up the business over the years, picking up equipment and even an employee, Nate, as his customer base grew. What he'd once enjoyed had lately become a drain and he was beginning to look for what was next. Willie was a lost soul—a divorced lost soul at that, much like the characters he'd sung about the last twenty years.

Willie took the less-traveled streets back to his house in Greenfield. He knew the routes the cops patrolled and wanted to stay under the radar, literally in this case. He breathed a sigh of relief when he pulled into his driveway. Drunk and tired, he hauled himself into his house and fell into bed.

#

He woke to someone pounding on his door. His head thumped and sloshed as he got out of bed and made his way toward the racket. He peeked through the door's small window and saw his neighbor Justin standing patiently. He opened the door.

"Hey, Justin, what's up man?"

Justin was relatively new to the neighborhood, having bought the bungalow next to him a few years prior.

“Hi, Willie. Sorry to bother you buddy, but I wanted to let you know that your car looks like it’s been broken into. I came out to go to work and noticed your driver’s side window was busted. I hope you didn’t have anything of value in there,” Justin said.

Willie’s heart dropped as he craned his neck to see his car in the driveway.

“What? Are you kidding me?”

Justin stepped back as Willie stepped out and started walking toward his car. As he approached it, he could see shards of safety glass littering the driveway. He looked in and saw the rest of his window peppering the floor and seat.

“Shit! My guitar!”

Whoever it was didn’t care enough to steal his amplifier, but his prize guitar was nowhere to be seen.

#

One week later:

Willie got home from work at the usual 6 pm. He pulled into his driveway, locked the door, and walked toward the front door. On the way in he grabbed the mail. Three junk mailers from local businesses and one envelope that was addressed in printed block letters. He walked in the house, tossed the mailers in the trash, and slid his finger to open the envelope.

In it was a picture of his guitar leaning up next to a bronze statue of a man holding an acoustic guitar. A sign on a post hung above that read, “Standing on the Corner”. In the background was a building with a large marquee that read, “Winslow Arizona.” Being a music nut, Willie quickly made the connection. He’d grown up listening to “Take it Easy,” by the Eagles and knew of the statue that served as a tourist attraction in downtown Winslow.

The note that accompanied the photo was also carefully printed and read:

Take it easy! The Eagle has landed and is a fine sight to see. If you’re standing on the corner, there should be a clue tucked on the underside of the informational kiosk across the street. If you want your guitar back, that’s a good place to start.

Willie stared at the note perplexed. *What the heck?*

He re-read the note three times, then repeatedly scanned the photo to ensure that it was Agatha. There was no doubt it was his as he saw the signatures on the body. For certain it was Agatha, the name he'd given it. When he split with Jaime, she'd confessed that she was always a little jealous he'd named it after an old girlfriend and not her. She told him it was weird, and he needed to get over her.

After pondering the note for a couple of minutes one thing became abundantly clear. He needed to go to Winslow.

#

The car stereo in Willie's Kia Soul hammered out blues and rock hits from Willie's Spotify playlist as the miles rolled by. His first time in Iowa was nothing short of underwhelming. Nothing but the sight of corn and the smell of hogs for miles and miles. Missouri wasn't much better, but at least held the appeal of having Kansas City to see out the window for a short stretch of it. KC, home of the Super Bowl-winning Chiefs and subject of the famous song, Kansas City. The song was heavily covered by some of the blues greats and was one he'd played himself a few times at gigs. As he rolled past the city, he put the song on Spotify and belted out the verses. The lyrics mention getting there by trains and planes, but never a Kia, a fact that made him grin when he thought about it. It felt nice finally putting a place to the song he'd sung.

It actually felt kind of good to be tooling down the road and the mind space it freed up in him from the craziness of the day-to-day. November was a slow time between seasons at work, and he'd managed to get his employee and friend, Nate, to cover the existing jobs for as long as it took him to find the guitar. He hoped it wouldn't take more than a week to get it back but was determined to follow the lead he'd gotten in the mail.

The ride provided him time to think and ruminate on the path he had traveled in life. When he crossed into the state of Kansas, he thought of the time he'd seen the band, Kansas, with his ex-wife Jaime at the Wisconsin State Fair. Then, a long, flat drive later at the Oklahoma line he thought of the song, "Oklahoma" from the musical of the same name. He never much liked musicals though, and for him the state was as dull as the song. Nevertheless, he was tired and stayed the night in a cheap motel in Guymon located almost dead center in the panhandle of the state.

In the morning he woke and hit the road after a quick breakfast in the motel lobby. After a long day in the car, he finally pulled into Winslow in late afternoon. He parked his Kia Soul across the street from the famous statue in downtown. He

walked over to the statue and took a selfie in front of it much like thousands of tourists had done before him.

He wandered over to the informational kiosk located near the statue. The kiosk told of some of the lore around the corner reference from the song as well as highlighting some of the city's local businesses and history. Willie tried to look nonchalant as he felt underneath the shelf for some kind of clue. On the underside of the third shelf he checked, he found an envelope taped to it. He pulled it off, put it in his pocket and walked back to the car.

Inside the Soul, he opened the envelope. Like the previous note, it was printed in blue ink and had a photo with it. The photo showed a picture of his guitar leaning against a small building, or more like a shack. One of the signs on it said, "Al Keys."

The note read:

You made it to the corner. Now you need be like Arlo and get into Los Angeles. There you can pick up a couple of keys at Al Locksmith and Keys. Tell them Arlo sent you. That'll move you much closer to your guitar, provided you still want it.

Willie made the connection right away to the Arlo Guthrie song, "Coming into Los Angeles." It seemed this person, this thief, had a musical knowledge to go along with their warped sense of humor.

"Oh, my God, really?" Willie said aloud. "Los Angeles?"

His head spun with the idea of having to travel even further. He'd never been to California, and he'd already seen more of the country than he'd ever dreamed. He even waffled for a moment wondering if this goose chase across the country was still worth it. Then, the thought of his guitar being on the other end of it quickly erased the idea of giving up. He had to get it back.

Willie googled motels in the area and decided to spend the night in Winslow. He would head out for Los Angeles in the morning, but for now he needed a shower and a bed for the night.

#

Willie woke to a ray of sunlight that cut through the slit between the drawn curtains in his motel. He'd slept fitfully but felt surprisingly rested and alert for 6:30, especially given the cruddy mattress he was on. He showered and ate a granola bar and raspberry yogurt cup that he'd bought the night before. When he was finished, he packed his bag. He threw open the curtains and was hit with the

full, harsh sunbeam of Arizona. But what hit him more was what was not there, specifically, his Kia Soul.

“What the hell? Where’s my car?” he said to no one.

He’d parked it right outside his room the night before and now it was nowhere to be found. He opened the door, walked out to the parking spot, and looked around. There was a little safety glass laying on the ground on what would have been the passenger side.

“Shit!”

He pulled out his cellphone and googled the Winslow Police Department to get a phone number. He dialed and after a few rings a woman answered.

“Winslow Police Department, this is Marie. How can I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Willie Bradford. It appears my car has been stolen.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir. Can you describe the vehicle and where you last saw it and we’ll look into it?”

“Yeah, it’s a 2019 Kia Soul, it’s silver and I’m staying at the Best Western in town here. It was outside my motel last night at eight pm and is gone this morning.”

Willie filled the officer in with rest of the details and information. They said they’d get back to him within an hour or two if they’d found anything. He hung up and sat on the edge of his bed. With nothing to do but sit and wait, he texted his buddy Nate back in Milwaukee:

Willie: *Dude, you won’t believe what just happened. My car was stolen.*

Nate: *Wait, what? For real?*

Willie: *I kid you not. WTF?*

Nate: *Man, that sucks. People suck.*

Willie: *They do. Anyway, I’ll let you know what I hear. If I find it, I’m probably heading to LA.*

Nate: *LA? I thought your guitar was in Winslow.*

Willie: *Yeah, me too. Whoever it is has me on some sort of twisted music-based treasure hunt. Giving me clues from music lyrics and shit. I can’t make this stuff up, man. Hopefully LA will get me a little closer to my guitar.*

Nate: *Of course, you'll need a car to get there...LOL.*

Willie: *Yeah, thanks for that reminder. Lol. Talk to ya later, hopefully from my car.*

Nate: *OK, keep me posted.*

Twenty minutes later, Willie's phone jumped to life. He clicked and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Hi, yes. Is this Mr. Bradford?"

"Yes, it is."

"This is Marie again from Winslow PD. We found your car. It was abandoned by the elementary school in town. They towed it to the impound lot where you can pick it up after you prove ownership."

"Okay, great news. Is it drivable?"

"I can't answer that, sir. Typically, these kinds of thefts are just joyrides for thrills and then abandoned. But I don't know its condition. You should come to the station and file a report then retrieve the vehicle."

"Alright. I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll need to get a ride there, obviously," Willie said. He finished the call, hung up and then called an Uber.

#

The Soul hurtled westward at 75 mph as Willie took in the dry desert landscape as seen through the windshield with thousands of miles of dirt and bugs behind it. Willie cracked all the windows to get rid of the cheap cologne and weed smell that permeated the car. Whoever it was that stole his car was apparently trying to neutralize the marijuana smell with their own heavy layer of eau de toilette. It appeared they were smart enough not to sync their phone to the Bluetooth, which may have provided a trail to the thief. They did however manage to leave an N.W.A. CD in the disc player. When Willie started the car, the stereo came on blasting, "Fuck the Police." Willie quickly snapped the song off and grinned at the irony of a stolen car making such a loud proclamation.

In any case, he'd spent the better part of the morning getting the car from the impound lot and getting the broken window fixed. These intangibles from the trip were taking a toll on his bank account. Turns out they'd done a job on his steering column using a screwdriver and a USB charger to start the car. Willie knew the KIAs were a popular target by car thieves for just this reason. Ease of access. The thief knew what they were doing—he had to hand it to them, the scum.

To pass the long hours through the desert, Willie added a playlist to Spotify that featured songs with lyrics about California. It cycled through songs like Zeppelin's "Going to California," John Hiatt's "Adios to California," and, of course, the Eagles' hit, "Hotel California." It was an Eagles song that started this whole quest, so that song seemed especially relevant. Willie was surprised at how many songs referenced the state and it piqued his interest as he sped across the state line.

The dry, arid desert environment was so foreign to him as a person from the weather-beaten Midwest. While he missed the green landscape so prevalent in Wisconsin, he had to admit this was a nice change. The mountains and buttes so far off in the distance were something he'd never seen in anything but pictures and movies and were a nice diversion from flat and brown.

After long, boring hours on the expressway, he soon discovered the freneticism of Los Angeles traffic, and it made him twitchy and anxious. The last thing he needed was a car accident in a state thousands of miles from home. The traffic reminded him of the 80s song by Missing Persons, "Nobody Walks in LA." It sure seemed that way, and most of them were on the freeway, evidently.

He exited and wound his way through the city streets, following the commands coming from Google Maps. He pulled his car into a parking spot outside the A1 Keys and Locksmith shack. It sat on 3rd Street, a busy parkway. The shack was smaller than most people's garages. Willie got out and walked up to the shack. A clerk wearing a collared shirt with the A1 logo on the pocket came to the window. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, yeah. This might sound strange, but someone told me you'd have a package for me. I'm looking for my guitar," Willie said.

"Oh, yeah. The guitar guy." The clerk reached under the counter and handed Willie a small box wrapped in brown paper.

"Do I owe you anything for it?" Willie asked.

"Nope. It was given to me by someone with instructions to just give it to you. I was told not to do anything more than that."

"So, you can't tell me who it was or what they looked like?"

"Sorry, man. They paid me nicely, and I gave them my word."

"Okay, well, I guess this will do for now. Thanks for your honesty," Willie said.

"No problem. Hope you find your guitar, buddy."

"Thanks, me too."

Willie took the package back to his car and opened it. Inside it was a key, a note and a couple of pictures. He unfolded the note and read it. The first line immediately brought the Scott McKenzie song "San Francisco" to mind.

If you're going to San Francisco, visit Saint Agnes where there is no Haight. Third pew on the left. Psalm 33:2-3 should be enlightening in more ways than biblically. And I have to confess, the end is near!

One of the pictures included with the note showed his guitar propped up against a Haight Street sign. The other had it leaning against the façade of a church complete with “Saint Agnes Catholic Church” spelled out on a purple banner behind it.

“Aw, crap. San Francisco now? What the hell?” he said aloud. Here he had driven across the country and now this petulant thief was playing musical geographic hide-and-go-seek games with him. He was tired of driving, and just wanted to get back to his life back home. At the same time, he realized he was seeing places he'd never seen before. He knew one thing for sure, he wasn't going to drive to San Francisco just yet. Willie wanted to see a little of the Hollywood area and some of the Beverly Hills area. He pulled out his phone and found a hotel near downtown and made reservations.

The rest of the afternoon he spent seeing the places he'd seen only on television or in movies. He went to Venice Beach, and people watched for an hour. The beautiful sandy beach and cerulean blue ocean all seemed so surreal to his Midwestern psyche. He drove to Beverly Hills and took a selfie by the sign and sent it to Nate. He did the same with the Hollywood sign. Nate was probably getting sick of his texts, but Willie couldn't help himself. It was so cool to be among these iconic and historic places.

Willie slipped into appreciation mode. It actually felt good to be away from everything familiar to him. He was surprised by how much he loved the unknowns of exploring. He wasn't ready to admit that he was wrong for all the times he'd told Jaime that he didn't like to travel, but he was beginning to understand what she saw in changing her surroundings by jumping in a car.

After the Hollywood sign shot, he found out where the Hollywood Bowl was and took a ride. At a pullover on one of the hills, he got a view of it from above. A hint of jealousy fell on him as he thought of all the rockstars that had been on that stage. *Maybe someday*, he laughed. From there he wound his way back down the mountain and made a trip to the Dolby Theater. He walked down the avenue of stars, where many of the names drew him back to movies he'd seen. The sidewalk was crowded, bustling with vacationers mixed in with the California natives. He was shocked by how much he enjoyed the area, despite its pandering to tourists. LA wasn't as bad as people had made it out to be.

#

Early in the afternoon the next day, Willie made it to San Francisco. The ride to get there was a long line of fast-moving traffic and the occasional nut-job going 90 mph weaving perilously between lanes. But he made it, nonetheless. It seemed the whole city was one hill after another as he worked his way toward the church of St. Agnes. When he hit the intersection of Haight and Ashbury, he immediately felt the sense of its history. The intersection and its neighborhood were the birthplace of the counterculture hippie movement in the sixties. He pictured Jim Morrison falling out of a car or hippies in a circle smoking a pipe. He was pretty young during the movement but as a musician himself he understood its significance.

He pulled across the street from Saint Agnes. Willie crossed traffic and tried the door. It was a weekday and there was no Mass. Nevertheless, he was a little shocked that the door was open, so he went in. Captivated by the beauty of the sanctuary, Willie walked in quietly down the main aisle to the third row, genuflected and executed a sign of the cross figuring, when in Rome. He sat in the pew and reached for the Bible in the rack front of him. He found the Psalms and flipped to Psalm 33. There was nothing except a whole lot of words. Thinking it might be some sort of clue, he read the verse:

- 2 Give thanks to the LORD on the harp; on the ten-stringed lyre offer praise.
- 3 Sing to him a new song; skillfully play with joyful chant.

Willie laughed with a chuff. It seemed the thief had a sense of humor even when it came to something as sacred as the Bible, by including reference to a stringed instrument.

He returned the book to its place and took the next one in line and checked it. When he got to the page, a note and another picture of his guitar fell out. He opened the note and it read:

I'm not telling you exactly where your guitar is, because Mumm's the word. Champagne awaits you at the end of your quest. There you can get your guitar, get in your car, and just let it roll on down the highway.

Willie laughed at the reference to the song by Bachman Turner Overdrive. The song was certainly a favorite of his with lyrics that talk about life on the road as a rock and roller. He looked at the photo and, sure enough his guitar was sitting next to the sign at the Mumm winery. His heart jumped a bit at the finality of the note. It seemed to indicate that his quest was almost done. In some ways though, it saddened him to think his road trip was almost done.

He took out his phone and Google mapped the Mumm Winery. The results showed the location in Napa Valley about an hour and twenty minutes away. Willie was ecstatic for a couple of reasons. He'd always thought it would be cool to see Napa Valley, as his ex-wife was a wine aficionado and bugged him on numerous occasions about going there. More importantly though, he knew he was close to having his guitar back—with any kind of luck.

#

Willie's jaw dropped as he approached the Golden Gate Bridge. The iconic structure and its amazing engineering he'd seen in so many television shows and movies was everything he'd expected and more. Despite the battleship grey skies and cool, damp air, the bridge gave him a sense of life. It energized him. He was finally seeing the world and it sparked his desire to see what lay beyond.

As the miles passed, Willie rocked out to his California Spotify playlist. He looked down at the USB charger that dangled from his still-broken ignition. For some reason, it didn't bother him like it had when it first happened. In the grand scheme of things, based on the experiences he'd had in the past couple of days, it seemed insignificant. Things like those moments in Winslow and LA and now in San Francisco and Napa made the gravity of something like a broken possession seem smaller. He wasn't sure exactly where the change had happened, but it was definitely a change in thought. A change for the better.

Willie walked into the Mumm winery and looked around. The smartly dressed female attendant on duty asked, "Good afternoon, sir. May I help you?"

"Uh, yeah. I have a strange request. I'm looking for my guitar. Has anyone left one here?"

"Why yes, in fact someone did. A couple days ago. They instructed me to turn it over to you given three conditions."

"That is fantastic news. What conditions?" Willie asked.

"First, I need an ID." Willie pulled out his driver's license and showed it to the woman.

"Thank you. You're a match," she said with a wink. "Next, I was told you need to purchase a bottle of our sparkling wine to celebrate your guitar recovery."

"No problem there. I'll take a bottle of your Brut Prestige," Willie said, pointing to the bottle on the shelf. He didn't care what kind he got as long as it led to his guitar and didn't require him to sell a kidney to afford it.

"A fine choice, sir. And, finally, I'll need a key to open the case your guitar is in."

“Ah, yes! The key. I have it right here,” he said reaching in his pocket, pulling out his key ring and showing it to her. He removed it from the ring and handed it to her.

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just be a minute. I need to go get it.”

She walked into the other room. Willie stood there waiting in expectation, thinking to himself, what a crazy trip. A week ago, he was back home with nothing to look forward to except booking his next gig. Now, he was on the West Coast buying champagne and seeing the country.

The woman returned with a guitar case in hand. She lay it on one of the standing tables and tried the key in the lock and it clicked open. She undid the other buckles and opened the case. In it was an envelope and the Fender. Willie’s eyes lit up at the sight of it. He pulled it out of the case and gave it a once over. There was no visible damage that he could tell. It was exactly as he’d last seen it in the Blues Emporium. It was a reunion worth every mile.

He tucked the envelope into his back pocket and thanked the woman. Willie put the guitar back in the case as she handed back the key. He tipped her twenty dollars for her trouble and walked out.

In his car, he opened the envelope and read the note.

Well, well, well. Your love for your guitar has taken you far! It is my hope that it has instilled in you a love for travel. There’s a big, beautiful world outside Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Now go see it!

~A Friend

Willie lowered his hands and looked out the windshield. In front of him were rows and rows of grapevines warmed by a lovely California sun. It was positively breathtaking and made him realize the scene was exactly what her point was all along this journey. He knew the thief couldn’t be anyone but his ex-wife, Jaime. For years she’d tried to get him to travel, and for years he resisted. He was a Midwest guy and his dislike for travel as a kid had made him rigid and unwilling to see the appeal of anything outside of Wisconsin for most of his life. On top of their differences on travel, he knew she resented his past affections for Agatha. More than once she’d told him he needed to grow and move on.

It was clear from the musical scavenger hunt he’d been on that she was pushing him out of his comfort zone and getting him to expand his horizons, literally in this case. Their split had been difficult, but amicable. He remembered her telling him he needed to grow, deal with his past, and realize what he had in the here-and-

now. Jaime had always been a caring, compassionate person and it seemed she still cared enough for his well-being to try and stretch him a bit. Not to mention that the process of moving the guitar around the country was probably helping her deal with her own need to travel, as well.

Willie set the note on the passenger seat. He decided from that moment forward that he'd call his precious guitar Jaime, as she'd done way more for him in his life than Agatha ever had. He had her to thank for what he'd seen the past few days and what lay before him. It was time to make some changes in his life. Then he pulled out his phone, opened Google Maps and typed, *Muir Woods*, then, *Yosemite National Park*, then *Estes National Park*, then *Black Hills*, then *Paisley Park* and added them all to his route.

#

Jim has four published memoirs, *At the Lake*, *Cretin Boy*, *Dirty Shirt* and *The Portland House*. He also has five poetry collections, *Thoughts from a Line at the DMV*, *Genetically Speaking*, *Reciting from Memory*, *Written Life* and *On a Road*. His nonfiction has been published in *Main Street Rag*, *The Sun Magazine*, and others. His poetry has been featured in *Orchard Poetry Journal*, *Blue Heron Review*, and many others. He lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin with his wife and enjoys fishing, kayaking, biking, and all things outdoors. Jim was the 2018-2019 poet laureate for the Village of Wales, Wisconsin.