

Without a Gun

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Third Edition

A Memoir of Belief, Survival,
and a Father's Love

Lou Levite, Jr.

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A Memoir of Belief, Survival, and a Father's Love

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For my daughter, Nicole.

What's Playin'

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Author's Foreword

I started writing this in the 1980s, while I was still living it.

I didn't know what it was going to become. At the time, I wasn't thinking about a book, or an audience, or whether anyone would ever read it. I was simply trying to make sense of what was happening around me before time had a chance to reshape the memories into something easier to accept.

By 1991, I believed I had said everything I needed to say.

I wrote it while I was on the run, moving from motel rooms to borrowed apartments across the American Southwest with a battery-operated typewriter and a backpack full of notes. I was convinced that if I returned to New Jersey and walked into the courtroom, I would never make it home again.

Much of that fear centered around a letter I had written the year before. When that letter resurfaced in legal paperwork connected to a child visitation proceeding, I became convinced that its contents would place my life in danger. Whether those fears were justified is for others to decide. What matters is that, at the time, they were completely real to me.

The original manuscript was nearly twice the size of this edition. I made copies and distributed them to trusted friends throughout the United States and Canada with one set of instructions: if they did not hear from me by a certain date each year, they were to send it to my daughter, Nicole.

Once you believe what you are living through might be the last thing you ever leave behind, you stop writing for the world.

You write for one person.

My daughter.

I had no intention of revisiting it. It was written so that if I disappeared, my daughter would one day have my account of what happened and be free to decide for herself what was true and what was not.

Whether she ever read those original pages, I honestly do not know. For almost three decades, those pages remained largely untouched. They began as something private—a father's attempt to leave behind an explanation—but over time they became something else: a record of one man's experience that I now believe belongs in the public conversation as much as it belongs to my family. This time, I hope she reads them.

I had no intention of publishing the book. Then Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Watching that happen brought back memories I thought I had left behind and forced me to revisit what I had written in 1991. His election became the catalyst that finally convinced me the work should no longer remain hidden away.

This edition, however, is different. It is no longer hidden away in motel rooms or entrusted to friends with instructions for what to do if I ever disappeared. It is offered openly to anyone willing to spend time inside another person's experience and reach their own conclusions.

Years passed. Life moved on, and what once felt urgent faded into the background. I left the manuscript untouched for decades.

Until 2018.

That was when I finally decided to publish it.

The decision changed my life in ways I never expected. After copies were sent to public officials, including President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, I became entangled in legal proceedings that ultimately resulted in my serving two years in the Georgia prison system.

To this day, I have never been able to shake the belief that publishing the book and sending it to those officials played a role in what happened to me.

I can only tell the story as I experienced it and as I continue to understand it.

This book is not about those events. It is about the years that came before them—and the man who lived through them.

What matters is this: every page that follows was written long before any of that happened. It reflects who I was during those years, what I saw, what I believed, and how I tried to understand the world while I was living through it.

This third edition has been carefully edited and reorganized—not to change the story, but to make sure it can be told. Large sections of the first edition have been condensed, expanded, divided into smaller chapters, and rearranged to improve the flow and readability while remaining faithful to the spirit of the original 1991 manuscript. Although this edition is significantly shorter than the earlier versions, it represents more than three decades of thoughtful revision and refinement while preserving the heart of the original story.

The story remains the same.

Only the telling has changed.

There are places where the text has been tightened, clarified, or adjusted to avoid unnecessary issues, but the core of it remains exactly what it was when it was first written. I didn't go back and rewrite it to match who I am now.

I couldn't.

That wouldn't be honest.

Time gives you distance. It doesn't always give you answers.

There are things in here I would say differently today—things I might see more clearly, or with more restraint—but the person who wrote this didn't have that perspective yet.

He only had what he was living.

Today, my daughter Nicole is 38 years old. She has lived her own life, formed her own understanding, and carries her own version of the story.

For this edition, I have added a new epilogue written in 2026. Unlike the rest of the book, which was written during or immediately after the events it describes, the epilogue comes from the perspective of someone who has had decades to reflect on what happened.

What you're about to read is the story as I experienced it then. The epilogue is simply my attempt to look back on it from where I stand now.

What I do know is that the experiences described in this book were real to the person who lived them.

This book isn't an argument. It isn't an attempt to prove anything.

It's a record of a period in my life when the line between belief, reality, and consequence became impossible for me to separate.

You don't have to agree with it.

You don't have to see what I saw.

But everything in here is real to the person who wrote it.

And I'm still willing to stand behind that.

If there's anything I've learned since then, it's that understanding doesn't always come at the same time as experience. Sometimes it takes years. Sometimes it never fully arrives.

What matters is that it's faced.

That it's recorded.

And that it's left intact.

So that's what this is.

Not a conclusion. Not an answer.

Just a story.

And I'll let it speak for itself.

Overture

“A winner never quits, and a quitter never wins.”

How many times did we hear that growing up? It sounds logical—almost too logical. For a winner to become a winner, he cannot quit. And a quitter can never win because he has already dropped out. Simple. Straightforward. But because it’s so simple, there’s not much to be learned from it—not in terms of moral integrity. Still, it’s something most of us heard over and over again growing up, usually in the middle of some kind of competition. It was all in the spirit of competition.

Then there was the idea of fair play. That wasn’t always taught the same way. You’d hear things like, “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game.” And that sounds right. It sounds like the lesson you’re supposed to take with you. But if winning—being number one—was what mattered most, as many of us were taught, then how you played the game often depended on how badly you wanted to win... even if that meant ignoring fair play.

So what is fair play? Some kids were lucky. They had parents or teachers who made it clear: a cheater never wins, and a winner never cheats. Think about that for a moment. That’s not as simple as the first statement. Because most of us have learned, one way or another, that a little deception can make the difference between being number one... or being the one who tried and didn’t make it. And the truth is, we remember the winners. But who

remembers second place? Who can name the man who finished next to Bruce Jenner in the 1976 Olympic decathlon? Exactly. History rarely remembers second place.

So being number one has its advantages. But it raises a question: why do people overlook fair play just to win?

Growing up in America, you start to understand something about the culture. It's competitive. Competition shows up everywhere—sports, school, relationships, jobs, promotions. You're always measured against someone else. You compete for attention. You compete for approval. You compete for opportunity. That's the environment.

And pointing that out isn't always welcome. Say something that sounds like criticism, and suddenly you're labeled. In America, disagreement is often mistaken for disloyalty. But all I'm doing is pointing out what I observed.

This kind of pressure starts early. You see it at Little League games, where parents aren't just watching—they're invested. "Did you see my Billy hit that home run? He just started playing last month! Come on, Billy—show them what you can do!" Not every parent is like that, but enough are that you get the idea.

And it doesn't stop at sports. "Billy, why didn't you get an A on your math test?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. I just don't understand fractions."

"That's not good enough. You have to do better."

"Yes, ma'am."

So what happens the next time Billy has a test and he still doesn't understand? From what I've seen, Billy cheats.

Most people will overlook fair play to achieve something they couldn't otherwise reach. In Billy's case, the pressure didn't just influence him—it pushed him there.

Pressure has a way of making ordinary people compromise the very parts of themselves they value most.

I was about to learn that lesson for myself.

Jane and I were sitting in my condo after work, smoking a joint and trying to unwind from another day at the casino. But I wasn't there. My head was somewhere else. I sat on the couch staring into space, trying to hold it together, but it wasn't working.

She saw it right away.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

She didn't buy it.

"Don't lie to me. Something's wrong."

I tried to brush it off, told her I was tired, but she kept pressing.

"You trust me, don't you?"

I said yes.

"Then tell me."

I couldn't. Not at first. I didn't even know how to say it out loud. But she didn't let go. And after a few seconds, whatever I had been holding in just broke.

I started crying.

I didn't expect it, and neither did she. Jane's eyes opened wide the moment she saw my face. She hadn't expected that at all. But once it started, there was no stopping it. I looked at her and finally said it.

"The dice games at work are fixed. They want me to steal from people."

I turned away—embarrassed—as soon as I said it.

She didn't say anything right away. She just pulled me in and held me there while I tried to get myself back together. When I finally did, I told her what I thought was going on. I told her it had to be the best-kept secret in Atlantic City, and I asked her never to repeat it.

She told me to quit.

I told her I couldn't.

From that night on, she was the only person who knew. And every time I looked at her after that, I remembered it—the moment it stopped being just a job

Chapter 1

In the Beginning

I will never forget something I learned in an International Relations course I took during the spring of 1986: **“Belief rules the world.”** It was a quote from Professor Jon Cojin at Stockton State College in Pomona, New Jersey. Back then it sounded like an idea—something interesting, maybe even important, but not something I fully understood. Later, I would realize it wasn’t just an idea. It was the foundation of everything.

When I was three or four years old, our black-and-white television showed reports about a war. I didn’t understand what I was looking at; I only knew that it was serious. My mother told me that even though it involved our country, it was happening far away. She said my father had almost been sent, and that was why they got married sooner than planned. When I asked her if I would have to go someday, she said she hoped not. “You don’t have to go until you’re eighteen,” she would tell me. She said it as though that was a long way off, like it wasn’t something I needed to think about yet. But to me, fourteen or fifteen years didn’t feel far away at all. At that age, time didn’t stretch—it collapsed. Eighteen seemed just around the corner. That was all I could think about.

The idea stayed with me in a way I didn’t understand. I would stand outside sometimes, looking up at the sky, trying to imagine what it meant to

be eighteen—not older, not grown up, just there, in that moment where something bad might be waiting. Sometimes I would look up at the sky and ask God—at least I think that’s who I was talking to—how soon it would happen, whether I would have to go, whether the war would still be going on by the time I got there. It didn’t look like the place to be. The idea of being shot at—or having to shoot someone else—didn’t make sense to me. My mother had always taught me to be nice to people, that hurting someone was wrong. But this was different. This was something everyone seemed to accept, something bigger than the rules I had been taught at home. That’s where the confusion started. If something is normal, does that make it right? If everyone accepts it, does that mean it’s okay? Or does it just mean no one is questioning it?

At the same time, there was magic everywhere—Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, leprechauns I hoped I’d catch someday. That world felt complete. It made sense in a way the other one didn’t. Santa was the biggest part of it, a man with flying reindeer who could travel the world in one night delivering presents to every child. That didn’t feel strange—it felt real. It felt right. But even inside that world, something didn’t add up. If something like that could exist—something good, something magical—then how could something like war exist? And why did Santa only bring presents to us kids? Adults never sat on his lap. They didn’t get anything. Was it because they fought wars? I never said that out loud, but I thought about it.

We went to church every Sunday. I learned about God, heaven, hell—another set of ideas presented as absolute truth. You didn’t question them; you accepted them. But those ideas didn’t line up either. If you went to war and killed someone, would you still go to heaven? If God allowed war to happen, did that mean it was okay, or even expected? If it was expected, then why was killing wrong? What did “thou shalt not kill” mean in a world where killing seemed necessary sometimes? Even then, I could feel something wasn’t consistent. The rules didn’t match the reality I was being shown. I didn’t have the language for it yet—I could just feel it.

As the years went on, the war faded from attention and life went back to being simple. Playing was everything; school—not so much. I grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey, playing T-ball, Little League, street hockey, and Pop Warner football. Everything felt normal again, at least on the surface.

Next door was a Jewish family. I didn’t think much about it until Christmas. They didn’t have a tree. They didn’t get presents from Santa. My

mother explained it by saying we believed in Jesus Christ and they didn't. That didn't make sense to me. Why would Santa hold that against them? What if they were right—and we were wrong? That thought stayed with me longer than it should have.

Then came the moment that changed everything. A friend across the street told me Santa Claus wasn't real. I didn't believe him. I had proof. When I was younger, my parents had accidentally left a tape recorder running, and we recorded Santa giving orders to Rudolph while delivering presents down our chimney. I could still hear it—the voice, the sound. It seemed real because I experienced it. I told my friend that. He told me I was being fooled.

I had to ask my mother.

At first she defended Santa. She said my friend was probably lying. Maybe Santa didn't stop at his house because he had been a bad kid. Or maybe he had stopped believing. She had an answer for everything.

But I kept asking.

Finally, she admitted the truth.

That moment didn't just change one belief—it changed everything. It wasn't just that Santa wasn't real; it was what that meant. I had trusted adults completely, not just my parents but all of them—teachers, family, everyone. Suddenly it seemed like they were all part of something together, like there was a shared understanding I wasn't included in, a system where certain things were presented as true even when they weren't. It was as if I had just discovered the biggest secret in the world, and it was built on something false.

Why would they do that? My mother said it was based on a real person; a tradition passed down. But that didn't explain what had happened inside me, because this wasn't really about tradition—it was about trust, and something in that trust had just broken.

That's when the shift happened. The magic didn't just disappear—it collapsed. And in its place was something I didn't fully understand yet, but I could feel it. If that wasn't true, what else wasn't? After that, the world didn't feel the same. It wasn't magical anymore. It felt structured, controlled, defined by what people agreed to believe. And even though I couldn't fully explain it, I started to realize something: just because something is believed doesn't make it real, and just because everyone accepts something doesn't make it true. That realization didn't come all at once. It built quietly—the same way belief does.

With the magic gone, all there was left to do was wait to grow up. And adulthood didn't look like much of a picnic. Evening television was still interrupted with images of soldiers returning from war, while everyone praised President Nixon for bringing it to an end. I was relieved, but I couldn't shake two thoughts: someday I might have to fight in one myself, and the adults around me were not nearly as trustworthy as I had once believed.

By middle school I had become something of a disciplinary problem. My parents thought a private school might straighten me out. They believed better schools and wealthier families would produce better manners. Instead, I learned that money and status do not necessarily make better people. If anything, I learned that pompous often breeds pompous.

I was teased constantly because of a birth defect that caused my eyelids to droop, and after one particularly difficult stretch I even brought a knife to school before it was taken away and thrown onto the roof of the science building. About the only thing I gained there was an appreciation for magic as a member of the school's Magic Club.

After my freshman year, I asked to return to public school. My grades weren't good enough to justify the expense, and I was happier around ordinary people anyway. For the remainder of my high school education, I moved in with my grandmother in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, and attended school in the town of my birth. After my first year of attending Carbondale Area Junior/Senior High School, I returned to New Jersey to spend summer vacation with my parents.

During that summer, on my sixteenth birthday, my family took our first trip to Atlantic City since casino gambling had arrived. There were only a handful of casinos then, and everything about the city seemed larger than life.

My mother was fascinated by them. Standing above a blackjack table at Caesars, she looked down at the dealers and laughed.

"You'd be good at that someday," she said.

My father quickly dismissed the idea. "He's going to college."

But Mom wasn't finished. She pointed out that I was good at math and said dealers made a lot of money. The thought lingered longer than either of them could have imagined.

Later that evening, we drove to Ventnor to spend a few hours with my father's business partner, Mr. Aasen. My parents settled in to visit while my sister and I slipped out, caught the Jitney, and headed for Resorts

International to see Steve Martin perform. A couple of casino dealers climbed aboard a few stops later. They carried themselves with a confidence that bordered on arrogance, but to a sixteen-year-old kid they looked glamorous. I found myself wondering what it would be like to have a job like that.

At the show, Steve Martin was asking people in the audience where they came from. Answers were from all over. One lady, of retirement age, near the front row, kept standing up with her arm extended, oohing until he picked her.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Where are you from?"

The lady stood up, put her right hand on her hip, and said with a conceited posture, "I'm from Atlantic City, New Jersey." She was very proud of that fact.

Steve was the best as he put his hand on his hip and imitated her, "No, really?" The lady was moving her head up and down with a ridiculous smile on her face. "Come on. No way! Really?" She kept nodding. "Did you know they have gambling here?"

The room exploded with laughter.

How exciting it must be to live there—with casinos and entertainment right in your own backyard. Yeah... she must have loved it.

Going home that night, I couldn't stop thinking about Atlantic City. The lights, the crowds, the entertainment, the casinos—it all seemed exciting. I had no idea that only a few years later I would find myself working there, or that those glittering buildings would shape the rest of my life.

Chapter 2

My First Shot

In September 1982, I moved onto Stockton State College's campus in Pomona, New Jersey, to begin my college education. Attending college was the only way I could eventually work for my father in his shoe-importing business. There was only one problem: I loved to party.

Living just outside Atlantic City had a certain pull. When you grow up in a small, boring town, a place like that feels like something else entirely. It wasn't just another town—it pulsed with lights, energy, and the promise that something exciting was always happening. That alone was enough to draw me in.

We called him Guido. He was the floor manager in our dorm and a member of the Playboy Club. He talked about it all the time—how he could walk into any Playboy property, flash his membership card, and walk out with a free magazine. That was enough to get our attention. Eventually, the conversation turned to casinos. Guido said he was heading to the Playboy to pick up the latest issue and maybe

take a shot at the dice table. He told me a friend of his made good money playing craps and had shown him how to play.

He asked if I wanted to go.

I had just turned eighteen a few weeks earlier. I was finally legal. It didn't take much convincing.

Guido drove. Tink, another guy from Stockton, came along with us. It was a Saturday night, a couple of weeks after Labor Day. Traffic built as we got closer, people heading in for the same reasons we were. As we rounded the bay in Absecon, the skyline came into view, lit up against the night. That was enough for me. I couldn't wait—gambling, free drinks, and Playboy bunnies walking around everywhere.

We parked and headed for the boardwalk first. It was packed with people dressed up, moving with purpose. As we got near the Convention Center, we found out the Miss America Pageant was going on that night.

We figured there had to be celebrities inside, so we walked into the lobby and looked around. We didn't recognize anyone, but Guido found out tickets were still on sale.

"The show starts in a half hour," he said with a smirk. "You guys want to go in?"

"Four bucks? Sure. Why not?"

After the show, we made our way down toward the stage, hoping to catch a closer look at someone famous. It turned out to be worth the detour—we saw Foster Brooks signing autographs, doing his usual drunk act. Or maybe it wasn't an act. It was hard to tell.

After grabbing a few pageant signs, we finally headed to gamble.

We entered the Playboy Casino through a connecting door from the Convention Center. How convenient. I was carded the moment I walked in, but I was ready—eighteen and legal.

It was my first time inside a casino, and it hit me all at once. The lights, the noise, the movement—it was like being a kid turned loose in a candy store. I didn't even know where to look first. All I could do was walk around and take it in.

At one point, I ran into some cousins from Carbondale who had taken a bus trip down. They were playing the slots. I said hello and kept moving.

The only game I knew anything about was blackjack, so that's where we started. We looked for a five-dollar table, but there were only a few, and all of them were full. If we wanted to play, it would have to be at a ten-dollar table. We found one with no one at it and sat down.

The dealer stood there with his hands folded, the cards spread face down in front of him. I pulled out the twenty dollars I was willing to lose, but not sure what to do with it.

Guido saw the look on my face. "If you want to play, just put the money on the table."

Tink and I did.

The dealer didn't seem too thrilled to have us there, but he started shuffling. When he finished, he slid a yellow card toward me.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"To cut the cards," Guido said. "Just stick it anywhere."

I played exactly three hands. I lost the first, then won the next two. That was enough for me. I was up ten dollars, and I wasn't about to give it back. I quit right there.

Guido moved on. I stayed and watched Tink play. A few minutes later, we heard shouting from the slot area. Guido came back and told me my cousins had just hit a small jackpot. I went over to see. A couple hundred dollars. You would've thought it was thousands from the way they were reacting.

When I got back, Tink was up eighty dollars.

"Quit while you're ahead," I told him.

He waved me off and kept playing. Up, down, back up again—he rode it out for a while before finally walking away with the eighty.

We said goodbye to the dealer. He barely acknowledged us, just gave a quick wave with a look that said he'd rather we hadn't sat down at all. Guido explained it—dealers hated having to start working if they'd been standing around.

From there, Guido and I headed to the dice tables. Tink went off on his own.

Guido jumped in, throwing chips all over the layout. I just watched. I had no idea what I was looking at.

Every time Guido rolled, he shouted, "Dollar yo!"

"What's that?" I asked.

"The eleven," he said. "Pays fifteen to one."

"Yo-eleven!" the dealer called out.

Guido got paid, then dropped a chip next to his bet.

"For the dealers," he said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"They work for tips. If I win, they win. Gets them rooting for you."

There was one other man playing at the table. Guido nodded toward him.

"He's betting against me," he said. "Every time I win, he loses. Every time I lose, he wins."

I looked down the table at the other player and then back at Guido.

Whatever, I thought.

It didn't seem to matter much. Guido kept losing.

Eventually, he lost everything. The other player left. The table went quiet.

"You were betting a lot for the dealers," I said as we walked away.

"Supposed to be good luck."

"Didn't look like it worked."

"My friend said they've got a button they can push to help you win."

"You believe that?"

Guido shook his head. "No way. Besides, that would be illegal."

We found Tink again. He was down forty.

"You lost the eighty and another forty?"

"Yeah."

"You schmuck."

I was the only winner that night.

A big ten dollars. Wow.

We headed back, already talking about it like it was some big adventure.

About a week later, Guido came up with what he called a sure thing—roulette.

He explained it using something we'd read in *Playboy* while walking the Boardwalk—an article ranking America's top party schools. There was even a rumor around campus that Stockton had made Playboy's list of the country's top party schools back in 1972. Whether it was true or not, everyone seemed to believe it. But what really grabbed him was the article's claim that UNLV students supposedly liked to bet their tuition money on red. That was all he needed to hear.

The system was simple. Bet red or black. If you lost, double your bet. Keep doubling until you won, then start over. Guido acknowledged there were two green spaces—0 and 00—but he was convinced they wouldn't matter often enough to beat the system. You can't lose.

It made sense. Too much sense.

We tested it at Harrah's. Watched the tables. Counted the spins. Four, five in a row—never more. We were convinced.

We each put up \$160 and picked a night to go in. Got dressed up. Felt like we had something figured out.

At first, it worked. Then it got tight. Then it got uncomfortable. Then it got real.

We hit six losses in a row.

Last spin. Everything on the line.

"Stay with the system?" Guido asked.

"We have to," I said.

He put \$160 on red.

The wheel spun. The ball dropped.

Black again.

That was it.

Guido shrugged it off. "Easy come, easy go."

I didn't.

“This game is fixed!” I snapped. “There’s no way that happens.”
The dealer just looked at me.
We cashed out what was left—fifteen dollars—and walked out.
Outside, Guido tried to calm me down. “That’s gambling, Lou.
We lost fair and square.”
He was right.
But I didn’t care.
I told myself I was done. If I didn’t play, I couldn’t lose.
That lasted until the spring.

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