

"Reluctant Gypsy" by Richard Donahue

A romantic comedy about the music business - murder and the mob.

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CHAPTER 1: EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF

Johnny Flannigan developed a sixth sense about trouble at an early age. It always happens when you're not dressed.

February 1948: 7:45 Sunday morning

Johnny lived with his mother and two older sisters in a one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Indianapolis. The girls slept on a foldout couch in the living room. Johnny, who was six years old, shared a double bed with his Mom, Elizabeth. His Dad was in the veteran's hospital at the time, faking tuberculosis. Johnny's big brother Levi and his wife Ellen lived in the apartment across the hall. Every time a battle erupted between them, Ellen would run over and hide; she knew the door was never locked. Elizabeth always told her friends, "Why lock the door? One night some thieves broke in and stole our furniture. Two hours later, they drove by and threw it back in the yard." She had a good sense of humor, but this Sunday morning was no laughing matter. Elizabeth was sitting straight up in the bed yelling.

"Don't do it, Levi! Don't do it!" Ellen had wedged herself in between the worn-out headboard and the paint-chipped wall. She was pleading with tears in her eyes.

"Don't hurt me, Levi, please!" Johnny wasn't fully awake yet, but he knew something was about to happen and it wasn't going to be pleasant. He peeked through one eye and saw Levi standing at the foot of the bed wielding a butcher knife. Levi, who was obviously inebriated, slurred his words in a menacing tone.

"You've lived long enough, Ellen. You've lived long enough." At Johnny's age he had a tendency to take everything literally, and he couldn't help thinking as he stared back at her... *She doesn't look that old.*

This was the first redneck reality show without the cameras, they had a built in audience out in the street waiting for the climax. Levi lurched to the side of the bed waving the knife in the air toward Ellen, and then he staggered backward on his heels. He was losing his balance, with both arms swinging in the air like an orchestra conductor. He crashed into a chair from the Goodwill store that was piled high with a wash load of un-ironed clothes. That's when everybody made their move – everyone but Johnny. Johnny's mom jumped out of bed away from Levi. Ellen broke out in the same direction. All the women galloped out the front door yelling.

"Come on, Johnny! Get your ass outta here!" For some unknown reason, Levi made no move to run after them. All at once it was just Johnny and Levi, staring each other down. Although Levi loved his little brother and Johnny knew that bond would never be broke between them, every hair on his body stood out, like he was holding onto the wrong end of jumper cables from a car battery. He watched Levi steady himself with the footboard and work his way around the bed. His stare held Johnny motionless; and just as Johnny began to visualize the Saturday matinee newsreels, *WILD MAN BREAKS BOND WITH YOUNGER BROTHER*, Levi collapsed down on the bed next to him, completely exhausted. The knife fell from his hand. It bounced across the floor toward a large cockroach that ducked and ran for cover. Levi rolled his eyes and looked at his brother.

"Johnny, you're the only one I trust. Nobody else understands me." For a moment Johnny was proud to be considered a guru at six years old, and he tried to remember where his Mother, Elizabeth had put his certificates in counseling and yoga. That's when Levi slipped his arm under the back of Johnny's neck like a pillow. Levi began to talk about everything from the war to putting Ellen in the grave. Johnny divided his attention between Levi and the commotion down in the street. Through an open window he could hear his Mom yelling.

"Johnny, get out of there. Come down here now!" He wasn't about to get up. Mercifully, he noticed that Levi's voice was becoming faint, as he began to doze off. Johnny lay there quite as a mouse. The clock ticked on and on. Eternity came and went *twice*. His heart was pounding, but he finally got the nerve to ever so delicately lift his head up. He looked like a mime without the makeup, slowly inching his way to the edge of the bed. Every tiny squeak sounded like a fire alarm in his ears. He slipped on his shirt and raggedy jeans with the six-inch split in the right leg from constantly getting caught in the bicycle chain. Quietly he worked himself down the hall to the front door. He took the stairs two at a time down to the street where his Mom stood crying with the girls. The cop cars pulled up with sirens blasting. They appraised the situation for a moment and walked upstairs with Billy clubs in hand. A few minutes later, two policemen drug Levi down to the sidewalk in handcuffs. The neighbors, who were mostly migrants from Kentucky, stood gawking from porches, dressed up in their hillbilly Sunday clothes ready for church. The younger cop shoved Levi into the back seat and slammed the door. Levi began kicking the side window. The older cop turned and said.

"We'll take him downtown and he can cool off in the hoosegow overnight ... unless somebody wants to press charges?" Ellen shook her head no, and said. "But will he be safe down there?"

"He'll be okay," the cop said. "It's everybody else I'm worried about."

They took Levi off to jail with flashing red lights. Johnny looked at his Mom and the girls half-dressed, and he could hear what the neighbors were thinking: *We might not have much . . . but we're better than you!* But from somewhere deep inside of Johnny, a little voice said, *Be brave. It won't always be like this. Be brave.* Everyone in the family knew Levi was still having a tough time re-adjusting to a normal life after facing life-and-death situations in world war two.

Submarine Duty

Levi served in the South Pacific. He was a seventeen-year-old kid doing a man's job. Much of the time he was serving on submarine duty. Levi was part of an underwater demolition team. Before the big battle, the sub would approach the island, then, Levi and a few other young men would slip out. They were armed only with knives. They carried C2 explosive and primer cord to blow up the underwater defenses planted by the enemy, to keep the US ships from getting close enough to shore to unload the troops on the beach. After planting and detonating explosives under water, Levi and the other crewmen waited on the shore to be picked up once the troops arrived. More than once they were discovered and forced into hand-to-hand combat with the Japanese. After a skirmish, he and the other men would sit on the heads of the dead enemy soldiers and steal their rations. When Levi was allowed R & R, he did what most sailors did who figured they would never get back to the states alive. He took on every tattoo parlor in the South

Pacific. Dancing hula girls on his biceps, the US Navy insignia on the left forearm and island birds, etched in pastel colors on the upper left and right side of his muscular chest.

By the time Levi came home from the war, Johnny was four years old. They took to each other instantly. When Levi came to the house, he hardly ever wore a shirt. Often times, he would sit Johnny on the couch next to him and imitate sounds like a drummer tapping on a hi-hat cymbal. As he flexed his muscles to the rhythm, the birds would fly and the girls would dance. Johnny enjoyed his brother's antics. Sometimes out of nowhere Levi would put his little brother in a friendly headlock, give him a noogie, and say, "Hey, little brother, you wanna drive a car?" And before Johnny had a chance to answer, they were out the door to Levi's '38 Ford waiting at the curb. He would sit Johnny on his lap in the driver's seat, and they'd speed up the street with the windows down and a summer breeze for the air conditioning. Johnny drove with both hands on top of the wheel, turning corners smooth as silk as Levi guided from below. Levi let Johnny lay on the horn when they flew by his little friends, who sat there motionless on their tricycles, watching him in envy.

To Johnny, Levi was the personification of macho. When Johnny was ten years old, a song came on the radio about a biker with tattoos, Johnny was sure the song had been written about his big brother, and he wasted no time telling his friends this revelation. The laughter was deafening, and Johnny took total offense at it. He got a knuckle sandwich on every corner in the neighborhood until he realized, the gift of "Bad Ass" was handed out only one per family.

Not long after Levi was born, his mom and dad, Elizabeth and Daniel, got a divorce. But they couldn't seem to leave one another alone. Well, actually, Daniel just refused to leave. What happened was that once the divorce was final, Elizabeth left the courthouse and Daniel walked down the street behind her. She said she tried to lose him by jaywalking, but she couldn't shake him. When they got back to the house, Daniel lay down on the couch, went to sleep and never left. So when they got pregnant with Johnny late in life, Elizabeth decided they should make it legal again.

The Beginning

January 26, 1942: 2:30 a.m.

The heavy iron knocker slammed five times against the old wooden door. The Justice of the Peace, Mr. Fahey, pulled himself out of bed and slipped into his robe. Hopping on one foot in the dark, he couldn't get his left slipper to cooperate and he slammed into the corner of the dresser.

"Damn it!" he hissed. In a half-run he flipped on the light in the hallway, and the slipper flapped against the side of his foot like a fish on a hook. He worked his way past a desk full of legal papers and folders, tenuously balanced against each other like a house of cards, threatening to collapse at any minute. Finally he reached the front door.

"Who is it?" he yelled. The pounding grew louder. Unlocking the door, but leaving the night chain attached for safety, he cracked open the door just enough to peek through. There stood Elizabeth and Daniel Flannigan, Johnny's future mom and dad. She was eight months pregnant with Johnny by this time. Daniel was weaving back and forth on rubber legs from consuming large amounts of whiskey. He said something incoherent, but Elizabeth interrupted, speaking in a crystal clear voice.

"We want to get married!" The magistrate raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "You are joking aren't you? This man is drunk!" Elizabeth showed no concern. "Aw, don't worry about it. He's always that way."

He married them to get rid of them. The so-called ceremony went quickly. The magistrate roused his wife out of bed to witness the event. She stood there with no emotion, dressed in her housecoat with the nightgown hanging out the bottom. She fought to stay awake as a curler dislodged and fell out of her hair to the floor. Elizabeth stared at the lifeless curl and thought, *Another failed Toni Home Permanent.*

After the I-do's, the magistrate led them back to his desk. Elizabeth signed the marriage license and gave the pen to Daniel, who was fading fast. He slumped down into the chair, and bumped his leg against an open drawer. The papers and folders from the top collapsed onto his lap and down to the floor. By the time they searched through the papers and found the license, Daniel was passed out. His body was arched back over the chair, and he began to snore with his mouth wide open. Bringing Daniel back to life was unbearable for Mr. Fahey. He yelled in desperation.

"Wake up man! Sign the paper and get out!" Elizabeth and the justice took turns on Daniel, shaking, pulling, and yelling. Finally Daniel opened his eyes, mumbled something about a luau and threw up in the waste basket. At this point the magistrate lost it. "Get out of my house, you idiot!" Elizabeth led Daniel out the door into the summer night, and the magistrate called after her. "Hey lady! that'll be two bucks!" Elizabeth, in her most sophisticated voice, with chin up and belly out, replied. "BILL ME!"

Right before Johnny was born the family was evicted from their apartment. Daniel, always being ahead of the game, found an abandoned house down the street a block away. He wasn't about to spend money on a truck, so the family just picked the furniture up over their heads, and walked down the street with it to the new shack. Daniel made the sisters carry the heavy things, while he walked along and criticized their performance. Elizabeth carried Johnny in her stomach and a hot plate in her arms for cooking. One month later Johnny was born at home. Two weeks after that, they had no money, Daniel had no interest, and Johnny was still nameless.

A Buggy and a Bassinet

Elizabeth heard a car door slam. She hurried over and peeked through the dirty window, pulling aside the threadbare curtain. She turned to Daniel.

"Oh, no, here comes your sister Hazel with her new husband! Don't answer the door. I don't want them to see this place!" Daniel had another idea.

"Don't be stupid, let 'em in. I think he's got money. He's a professional gambler." Elizabeth, realizing her mistake, fluffed up her hair with her fingers and began practicing her sophisticated look. Daniel, always wanting to be helpful, pointed out the runner in her nylon when she walked to the door. Just as she reached for the doorknob, which came off in her hand, she turned her ankle, breaking the heel off her shoe. She quickly kicked both shoes off and into the corner. Daniel slipped on his suit coat. He always wore a suit, the same one every day. He was constantly ironing his coat and trousers, making them so shiny that when he walked by a window, the sun reflected off his pants like a strobe light.

Aunt Hazel was attractive for a woman of fifty. She had beautiful black hair, wrapped in a beehive with a decorative gold pin in the back holding it together. Her appearance was always perfect, with bright red lipstick and long dark eyelashes, and she

always wore lots of expensive perfume. Hazel ran with the fast crowd; she loved to have fun. Most women were jealous of her because she made a grand entrance wherever she went. She couldn't help it. She was a Leo. She made no bones about her dislike for her brother, Daniel.

"I don't care if he is family," She would say. "Keep your hand on your wallet when he's in the room." She delighted in pointing out another moral failing: "Worst of all, he can't hold his liquor." Making her grand entrance, Hazel pushed open the door.

"Where's that new baby! I want to see my little nephew." She could hardly contain her excitement. Her new husband John did a forward roll through the front door right behind her. Elizabeth and Daniel showed only mild surprise at this gymnastic feat. They remembered he had grown up in a family of acrobats, traveling around the world in a circus. Over the years, he had become a professional gambler, a dealer. He'd set up a game in the back room of some tavern or someone's house for three or four days at a time. His partner would pay off the cops and everybody made a lot of money.

John was a likeable little elf-like guy, always telling jokes and doing magic tricks. He could make a quarter flip from heads to tails by laying it on the back of his wrist, and rotating his hand in such a way that a muscle in his forearm would snap and the coin would pop up and turn over. This move was unique to his arm only. Years later, he showed little Johnny the trick, who spent months trying to perfect it. That was impossible of course, and in the process Johnny almost ruined his arm for life. John was nimble on his feet. Only a practiced eye could see that he and Hazel were halfway into a weeklong drunk. Hazel spotted the baby bunched up in a blanket on an old throw rug on the floor. She lifted the kid up and hugged him tight.

"What did you name this baby?" she asked. "We haven't named it yet," Daniel said. To him the kid was just something he had to step over to get to the kitchen. Actually he and Elizabeth had forgotten to name the boy.

"You gotta name him," Hazel said. "He's two weeks old!" Still holding the baby, she thought for a moment and then broke into a broad smile.

"I've got an idea," she said. "Name him after John!" John gave Hazel an admiring look. "Yeah, name him after me and I'll buy him a bassinet," He said proudly. Daniel, who was staring aimlessly out the window at this point, did a double take giving himself a temporary whiplash when he turned to accept the offer. He loved anything that was free. Then he heard Elizabeth, whispering out the corner of her mouth.

"Don't you dare! Johnnies the name they use in all those dirty jokes." Hazel, sensing resistance, said, "We'll throw in a buggy too." The Mom and Dad locked eyes, both realizing a major opportunity.

"A buggy *and* a bassinet.?" Hazel looked at John.

"Hell yes," John said. "Little Johnny deserves the best!" With that, he whipped out a pint of whiskey from his hip pocket. He tossed back a shot and handed the bottle to Daniel. Aunt Hazel was all smiles.

"Little Johnny Flannigan," she kept repeating, while holding her face next to the baby. She continued walking around, sizing up the house.

"Little Johnny Flannigan, you're gonna be somebody. I can feel it." Then she walked by Elizabeth and whispered. "You gotta get out of this dump!"

A Professional Deadbeat

Johnny was still a kid when his Dad was admitted into the veteran's hospital with tuberculosis. TB was a prevalent disease back then and he jumped right on it. Daniel knew how to cut corners and get by on as little as possible. For instance, he smoked Marvel cigarettes, the kind you buy for a dime. You get the cheap tobacco with the paper and roll your own. This stuff could kill an elephant with just the secondary smoke. One day after Elizabeth had been pressuring him to look for a job he came up with a plan of his own. He lit up about forty cigarettes in a row, worked up a hacking cough and walked over to the Veterans hospital. He spit up blood for them until they gave him a white gown and put him in a dorm with what he termed the "other war heroes."

Daniel was drafted into the army during World War I. He was stationed twenty-two miles out of town and never left the states. Three months after he was drafted, the war was over, and he sucked the government dry for the rest of his life.

But in his younger years, he did have his chances to become somebody. While in the army, he joined the boxing team to get out of KP duty. Daniel was known to be a scrapper in his old neighborhood. So staying true to form, in the first boxing match, he knocked the other guy out. He won the second fight by a TKO. By this time he and his trainer were excited about his boxing future, so the trainer moved him up to the better competition. Daniel's first competitor was pretty good. In fact he was so good they carried Daniel out of the ring in a basket.

CHAPTER 2: 1950 CASH POOR

Johnny was going on nine years old when his Dad was released from the Veterans hospital in the middle of August. Elizabeth was working at Rubens Fur Company. The two Jewish brothers sold expensive coats out of their plush showroom downtown. Elizabeth ran the busy switchboard in a corner of the store. All the employees liked her. Even though they were a tough bunch, she just wrapped them around her finger with her funny, innocent remarks. The family was always low on cash because Daniel was still looking for a job. Of course, every time a job came by, he made sure he was looking the other way. Over time, he decided that the best way to make money was down at the pawn shop. You'd have to look quick at anything of value Elizabeth brought into the house because the next day it was gone. Watches, rings, even appliances. One time he pawned the little Johnny's snow suit, Johnny was still in it!

Daniel worked Elizabeth with precision showmanship. Every morning he would sit at the dining room table and read the newspaper. Elizabeth would come down the steps, wearing her old housecoat and no makeup. She was always tired. She worked hard to make up for the things Daniel refused to do. With her shoulders hunched over, she'd sit down and light up a Chesterfield. Daniel would look up and say good morning in his most sincere voice.

"Elizabeth, you look beautiful! Especially in the mornings, the way the sun glistens on your porcelain skin." (The sky was usually cloudy.)

"You really think so?"

"I'm a lucky man."

With that said, her face brightened, her shoulders straightened, and she'd get dressed for work. In rain, sleet or snow, she would walk to the corner and catch the downtown bus, while Daniel was turning the page to the sports section.

When they ran out of cash, Elizabeth would go to the Ruben brothers at the fur company. Little by little, she'd weave a web of sparkling conversation and tell a funny story about the home life.

"...and the burglars threw the furniture back in the yard! Ha, ha, ha." While the brothers were bent over laughing, she'd con them out of a fifteen-dollar advance. She worked there twenty years and was paid for thirty.

Growing up and having nothing was something Johnny never got used to. The furniture was old and always covered with a film of dust from the coal furnace. A drooping couch sat next to a dirty wall. They had a foldout chair that wouldn't fold out and a coat hanger for a TV antenna that made the picture flip over and over. I'd like to say the vacuum cleaner sucked, but it didn't.

A Special Breakfast

One winter morning when Johnny was about five years old, Elizabeth dressed him up in new Buster Brown shoes and a gray plaid coat that his brother Levi and Ellen had bought him. They took the bus to Maxwell's, a classy restaurant downtown, to have breakfast. (She must have hit up the Ruben brothers for the cash.) The head waiter wore a handsome black suit and tie along with a crisp white shirt. He led them to a table and pulled out a chair for Elizabeth and one for Johnny. After he handed them the menus, he

made a slight bow and walked away. Johnny was amazed that the man would let them in, let alone bow. Sitting there, Johnny could smell the fresh coffee and bacon cooking. When he looked around the room, he noticed the customers were all dressed up – men in business suits and women in silky dresses. Every table had fresh cut flowers in sparkling vases; with a linen tablecloth. Then the waitress walked up. She wore a starched white blouse and a dark blue skirt. Her fingernails were polished red and her makeup was perfect. She was so lovely Johnny went weak inside. He thought they had sent out a movie star to wait on them. That moment was like a dream. Johnny felt as though he was really somebody. Surrounded by this much beauty was so overwhelming that when the waitress turned to take his order, he couldn't speak. Elizabeth had to order something she thought he might like. But when the food arrived, he was so lost in paradise, he couldn't eat. His stomach was filled with Monarch butterflies. He could have flown around the room. Later when they cleared away the dishes, his Mom asked him what was wrong, but there was no way to explain. He just reached over and took her hand. He looked into her sweet face and thanked her. For most people, it might have been just another day; but for Johnny, it was unforgettable.

A Night Swim

Life with Elizabeth and Daniel Flannigan was like driving in reverse. You never knew what was coming. One hot and humid summer evening Daniel decided to take them swimming. His dad rummaged through the closet and found an old pair of swimming trunks. Mom borrowed a swimsuit from a neighbor. They found out later this was a big mistake. They couldn't find anything for Johnny to wear, so they planned to rent trunks at the pool. Leaving the house they walked down the street to the bus stop. Dad was wearing his fedora, wrinkled shirt, tie, and reflector suit. Mom was doing her sophisticated walk for the neighbors – elbow against her side, forearm up, smoking a Chesterfield. She and Daniel lived in a fantasy world. They made believe they were normal. As they walked along, Daniel tipped his hat to the neighbor ladies out for an evening stroll with their husbands and kids. He was always polite.

"Good evening, Mrs. Courtney." Mrs. Courtney remarked to her husband as they walked on.

"Isn't he a nice man? What does he do?" Her husband looked back and said.

"I've never seen him do anything."

On nights like this, life was good. Johnny glanced back now and then at his Mom and Dad talking and laughing, enjoying each other's company. Daniel talked about things he was never going to do, and Elizabeth acted as though she believed him. Summer evenings were slow and easy. Humidity hung in the air with the constant smell of the soybean factory down the back alley. People sat on porch steps fanning themselves or perched in second-floor windows with no screens waiting to catch a breeze. From house to house, the faint sound of radios playing Sinatra, Tony Bennett and the Mills Brothers blended in and out of each other. The folks from down south listened to Hank Williams. Teenage boys hung out on the corner in front of Doherty's Drug Store beneath the flickering neon sign with half the letters out. They leaned against the building or the street lamp and flirted with the girls who were walking by pretending they didn't notice the whistles and wise cracks.

Johnny stood at the bus stop with his Mom and Dad until the trolley pulled up, bouncing over the rusty streetcar tracks that were of no use any longer. The pressurized doors opened, and he jumped up the steps. Daniel, always the gentleman in public, gave Elizabeth his arm and escorted her on board. Daniel somehow knew the driver. He leaned over and made up some excuse for the lack of money. Johnny was embarrassed, but Mom didn't seem to mind. She stood there killing time, reading the advertisements above the windows, taking her mind off the big picture. *We have no bus fare.*

The driver gave Daniel a long, sarcastic look and maneuvered the big steering wheel away from the curb. After he motioned for them to take a seat, he closed the doors and drove on down to the next stop. Johnny loved the feel of the leather seats as the bus glided along, with the warm smell of a summer evening flowing through the open windows. Little by little their beat-up neighborhood disappeared, and mile by mile the houses, cars and colors became vivid and rich. They entered the affluent side of town, and Johnny wondered if some day he could live like that. He sank back in the seat and dozed off into peaceful sleep.

It was evening when they finally arrived at the pool. The lights sparkled across the water like stars. The pool was full of people who were having a great time. Johnny was sure it was going to be a great evening.....well.....

Mom went to the ladies locker room. Dad and Johnny changed clothes on the other side. Daniel's trunks were too tight, and Johnny's rented trunks were three times too big. All the way to the pool area Dad was pulling the trunks out of his crack, and Johnny kept pulling his up. When his Elizabeth came out wearing her borrowed, one-piece, black swimsuit, Johnny gave a sigh of relief. At least her suit fit.

They all three ran to the edge of the pool and dove in. When Johnny hit the water, his swim trunks slipped down to his ankles and dropped off. When Elizabeth surfaced they all realized that the suit she was wearing must have been in the neighbor's closet long enough for the moths to have gotten to it. She looked like she had been hit with a machine gun. Then, insult to injury. Johnny looked up and saw the lifeguard running toward the water, he blew the whistle and yelled.

"Somebody shit in the pool...everybody out!"

Jesse Davidson

When Johnny first moved to the neighborhood, he walked out on the sidewalk to take a look around. A few houses to the left, some barefooted kids in dirty clothes were jumping in and out of empty windows, playing tag. They paid no attention to the mother, who was yelling at them to settle down. She finally gave up and continued sweeping the rickety old porch, accomplishing little more than moving the dust around. They were Kentuckians, like a lot of the families in the neighborhood who had come to Indiana looking for work.

After a minute Johnny looked across the street and there he was, little Jesse Davidson. He was decked out in a cowboy hat that didn't fit, worn-out fuzzy chaps, boots and a set of rusty spurs. Straddling a broomstick pony, he held the reins in soiled, brown leatherette gloves, with a few leftover strands of fringe on the side. Around his waist hung double homemade holsters and two six-shooters, sporting ivory handles made of cheap plastic. Needless to say, Johnny was impressed. Jesse was staring at this new kid like a gunslinger right out of a movie. At that moment Johnny could smell the horses and hear the music. This could be a showdown, he thought, but yet, he was unarmed. Johnny

stepped off the curb and started across the street. They continued to stare each other down. The wind whipped up and Johnny was sure he saw a tumbleweed blow past him and disappear between two parked cars. He reached the other side of the street and stopped. Jesse glared down at him from the sidewalk atop his steed. Johnny wasted no words. "Can I see your guns? Jesse slowly moved his right hand toward his sidearm.

"I don't trust strangers." With that, he quickly drew both guns and twirled them forward, then in reverse. Magically, he flipped them over with the handles facing the stranger.

"Here, try these on for size." It was easy to see, Jesse was an actor. Jesse and Johnny became best buddies. They played together on the street from morning until night. Jesse lived in a dump down the street. Jesse was different than most of the other kids. His family owned a second-rate carnival that traveled to small towns all over the map, conning poor country folks out of their hard-earned money. When Jesse was twelve, the family took him on the road with them. He learned the facts of life faster than most. He became a tough street fighter that you didn't want to mess with. When he was fifteen, he would have four or five hundred bucks in his pocket. His family knew how to make money, but they had no idea how to hang on to it. At any given time they would either have a small fortune or flat broke.

One of Jesse's older brothers had an old Gibson acoustic guitar. Jesse would bring the flat top out on the front porch, and over time, he and Johnny learned to play it. There was always at least one string missing, which made it even harder to work with. But little by little, Johnny found out he had a knack for making up songs. Jesse had a better voice so Johnny would write down the words, make up a melody, and Jesse would sing. They spent most of the time laughing. They had no idea what those small beginnings would someday lead to.