

WAYWARD TRACKS

Revelations about fatherhood, faith, fighting with your spouse, surviving Girl Scout camp, striking bottom, hitting fifty, playing hockey, trick knees, fugitive joy, looking for your car keys, fixing what's broken, first sonograms, last goodbyes, and remembering what matters most.

MARK
COLLINS

WAYWARD TRACKS

Mark Collins



Revelations about fatherhood, faith, fighting with your spouse, surviving Girl Scout camp, striking bottom, hitting fifty, playing hockey, trick knees, fugitive joy, looking for your car keys, fixing what's broken, first sonograms, last goodbyes, and remembering what matters most.

ie.
in extenso

PLAYLIST

Foreword by Paul Wilkes	7
Introduction: Words Fail Me, and Vice Versa	11
Track 1: Mourning Has Broken	17
Track 2: Purgatory on Wheels	
a. Buddha in the Breakdown Lane	19
b. None of Them Can Stop the Time	20
c. It Takes a Village with a Trouble Light	22
d. The Last of How It Was	23
Track 3: Sixteen-and-a-Half Years Old	26
Track 4: September Morn	
a. A Different Language	28
b. I Love You in a Post-9/11 Way	34
Track 5: Life: A Primer	
a. Sonograms	36
b. The LifeMeter	38
c. Note to New Users	40
d. Bury My Knee at Wounded Heart	42
e. Play-by-Playback	44
Track 6: In the Express Lane	46
Track 7: Letter to My Daughter	47
Track 8: Only Shades of Gray	
a. Some Dyed for Beauty	49
b. The Color of Forgiveness	50
c. My Goodness, You're Good Looking	51

Track 9: Giving Back What I Lent.....	53
Track 10: Teachable Moments	
a. Daddy’s Little Girl Scout Camp.....	57
b. Solving for Why.....	60
c. An Open Letter to Pitt Students.....	62
d. Note to My Daughter’s Social Studies Teacher.....	64
e. My Speech to the Graduates.....	66
f. To My Daughters on Their Birthdays, in Lieu of Gifts.....	69
Track 11: How Still We See Thee Lie, and Lie Again	
a. The Advent of Customer Service.....	71
b. Holiday Email Apologia #37.....	74
c. Stocking Stuffed Full of It.....	77
d. “And He Shall Be Called...”.....	79
Track 12: That Thing with the Feathers.....	80
Track 13: The Names of Those Places	
a. Me Hitting Bottom.....	82
b. The Worst Apostle Says Thank You.....	85
c. The Names of Those Places.....	87
Track 14: Not Always.....	91
Track 15: A River of Sin Called Denial.....	92
Track 16: 4:53 a.m.....	94
Bonus Track: The Pope’s Mechanic.....	96
Notes.....	101
Acknowledgments and Dedication.....	103

FOREWORD

By Paul Wilkes
Author, *Your Second to Last Chapter*



Laundry Lists of Stupid Stuff

Most of our lives are spent churning over old hates and loves and replaying videos that have some semblance to what really happened but are mostly highly edited versions of the truth. Usually that's where the Rorschach of our lives remain, running up and down the neural highways, howling at the moon, sobbing uncontrollably or laughing like a fool.

For some of us, the writers among us, those brain meanderings find their way to the tips of our fingers and onto a page. We ask ourselves: Is it only me? Am I the only one with a laundry list of stupid stuff scrolling through my mind as if my finger was stuck on the keyboard's down arrow?

We write about what we have experienced and what we think about what we have experienced. Yes, we want to entertain our readers, but I believe we mostly want to remind ourselves what we really saw, felt, and did. We want our memories to come clear, and the only way to do that is to write them down. And, looking at our written words, we often find that "Yes, that's exactly the way it was, the mythic truth, far clearer than it ever was before in my befuddled brain."

Mark Collins is a very good writer. In this wonderful crazy quilt of short essays and poems, he takes us on a bumpy ride along his neural highways, with plenty of stops along the way to plunge deeply

and perceptively into the everyday holiness of our lives. (Sample of his tone: “I speak to you as a happily married man. I can’t speak for my wife Sandee, because she’s not speaking to me right now.”)

We hear of Mark’s father, whose mother pleaded successfully to FDR to keep her son out of World War II, only to see him enlist. We examine the contents of the glove compartment of his car about to be sold that tell exactly who this fellow is. We read his letters to his daughter and to the pope and stories about death, life, banality, spirituality, faith, doubt.... They’re all here, but lifted up with an indomitable spirit and literary skill we cannot help but cheer on: Go, Mark, go! Don’t give up; you’re on the one yard line; punch it home!

Now let me get out of the way and give you a preview of just a few of my favorite passages from *Wayward Tracks* by this Pittsburgh Everyman, who always provides us with a new spiritual, albeit sometimes painful, insight into the human encounters we readily recognize from our own life:



“Maybe I’ll try loving my neighbor by helping to load her cart at the supermarket instead of secretly seething because she has way more than twelve items in the express lane.”



“It has always troubled me that out of the five members of my birth family, I was the sixth-best writer. Everyone, including the dog, told better stories. My sister Cindy could tell stories—or at least finish them. When she found out that a well-known philanderer had lost his legs to diabetes, Cindy said, ‘Well, he won’t be running around on his wife anymore.’”



"I do know this: Suzanne fired one shot, and that bullet ripped through several hundred people. Look around at the funeral tomorrow; count the wounded. They'll be easy to spot. Suzanne loved her family, so I can only guess she wasn't herself when she picked up that gun."



"In the hierarchy of sin, the basest level is denying God's merciful bounty to our fellow astronauts on spaceship Earth. To squander the future for the present denies hope for God's children in coming generations. Trust me: There is a special circle in Hell (or at least a very long line in Purgatory) for souls with such hubris. Catholic or not, Christian or not, believer or not, we can't steal from the future and not pay the price. Nature always wins."



"And I've spent twice that time in church—an eternity, really—waiting and praying for miracles and answers. On days like today, sitting bumper-to-bumper on the Parkway East on my (late) way to work, prayer seems like an ill-timed joke and God reminds me of a careless absentee landlord who's put me up in a windowless, cold-water flat with no heat and no chance at subletting—except maybe to my sister in the ICU, who'd welcome the change."



“But that’s not the end of it. All of these lonely, painful journeys share something else: shedding your old self. Not only shedding the usual suspects (possessions, prepossessions, presumptions), but shedding your old way of thinking.... Here is my prayer for you, the same prayer I whisper into the ether for myself: Pray to the God who’s there. Pray to the God who you wish were there. Pray to the divine emptiness you feel.”

INTRODUCTION

Words Fail Me, and Vice Versa

What happens when one's professional writing career is unforgivingly staked, in part, to the divine?

I worked as a writer for the better part of fifteen years before moving on to my current profession as a teacher and advisor. Writing was always more than just a job to me. Writing drove, enlightened, and finally devoured me. I gave it up mostly because writing and me weren't getting along. We had a passionate love affair, but a troubled marriage; finally we decided on a conscious uncoupling. Yet, like any old habit, it was never really gone. Recently I've made a new and disturbing discovery—it's not that I'm incompatible with language, it's that I don't trust it. My faith in words has faltered. For any serious writer "words fail me" isn't a cliché, it's a diagnosis.

Though I no longer write to put food on my family's table, and confess to being somewhat piety impaired, I continue to contribute to *Daily Guideposts*, a mainstream publication of inspirational devotionals. Some of what I have written for *Daily Guideposts*, newspapers, magazines and other publications is included here.

But any book claiming to be about divinity and honesty owes its readership full disclosure:

I believe in God. I think.

This acknowledgement alone is hilarious because my belief, tentative as it is, has not slowed down my repeated and active commission of sins. Although we all sin, some of us sin more spectacularly than others, and none more than those who write about it. To openly acknowledge one's belief *and* one's myriad transgressions is to secretly hope for public absolution. *He's self-flagellating in public! How refreshingly sincere!*—thus encouraging the sin of pride. How ironic.

Speaking of irony: memoirs such as these are, by nature, selfish and arrogant. The world is full of suffering in need of my hand and yours, yet here we both are, focusing on the first-world problems of a first-world sinner, a chronicle of irony and self-deception. Consider what follows to be a form of penance for this.



We used to think that humans were the only species that could use tools...until we saw other primates at work, and realized that was a stupid assumption. (That would have made a good working title for Darwin's *Origin of the Species: Human Pride—Another Stupid Assumption*.) Then we thought we were the only species to use language, and were proven wrong yet again. All sorts of species communicate, and those who do often seem to do it better than we humans. Have you ever watched a nature program about whales where one whale says to another, "Huh?" or "Wha'd you say?" No. They communicate over acres of ocean and never repeat themselves or mishear anything. Meanwhile I haven't understood one word Bob Dylan has sung in fifty years.

However, it is true—probably—that humans have some singular aspects in the ways we communicate: We're the only species that uses written language, we're the only species that understands irony, and we're the only species that deceives itself.

Granted, other species have a sense of humor, but it's pretty basic. Monkeys and chimps at the zoo fling things they shouldn't fling and laugh about it. (I'm laughing too but that's different. It's research.) But humans enjoy the richness of irony. Humans understand—occasionally, usually suddenly—that things aren't as they appear, and we're not who we think we are, and it's...well, not always amusing, but it's at least enlightening. *That's* irony. Irony is a blunt tool because irony is rude. Irony is truth-telling. Irony is unsettling.

To understand irony is to stare into the abyss, and see the abyss stare back and chuckle. With irony, you understand that life, even in its blackest form, is something of a joke; what seems to be Crucially Important is just a Passing Moment. The truth of your real rank in the world is restored. Your previous posture of consequence was just Another Stupid Assumption.

Other species also are good at deception—in fact, it’s pretty much standard policy in nature to hide or camouflage oneself. They don’t call it deception; they call it survival. No one rebukes a chameleon for changing colors. Humans, on the other hand, actually come up with lies of all sizes to deceive ourselves. *Ourselves*. Think about that. And forget the measly one-time lie—we create the kind of self-deceit that’s a chronic, ongoing enterprise. We have built a narrative house of cards that we could easily break out of at any time, and yet we cannot imagine escape. *My spouse will never look at another person. My kids will always respect me. I will always do unto others...* do I need to go on? What I’m *really* saying is that my spouse will never be human, my kids will never be human, and I will never be human. Why would Jesus bother to become “fully human” if not to realize who and what we are? What would be the point? Surely some of the motivation would be to see our own brokenness—otherwise the Apostles’ Creed is just Another Stupid Assumption, and Jesus never could have been “true God and true man” and never wrestled with the demons of self-deceit. On the contrary, Jesus *openly* wrestled with demons. He was just more successful at it than we are. (And while we’re at it, it seems that Jesus was especially prickly about self-deceivers: “...one of you will betray me; you, you over there, will deny me three times.” Not me, pal. No sir. You can count on me. Yep. Roger. You betcha.)



What did we humans do to deserve this unique good-and-bad combo-platter of deceit and irony? I can see the evolutionary advantage of deceit, both self- and otherwise. There are lots of instances in which the dishonest among us get the upper hand. But what evolutionary mechanism would select for irony? I can't figure it out, except that it apparently became important to us hominids to occasionally acknowledge that we aren't who we appear to be and that we are often, in fact, ridiculous. To admit this, I think, brings us to the outskirts of the divine, bordering on redemption: It announces something greater than the fatuous, self-important role humanity has assumed for itself. Maybe that's why we tend to celebrate the divine through art, literature, dance, theater, and poetry. It's difficult to achieve deep insight through our public or private selves. We have to make up personas to do the heavy lifting required of clear-eyed truth. It is through art that we edit our real selves. Our flesh-and-blood versions are lousy and evolving first drafts, with all the attendant sloppiness and misdirection and deceptive veneer.

Good writing *sounds* original, like hearing Louis Armstrong riff for the first time. But good writing is anything but original. Good writing cycles through countless iterations to parade as original; it rehearses and rehearses and rehearses to sound new. Many religions, especially Christianity, understand this. The “re-” prefix in redemption and resurrection implies a return to an earlier, purer, sinless state—but we all understand that's a ruse. We won't be returning to Eden ever, yet we live as if every Christmas is the first Christmas, every Easter is the first Easter, every new sin invites the possibility of new salvation: to revise ourselves, to seek redemption, again and again and again.

In reality, every act of revision in art is an act of contrition—thus the following prayer to me and to you, dear reader: *O My God, I am heartily sorry for this imperfect mess. I detest ridiculous, clichéd piety, sentimental and dishonest and cloying, which hath offended thee and*

me and everyone else. I am truly sorry and humbly repent, and firmly resolve to do better tomorrow—after at least six hours of sleep and a couple of shots of near-occasion, 80-proof, single-malt sin.

Every act of revision is voluntary, like asking for forgiveness. Despite the advice from pop psychologists, most of us act as if it's *always* better to *not* ask for forgiveness and simply pretend everything is all right. Sure. We do the same with our words. Self-deception is so much easier than the hard work of truth-telling. We discern that our deathless prose is actually a little trite and dodgy. But they're okay for now, right? We firmly resolve to do better tomorrow, knowing tomorrow will require its own contrition.

And maybe that's why some of our favorite art portrays us as the hilarious, screwed-up, sinful characters that we are. That I am. I'm the person laid bare in the following pages, albeit revised and somewhat PhotoShopped, by my editors and by myself. But I think the whole idea of editing, revisiting, correcting, makes me all the more hopeful, makes the idea of redemption all the more possible, all the more holy, all the more amen.

TRACK 1

Mourning Has Broken

Sometimes life shatters.

At first there's the shock of the sudden, the wide-eyed "*what was that?*" followed by disbelief, then belief, then a numbness so deep that your heart beats but generates no measurable pulse. Time goes on, but you wouldn't know. Each morning you get up and get dressed—or not.

But at some point you have to address the pieces that are left, scattered about like an exploded jigsaw puzzle. And there you are on your knees, retrieving each piece—the big ones, the broken ones, the slivers. Slowly you rebuild the entire thing until your knees hurt and it still doesn't look anything like the picture on the box because of all that's missing. And all you can *think* about is what's missing, the sorrow of what isn't, the grief for what's gone.

And so, a choice: fill those voids using the tools you have around the house (memory, imagination, stubbornness, and maybe even prayer if you still can but no one would blame you if you can't), *or* focus forever on what might have been. I think that choice matters, maybe because there's just that one thing left that you control.

Eventually what you find in your hands isn't what's missing, but the unedited, un-cropped, un-filtered version of the photo on the box—the real version, the to-scale version, *your* version. Turns out this actual version will always have pieces missing, and missed...but the puzzle is now complete, holes and all. This holey puzzle is yours to keep.

Strangely, reality doesn't care how your new puzzle compares to the old picture. Reality doesn't notice what's missing, only what's there. In fact, most people won't notice what's missing, either, and

you'll be thankful for that. Most people are kind, and those who aren't kind usually have more missing than you do.

There is some solace, I believe, in this journey. I have found such journeys begin not with a single step (that comes later), but begin at that initial moment—on your knees, trying to figure out what's lost, what's still here, trying to gather it all up, trying to gather the strength to start anew...

...and you think maybe hope has arrived, but it hasn't really because hope doesn't arrive on schedule or in a box. Hope comes the second you utter its name, the second you're willing to think about tomorrow, to plan again, to re-introduce yourself to your roommates on this planet, to live this new, unsought life as something both holey and holy.

Scribes once called these things faith and grace—the unseen, the undeserved—but these were compromise words, names to describe the unnamable, the indescribable. Somewhere deep in our marrow lies the steely will to move on when there's no earthly reason to do so. Our species has survived on such deep and fragile resilience, which resurrects itself each time we begin on our knees, looking finally past ourselves to what lies beyond what's missing to what we actually have, and what we can do for others with what we actually have.

And that's what a prayer is, I think.

TRACK 2 > PURGATORY ON WHEELS

TRACK 2A

Buddha in the Breakdown Lane

For centuries theologians have wondered how the world's great teachers—Buddha, Therese of Lisieux, the Desert Fathers, et.al.—were able to lead lives of such compassion and forgiveness.

I know how: None of them ever drove a car. Trust me—if the Buddha had my daily commute through rush hour in Pittsburgh he wouldn't be so jolly.

I admit my sins are many, and impatience ranks right up there. I look calm and collected behind the wheel, but I'm actually contemplating the logistics of a roof-mounted howitzer (sure it's costly, but I could then take care of the Camry that just cut me off for the fifth time).

Recently, however, I've tried another tack: praying. I already use the Lord's name in many colorful and creative ways, but this is different. I pray the rosary, which takes me from the Camp Horne entrance of I-279 all the way to town. There's something soothing, something comforting, something ineffable about this ancient litany of prayers, this connection with our storied past. I can't explain it—I just do it because it works.

Which might help explain that whole compassion and forgiveness thing, too.

TRACK 2B

None of Them Can Stop the Time

Last month I shoed my kids into the van and drove around the block. After a couple of circuits, I told them they were about to witness history: the odometer turned 200,000 miles.

They were less than impressed. “Does that mean we can buy a new car now?” my daughter Hope asked.

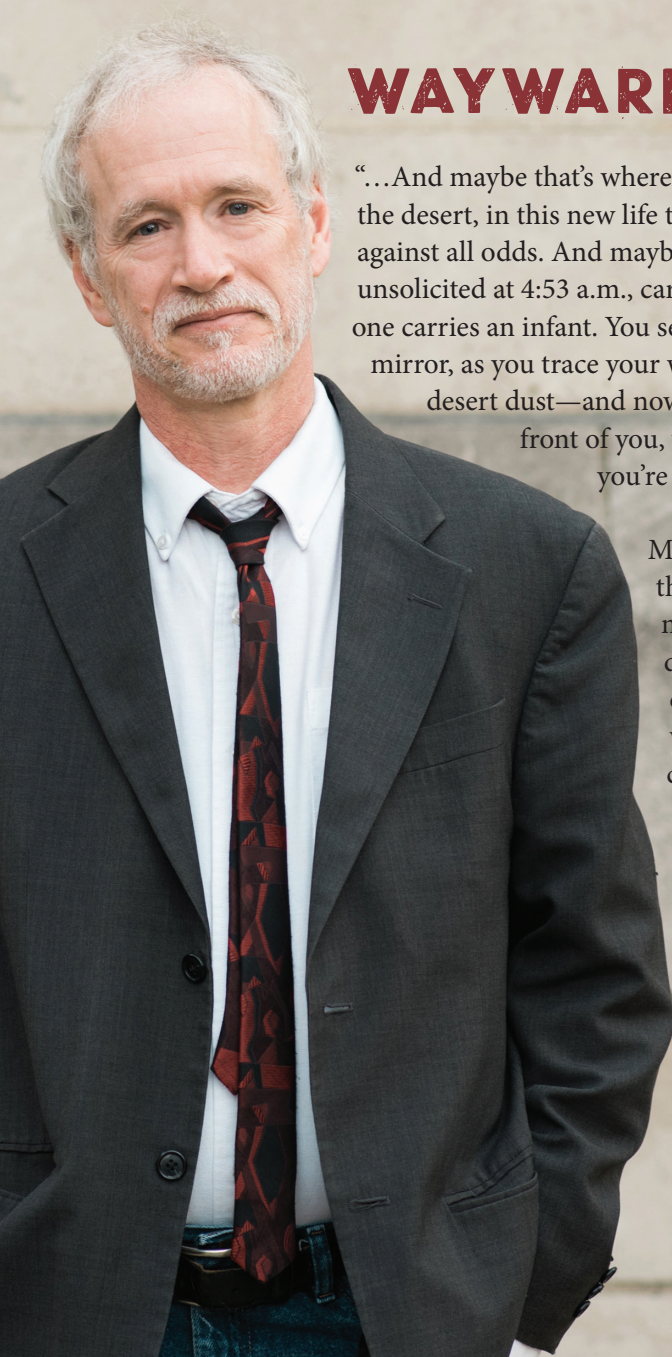
It’s a fair question, because the van is in less than fair shape. The sliding door doesn’t really close, which makes for a frosty ride. The “check engine” light is on permanently; sometimes it flashes three dots/three dashes/three dots. Where’s that owner’s manual? The rain gutter is loose—at high speeds it beats out a rhythm reminiscent of early Bob Marley.

And the whole idea of miles (even a nice round number) is suspect. In case you’re curious—and even if you’re not—the concept of miles is based on old English agrarian measurements (four rods per chain, eighty chains per mile). It’s so bizarre that even the English have abandoned miles in favor of kilometers, so a celebration of 200,000 miles is about as meaningful as commemorating 1:23 p.m. because it only comes once a day.

Which got me thinking: chances are that the odometer is not accurate—see above—but it’s still an achievement, right? That’s like six trips around the globe. I might have reached the moon in another 40,000 miles. Since my van was born, we’ve had three presidents. Two of my three children were born, too, as were millions of other kids. People were married, divorced, lost jobs, found five dollars in the lint tray, got sick, got better, played hearts, had their hearts broken. In that same time period, I’ve kept the van together with an artful combination of body putty, mechanical ingenuity,

and blue language. I've kept my life together too—no small feat—through pandemonium, therapy, and more blue language. Last year the deadline came and went, and no IRS audit—hallelujah! My sister can maneuver her wheelchair by simply turning her head, and not even God saw that coming.

It's funny how we celebrate arbitrary dates but rarely celebrate the fantastically wonderful mundane of today, of this afternoon, of now. Your youngest kid can read and write—do you have any idea what a gift that is? The roof will stay on your house through the next storm because of the good work of a carpenter you've never met. Tonight a four-year-old and a soldier in Iraq and a surgical nurse and a truck driver and your cousin Lenny will say a prayer, and it will be answered. And my van will start, I think, and I will be thrilled as I inch my way (not millimeter my way) through traffic toward home—a little cold, limping toward the next ordinary extraordinary milestone, listening hard to a Bob Marley song about redemption.



WAYWARD TRACKS

“...And maybe that’s where you find the divine—in the desert, in this new life that has emerged unasked, against all odds. And maybe that’s grace: showing up unsolicited at 4:53 a.m., carrying solace as tenderly as one carries an infant. You see it now, in the rear-view mirror, as you trace your wayward tracks through the desert dust—and now that the dust has settled in front of you, you have some idea of where you’re going. Against all odds.”

Mark Collins helps us discover the miraculous in the mundane moments of our daily lives, and shines a bright cone of light on the things we usually see only out of the corner of our eye.

MARK COLLINS is the author of two books of essays, a chapbook of poetry, and co-edited *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television and Fred Rogers*. He is married and has three daughters, making him the only male in the house. He teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and plays dekhockey when they let him. He once scored a goal. He thinks. Someone was in the way so it was hard to tell.

Spirituality/Stories

Distributed exclusively by
ACTA PUBLICATIONS



978-0-87946986-3



www.actapublications.com



\$14.95