

Gimme Shelter : A MEMOIR OF SURVIVAL AND RECKONING

by George Keller

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Thank you so much for reading this sample chapter! I've kept this story close to my heart for decades, and am finally ready to start telling it in this book, to give others hope and help them know that change is possible. If this crazy story helps even just one person, it will have been worth living through.

If you're interested in buying bulk books for your program, booking me as a speaker, or learning more about my story, reach out to info@runninggeorge.com.

*Thanks,
George E. Keller*

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Introduction: Running George

I pushed the gas pedal to the floor, bracing against the steering wheel as I took another sharp corner. Telephone poles and mailboxes ticked by, my engine roaring and John Cougar Mellencamp whipping out my window into the quiet morning. I checked my rearview mirror. The pissed-off bikers were still there, maybe a dozen of them riding full throttle in pursuit.

We were on the North Shore Road on Hood Canal, winding along the water. I was in my pickup, the window down, the air blasting through the cab slicing through the last of the morning's hangover just in time.

A pack of bikers was hot on my tail, and they weren't happy with me.

I whipped that pickup around corners, cutting the center line. On one side of the road, the forested hillside jutted up steep, branches hanging down so close that it sometimes felt like I was driving through a tunnel. On the other side of the road, the shoulder dropped away ten yards into the calm, mirror-smooth waters of Hood Canal. One mistake and I'd go flying off the embankment.

If I could just make it another few hundred yards, I had an escape route. A friend of mine lived two miles up the road from me, on the other side of a blind corner. The bikers would have to slow down, giving me just enough time to get down his driveway and out of sight. So long as his gate was open.

God and I weren't normally on speaking terms, but I prayed his gate was open.

I pushed the pickup to its limit until the bend where the road dropped away, only the mudflats of the canal beyond. Yellow road signs screamed caution of the ninety-degree turn, and by the skid marks in the asphalt you could see more than a few people had missed those signs in the past.

I didn't slow down.

I smoked past the speed limit signs, and—at the last minute—slammed on the brakes and slid that truck sideways through the corner. I immediately wrenched the steering wheel back the other way. Fishtailing, hoping for a miracle, and already committed to my fate. If my friend's gate wasn't open, I was crashing through it anyway.

Somebody must have been looking out for me that day, because the gate was open. I gunned it down the driveway, gravel spitting out from my tires, then tucked my truck up behind the house, heart pounding as I switched off the engine and held my breath.

I was already reaching for one of the beers behind my seat as I heard the *whoof, whoof, whoof* of motorcycle engines blazing by out on the road. I counted them as they went, grinning and toasting myself with that beer.

Running George had won again.

I've been on the run more times than I can count. Some runs were successful. Some failed. Some were smart. A lot of them were...not so smart. That day, I honestly don't even know what possessed me to run. To put myself in danger, to nearly wreck my truck, to commit to a line that would have destroyed my friend's gate and totaled my truck if it had been closed. To goad those bikers into a dangerous ride that could have gotten someone killed.

After all, those guys were trying to help me out. Though, at the time, maybe getting help was the thing I was most scared of.

I'd been half-heartedly trying to get sober at the time. I've hit a lot of rock bottoms in my life, but a few months before the run down Hood Canal, I'd been drinking enough that my troubles piled up so high I got suicidal. I called the suicide hotline, and when they realized I was drunk they called the AA hotline and sent this sober biker over to talk me down. He'd eventually got me attending meetings, and his whole sober biker crew had taken me on like a project.

One way they'd tried to bring me in was to give me some responsibility: the key to the grange hall where we held our meetings. They figured if I was supposed to be the guy who opened the meeting, I'd be sure to show up. And to sweeten the deal, they promised to pick me up on the way for a motorcycle ride. They'd even brought a spare bike for me.

But I'd gotten drunk the night before, and forgot all about those guys coming until my wife woke me up. In my hungover state, I panicked. I threw on my clothes, grabbed my keys, and jumped in my truck. Right as I turned out of my driveway, I saw the pack of bikers coming down the road with my friend riding at the front of the pack.

I made eye contact with my friend. His brake light lit up. The brake lights piled up behind him, and something howled at me to run.

I gassed it. And you know the rest.

The bikers ended up going down to the grange to open that AA meeting without me. Since the guy with the key—me—was busy getting drunk at 10am behind his friend's house after leading them on a wild goose chase, they had to make do. They might not have had a key, but they all had some outlaw history, and no qualms about just breaking in to hold the meeting.

About a week later, they were retelling that story and somebody said, "Did anyone ever catch that George?"

"Nah," my friend replied. "He's probably still running."

They weren't the first ones to call me Running George. My friends on the streets of Philadelphia called me Running George, and so did the cops. My commanding officers in the Navy called me Running George. Throughout the motorcycle club world in the Pacific Northwest, the name Running George used to be enough to make people nervous.

One time I was talking to a guy who was working on my bike, and we realized we had a friend in common. I said, "Well, tell him that Running George says hi," and the guy stopped dead still.

"Man, I've heard about you," he said carefully. He showed me his gun. "I heard you always carried a couple of these."

"That was a long time ago," I told him. Because by that time, people knew me as Running George the sober speaker, the guy who helped people by telling his story, the guy who had brought meetings into juvenile detention centers and adult work release detention centers as a volunteer for the Department of Corrections.

It's a name that lives on both ends of the spectrum.

I had a reputation as a man not to mess with, and it didn't come by accident. It was the result of a deliberate effort to transform myself from the scrawny red headed kid people could push around. To protect the terrified child no one else was going to stand up for.

To finally quiet the fear.

Where I came from, if you showed weakness you were done. So I'd learned from a very young age how to play with fear. How to hide my own by inflicting terror on others, and then numb it all with drugs and alcohol and fights.

No matter how bad my reputation got, though, it couldn't keep me safe from that fear. It couldn't stop me from waking up at night, sobbing and trembling with anxiety. But I didn't know any other way to be.

So I ran from the cops in Philadelphia where I was living on the streets as a kid, and they learned to cuff my feet so I couldn't sprint. I ran from the mental institutions they tried to lock me up in as a juvenile, and they learned to keep me tranquilized. I ran from the Navy. I tried to run from my first wedding, and I ran emotionally from the marriage that followed.

Most of all, I ran from myself.

I wish I could say I hit one rock bottom and learned to face that fear, but it took me more hard knocks than most before I stopped running and finally woke up. From being a homeless teen on the streets of Philadelphia, to working for the Italian mob, to hiring myself out to biker gangs as a freelance enforcer, to busting up my share of noses in barfights, I've done a lot of things that I'm not proud of. I fell more times than I can count. But every time I could have fallen for good, the impossible happened.

Someone appeared to pick me up one more time. To give me a hand back to my feet. To show me an off ramp from the life I'd been leading.

This is the story of the boy with the unbreakable spirit, who would rather die than bow before his bullies. The boy who fought so hard to survive that he remade himself in the image of his oppressors. The boy who could outrun anyone but his own demons.

I tried a lot of things over the years to protect that boy. I forged that boy into a man no one could touch. I soothed his pain with anything that would numb me. I fought against the dark with every ounce of strength I had.

In the end, I finally realized that the only way to protect that boy was to learn to love him.

Now, I want to be the person who picks someone else up. If telling my story in this book helps just one other person break free of fear and addiction, then living it mattered.

But to tell it right, we need to go back to the beginning: to Philadelphia.

THANK YOU FOR READING THIS SAMPLE CHAPTER!

Learn more about this book at www.runninggeorge.com, or reach out to info@runninggeorge.com

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