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*Bluegrass and Low Tides Forever*

***“Cause I was thinkin’, it really don’t matter if I lose this fight. It really doesn’t matter if this guy opens my head, either. ‘Cause all I wanna do is go the distance...”***

Sylvester Stallone from the film *Rocky* (1976)

Invariably, whenever people have asked me how I ended up in Kentucky from New York, I tell them the truth:

I was kidnapped by my parents and held hostage against my will.

In 1976 – the year of the United States Bicentennial – my parents finalized their move from Coxsackie in upstate New York to Kentucky’s largest city of Louisville.

When I finally shared the news with my C-A school classmates, I remember feeling embarrassed when our Earth Science teacher, Mr. Gunderman, commented, “*Kentucky?* Do they even wear shoes there?”

I didn’t have an answer – or a fucking choice to go.

My parents were now *grandparents* for the first time. My oldest brother, Mickey, had married a Southern girl named Ronnie, and they had welcomed their first daughter, named Kama. Living in Indianapolis, Indiana (less than 2 hours north of Louisville), my parents were

offered the sale of a small house in Louisville which belonged to Ronnie's mother, who had recently died.

The single family house was on Inverness Avenue in the south end known – a quiet, mostly blue collar collection of neighborhoods, churches, small shopping centers, and one of Louisville's largest public parks, Iroquois.

Unassuming and one-story, the house was *not* the large, two-story dwelling we had in Cocksackie. Set well back from the street, it had a small rectangular front yard with an angle of hedges in the front and running up one side. A thin gravel driveway shunted up to the structure, boxy and covered in uniform white siding and plain windows. The interior was small – an enclosed front entrance porch, living room, kitchen, bathroom, and just three bedrooms. There was also a tiny fenced in backyard, as well as an unfinished basement accessible through its own outside entrance off an enclosed back porch.

When we first saw the house, my heart sank. It didn't take me long to internally do the math and ask myself, "*Where was I going to sleep?*"

At the time of the move, it was my parents, my older brothers (Jeff and Tim) and just one of my older sisters (Amy) wedged into this shoebox. My father had his own room – sometimes my mother, at that point, would either be sleeping with him or bivouacked on the living room sofa. Of course, my sister Amy had her own room, leaving my older brothers to share the one remaining bedroom.

My *room* was in reality a small corner of the living room that was partitioned off by a jerry-rigged rod and hanging curtain that shielded me from the other section of the room. It felt like it looked – a makeshift dressing room with a small bed and dresser and not much room to do anything but feel like a prison cell would be a luxury upgrade.

The move from Coxsackie to Louisville – in both the physical relocation and the upheaval and unpacking of my spirit – was like opening up a carton of eggs once it's been dropped on the hard ground. I knew damage was done and there was a mess inside – and something was lost, irretrievable and broken.

During the first few days and weeks once in the house on Inverness Avenue, I was stalked by feelings of anger, rage, jealousy, and intense loneliness. On the surface, I knew that my parents were happy to be closer to their first grandchild but that didn't matter to me. My brothers were out of high school and looking to launch into their own lives soon enough (giving me a fragile hope that I could actually then score the bedroom for myself); my sister was still in high school, so there was the issue of getting us settled into a new educational community.

I was having *none of it*.

Foul, petulant, moody, mean, and abusive to all around me, I wasn't shy in making my demonstrative feelings known, spewing them as toxins across the tiny internal landscape of our new *home*. Crying myself to sleep at night, headphones on and listening to music on my stereo was a frigid comfort to my slain heart. Once awake, it was the same – *fucking Kentucky*.

One day Jeff and Tim asked me to help them move something in our basement (which, to my only pleasure, was an area that I could set up my used drum kit in and had plans to carve out a small corner which had a work bench and shelves for a *personal space* to spend time in).

Downstairs with them, they closed the door behind me. I could tell by the looks on their faces that something was cooking and not so good for me.

“You gotta cut it the fuck out,” Jeff said, Tim silent but glaring behind him.

“What?” I played innocent, already scoping what was coming. One of our favorite books was *Durango Street* by Frank Bonham. A street gang-type fiction story, it centered around main

characters Rufus Henry and a gang leader, Bantu. As brothers, we had voraciously enjoyed the urban flavor of the writing and one of its classic lines: *“You get beats into this gang and you get beats out...”*

“Making it hard for Mom and Dad,” Tim threw in, a few steps behind Jeff but partaking in this verbal shakedown.

“And what if I *don’t*?” My voice was already trembling, both from fear and this volcanic rage for being singled out instead of supported.

Having hands put on me in anger and punishment wasn’t a new concept. Having my older brothers smack me around to make a point or assume sibling control didn’t necessarily come out of left field. And even though it was just a few gut punches and neck chokes from them as they forced their agenda onto me in the confines of the basement, I got the point.

*Fuck you, John. Your feelings don’t mean shit. Get it in line or there’s more pain coming. They don’t need you making waves. Conform. You get beats into this family and you get beats out...*

Left alone on the basement floor, crying like a little girl with no recourse to run to either parent for safety or comfort, I felt like a boxer in the ring being booed and hissed, once again having the crap beat out of him for the sake of becoming a warrior he never was.

***“I was in denial of the glaring reality that my existence depended on my willingness to comply with the family policy of me earning the splinter of space they granted to me.”***

M. Wakefield from *Narcissistic Family Dynamics: Collected Essays (2020)*

During that initial transition to life in Louisville, it was perhaps music alone that was life-saving to me, an emotional life raft in the middle of a horrific ocean crashing about me every day with its tsunami waves of fear, shame, confusion, rage, and loneliness.

The only solace to my own story that I could find was in the songs and lyrical stories portrayed in the soundtrack to my own imagination. For the realities of the familial landscape was brutal, scarred by burnt trees and rocky soil that couldn't possibly bring forth any crops of goodness or sustenance.

My parents enrolled me and my sister in Iroquois High, a local public school. I was just entering my freshman year while Amy was starting her junior year. Much larger than Coxsackie-Athens, it was overwhelming to me – the total anonymity of being *new* and *knowing no one* didn't help. And, as I quickly found out as did Amy, the course level and content seemed to be behind what we had already encountered in junior high in New York.

Since my mother hadn't abdicated her role as my biggest enabler within the mine field of our dysfunctional family, she was sympathetic when my sister and I came to her with these concerns very early in the school semester. After private conversations with my father – of course, about *the price it would cost them* – they made the decision to transfer Amy and me into private Catholic schools in Louisville.

Amy was put into Holy Rosary Academy, an all-female Catholic school founded in 1867 by the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, while I was enrolled into St. Francis DeSales High School, an all-male Catholic school established in 1956 by the Carmelite Order as a private college-prep school for young men. It's educational pillars were based on *faith, brotherhood, and tradition*.

And even though I wasn't happy at Iroquois, it was yet another *move* that my wounded heart had to endure for the sake of the illusion that it was safe, sheltered, and cared for. I was too angry and selfish at that age to understand or conceive of the sacrifices my parents made for me and Amy – but I was also painfully aware that having no choice or say in the move from

Coxsackie to Louisville had given me the impression...deep in my growing bones and balls...that I was just *the baby of the family* that everyone teasingly referred to me as.

*Without a map, I was along for the ride, much like past family vacations where I was forced to sit in the very back of the station wagon in spite of its position making me nauseous and car sick.*

To a fourteen year old, all of it was confusing – the anger, the loneliness, the separation from the identity Coxsackie was imparting. In Louisville during that first year, nothing fit or felt right – within the family, in my head, or even within my body and its growing adolescence.

Still reeling from the sexual curse my mother had infected me with after the discovery of the stolen porno mag and the chronic masturbation it unleashed in me, I found myself drowning in deep pools of confusion and shame around the attachments I was forming. Not understanding or conceptualizing that I was, indeed, a *surrogate husband* to my mother, I somehow began to imprint my masturbatory fantasies around her.

Latent with the carnal sexual hunger of a young teen with no healthy social dating outlets, I felt trapped in this mode of thinking, finding both satisfaction and solace on one hand (literally my right one) and yet the grip of embarrassment on the other (figuratively my left one). *Do all young men think about fucking their own mother?* In my delayed Oedipus complex, I was lost in the pleasure of it all. If, after all, I was “...as dirty as your father...” well, then, I would have some fun to show for it.

Coupled with this, an unhealthy sexual attraction began to take its twisted root near the end of our time in Coxsackie with my older sister, Amy. During our childhood in The Bronx, there were a few moments of naked exploration, hidden in secret, mere children tempted to see

what the other looked like – yet there were also moments of sneaking kisses or touching each other that while extremely gratifying also was tinged with the sense of *I must keep this hidden*.

Part of the sexual dysfunction inside our family was my suspicions that Amy was also involved at an incestual level with our brother, Jeff. In Coxsackie – and later at the house on Inverness Avenue in Louisville – the two would sequester in her bedroom, many times me hearing the door being locked, followed by quiet, hushed conversations, sometimes the playful giggles and laughter from Amy, other times what sounded like muffled noises like moans.

I always felt like *something was going on inside that room*. Whenever they would exit, I would sometimes observe just the body language – teasing, eyes locked on each other, surreptitious whispers, looks, touches that I both observed and tried not to see.

While in Coxsackie, Amy, as well, became a major star in my sexual fantasies. Based on what I suspected, it was always the lure of “*What if it’s true?*” that fueled such masturbation jags.

One day, when the two of us were alone in the house on Church Street, we were just being playful, teasing our family dog, Skippy, while downstairs in the living room. At one point, he began to chase us around, and I ended up falling onto the couch, Amy toppling over on top of me as Skippy barked and teasingly nipped at us.

When I suddenly realized that Amy’s body on mine was encouraging a rock hard erection in me – and her seemingly benign response of smiling and lightly rubbing against my body – I didn’t even hesitate when my hands reached around and slid down the back of her denim shorts, my fingers rubbing and squeezing her buttocks.

After a few short moments, she got up off the couch and went into our kitchen, sitting at the table in one chair. I walked in behind her, seated myself in the other chair, and found myself

lost in the confused reality of what I was experiencing. In a moment, I slid from the chair and onto the floor underneath the table, starting to kiss her bare feet and up her legs, moving my mouth onto the crotch of her shorts.

I began to push her back in the chair as I came to my knees in front of her. I put my hands on her large breasts, barely contained by a powder blue halter top. I was palpitating, a light sheen of sweat beginning to cover my entire body, chest thumping as my heart pumped blood in overdrive, lost in space and sexual determination.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said to her, Amy’s eyes glazed over with pleasure. After a moment, she softly removed my fondling hands from her chest.

“We can’t,” she said. “Mom might come home and catch us.”

I objected, stating the obvious that our mother had just only recently left for her full-time day job at a local newspaper office and wouldn’t be home for hours upon hours. My father, too, was at work for the day and wouldn’t be coming home until later that night. Our brothers were off for the day at a basketball camp, so they, too, wouldn’t be arriving home to interrupt us.

Amy wouldn’t go for it – but the sexual confusion and deep misplaced attraction was *cemented in me*. In the rearview mirror, my case was simply argued: *She didn’t say “No” or acted offended or disgusted by the idea. There were no threats of “What the fuck are you doing?” or “Ewww, I’m gonna tell Mom and Dad!”*

To me, she just simply didn’t want to get caught doing what we both wanted to do.

It was never mentioned again – and nothing like it occurred between us. In the mold of sexual dysfunction and its confusing impacts, the hardening of my mind to the ideas of pleasing both my mother and sister were just as real as the overwhelming joy I had with holding my own cock.

And, so, the contagion of confusion began to further twist the roots of my healthy development – taken hostage against my will, no friends to speak of, sentenced to four years of an all-male Catholic high school education looming ahead, no interactions with girls my own age *anywhere*, the continued in-fighting and emotional turmoil at home with my parents and siblings, and a deepening abyss of ungodly behaviors that were not of good soil in me.

While anything could – and would – stir the waters of adolescent lust in me, I was also susceptible to the still raging rapids of imagination and romanticism that coursed through my veins from a heart that was not only lonely but still seeking.

Near the end of 1976, I was transfixed by a color photo of actress Jacqueline Bisset from the movie *The Deep* that was in a copy of *Newsweek* Magazine. Ahh, that *wet t-shirt* was responsible for launching untold orgasms – for me and many of my peers. Adults, too. But on the same page in that issue was an innocuous color photo of a young Broadway actress, copper red hair, deep blue eyes, blowing a bubble with gum while holding a small Orphan Annie ragdoll.

Unlike anytime or anywhere or with anyone else, the lightning bolt hit sure and true, the peals of thunder in me unmistakable in their power and persuasion.

*Wow – who is she??*

Just two years younger than me, Andrea McArdle was a Philadelphia spitfire with a voice channeled straight from Ethel Merman. Cast as the original *Annie* on Broadway in 1976 – the production going on to win the *Best Musical* Tony Award that year – it was her rendition of the iconic song, “Tomorrow,” that sent her into the national spotlight and a career in musical theater, cabaret performances, record albums, and television.

And with a single glance behind a bubblegum grin, *she captured my aching heart*.  
Infatuation? Yes. Inspiration to keep believing that I would find somebody to love? Yes, indeed.

Like the picture of Tatum O’Neal that I used to carry around, Andrea’s was clipped from the magazine and put into the pages of an early *Journal* iteration, a bookmark of imagination that I would take out and gaze upon while listening to music – the Broadway cast album from *Annie* or other songs that spoke to my longing for love.

In the midst of being – once more – the *new kid on the block and at school* – this little orphan boy in me found a little orphan girl to think about. And I wondered – *maybe?*

It was a story larger than me – and one that would write itself between the lines and upon the blank pages of years to come...for both the young man I was and the young man I would become.

***“You look in her eyes / The music begins to play / Hopeless romantics / Here we go again / But after a while / You’re lookin’ the other way / It’s those restless hearts that never mend / Johnny come lately / The new kid in town / Everybody loves you / So don’t let them down.”***

The Eagles – *New Kid in Town* (1976)

Having had some practical experience in being *the new kid in town* (after moving from The Bronx to Coxsackie in upstate New York), I made the mistake of thinking it would be the same deal in Louisville.

Being no stranger to the idiosyncratic rituals of attending a Catholic school (after all, St. Nicholas of Tolentine in The Bronx did its duty *and* damages to those early grade school years), I figured my freshman year peers would be welcoming and cordial, given the college-prep nature of DeSales and its mission (*brotherhood* being the middle pillar of this foundation).

Wrong. Cue Chuck Barris and shades of *The Gong Show*.

Not only was I the *new kid*, I was also a fuckin’ *New Yawka*...a Yankee in the Bible Belt.

Where in the bucolic upstate surroundings of Coxsackie my Bronx cache was considered worthy of engaging questions and curiosity, in *Lou-a-vull* (the local's pronunciation within this Southeast state's largest city) I was *persona non grata* from the get-go. Certainly not accepted nor welcomed, I found myself out of the proverbial frying pan (having transferred from Iroquois High) and cast ironed into the providential fire.

And as the only Jamiolkowski at this school (no older brothers around to close ranks with), I was *on my own to fight my own battles*.

The first few weeks were tough. I was trying to make friends and finding none, the kind of atmosphere where the lunchtime in the downstairs cafeteria was an exercise in loneliness, sitting apart from my freshman classmates, always hearing them snicker and whisper about me. None of them really stepped up to talk with me during, between, or after classes.

Of course, the various teachers would single me out in some subjects the first week at DeSales during the self-introductions of us as classes began. Some of the more comic relief freshman in my class section (1-1, which was the highest level) started in on the Polish jokes and slurs, equating me to a brand of pickle (*Polski wyrob*).

And, naturally, gym class was the most brutal rendition of torture. In any team endeavors, I was always picked last – sometimes not at all, causing our instructor (a tough Chicago athletics director named Ron Madrick, who served as the head football coach for DeSales) to see me on the bleachers alone and wonder, “*What's wrong with you? Get out there!*”

By the end of two weeks of this constant pressure to see where I could – or didn't – fit in and finding no easy key to unlock the doors of their contempt, I found myself at odds with myself and rapidly losing perspective on what to do with my own anger. One day in gym class, one of my freshman classmates said something derogatory about both my New York background

and Polish heritage, going for a one-two punch that elicited rounds of laughter from many of the rest of the young men.

Walking up to him as he was laughing, I threw a punch into his head and rammed my tall body onto him, knocking him down and continuing to pummel him. Coach Madrick was quick to pull us apart, ejecting me from class and to the downstairs locker room for a shower. A few minutes later he found me halfway down on the stairwell, hot tears of anger and shame on my face.

“You’re *tougher* than this,” he said at first. He also told me that he, too, was of Polish heritage. He reminded me that being from Chicago was also tough for him, at first, in acclimating to the South and Louisville. “But you can fight every last one of them and *still* not gain their respect. Sure, you can be tough. The way in is to be *smart*.”

Coach Madrick asked me to stand up. In his tough face I could see compassion but also a challenge. His next words were those I really never heard before – even from my own father.

“C’mon, son,” he said in his thick, Chicago accent. “Let’s go show these hillbillies what *tough and smart* looks like.”

He walked me back up the steps and back into the gymnasium. As we entered, the rest of my classmates were still playing a game of pick up basketball. Coach Madrick draped one arm protectively around my shoulder and put his whistle in his mouth, blaring it several times to interrupt the game.

“*All of you sit down – NOW!!*” he screamed, his voice a thunder crack in the echo of the gymnasium. All complied, arranging themselves on the bleachers as we approached. Coach stood me in front of them, his arm still around me. “Now,” he said, his voice like a steel blade cutting skin, his eyes on fire as he scoped the freshmen in front of him, “I’m not sure what your

fucking problem is, but if you got a problem with *him*,” he said, tapping a firm hand onto my chest right over my heart, “then you’ve got a fucking problem with *ME!!*” He stopped, his voice booming inside the DeSales gym. “Is that *understood?!?*”

Naturally, inside I was shaking – but it was for all the right reasons. No one in authority had ever stood up for me like this before. I watched the faces of my classmates on the bleachers – some were terrified, others hung their heads in embarrassment for being called out like this, and a few had that glazed look of a deer that just saw the car headlights in the moments before it became road kill.

And then one solitary voice from within the pack spoke up. I looked over – it was one of my 1-1 classmates, a young man with a shock of blonde curls that looked like a better version of Harpo Marx’s classic hairdo.

“Coach asked a question!” Charlie Tewell shouted. “Understand?” he challenged the rest of the class. A strong gathering of “*Yes, Coach!*” came flooding off the bleachers, along with Charlie, walking up to me with an extended arm and hand. “Welcome to DeSales, John. I really can’t pronounce your last name very well, but I’m willing to learn.”

His smile, genuine and true, was a beacon of hope. Coach Madrick thanked him for showing how it’s done and told him to sit back down.

“Now listen, men,” he said, his voice in a more gentle yet firm tone, “Jamiolkowski may be *new* with us here, but do you remember when *you* were new somewhere else in your life? It ain’t easy. One of the reasons a DeSales man is different from the rest is that we stand up for each other, no matter what.” He put his arm back around me. “I’m a lot like John here. From a big city who left his friends to move somewhere new. That takes courage. And I respect him for that. And you’re gonna do the same – or answer to me.”

And – as the saying goes – *that was that*.

For a closer, Coach Madrick called the freshman off the bleachers that I scuffled with. In front of the rest of the class, he asked us to apologize to each other for the missteps we both made – his using Polish slurs and me for throwing the first punch. Even under Madrick’s glare, it was an authentic and humbling moment for me and my classmate. We shook hands.

“You both good?” Coach asked us. We both looked at each other and nodded our heads. “Good. Jamo,” he said, using my New York nickname I had mentioned to him in the stairwell confessional, “take the center spot. All of you,” he then shouted and whistled to the rest of the class, “*back on the court!*”

And whether it was a Southern hazing or a college-prep initiation, it was *over*. In a way. For the moment. Respect, I knew, had to *be earned*.

***“When ridicule is shrill, remember people only bother to belittle something they perceive big enough to fear.”***

Vanna Bonta (1953 – 2014)

In the rearview mirror of life, it’s easy for me *now* to see where the bully in *me* came from the bully in *them* – my father, a nun, or schoolmates. And through the windshield of hope, it’s always been painful to see the landmarks of ridicule go passing by – sites I know well from the map of my own travels and the experiences of having stopped countless times along such trails to see them up close.

Perhaps that’s why I can fully understand – and appreciate – the causes and motives for any man to commit either homicide or suicide. *I know that man in me*.

And before the false narrative can be written, *I am that man* who bullies and ridicules others. Happens *every* day, somehow, someway. Sometimes it feels really fucking good – and

other times it brings about the proper guilt and conviction a soul (mine) needs for transformation into becoming good soil, the man God meant when He meant *me*.

I find it simply mind-boggling that the Apostle Paul, in the book of Romans, lays it out for all to consider:

*“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay.’”* (Romans 12:19 NIV)

And a part of me, right there in those days of high school beginning and moving through four years at DeSales, cobbled together a Frankenstein monster bent on – one day – having my revenge, taking it off God’s hands because, after all, He’s God and probably has better fucking things to do.

*Dear friends?* It was tough going during freshman year – beyond Charlie Tewell, it was a slow and steady drip of having to endear myself to others...John Bilotta, Todd Bolus or Mark Mitchell, Ronnie Young, David Thomas or Keith Biegert. As with C-A, there was always the *too cool for school* crowd – Kenny Hemming or Doug James, Joe Pat Simms or Kevin White. Now, to be fair, all of them were just as insecure or braggadocio, scared or brilliant at bullshit *just like me*.

If not at school, there was still the gauntlets of bullying and ridicule going on inside the house on Inverness Avenue. The relationships with my father and older brothers were still contentious – no real lines of communication, opposition stuck points, differences of opinion fraught with subtle threats of violence. Gone was the comfortable size of the house in Cocksackie where one could move to a neutral corner – the shoebox in Louisville seemed constrictive, like a cage waiting for a dog fight.

Like a pit bull, life can beat the breed into becoming a monster it was never meant to be.

Once ripped from the development of my own personality and orbit of life in upstate New York, I found myself feeling the bitterness of hate and the spiraling shame that ridicule inflicts upon the heart. If I wasn't seen or appreciated for who I am, and if I'm laughed at or mocked for what I am, I began to think: "*Why be me? Why not be like them?*"

Slowly, like an iceberg shifting across its Artic tundra, my inner compass began to twist from a healthy, mature true North to a skewing at its poles – frenetically and magnetically influenced by a combination of loneliness, anger, shame, and rage.

*Loneliness.*

Desperately missing my former band of brothers in Coxsackie (Mark, Greg, and Julian), as well as the daughters of Eve that walked to and fro around me in the upstate Garden of Eden, giving me a beautiful education in how a boy becomes the man known as Adam.

*Anger.*

A war of attrition had begun in the Jamiolkowski household – truly launched and waged long before I was drafted into its dysfunctional ranks, but as a grunt in the foxhole I was bound and determined to kill the enemy with whatever weapons my untrained hands could muster.

*Shame.*

Looking in the mirror at a teenager who didn't have a job, car, girlfriend, or any cache of cool necessary to barter in the economies of high school was like walking about naked in the crowd of bespoke arrogance surrounding me – quite not good enough, never will be, don't try.

*Rage.*

If I let my blood boil to overflow, taking into account the slights, wounds, assaults on my heart and story, or the unforgivable deeds done to me under the false flags of love, family, and

friendship, my hands would have been bloodied and my picture just a mugshot in the perp books of life.

So the journey from 9<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup>, as I saw it – and experienced it – became a place of niches...becoming someone I didn't have to work too hard at, the placenta of my *false self* – the brilliant disguise I was crafting in this world around me – now covering my skin with the ooze of opportunity.

Intelligence beckoned the know-it-all in my personality to try on different masks for different days. What little creativity I could excel in – typing and writing – was prostituted in order to help others craft papers for English classes. A love of playing tennis with my older brothers morphed into doubles tennis at DeSales just to prove to myself I could letter in something. And a fascination – or obsession – with organization (control) opened up a door to editing our school yearbook, a chance to be on a team where I secretly believed I was in charge because I was the best they had in the room.

And down the road of four years, mentors would appear, more funerals would make me cry, and the promise of a diploma would magically craft a map that would lead me back to New York in an escape from the maximum security prison that held no hope of pardon: *my family's desire to see me fail when nothing in my bones or balls would surrender.*

***“Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.”***

Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

As a teenager, I had no concept of what sacrifice my father and mother were making financially to provide me with a good education, one that could one day provide me with a doorway to a future that would be better than their past.

Selfishly, I imagine, my heart wanted nothing more to be back with my old friends.

DeSales offered a quality learning experience focusing on developing the mind and character of a young man preparing for a life ahead. The problem was that I was there yet *not fully present*.

It wasn't lost on me from the beginning that being surrounded by only other young men my age was not balanced. The lack of the feminine was difficult to adjust to, especially since I had zero contact with girls my age being new to Louisville and having no other social contacts except for my schoolmates at DeSales.

Of course, there was also a new level of expectation and self-pressure I was inflicting upon myself – who I was, who was I supposed to be, and who I was determined to become. At DeSales, they ranked each class level (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) into divisions – Level 1, 2, and 3. For my high school journey, I was tested at and placed into the 1<sup>st</sup> Level each year – supposedly “the best and brightest.”

I didn't feel privileged or special – I actually began to feel more *alone* than ever before. At home was always the same story – a weird mix of belonging to a name, something that resembled family, yet was fraught with its own emotional abuse and danger that I never could feel a sense of safety or peace. Then, at school, I was separated into a portion of assemblance, grouped into a union I didn't necessarily fit into, on my own, still a stranger in a strange land.

So I struggled – against it all and especially *with myself*.

My focus wasn't particularly on what I was learning. Not much different than studies at C-A school in New York, I found most of my English courses to be where I excelled; that, and interestingly enough, Typing classes we were given. From early on at DeSales, I was able to be recognized for both my creative writing talents and dexterity on the keyboard skills I was given to develop and utilize. I knew I was the best writer and typist at school, but that didn't matter.

Science and Chemistry were interesting to me on a basic – Biology, of course, for what I got to dissect (frogs, fetal pigs, etc.) – but the Mathematics courses (Algebra and beyond) were of an immense challenge intellectually for me to grasp and excel within.

History, religious studies, and health/physical education rounded out the curriculum; all were able to keep me stimulated with new ideas, concepts, or precepts yet nothing inherently structured around them called me to proceed past what was necessary for a passing grade.

So I became *an average student* – nothing special within my class division and enough grace and good marks to not warrant any discipline at school or at home. After all, I had no allowance to spend, no car to drive, no girls to date. All the struggles did was send me deeper into fantasy, imagination, solace, and teenage angst that ate away at self-esteem, confidence, and whatever character was trying to build itself from the ground up with a construction crew of one.

Paradoxically, certain skills I had within both English and Typing classes quickly endeared me to a small group of fellow classmates who – how should I put it? – weren't exactly the sharpest Crayola's in the box when it came to writing papers or handling a keyboard.

So I did what came naturally – I bought their friendship.

Creating a mini-black market opportunity for myself, I agreed with each of them (Kirk, Jimmy, Carlos, and Phil) to craft any number of their required English composition papers for them and do all the typing and retypes necessary – each for a negotiated cash fee. The challenge was that I had to, at first, read some of their previous papers turned in to assess their writing style, vocabulary, syntax and hopefully capture that *and* gradually increase it, along with the hoped for grade, without setting off alarms with the various teachers.

Maybe it was a bold design or just balls of brass – yet, as it got off the ground the plane actually flew without stalling, crashing, or burning me in the process.

And it worked – probably because I was good at working behind the scenes. It would be years before he put this curse upon me, but perhaps my father was right when he said of me, “*He’ll get what he wants – by hook or by crook.*”

Part of me wanted in their crowd – the four of them were fast friends, each had their own car to drive to and from school, sat together at lunch, joked together in class and generally modeled what a small band of brothers at that stage of life could and should be...*friends*.

I knew my acceptance into their circle was based on talent, performance, and cold cash. Yet something in me was already broken, wounded, and damaged enough to give me the false sense of *acceptance* that illusions – much like my dabbling in wanting to be a magician – are never what they appear to be but always what is shown to them as what they need to believe.

So for much of sophomore, junior, and senior year at DeSales, it was *business* as usual with them – it wasn’t like I was writing “A” grade material for them, but for some I brought them up a full grade level in their writing or more. I didn’t even consider it enabling or damaging to their educational development – fuck them if they couldn’t structure a sentence, paragraph, or cobble together theme and commentary to save their lives.

It wasn’t until late in Honors English during my senior year that our teacher, Fr. John, came to me one day after class and asked if I was getting paid my fair share.

“For what?” I asked, half ingenue and half huckster in my smile, fully understanding that *he knew* what I didn’t want him to.

“Writing their papers?”

A bit shocked, I asked, “So, you don’t care?”

Fr. John smiled back at me. “If *they* don’t care to do their own work, I just care that you’re getting your fair share of doing it for them.”

Definitely the coolest fucking priest I ever knew. And in those final years at DeSales, his influence on my creativity would usher in a fork in the road that I've never looked back upon, having chosen it with both head and heart, for better or worse.

***“A soul that sees beauty may sometimes walk alone. For the world has given up on beauty. It doesn't believe in fairy tales anymore, or happy endings. But, if my words mean anything – hold out for that beauty. Walk alone until you grab it. The pain of walking alone against the Stream is worth it.”***

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832)

There were a few reasons I got into tennis in the first place. One of them is because my older brothers, Jeff and Tim, would love to go to the Louisville area parks (especially Iroquois right down Inverness Avenue where they had these deep, green composite clay courts, as well as Wyandotte Park, where we could play under the lights at night on the tough asphalt) to engage hours of one-on-one, round robin matches that *included* me.

In those days of the late 70's, there were *gods* we worshipped – Björn Borg, Guillermo Vilas, Jimmy Connors, Vitas Gerulaitis, and – of course – Johnny Mac himself, John McEnroe. I remember each of us had the coveted and nearly indestructible Wilson T-2000 aluminum frame racket Connors kicked ass with.

And when I screwed up the nerve and courage to try out for the DeSales Tennis Team, I didn't care if they took me or not because I showed up with a Donnay wood racket *just like* Borg's. When I was able to hit a perfect, two-handed grip missile of a backhand across court for a winner, it was like channeling the Swedish champion himself. *Pure beauty.*

My early friend at DeSales, Charlie Tewell, was one of the purest and fluid players I'd ever witnessed close up. He was one of our team's top singles players (alternating between him,

Kevin White, and Gino Calandrino). He encouraged me to come out for the team, regardless of where I ended up. And that spot would be on the 4<sup>th</sup> seeded doubles pairing.

For what it's worth, getting that coveted Colts brown and white sports letter – even though my parents couldn't afford that fancy leather-and-canvas jacket that most all of the jocks sported – was too cool.

Being on the *last squad* for our team wasn't too demoralizing – at nearly six foot-five inches tall, I'm sure that Coach Burke (our tennis team leader), along with his assistant, Pat McBride, loved utilizing that height in doubles play, especially at the net.

Having spent countless hours playing with my brothers in fierce 2-against-1 pick up matches, I was coordinated enough to be able to cover a lot of ground, even with a gawkiness to my gait that was made up for by agile footwork from all the practice I picked up with them. My serve wasn't great but could sometimes deliver the crushing ace with enough speed to surprise even me. My forte was a hammer of a forehand, one which I could deliver with precision or blinding accuracy into various corners when needed. That, and the always unpredictable flop shot that I loved pulling out of my bag of tricks.

Going back to the tennis gods who ruled the 70's, I could only emanate what I saw: the cool yet brash ferocity of Connors; the super suave and ice-cold calculations of Borg; the sheer grit and balls to the wall strength of Vilas; the playful and passionate intensity of Gerulaitis; and, notwithstanding, the explosive and temperamental character of McEnroe.

*I wanted to be all of them – and knowing I never would be made acting like some of them while playing at DeSales, well, a bit difficult.*

In short, I began to notice a temper – a slow boil inside, rage looking for a way out, something or someone to pummel.

There was a certain *violence* to playing tennis that was a good physical release for me in light of all the anger I experienced in my emotions at home and my frustrations at what I considered to be a stunted adolescence.

During the pick up games with my older brothers – really, throughout our history of engaging in any sports activities together, whether it be playing basketball, baseball, or football...fuck, even Whiffle Ball – I was both witness and accomplice to those explosions of anger, rage, and frustration at my brothers or received by them.

On the tennis courts, it translated during my matches with the DeSales team to my inner demands that I *control* everything that I could – even if it was a simple tennis match. Yes, of course, I wanted to work with my doubles partner yet was pissed off that I had to share the court, at times, with someone who possessed less talent than I did. Or in the arguing of points – what was *out* compared to what was *in*.

And I *hated* to fucking lose – it just made me feel more like a loser than I already was seeing myself as.

My participation on the team lasted only one season, but it was better than no experience at all. Charlie was my biggest fan, though – he always encouraged me to practice, sometimes coming by to go with me to Iroquois Park for rally sessions and instruction. He would always cheer me on during doubles matches, coaching me with comments and praising the good shots I made for the matches.

During those years at DeSales, he was always ready with a smile, a kind word, never acting like he was one of the cool dudes (which he was) but, really, just a *good friend*. In the moments, those types of kindness truly mattered most.

And there were others...

Todd Bolus – a jokester with a serious mind. John Billotta – a nearby neighbor who would join me on my morning walks to DeSales. David Thomas – another kindred soul who battled the awkwardness of adolescence and loneliness.

A few others – namely Keith Biegert and Mark Mitchell – stood shoulder to shoulder with me, not in physical size but in other passions, like being teammates on the DeSales Bowling Team or co-editors of *The Yearling*, our DeSales High School yearbook.

Both those pleasures and responsibilities – with Keith and Mark as peers – began to teach me about the camaraderie of friendship and the ability to work together with others in the concepts and constructs of teamwork.

With our work during both junior and senior years at DeSales on the yearbook staff – shepherded and guided by one of our favorite English teachers, David Winkler – we spent many hours after school, weekends, and holiday breaks at the school, going over pictures, preparing blueprint layouts for the annual volume that was important in the students life. After all, the rite of passage – for any high school student – of bugging their parents to purchase the volume, then awaiting its arrival, pouring over the photos and captions, reliving the memories, and taking it to the list of people one wanted to have autograph it or pen in some pithy saying that would outlast the tests of time was timeless in itself.

Playing a part in that, for me, touched several bases: it was an avenue of both organization (the “brain” work of seeing the bigger picture of crafting pages with both print and images, learning about cropping photographs, sizing layout pages, all the technical aspects of it) and creativity (putting my heart into a project, staying with it to completion, and having the satisfaction in the finished product that I was an integral part of it coming to life).

*And from these ashes of experience, a phoenix of hope began to rise...*

It was also an outlet of creativity that was beginning to nudge me towards a path in creative writing – one that was also an introduction to mentoring and affirmation of a talent I somehow knew existed inside of me but needed encouragement to come to the surface and begin its own articulation.

With his first assignment as a teacher at DeSales High School, Fr. John Coleman (of the Carmelite Order) helped guide our English classes throughout both junior and senior years. A native of Los Angeles, California, Fr. John was just 28 years old when he came into our lives. And, for me, he was the first teacher or voice to recognize my writing and encourage me to follow that path for both the passion of creativity and the importance of its impact on others.

In his 2019 obituary, it was noted that “...*his great loves were helping others, guiding them to love themselves and be the best ‘them’ possible, and all the arts, especially music, theater, and writing.*”

For me, he was a galvanizing presence – a priest whose dark hair was a bit longer than most others; he always had a copy of the Billboard Hot 100 pinned to the bulletin board by his classroom desk; he was a teenaged journalist who interviewed rock bands and singers for popular music magazines; he would sometimes use raw and candid language in the classroom to help get a point across; he was fierce in his praise of good writing and caustically constructive in his criticism of crap prose; and, it seemed to me, he was always “in” on the joke of life and his attempts to mold the sometimes flaccid young minds he was in charge of to wake the fuck up and smell the coffee of the future that could possibly turn bitter if not properly tended to.

Through semester-long class modules on the prose of Lillian Hellman to walking us through creative writing projects and also in a semester’s course on speech writing and public

speaking, Fr. John had the goods to deliver on his passion and promise – at least for me – to encourage the best in his students and to challenge them to rise to the occasion.

In my senior year at DeSales, our graduating class decided not to have the normal path of the “smartest kid in school” (the vaunted title of *valedictorian*) bestowed the honor of delivering the convocation speech at the spring graduation ceremonies. Instead, they opened up the process to offer any student who had the balls to step up and enter a speech writing contest – the winner would then be the one to give the speech on graduation night.

I recall talking to my grandmother, Blanche, in New Jersey over a few minutes of a shared family phone call in early spring of 1980 about it.

“Oh, Johnny,” she said, “you should do it. I know you would do such a great job.”

Little did I know but that was the last time I would hear her voice...

As more of that devastating and painful story would unfold – much in the timekeeping sense of a New York minute, a flash here and everything is changed – I dashed off a rough draft copy of the speech for my submission. Literally handwritten and then put to print in the school’s typing lab in less than one hour, I turned it in – just one of maybe a half dozen entries up for consideration.

And when, after a brief absence from school, I returned to find out that my speech was chosen as the contest’s winner, my first thought was, “*If Granny could see me now. And, fuck, now what?*”

Fr. John Coleman wasn’t the kind of teacher – or man – to let someone he was fond of mentoring drift alone on choppy waters. He stepped up and volunteered to work with me over the course of a few weeks prior to the graduation ceremony to tighten the speech, work on it diligently in practice, performance, pacing, and was both a beacon of light and fierce

encouragement to see me succeed in what was, obviously, a pretty big fucking moment in my story at and through the journey of DeSales High School.

And it was there – within those blossoms of springtime in Louisville, and the end of a four year journey of education and loneliness – that I first discovered a simple yet unescapable truth about life: *sometimes, the only way out is through.*

I was at home one evening with my mother and sister, Amy, when the phone rang. Picking it up, I was pleased to hear the voice of my cousin, Jimmy, calling from Ft. Lee, New Jersey. After exchanging a greeting, he asked immediately if my father was home. When I told him that Dad was at his nightly job with the United States Postal Service, he then asked me to put Mom on the phone.

When I did, I was lingering by my bedroom door. Her words were brief and yet held the weight of the news: “*Oh, no...oh, God, no.*” After a few minutes of stilted conversation, she hung up the phone and then called my sister out from her bedroom. She looked at us both and said, “Granny died.”

While my sister and mother both began to cry and hug, I just went numb. My mother asked me to go over to DeSales where my older brothers, Jeff and Tim, were playing some pick-up basketball at an open gym night.

I took off from the Inverness Avenue house – at first walking quickly, I began to run. For a few moments, it felt like I was moving the fastest I ever could or would, my feet flying over the pavement, sidewalks, and dirt paths of my normal walk to school route.

Suddenly, I began to scream into the night, “*Why? Why?!*” It felt like I wasn’t touching the ground, like a messenger in a war delivering the bad news up the line that a formidable invasion was just on the border.

When I got to the gym, I saw Jeff and Tim near the bleachers. At that point in our story, there was sibling tensions between us – my best guess was it got centered and blew out of proportions with my plans to leave Louisville after high school and pursue my college education back in New York. Jeff and I weren't really on the best of speaking terms, and Tim was always closer to and with him so I considered it full-circle from when the move to Kentucky happened and they had me cornered in the basement.

Out of breath, I came up to them both and collapsed on the lowest bleacher seating. Jeff smugly asked me what I was doing there. Dripping sweat, chest heaving for air, I just looked up and said, "Mom sent me. Grandma died."

Tim began to curse out loud. Jeff slammed the basketball he was holding violently against the gymnasium floor. The three of us went home in our mother's car, silent. Maybe it was just me or perhaps it was the next logical step in the progression of events – *we were going to have to tell my father his mother was dead.*

Mom insisted that we all go with her to the main USPS distribution center where my father worked. Upon entering, she asked for a manager to come to the security desk where she explained the situation and persuaded the manager to let us all go as one family into the back production facility to meet our father.

I was tailing the pack when I saw him across the huge floor, approached by his supervisor who turned his attention to us standing in a pack some distance away. As he approached, I could see a look of first surprise, then something that resembled anger, cross his face – like he was both shocked and deeply annoyed to see us all there. *He doesn't fucking get it*, I thought – and right behind it was the murderous rage I felt for him. I didn't pity him. I was actually glad that he was to suffer. *This should be good.*

My mother broke from our ranks and walked up to him, put a hand on his arm, and whispered the news to him. They didn't hug, nor did he look at us. He said something to her, then turned and walked away. When she came back, she told us that we'd be driving home and he would be coming home later.

Typical of my father – stoic, a brick fucking wall, nothing in, nothing out. Get the job done, in spite of the tragedy dumped on him. A worker, a man who had to finish the shift before dealing with death. A man, I thought on the quiet ride home without him, that I could never – or ever – would be.

Once my father returned home earlier than usual that night, things rapidly went into motion – many phone calls to airlines, hushed discussions between my parents about, of course, money, and even an argument about who should go or who should stay, including a blow up with my oldest brother, Mickey, who drove down from Indianapolis after receiving word and his storming out of the house in defiance and opposition to how to get us all up to New Jersey for the wake and funeral. In the end, my brother Jeff decided that he wasn't going to attend either, using his staying home with the family dog, Skippy, as a way to keep expenses from ballooning too high with the additional kenneling costs avoided.

My mother insisted I go to school the next day and hand deliver a letter to our principal explaining my upcoming absence. I remember when the news began to circulate among my 4-1 classmates and teachers the genuine outpouring and sympathy with the simple expressions of condolences. I couldn't, nor wouldn't, cry in front of any of them – even though I wanted to.

So, with father and mother, both sisters, and my brother, Tim, flying out of Standiford Field Airport in Louisville, I was very nervous, it being the very first time I would be taking a plane ride. With all the stress, excitement, and rush of events, I ended up getting nauseous and

sick as the plane neared its descent to Newark Airport. Both ashamed and mortally embarrassed, I grabbed for the air sickness bag and filled it to near capacity, cloaked in humiliation when my mother handed it to the flight attendant to discard.

We were greeted by my cousins, Jimmy and Billy, along with their girlfriends, Lynne and Sue – their cars acted as a shuttle for us all to the residence in Ft. Lee where my father's sisters, Dottie and Joanie, resided.

Upon arrival, the two of them began to wail, cry, and moan deeply when my father came into the split level house they occupied. All of us children were smothered in hugs and tears, the feeling of it all – to me – a pain in the ass and a bit theatrical. Maybe I was feeling a bit like shit after getting sick on the plane, but had plenty of food and soda at their house to replenish my energy.

It was decided that a family friend of my Aunt Dottie's, an airline pilot named Jose, would offer his apartment in a nearby city to sleep my cousins and me and my brothers for the duration of our stay since he was out of town on flights.

Jimmy and Billy decided on the drive over to Jose's that they wanted to take me and Tim out for some beers, maybe shoot some pool. Even while at the Summit Avenue house in Ft. Lee, it was revealed that Jimmy had already talked via phone to my oldest brother Mickey and persuaded him to fly up the next day.

So after a few beers at a local pub, we drove to Jose's apartment. Located on a top floor of a residential building about twenty minutes south of Fort Lee, it was a spacious, two-bedroom high end living space that was eclectically furnished by a bachelor airline pilot. From the moment I entered, it didn't matter where I would sleep or what I would have to occupy my time.

It was staring at me from beyond the balcony with sliding glass doors, beckoning me in all of its bright lights and glorious luminosity...

*The skyline of Manhattan from across the Hudson River.*

Even for a Bronx boy, such an image – even at night, in recollections from anytime I could be up on the roof of our Sedgwick Avenue apartment building, looking off into the distance – evoked a strong feeling of *being home*. And it was the closest I had been to the city since leaving it nine years earlier.

The unfolding plan was for the wake to take place the next two days and evenings, followed by the funeral and burial on the third. With “the boys” (me, my brother Tim, and my cousin Jimmy) staying at Jose’s (my cousin, Billy, had his own apartment in Wallington), it was also going to be the crash zone for my brother Mickey.

At the funeral home, I remember the resurrection of both childlike fears of death and the memories of past wakes (Aunt Rita’s and Edna’s) – that creepy sense of parlors, the low organ music playing in the background, the somber air, the heaviness of grief surrounding and touching everyone. It was no different here, but my memories of visiting Grandma as a child in North Bergen kept gnawing at my heart as we drove over, parked, and entered the funeral home.

My oldest sister, Nancy (who was living in Troy, New York), came up to my side as I hesitantly stood by the display room entrance. Ahead was Grandma’s open casket, and I could see her laying in silent repose – yet I was just as stiff, frozen, unable to move. Nancy breathed out a heavy sigh, her tears already beginning. She took my hand firmly in hers and said, “It’s okay. Let’s do this.”

And off I went to the kneeler set in front of the burial casket, looking at a woman I really didn’t recognize as the loving matriarch, the Polish woman who loved to cook and loved to love

on her grandchildren. Gone was her smile and dancing, dark eyes that lit up whenever she would see me come into the back door of the North Bergen house we would visit every Sunday, hugging me tightly and secretly offering me access to the black licorice she hid in the pantry just for me.

For me, it was the first proximity to death – and the death of someone I loved. My teenage mind was trying to reconcile the life I knew from her being and what I was seeing in front of me – posed, embalmed, sleeping the slumber of death, waxy and not a true spirit. *She was gone yet right here in front of me.*

At this morning wake's gathering, it was just the immediate family in attendance. Through a mid-afternoon gathering back at the Fort Lee house for a full meal and more memories being shared, the evening's schedule was to include the arrival of Mickey and another gathering at the funeral home.

While at Jose's apartment the previous evening, I had discovered his stereo system, a small album collection, and a pair of extended cord headphones that would reach out the balcony. One record that caught both my eyes and ears that first evening was the soundtrack to the film *Quadrophenia*, based on the original album from The Who.

Having spent my adolescence in idolized amazement at *Tommy*, I put the first vinyl disk of the double album on, the apartment quiet and dark, both Jimmy and Tim crapped out and asleep in the bedrooms. It was just me, The Who, Manhattan at night, and my heart torn in several deep fissures of grief, joy to be so close to home, and wondering who I was in this fucked up story of my life.

*Quadrophenia* was the sixth studio album release by The Who in 1973, telling the lyrical story of Jimmy the Mod, who loved drugs, beach fights and romance. Disillusioned by his

parents view of him, and plagued by self-doubts and anger, the musical story was expansive, both poetic and full of rock bombast, another *opera* from Pete Townshend that, in fact, rivaled his work with *Tommy*.

And there I stood, the midnight hour come and gone, the music blaring in the headphones, and the song, "*I'm One*," fileting my heart and unleashing a flood of tears that I had no permission to stop nor wanted to impede for each told a story of loss, suffering, and longing that my young heart needed to articulate.

*"Every year is the same,*

*And I feel it again...*

*I'm a loser,*

*No chance to win.*

*Leaves start falling,*

*Come down is calling...*

*Loneliness starts sinking in.*

*But I'm One.*

*I am One.*

*And I can see that this is me,*

*And I will be*

*You'll all see I'm the One.."*

In those lyrics, at that place and in that time, I found *me*. After the song finished, I would walk back in, reset the needle on the spinning vinyl, and go back out into the night, standing on the balcony, breathing in the night air and majesty of Manhattan unfolded before my eyes, and let the words salve my heart in the deeply wounded places I had never gone before.

*I am One...*

When Mickey arrived later in the day of the wake, I witnessed the deep bonding between him and Jimmy and Billy that existed yet wasn't truly noticed in my own childhood – the fierce camaraderie, the shared jokes and experiences, the communion of cool and hip and slick between them, an unspoken language of brothers (or, in this case, cousins) in arms...one for all and all for one.

The evening portion of the wake was, again, very difficult emotional territory to wander through. Near its end, I found myself overcome with both grief and tears, deep sobs for the loss of Grandma overtaking me. Oddly, I felt strange – like I was doing something that shouldn't be done, crying in front of my family and relatives like I was. The feeling, and the tears, came and went quickly. Seeing my oldest brother helped – after all, Mickey was the one, back in The Bronx, who taught me how to tell time and tie my shoes. *It'll be okay* I remember thinking when I saw him.

Back at Jose's after the wake, it was all of us – Mickey; Jimmy and his girlfriend, Lynne; Billy and his girlfriend, Sue; me and my brother, Tim – just hanging out, drinking and telling stories. A long ago girlfriend of Mickey's, Genie Moore (who lived in Manhattan), suddenly appeared at the apartment door, ringing up from downstairs. Our family knew her as the love of Mickey's life long before he met and married Ronnie from Kentucky.

She was obviously here to help console Mickey in whatever grief he was experiencing, but when the core of them left for the evening to go out together, I found myself alone in the apartment – just me, *Quadrophenia*, some Heineken beer, and the Manhattan skyline listening to my prayers and dreams whispered aloud, once more transported by the lyrics of "*I'm One*" to a different place in my heart.

*“I’ve got a Gibson,*

*Without a case.*

*But I can’t get that even tanned look on my face.*

*Ill-fitting clothes,*

*And I blend in the crowd...*

*Fingers so clumsy,*

*Voice too loud.*

*But I’m One...*

*I am One.*

*And I can see that this is me,*

*And I will be...*

*You’ll all see I’m the One.”*

Up for hours near the approaching dawn and listening to the entire spectacular rest of the album and the story of Jimmy the Mod, Jimmy the Cuz and brother Tim finally came back.

Mickey wasn’t with them – which, to me, meant he was somewhere with his old flame. Jimmy stayed up a while with me, talking about music, my life, his story, and just being the cool cousin I always saw him as.

He finally crashed, and I was waiting on both the sun to rise and Mickey to come back...which he finally did. He silently smoked a cigarette on the balcony with me, confiding in me that he didn’t want anyone else in the family to know (meaning my parents) that he had been with Genie.

It was a moment of shared secret, brotherly cool, being invited in behind the velvet rope of the brother who had been at Woodstock and was now trusting his baby sibling with his story.

The second day of the wake saw other family, friends, and relatives stop by the funeral home. Afterwards – the night before the burial – the group of us brothers, cousins, girlfriends, and once more the presence of Genie gathered at Jose’s. Me, Jimmy, and Tim began to play a round of rummy to determine who would get to sleep in the only two beds available. This was where I began to flex my bravado and stupidity by raiding his well-stocked whiskey bar, hitting the decanter of V.O. Scotch, as well as drinking beer, and finally joining my brother, Tim, in a few White Russian cocktails.

All past that was a blur – projectile vomit; Jimmy and Billy screaming at each other about who was to blame for getting me fucked up drunk and how my mother and their mother were going to tag-team and kill them both; feeling as if the world would never stop spinning, just bringing up more and more puke; and, finally, Jimmy stripping us both down to underwear and holding me in Jose’s tub as ice cold water cascaded down upon us until all of us – including Billy and Tim standing in the doorway – were howling in laughter and cursing and hoots and hollers that in my words culminated with, “*I think I’ve earned one of the beds here for myself!*”

In the legend and lore of this tale, I later found out that Jimmy had put a stainless steel cooking pot next to me during the night in case I got sick again – which I did, and in a drunken blur left the pot, half-filled with vomit, on the floor, pushed deep under the bed I was sleeping on. Jose didn’t find it until weeks later when he returned – and Jimmy had to face his ire.

The family had rented funeral cars to travel to the burial site from the parlor. My hangover and morning sickness were brutal. When Jimmy and Tim walked me into the Summit Avenue house, both my mother and Aunt Dottie took one glance at me and tore into them both for bringing me back in this condition. On the ride to the funeral parlor for a short mass, I began

to immediately get car sick. As if on cue, my mother, brother Mickey, and sister Nancy all pulled out large plastic freezer bags they had brought along in my defense.

My parents, having mercy on me, gave me permission to be given a ride back to the Fort Lee house and skip the longer procession to the cemetery and the burial ceremony. I crashed into my grandmother's bed and collapsed into a minor coma for the next few hours until everyone came back for a post-cemetery food festival.

At Jose's that final night, I didn't drink a drop. I spent the night on the balcony – *Quadrophenia* pounding into my recovered brain like a new found pulse. The night was electric, the lights of New York City imprinting through my pupils like a million quasars that would never die.

I whispered a promise into the night...

*"I'll be back. I'm coming home."*

***"When I left my home and family / I was no more than a boy / In the company of strangers / In the quiet of the railway station running scared / Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters / Where the ragged people go / Looking for the places only they would know."***

Simon & Garfunkel – *The Boxer* (1969)

During the advent of senior year at DeSales High School, my focus was lasered in on just one priority: leaving Kentucky behind and returning back to New York City to attend college.

Even though my parents were adamantly opposed to this idea (primarily due to the financial constraints and burden it would put on them), I didn't care – I wasn't going to be my father's son and live out a life of quiet desperation permeated by self-hatred and the violence that erupts from within it.

With a motivation such as that, I was freed to do what I did best: survive and conquer.

With the logical option from my parents being the University of Louisville (very low, in-state tuition for students and the opportunity to live and work from a home base), I had also been offered full-scholarships to Purdue University in Indiana and even Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. (which, on first blush, was a viable alternative if I still wanted to pursue a law degree with dreams of joining the FBI). Yet, in reality, there was only one campus that I was setting my sights on...

Fordham University in The Bronx.

Established in 1841, it was the oldest Catholic and Jesuit university in northeastern United States, and the third-oldest university in New York State. And with the Fordham University School of Law, I knew that my education – first in The Bronx and then in Manhattan – would consist of seven years of heaven, climbing mountains to my destiny, and a triumphant launch to my very own life and career... apart from and finally away from my family, for good.

Strangely enough – and through aligning my desperate interests with my enabling mother and using that as leverage with and against my father's determination that I should just get a job and grow up to be like him – I finagled and coerced them to arrange for a visit to Fordham's campus scheduled for the spring of 1980, my graduation year from DeSales.

Somewhere in the mix, an invitation also came from a private college in Westchester County, New York – Manhattanville College. One of our family cousins worked for New York Law School, which had an affiliated 3-and-3 program with Manhattanville, wherein a student would work an accelerated undergraduate course of study at college then enter law school one year early with preferred admission. Fueling this intensity (after all, I did want to pursue a *Juris Doctor* degree), was my curious interest in the law – prompting me to find and buy old law books in our local public library book sale, reading an old version of *Black's Law Dictionary*,

and even buying a Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) study and exam book, taking a mock exam twice *and passing it at the age of seventeen*. If this was my destiny calling, my ears were pricked up and on fine tuning to hear its message loud and clear.

With everything coalescing into a frenetic and frenzied senior year – working on *The Yearling* final yearbook as a co-editor, the death of my grandmother and the trip East for her funeral, and having to prepare to deliver the DeSales convocation speech at graduation – the scheduled tour of Fordham pushed itself into the rightful place of top priority to me.

*I couldn't fucking wait – and nothing was going to get in my way of making it work.*

So with my brother Jeff in tow, my parents drove me up to New York for the visit. It was to be a very quick, in-and-out trip, no more than a day there and to return to Louisville the next. The night before I could hardly sleep, and with each mile in the car I began to get more excited about the possibilities of everything working out to my favor.

Now I knew that my family was extremely jealous of what was going on – my oldest sister, Nancy, was on her own in Troy, New York. Brothers Jeff and Tim were dallying about the University of Louisville, not really taking their opportunities seriously yet also branching out into their own lives and spaces. Amy was a freshman at Transylvania University in nearby Lexington, Kentucky – again, all of them branching out on their own, in their own ways, but somehow offended that I wanted to do the same, even if it cost my parents an investment (financially or emotionally) that would be a burden.

When we arrived at the Fordham campus in The Bronx on the day of the scheduled tour (set up nearly a month in advance), I was devastated from the start – it seemed that no one in the Admissions Department had bothered to confirm our visit, and had nothing scheduled for me to

partake in, usually a full day's agenda of tours, meetings with campus officials, introduction to various students and the like. *Nothing*.

With my mother doing a slow-burn Irish fume at whoever was unlucky enough to cross paths with her, and my father not really engaged at all, looking as if all of this was just the huge fucking waste of time, gas, and money that he knew it was, I stood by – a part of my heart being torn to shreds in the wake of the news, too angry to cry yet somehow feeling abandoned and forgotten as the Admissions office scrambled to have one of their harried staff put together a truncated tour of the 85 acre campus full of Gothic architecture and tree-lined walkways.

In a word: *disappointing*.

What should have been a full day turned into just two hours of time that I felt was an inconvenience to the tour guide hesitantly assigned to show me just a few highlights of the Rose Hill campus.

When it was over, my mother suggested that we take the half-hour's drive from The Bronx to Purchase, New York to visit the campus of Manhattanville College. In the car I was sulking like a six-year old, dejected from being rejected, not really giving a fuck but not really having a choice.

“Let's just go see what they have,” she said. I knew my father, silent and stony, was fuming inside, another wasted drive for what he saw as folly.

Leaving behind The Bronx, we took the Bronx River Parkway to the Hutchinson River Parkway and into Westchester, my mother reading the AAA *Guidebook* as map master and director of directions, in between telling my father how to drive, where to turn, and how he needed to slow down at regular intervals.

All the while, I was thinking – *is this it? Will it be green grass and low tides forever?*

When we pulled off Purchase Street nearly an hour later, just shy of noon, I remember thinking to myself, “*This place looks too rich for me.*”

Fordham was city, The Bronx, a place that I knew – if it was good enough for Alan Alda (Benjamin “Hawkeye” Pierce from one of my favorite television shows, *M\*A\*S\*H*), then it was good enough for me. After checking in at the small security guard shack off the entrance, we parked in front of Spellman Hall, the freshman dormitory, as instructed and headed off on foot around the building to walk down the school’s open plotted quadrangle that split several dorms off from the education, music, and library buildings on our way to the administration offices located in Reid Hall.

When we turned the corner, I was slain – and it was a done deal. There, at the far end of the Quad, stood Reid Hall – *The Castle*. If I ever looked at or saw a building as a beautiful woman, there she was...voluptuous stone, undulating seduction, and windows that peered into my soul and said, “*Come to me.*”

Unlike Fordham, the Admissions Office was ecstatic to see us – unannounced, unscheduled, and unassuming in their warm and generous welcome. If they had a real fucking red carpet, I believe they would’ve gotten people to unroll it for us as we were taken by a personal guide to visit the President’s Office, the Dean of Students, the head of Admissions and Financial Aid offices, as well as the Resident Life Director. We were given a complete tour of campus, lunch in their dining room, and a walk through of all four dorms – Spellman Hall (freshman), Founders Hall (sophomore and above), Dammann and Tenney Halls (suite-based accommodations for junior and seniors, along with select grad students).

When we left, my mother was speechless; naturally, my father didn’t have much to say except that he wanted to get home. Looking at me, my mother asked what I thought.

“It’s not Fordham,” I told her, “but they were pretty cool.”

Inside, I was toast. *Fordham fucking who?*

Back in Louisville, my focus was now split, like a case of temporary schizophrenia that kept me up nights thinking two things: how was I going to prepare for the graduation speech, and who between Fordham and Manhattanville would come up with the most financial aid and scholarships to win my heart?

On one hand, Fr. John Coleman got me in the best shape I could be in – he worked for weeks leading up to the graduation ceremony, working with me for hours each day after school, meeting inside the DeSales chapel, going over the speech time and time again, giving me presentation tips, critique, and the both of us honing the delivery until it was second-nature and met with both of our affirmation and approval.

The situation with where I would go to college was another story – one that brought out the usual bullshit and hand grenades inside the Inverness Avenue home and being lobbed by my parents at each other and certainly towards me.

Either way, my grades were good enough to get me into either institution. Fordham worked on a regular GPA curriculum of study while Manhattanville used a unique system based on a portfolio of accumulated work, projects, compositions and grade performance and evaluations done throughout the year and over the course of the four years of undergraduate work.

In 1980’s money, tuition was always a concern. Even without someone from either Bursar’s office sticking a loaded gun to my parent’s heads, I knew that even with financial aid, grants and scholarships, I’d probably have to take on a student loan debt to make it work from

year to year. And when Fordham began to balk at meeting us halfway on the finances, my mother began to quietly assure me that Manhattanville would be a strain on their finances.

Naïve and determined, I petitioned their Financial Aid office and received a fairly substantial package of aid – that, along with a student loan from my local bank, stubbornly co-signed by my parents would give me the wiggle room to escape Kentucky and be repatriated to New York.

*And once there, I knew, I was gone from them for good.*

Graduation was a blur – the cap and gown, the endless pictures, the family getting disgruntled yet dressed up to attend, and the pressure of having to do the speech before an audience of a few thousand people.

When it was time, I remember looking out into the audience. First I spotted my family, thinking oddly that it would be a crapshoot if they were proud of me for having this honor or expecting less of me than I was truly capable of. After all, my mother knew that I loved to write and my father really didn't give a shit, so – to me – it was a wash.

Looking from them, I saw Father John Coleman sitting near the front row with the rest of the DeSales administration and faculty members. He smiled calmly, gave me a thumbs up, and used his hands to signal “...*nice and slow*...” as we had practiced diligently and determined to be the greatest threat to a good speech from a bad one.

Turning the page in the convocation book in front of me, I looked down at my copy of the speech that was included inside of it for my reference. Each of the pages were encased in vinyl page holders – and my eyes blinked once, then twice, and my practiced confidence suddenly had its balls in a vice grip of inhuman proportions.

*I couldn't see a fucking thing.*

It wasn't my glasses – they were clean and fine. The lights from the scaffolding above me in Louisville Gardens was so bright that they reflected an unholy glare across each of the pages of my speech. I turned from page to page to see if any were different. When I looked up at Fr. John, he had this inquisitive look on his face. Taking in a very deep breath, I just smiled, took the book in my hands, lifted it up from the podium, and showed it to the audience.

“I can't really see a thing,” I said into the microphone, closing the book, placing it down on the podium in front of me, and looking out at Fr. John, “but you'll be glad to know I'm prepared for anything.” The look on Fr. John's face went from confidence to delayed concern. *“Isn't that what a good education should do – and what a DeSales man should be?”*

And then I gave the speech that was drilled into my brain and heart, not needing the pages to refer to. Roughly twenty minutes or so in length, it flowed from me like a river of peace, pause, and delivered with both polish and playfulness at the right moments. There was appropriate laughter at the inside jokes, and applause at the beats that Fr. John and I had expected.

In the end, receiving a standing ovation from my classmates, faculty and staff, and audience was beyond the words I had just delivered. After everything I had experienced from the start and through the previous four years at DeSales, I felt as if I had earned the joy that sound delivered, like a drum beating in my heart in perfect rhythm, sure, steady, syncopated.

*I was seen – and I was heard.*

***“Sometimes I wonder where I've been / Who I am / Do I fit in? / I may not win / But I can't be thrown / Out here on my own / Out here on my own.”***

From the movie *Fame* (1980)

The letter from Manhattanville came in a single, business-sized cream colored envelope.

A logo of The Castle was emblazoned on the upper left corner, my name spelled *correctly* on the top line of its destination. This was extremely important – in a last, comical error from the nightmare of Fordham shooting themselves in the fucking nuts, they sent their financial aid decision letter to me addressed to *Mr. Joan Jamiolkowski*.

The letter from Manhattanville was simple and to the point: I was accepted for freshman year studies beginning in August of 1980. I was also assigned a date on which to report for freshman orientation and details of the financial aid package that would allow me – with the help of a student loan – to attend.

It was my ticket out. I felt like Charlie Bucket in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.

And it didn't surprise me that my Jeff, Tim, and Amy weren't happy for me.

My parents – loving and caring – did bless me, their youngest son, in only the way and with only the words each of them could bestow from their hearts:

*"Don't blow it,"* my mother said.

*"He'll get what he wants by hook or crook,"* my father added.

In that summer of 1980, I had one reason to live: *to leave my family and never return*.

Little did I see through the windshield of life that the road ahead, paved with the curses of both my father and mother, would keep my hands on the steering wheel of a car too powerful for me to handle, my foot pressed to the floorboard of self-determination, burning the fuel of folly and tearing the rearview mirror off in arrogance, throwing it from the window with a free hand, extending the middle finger to anyone and everyone that ever doubted who I was and where I was going.

*I Am One.*