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Place of the Owls

***“Well I’m New York City born and raised / But nowadays / I’m lost between two shores
/ New York’s home / But it ain’t mine no more...”***

Neil Diamond – *I Am...I Said* (1971)

Einstein was right: *“Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.”*

Certainly not planned yet ultimately coincidental, our family made the transition in 1971 from The Bronx to the bucolic upstate town of Coxsackie, about one-hundred and twenty miles north of New York City.

Located in beautiful Greene County and on the banks of the Hudson River, it was founded in 1788. One of its first settlers as part of the New Netherland development was Pieter Bronck, of the same family lineage for which The Bronx is named. The town’s name is partly ascribed to the Mahican Native Americans of the Algonquian Tribe – with a variance of pronunciations, my ears first heard it phonetically as *“kuuk-SAK-ee.”*

Only nine years of age upon arrival, none of that was known or if it were would have been of little comfort – in a town of a little more than two thousand inhabitants, I might have well been left by Neil Armstrong on the Moon with a fucking Spaldeen and a bag of Black and White cookies to remind me of *home*.

Ever the silent observer, I knew *somehow* that my parents had taken out a mortgage to buy the former two-family house at 62 Church Street. Before we moved in, it had been the home to both the families of John Mayotte (Head Varsity Baseball coach at Cocksackie-Athens High School and an inductee into *seven* baseball Halls of Fame including the New York State Hall of Fame) and Theron “Tete” Gunderman (a venerable and popular Science teacher at C-A School as well).

All three families met there the day we moved in. Tapping into a new found excitement, I ran about like a dervish throughout both floors of the house and basement. Quickly doing a room count (including the two and a half *baths*), I interrupted the adults and asked the most obvious question:

“*This means I can have my own room, right?*”

Little did I realize in those first days of transition that everything was going to be shaken and stirred, much of what was to shape me condensed into five idyllic years.

It began with just the surroundings of our neighborhood on Church Street, our house near the top pitch of road that wound down towards the main streets of Cocksackie. Trees and grass, hills and quiet, birds and raccoons, owls hooting at night, and skies visibly showing their majestic curtains of stars that were barely visible from the rooftop of Sedgwick.

All of this and more was culture shock and then some to my sense of needing a foundation to feel safe.

It also meant making new friends with other young boys and girls up and down Church Street – and also knowing that I would have to run the gauntlet of being the *new kid at school* soon enough. In a town that size, word of new residents passed between the bookends of sunrise

and sunset, tinged with the patina of “...*city folk*...” as if we were somehow trespassers into a realm hidden from the noisy boroughs and bridges, subways and skyscrapers.

“Now, ain’t it good to know that you’ve got a friend / When people can be so cold? / They’ll hurt you, yes, and desert you / And take your soul if you let them / Oh, but don’t you let them...”

Carole King – *You’ve Got A Friend* (1971)

Entering the new path of public education in Coxsackie was a cold shower compared to the assaults and embarrassments survived in my third grade massacre at Tolentine. During that year, my soul was fileted by the trauma and my heart beaten as if prime veal in the hands of a psychopathic butcher.

Even with decades in the rearview mirror of life and the warm amber kaleidoscope of fine bourbon in the bottom of an Irish cut crystal rocks glass to pacify my mind, I can still unlock the doors of those compartmentalized years in elementary and junior high to unearth treasures of memories that were the healing I needed in those uncertain times.

One of the first friends to welcome me to the town was a young girl who lived further down Church Street. Kelly was a blonde haired ray of sunshine to the *new kid* that I was. A year younger than my swiftly maturing age of nine, she was the sister to Jimmy, another young boy who was to be entering the fourth grade with me at Coxsackie Elementary. I met her through him one day while down the street with some other neighborhood boys. A tomboy with honey brown eyes and a coy smile, she was just enough shy and also a bit bold enough to attract my attention.

Within the first few days of school beginning, she would come by our house and politely ask my mother if I could walk to school with her. It wasn’t a far venture to the school on Sunset Boulevard – a little over a half mile, up Church to Washington Boulevard, then down Sunset to

the school campus (which coupled the elementary, junior and high school buildings along with athletic fields).

My mother would send us off with a knowing smile, wishing Kelly a good day and tousling my hair as I sheepishly left home with this cute girl by my side – not sure what to do but walk.

In those virgin days of companionship, our talk was mainly her asking me question after question about “...*the city*...” and her fascination with New York (which she had never visited). What I found in those pleasantly awkward exchanges was a chance to begin *pretending* I was someone I never was – either on the streets of The Bronx or even in the hidden truths of who our family really was.

That’s what fourth grade was – an audition to a play I wasn’t provided a script for but had to write on the fly each and every day, the whirlwind of edits and new lines, characters, settings, and plot making me dizzy with both fear and exhilaration.

Somewhere along the journey back in The Bronx, my mother had my IQ tested. It was no surprise that my reading skill, level, and comprehension was through the roof – even my first teachers at Coxsackie Elementary knew this. Part of the initial flush of being new to town and this particular group of students was an internal compass that I *knew* – intellectually – that everything was going to be fine...*as long as I controlled my narrative*.

The “moderately gifted” scale of my testing somehow encouraged my mother (for this would never come from my father) to have me pursue some musical training. First, it was piano lessons with a local teacher for both me and my sister Amy. We had a piano in our family and my father (when home on weekends) would love hearing me practice basic sonatas or any of the pieces from the *John Thompson Modern Course for Piano* books I took lessons from.

Then she nudged me towards involving myself with the elementary school band classes that were offered as part of our curriculum.

Great, I recall thinking, another fucking decision and leaving myself wide open for failure.

So in the randomness of all things, I was introduced to the trombone. Perhaps because I was growing into a tall and lanky young man or simply due to the need for a second chair participant, our band leader – Bill Baxter – encouraged me to take up “...*the bone*...” as my instrument.

And I accepted. My parents bought a new student trombone for me, and it soon became a comical struggle to lug this small rocket launcher-sized hard-shell case with me (along with school books and lunch) to and from C-A Elementary on the days when band practice or after-school lessons were on my schedule.

Little did I know or realize at the time, within our band room I would be introduced to some fast friendships with boys and leap head deep into crushes on girls who populated the orchestra.

Next to me in first trombone chair was Mark Gustavson, the only son to Arthur and Elizabeth. Another growing tall and bespectacled youth, Mark was crazy smart and musically talented beyond the bone skills he displayed. He was one of the first in a line of fellow students I would get to know in that first year outside of The Bronx and also share our band experiences together with.

Beyond the practice room sessions with Mr. Baxter and our various abilities, I found myself fascinated with the mixture of brass, woodwinds, and percussion that formulated our ranks. Trombones, tubas, French horns, trumpets, cornets, flutes, piccolos, clarinets, oboes,

drums, timpani, and cymbals made up the cacophony of noise that under dedicated practice and the emergence of talent became a coalescence of young creativity that would perform in various platforms for the C-A school and community at large. There were always concerts to prepare and perform for, as well as the challenges of participating in marching band and community orchestra events during my years there.

Mr. Baxter had compassion on all of us yet also introduced the importance of practice and being prepared, the love of music he had and the skills at conducting that taught me how to keep time, a watchful eye, and being one small part of the larger creation of the music we performed.

Yet something deeper was taking hold in the marrow of my heart and soul during those tender years of burgeoning friendships and the discovery of music under the disciplines of practice and performance that cried out in silence to the pain I was suffering inside of my own family.

And many of the stories I read as a small child upon the pages of the encyclopedias about courageous explorers began to coalesce into a realization that I was – as the youngest son – perhaps at times the most brave of the company or the most lost without compass or map to discover the ruins of love, trust, and safety that I was forced to navigate my way through.

“A family can be the bane of one's existence. A family can also be most of the meaning of one's existence. I don't know whether my family is bane or meaning, but they have surely gone away and left a large hole in my heart.”

Keri Hulme – *The Bone People* (1984)

After moving upstate to Coxsackie, my father continued his job driving a bus in New York City for an extended period of time in order to qualify for enhanced pension and retirement

benefits. This meant he was gone during the week and came home on weekends, putting additional stress upon my mother in her already demanding role of shepherding six children through daily life.

And it was during our time in this serene village that I began to see the veins of dysfunctionality begin to rupture and bleed within what I could only perceive as the heartbeat of our family.

From the continuing assaults of physical, verbal, and emotional violence to the secret and sordid rumors of sexual immorality, as well as the specters of mental illness, destructive sibling rivalries and financial shame, I could witness the diseases of arrogance, lust, hatred, and desperation begin to permeate the pages of our family story – perhaps some chapters being revealed to me from an accelerated sense of maturity or maybe just out of a naïve awakening from the fear of nightmares into the shocked awareness of lucidity to what the real world of our family truly meant.

How could I reconcile seeing my father and mother in heated debate in his bedroom one quiet afternoon, arguing about an unknown issue in hushed and threatening tones, erupting into his forcing his hands around her throat and choking her until I cried out from the doorway? Where was my point of context to be part of a meeting with a family from up the way on Church Street who accused one of my older brothers brother of sexually molesting their youngest daughter? Who was to explain to me why my mother disappeared from our home for several weeks to enter a hospital when she wasn't physically wounded but was told “...*she just needed to get some help?*” And why did I know that our lack of money wasn't unique to our family yet led me to believe that we were always poor to begin with and could never really share in the American Dream like others around us?

Little did I realize, within the idyllic years that Coxsackie would wrap around my heart and soul like the true embrace of a loving mother or the deep initiation of a strong father, but the *story of me was somehow being hijacked by the erroneous penmanship of a toxic ink.*

Father. Mother. Brother. Sister. Labels, yes – roles played out according to script, direction, lighting, scenery, and plot to be sure. Much changed in such little time. New horizons and vistas of relationship outside the lines of a family coloring book were being opened to me. The self-awareness that was forced to the surface in The Bronx in terms of surviving became somewhat rooted in the rich and moist soil of *living.*

Yet the ominous whispers of shame, the lingering tendrils of violence, the acceptance that my mind was a sponge soaking up the overflow waters of my family brokenness and wounding with no proper wringing out dogged my steps, sleep, and waking days of a young adolescent head drifting in the pink clouds of hope and dreams.

If the perfect sky was torn, I was still blinded by the sunlight of my own naivete or perhaps, at a deeper, cellular level, the transformation of a boy into the hopes of becoming a man drastically different than was modeled to me by both my father and brothers.

I didn't feel drawn to being a hard worker, a slave to a paycheck that kept poverty at bay, nor did I subscribe to being the athlete or the popular class clown or the desperate middle child who played chameleon to the whims of those around him. For me, during those years in the place of the owls, surrounded by new friends, the awakening of desire and infatuation, I let my dreams wander the corridors of fancy. Why couldn't I become a grand master stage illusionist magician, a crime fighting F.B.I Special Agent, or a rock and roll superstar drummer?

I was, in fact, just beginning the steps of a journey to become the *me I was meant to be* – yet already knew that the dynamics of my family life were almost insurmountable from the start.

I was too young to remember my father's father – nor did I know his story, born in foreign soil, or the wounds to his heart that shaped him and his only son. My youth didn't afford me the clarity of my mother's story – abandoned as a child, nor the suffering that must have inflicted upon her spirit growing up with a sense that love or family meant nothing.

Spiraling around me in what the peace Coxsackie offered me was a turbulent storm that found me in the eye, surrounded by an unfamiliar calm all around me yet foreboding the coming gales and destructive winds of change that would once again uproot me from the good soil I found in new friendships and the desires of dreams.

“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.”

The Who – *I'm One* (1973)

One of the survival skills I learned in those Bronx days and from their urban tales was that *observation* was crucial to learn the right – and wrong – way of navigating the unpredictable emotions of my parents and siblings.

Being the youngest of the tribe had its privileges. From those boyhood eyes, I learned to discern the body language of my father, the emotional pendulum of my mother, and the scattered personalities of my three older brothers and two older sisters.

From the slow and steady life of a human caterpillar, I had to stop feeding on what everyone else was doing around me and take the risk to hang upside down from a twig that twisted in the wind, trusting the process of molting into a chrysalis of hope and rebirth. Little did I conceive that God – in His plan – was always in the business of radical transformation, protecting me until I was at the appointed time to emerge as...

Me. John.

What is a young boy to do, traveling the path of nine to fourteen years in life, without a guide to lead him through the questions and circumstances of adolescence? If I simply looked around me, I witnessed the fragility of my family and somehow began to paint the canvas of my heart with shame and rejection. Yet within the days of this time of youth in Coxsackie, I began to experience that identity emerge outside of the shadows of assaulted sonship and the influences of my siblings.

It was an odd and disruptive feeling – thinking to myself that, even within what was supposed to be the *safety* of my family, that the threats were more dangerous and somehow, somehow, I really didn't *fit in*. This was the intercourse that created a deep agreement that I was apart from, not a part of.

Perhaps it was fear that fucked anger and begat the shame which always followed me like a lost puppy wanting nothing more than to be loved, fed, and played with in pure joy. Maybe it was the galvanizing moments of having my first real bicycle yet being forced by an overprotective mother to have training wheels on it – only to endure the teasing and ridicule of other neighborhood kids because I didn't have my father around to shepherd me in the learning process or my older brothers were too busy to care.

And so the friendships at school and my own growing creative interests – in music, movies, storytelling, and the dreams of “*What do I want to be when I grow up?*” – offered safe haven and passage to those avenues in my heart where all was well, I was safe, and something (or Someone) invited me towards that which I craved more than anything else.

To be loved.

In the loneliness that pushed against all of it, music became both an ally and early lover of my soul. I would find myself listening to songs and feel myself exhilarated, inspired,

overcome with either joy, sadness, or a deep hunger to cast myself the hero to a young girl needing one. My spirit would dig into both lyrics and sound, listening and listening and seeking and searching for *a part of me that each song spoke to, intimately and with purpose.*

Not recognizing the call, God was inviting me into a conversation of the heart in a language all His own that was specifically tailored to the vocabulary of my wounds. Any normal person would cringe and feel great sympathy and compassion for a young boy in a hospital intensive care unit. And, yet, most families – most certainly mine – were no different in the damages done at such a high cost to health...mental, physical, emotional or spiritual.

At this age, and in this place, music – like movies and stories told through television and books – also orchestrated a symphony of emotional rescues for me in the waves of my family seas.

Living vicariously through the characters, settings, and plots of those mediums I could cast myself as someone I wished to be, longed to become, the recognition of spotting something in someone else that I had a vague reckoning of inside myself. *Story* was beginning to shape me – as were the friendships of my own outside of the only relationships I knew within my family – to call up the process of identity and my journey to embrace it.

And through the loneliness and longing, the desperation and desire, the vulnerability and exploration of my personality, I began to dream beyond the ferocity of memories in the wake of The Bronx and deeper still past the peaceful boundaries of upstate New York into a *life that I had yet to live but was invited to apprentice in learning how to build.*

Yet I really didn't know God from Adam – it was still mostly church on Sunday's at St. Mary's and that was that. I would still find myself drawn to the stories within the children's Bible that had come with me in the move to Coxsackie, but the memories of Tolentine and abuse

suffered there only kept building a wall in my heart, surrounding it with impenetrable brick and mortar of anger, resentment, hate, and fear. I couldn't escape the feelings of intense shyness and uncertainty inside of me when it came to trusting *anyone*.

With the friendships I was developing at school – with Mark and others like Greg Musial, Julian Starr, Marty Schnur, Charlie Fensterer, Wayne West, Kenny Wich, Dieter Young (as well as the proximity to the attractions to so many young girls at Cocksackie-Athens) – there was a sense I could construct a façade against the stories of my past by attempting to be *me* with those who seemed just *like me*.

Among the come downs that kept calling to me, I would hear both the persistent knocking on the doorway of my heart and the captivating whispers into the ears of my soul that only the daughters of Eve could conjure. If those friendships with Mark, Julian, Greg and others signaled the first declarations of what a band of brothers could be in my own story, then the allure of Beauty – in the different girls (*as friends*) that began to invite me into the fragrances of infatuation, school mate crushes, and the buzz and flutter of the *birds and bees* never saw coming the assault upon my own developing sexual curiosity.

***“Baby, you know that dreams, they’re for those who sleep / Life, it’s for us to keep /
And if I chose the one I’d like to help me through / I’d like to make it with you / I really think
we can make it, girl...”***

Bread – *Make It with You* (1970)

Even today – decades later – I can still see them...walking into the classroom dressed in blue jeans and peasant blouses, tossing hair and smiles about like intoxicating grenades blowing apart my heart and dreams with eyes of blue like the seas, green as emeralds, dark brown like rich chocolate. From those first days with Kelly Vosburgh, I was overwhelmed with the

proximity to Kelly Plant, Stephanie Korzon, Karen Misuraca, Leslie Armer, Denise Connolly, Liz Bushey, and Karen Meyer – all fellow students at C-A school, most members of the band and orchestra where I continued to play trombone with, and energetic participants in some of the best recess games of softball that a young heart could participate in.

They were all right there beside me, most every day – and yet were also unobtainable, the princesses as far away as the moon and stars that I saw hung in their beauty, their ripening bodies, and the smiles that could and would steal my breath away at every turn.

Naturally – from the age of nine to fourteen – I would first begin to appreciate the sunrise and sunset of a girl’s beauty casting both its rays of sunlight and dusky hues of twilight into my story. For each and every one of them that were in proximity to my daily school hours, much more time began to elapse and eclipse the turnings of my heart, mind, and imagination in the hours, nights, and weekends spent apart from them.

I was painfully shy, emotions paralyzed through the scars of emotional and physical abuse already suffered and survived, to where even the immature concept of opening the gates of my heart to schoolyard crushes and infatuations seemed *dangerous* at best. While there were brief moments as “the new kid at school” that were part of an initiation crafted by the reigning bullies of 4th grade (and, to which, some of my older brothers did come to my rescue in order to teach me how to stand up – *or fight* – for myself against them), by 5th grade I was settled into deeper friendships and relationships.

And I kept observing the other young boys around me – their bravado or at ease manners with the girls I was attracted to, and how those girls responded in kind, sometimes pushing away their pre-adolescent advances or yet giving signals that they were intrigued and welcomed. *Shy and confused* – I didn’t understand what made a girl’s heart tick or how to approach it.

Perhaps it was the inquisitive nature in me or – more likely – just the natural progression of boyhood from whence such fascination and fantasy came, but I knew that something felt disconnected in me around these girls...like I would always be the square peg trying to fit into the round hole.

Many a classroom time was spent following my mind and eyes as they gradually tuned out the teachers who, for some measure, were reinforcing education I had already pursued on my own. I would let my gaze rest upon the profiles of beauty. Sometimes they weren't far – maybe Denise was in the seat before me or one of my favorite Karen's right next to me. Other times it was the feeling of my heart stopping its eternal beat momentarily as Leslie would ask me an innocuous question about "*What page did he say we're on?*" or Liz simply asked to borrow a spare pen or sheet of paper I always seemed to have.

It became habit that once out of school – during the nights, weekends, or vacation breaks – that I would begin casting stories...either secretly in spare notebooks or within the libraries of my mind and heart – heroic stories of burgeoning romance, me coming to their rescue in valor, or simply just being with them as our unspoken feelings surfaced in the gentle touch of one hand upon the other.

Unrequited love began to till the soils of my heart – not as clumsy oxen or a farmer desperate for harvest, but in the longings that I would someday discover came from the Author of the Sacred Romance itself.

Near the end of my time in Cossackie, I remember those longings had a moment of lucid reality that still haunts me in the most tender ways.

I was walking down the nearly empty halls of C-A school, side by side with Karen Misuraca (who played saxophone in the Community Band we were both a part of). As we

walked together, the sides of our bodies close enough to touch as we moved in step, going nowhere in particular, I felt the courageous call of a young man when he announces to his own heart that the feelings residing there had an equal voice in the reflection of beauty that made him speechless.

We ended up in the doorway of the cafeteria, where there was a square dancing class going on inside. I knew my mother would soon be outside the school entrance to pick me up and drive me home. I also knew that Karen knew I was drawn to her, infatuated and head over heels as any young man would be. As she leaned against the doorway and looked up at me, her eyes telling me that she was waiting for *something* to be said, I also felt the pain of knowing that our family was soon going to be moving away from Coxsackie.

In the moment I wanted to kiss her, I heard the blaring horn of our family station wagon from outside a nearby entrance. *The death knell from a mother who didn't want me to surrender her love.*

I never took Karen's hand. I didn't lean in to steal the kiss she would have willingly given away that night. When I told her I had to go, something in the spirit of a young boy on his journey to become a man felt buried in a landslide of shame. Maybe I saw it in her eyes, too – but something told me that something in my shyness wasn't being shamed or told it was wrong.

Life is sometimes those moments missed that cannot be restored and yet are always, in their wake, searched for upon the sands of time that hold the breaking waves of the deepest memories.

There was something, too, that was tracking my steps through this wilderness of wonder and longing. It wasn't a spirit of love – *it was an emissary of evil that would soon enough reveal itself in both my story and life.*

“My first time I jacked off, I thought I’d invented it. I looked down at my sloppy handful of junk and thought, ‘This is going to make me rich’...”

Chuck Palahniuk – From the novel *Choke* (2001)

As a 12-year old boy, 1974 certainly held many a great event: the discovery of the Terra Cotta Army of Qin Shi Huang; Hank Aaron blasting his 715th home run to eclipse The Babe; Patty Hearst aka *Tania* wielding her M1 carbine while robbing a bank; the introduction of the Universal Product Code (UPC) – something that obsessed my mother to write a manuscript about it; Phillippe Petit walked the high wire between the two World Trade Center towers in New York City; President Richard Nixon resigned amidst the Watergate scandal; Ali beat Foreman in *The Rumble in the Jungle* to retain the Heavyweight championship; John Lennon made his final public performance in New York City; the Rubik’s Cube was invented...

And, oh yeah, I discovered the splitting of the sexual atom in masturbation.

Innocence aside, coming into my bedroom after a casual shower one day found me with an erection that could cut diamonds. For some reason (having experienced them before but, as most young boys, neither totally fascinated with it or too scared to ask my parents for any advice on what to do with it), I decided to take hold of the situation and found that getting a grip on things only made me feel strangely *outlaw*, like I just rode my stallion into town and all the ladies were eyeballing me.

Hand to flesh, ignition started, countdown to launch took my mission control by complete and utter surprise. *Three...two...one...LIFT OFF!!*

Two things I clearly remember in the moment: first, the force of my first orgasm knocked my naked body back onto my bed (thankfully), breaking my fall into the bliss of sexual oblivion; and, second yet most importantly, I momentarily passed out – hot, white light into total

blackness. And when I came to – heaving breath, covered in flop sweat from head to toe, pleurably convulsing in what I could only describe as the firestorm of creation unfulfilled yet gloriously pulsating into my core, I felt a feeling of ecstasy that never introduced itself properly yet was certainly *my first drug, my virgin addiction, and the indecipherable whispers of a secret that began its pursuit of me.*

As a young boy on a dangerous yet exciting mission, the discovery of sexual pleasure and the inherent joy of a bottomless well of orgasms led me to use anything and everything as source material – the natural attraction and fantasies of girls at school, the alluring lingerie ads in shopping catalogues, and a harem of television beauties that while visited in black and white were always in stunning color as the climaxes exploded in and out of my body.

One day I found myself taking a trip with my mother into downtown Coxsackie for a visit to our local drugstore. Having already been fascinated with their newsstand and various collection of comic books and magazines, I made a discovery on the level of the explorers I had voraciously read about in our family’s encyclopedia volumes.

They had pornography.

Surreptitiously hidden in a back row of the periodical racks, my eyes scoped titles like *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Without cause or reason, my heartbeat increased as I looked around to see if my mother was within sight. Peeking around the corner next to the newsstand, I saw her near the back of Vermilyea’s at the pharmacy counter, far enough away for me to engage my mission further.

Reaching back into the rack, my hands exited with a small *TV Guide*-sized porno mag with a tasteful picture of a nearly nude and very buxom woman on its cover. It was sealed in

plastic wrap and I noticed my hands were shaking as I held it, eyes transfixed at the image of the woman and a dual-edged thought cutting deeply into my brain:

“I must see what’s inside and I must now take this with me.”

Most crimes, I discovered over years and times, are born of such simple and idiotic thoughts.

With the deftness of a burglar and a thrill that shook my entire being, I swiftly looked left and right and immediately stuffed the small porno mag into my pants at the front, covering it with the draping of my t-shirt.

Nervously and beyond excitement, I left the aisle and discovered my mother approaching from her shopping.

“You ready, baby?” she said, a smile on her face, a pat of her hand on the top of my head. “You want anything?” she asked as we began to walk from the store.

I stammered a clumsy “No” and ambled as nonchalantly as I could with the magazine digging its way into my groin, hoping that I wouldn’t feel the hand of a shopkeeper on my shoulder as we exited the drugstore. The fresh air and sunshine out on the sidewalk made me think of all the movies I’d seen where the criminal was freed from prison, breathing in freedom and planning the next steps of his criminal empire in the same moment.

Once back at home, I couldn’t get to my bedroom fast enough. It had already become a sanctuary of privacy, independence, fantasy, and creativity. Tearing the plastic wrap from the porno mag, I let my fingers caress the cover image of the nearly nude woman, not surprised at the immediate erection growing in my pants. Slowly, deliciously, I turned page after page of the black and white treasure, seeing in full form a naked woman’s body – some white, some black – that both took my breath away and pounded the blood into my ears at a thunderous level.

At that age – and in that season of exploration and discovery – masturbation became a repeatable joy and now a secret habit. In my young mind, it was a savior from the shyness and common-themed discussions among my classmates at C-A school.

One weekend day, I returned home from riding my bike eager to spend time in my room with what was now a well-worn treasure map in my hands – certain images favored over others, the anticipation of linking the fantasies I concocted in my mind with the ease and dexterity of my self-stimulation quickly becoming the focal point of my youth. Looking for the magazine in its usual hiding place in my bedroom, my body froze in terror at my discovery.

It was gone. There was only one possible explanation: my mother had discovered it during her random, but predictable, cleaning of my sometimes disorganized room.

Panic swept my brain, a cold flop sweat covering my forehead and my pulse doing a crazy samba dance in the bloodstream of consequences.

Moments later, my mother appeared in my bedroom door, face set like a flint as she said, “I want you to take a ride with me. Let’s go.”

I didn’t ask for a reason, following her out of the house and into the family car, an odd terror paralyzing both thought and speech. She drove to the parking lot of our nearby grocery store, the parking lot completely empty. Parking the car, she turned the engine off and immediately lit up a Pall Mall cigarette, not even bothering to open her driver’s side window, the smoke further nauseating my stomach to the point I had to begin fearing I would vomit all over myself just from the fear alone.

“Where did you get it?” was her only query, her face unable to gaze at me.

When I answered with the truth – “*I took it from the drugstore*” – her face pivoted towards me, her anger flashing in her eyes, her hand coming out of nowhere to slap my face

hard, sending white hot shards of anger and shame into my skin as the tears involuntarily began to flow out of my eyes. Her second slap was unnecessary yet found its target with amazing ease and what seemed to be pleasure on her features.

“You’re as *dirty* as your father!” she screamed, the echo of this curse filling the car, its reverberations in my spirit and mind setting this curse in concrete, shovels of deep shame casting their toxic soil onto any possible redemption for someone so young and tender.

While in the empty parking lot, I looked out the car window to see one of my C-A classmates, John Pohl, riding his bicycle around the asphalt, doing lazy circles and getting closer to the vehicle. When he was close enough to recognize me, my head falling heavy to my chest, my tears and sobbing now uncontrollable.

As he biked up to my window, I raised my eyes in a plea for him to move on. His smile turned to genuine concern as he saw me crying, his words, “*Are you okay?*” falling limp in the air outside and procuring no mercy from my mother inside.

Waving him away with a hand, I watched him innocently ride off on his bike, thinking of my decision to steal the magazine and its reverberations. Later that day, my mother put a headstone on my shame by driving me back down to Vermilyea’s drugstore and demanding that I confess to the owner. Shame upon shame, she had to stand there and hear her youngest son – albeit a surrogate husband she was grooming long before this day – own up to his criminal and immoral deeds. I could only imagine her thoughts.

My boy is a thief and pornographer.

In the red tears of anger and embarrassment filling her eyes, I accepted the role. When she also gave the store owner the money owed for the thieved porno mag, it was a debt I knew I could never repay.

And more would come – both physically and emotionally – from that day, stories that were to be written between the lines of my story, sexually, that I could neither fantasize now or imagine would be aroused through reality.

“I never ever had a negative experience in baseball as a youngster. That kind of lit the stove for me, got the fire in my belly.”

Baseball Coach John Mayotte (2012)

I first met the man lovingly referred to as “Coach” throughout his legendary baseball skipper history when our family first moved into the house at 62 Church Street in Cocksackie. Coach John Mayotte was the leader of the Cocksackie-Athens Varsity baseball team, a juggernaut of success in their New York State athletic division from the late 60’s through mid-70’s.

Having married his high school sweetheart, Amy, he never was the biological father to any children yet considered every single player he ever coached as his *family*.

Within the context of my wonder years in Cocksackie, I was encouraged by Coach to try out for one of the local Little League teams.

“I think you’ll have fun, Johnny,” he said, calling me by his own casual nickname. “You’ll learn what it means to be part of a team, and you’ll learn a few things about life, too.”

For a young boy on the cusp of adolescence, his words were *fathering*. They seemed like a blessing to a part of my heart that wasn’t hearing them from my own father or from the too busy antics of my older brother.

The tryout process to gain entrance to one of the Little League baseball teams also brought a rare opportunity for me to bond with my father, who actually spent time with me at the school baseball diamond teaching me the basics of hitting, catching, and throwing – sometimes

with the assistance of older brothers, Jeff and Tim, allowing me to have enough rudiments in hand to successfully pass the tryout camp and be “drafted” by the Cards.

While all of the local teams appropriated names of Major League baseball teams, the Cards were local cellar dwellers, the team with the historically worst record and not-so-best players on the roster. To me, none of this really mattered – I just loved having the uniform, getting any turns at bat, and true to Coach Mayotte’s prediction the opportunity to experience what being one member of the whole team was really about.

In the beginning, I was a utility player – starting in the outfield, moving towards the infield, and finally – and surprisingly, especially with my growth spurt and becoming so tall, so fast – finding a love and grit for the position of catcher.

Once more confidence in my mediocre skills began to increase, and I was regularly in the line-up behind home plate, I began to eek out base hits while batting and confidence to gear up and handle our roster of pitchers (...to this day, thinking back to Stevie Litchko’s blazing fast ball pounding into my mitt still makes my hand hurt...).

While I never made the annual All-Star Team roster (that honor went to Greg Durnford, the other Cards catcher whose father was a high-ranking school administrator, so perhaps politics were involved), it was learning the life lessons Coach Mayotte alluded to – winning *and* losing – that seemed to matter most. And I found out my passion for *protecting the plate at any cost* surprisingly transposed a deeper understanding at that age in the importance of protecting my own heart.

Interestingly enough, my father also volunteered to be one of the Little League umpires, and one day had the assignment as home plate ump right behind me as I caught a game we were playing against the Braves. It was both a strange and comforting feeling to have his strong

presence huddled right behind me, sometimes feeling his gentle hand on my shoulder, occasionally hearing him whisper some words of affirmation or encouragement after stopping a wild pitch or throwing out a runner trying to steal from first base.

During one climatic play at home plate – where a runner advanced from second base on a long, fly ball to the outfield that gave him the opportunity to round third base and try to score – I saw the relay throw coming in right on target to me so I positioned my body in front of the plate, seeing the locomotive of fury in the Braves player coming in for home with intentions of sliding in to score the run.

I caught the missile of a relay from the shortstop in my glove and bent down to make the tag as the runner reached me almost simultaneously. *I had him dead to rights, no question – he was fucking out!!*

From behind me, the loud and bellowing voice of my father screamed, “*SAFE!!*”

Even before I could turn in disbelief, I heard the mocking and disapproving roar of the spectators lining the benches outside the Little League in West Coxsackie chanting, “*Out, out, out!!*”

In a white hot moment of anger, I threw off my catcher’s mask, ball still firmly clenched in my catcher’s mitt, wanting to smack the living shit out of the Braves player who was both smiling and egging me on as his team celebrated in their dug out bench area.

“He was *out!*” I shouted at my father, still standing there signaling his choice with his hand signal.

Shaking his head in opposition, he again called, “*Out!*” The crowd was clearly on my side, and as my coaches came out to back me up, I felt a hatred in my blood begin to boil, a pent-up volcano of anger towards my father begin to erupt.

“*No way!*” I screamed, now throwing down the mitt and ball violently on top of home plate, shaking my fist uncontrollably at the point of impact and standing my ground. “*He was FUCKING OUT!!*”

The look of shock and bewilderment crossed my father’s face – and all I could do was think back to that moment as a young boy where he said, “*Come here,*” promising not to hit me but doing just that.

He took off his umpire’s mask, and only I could see the rage flashing in his eyes. My coaches were now between me and him, so feeling this barrier of protection, I simply stood there, my body shaking with disbelief and embarrassment.

“Out,” my father said in finality.

The crowd now sensing or knowing that this was a *father and son* moment, seemed to quiet for just a split second. I saw the opening and took my best shot.

“*Wait ‘till I get you home!!*” I screamed at my father, who then had reached his breaking point, winding up his hand in the classic umpire’s fashion and throwing me out of the game. My coaches held back my angry advance at my father, forcibly removing me from the field as I continued to shout obscenities at my father, the crowd now roaring their approval and shouting my name in unison, booing my father violently and viciously.

Walking off the field towards the Cards dugout and being met with the cheers and pats on the back and shoulders from my teammates, I remember the odd feeling of tears of anger and uncontrollable smiles of joy plastering my face with the bricks and mortar of a boy turning into a man.

We never spoke about that game or moment to each other. And my father never umpired another Little League game in Cocksackie.

The pinnacle of my diamond days – even after a few losing seasons with the Cards – was when Coach Mayotte gave me a spot as the bat boy for the Coxsackie-Athens varsity baseball team. Always a top contender in their school’s division athletic league, it was a chance for a boy leaving behind elementary school for junior high the opportunity to hang out with the upperclassmen.

Many were friends with my popular older brothers, Jeff and Tim, so having “Little Jamo” around (even though I was as tall, or taller, than some of them) gave me another layer of identity outside of the shadows of my family.

With Coach Mayotte’s encouragement and permission granted from my parents, I was able to be present after school for all home games played at C-A Field as well as the bigger payout – the chance to travel *on the road* to other local schools in Greene County and beyond on the team bus.

And it was a delightful introduction to higher education...

Reveling in the bombast and bravado of the senior class players and others on the team – the raunchy jokes, the shared camaraderie of young men who were, to me, fearless and brave, and the front row seat it gave me to athletic masculinity certainly was eye opening.

Chewing my ever present bubble gum while some of the players dabbled in chewing tobacco on the sly, I was lovingly teased and yet fiercely protected by those players. *I was a part of the team – counted on, appreciated, sharing in the wins and losses with them all.*

Concurrently – and during our summer breaks from school – I would join Jeff and Tim in local pick-up baseball leagues that they helped organize and run for other high school mates of theirs. From our love of sharing baseball cards, in honor of the Bronx blue blood of the New York Yankees in our veins, and even beyond our obsession with the Cadaco *All-Star Baseball*

board game that we would spend countless hours playing, those summer leagues in Cocksackie were some of the most endearing times I spent with two of my three older brothers. We were always *on the same team* – and to my sense of not having any siblings younger than me, it was a connection (much like being a part of the C-A team) that made me *feel a part of and not apart from*.

That is, until the one summer near the end of junior high school when teams and players held their roster drafts – and I wasn't chosen to be on the same team as Jeff and Tim. When I learned that they had somehow allowed another team's captain to pick me for his squad – and they didn't fight to keep me for their squad.

Abandoned. Forgotten. Not wanted. Sort of like the feeling when an older brother, naturally, doesn't want his kid brother hanging around in any way. The pain hit deep, close, because it came from within *home*.

Having none of it, I quit the summer league. My brothers and I never spoke about that decision again, a silent wedge of distrust hammered between us. And I never swung a bat, fit a glove on my hand, or threw a baseball with anyone ever again.

“If music be the food of love, play on.”

Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare (1845)

In a house with eight people and near as many stereo systems, the ever-present sounds of music was always a way for me to listen to a secret language that communicated between my head and heart.

And what young man doesn't somehow, someday, want to be a rock and roll star?

With a boyhood love of Top 40 music, AM and FM radio, and the osmosis education of various musical tastes from the aural influences of my siblings collection of record albums, I first

gravitated towards my own interest in a variety of artists – jazz drummer Buddy Rich, the New York-based theatrical rock bombast of KISS, and the Canadian prog rock complexities of Rush. Thrown in for good measure were television pop stars The Monkees, the Partridge Family, and David Cassidy. From across the pond, of course, The Beatles as well as the Dave Clark Five.

Around the time I turned thirteen – and as an offshoot from finding myself compulsively tapping both hands and feet along to the various musical artists I constantly listened to – I found myself keying in on a desire to try playing the drums.

The first blushes of this were encouraged by Mr. Baxter in our C-A school band practices. He would allow me to stay after school and piece together a snare drum, marching bass drum and foot pedal, a larger marching drum on a stand and a few brass cymbals, the cobbled acoustic kit something to begin playing around with on my own time. That, and looking through catalogues from Montgomery Ward's or Sear's (daydreaming about owning a full-on drum kit of my own someday), kept my curiosity satisfied.

One of my school friends, Kenny Vetter, was in our C-A band in the percussion section. At one of our elementary school talent shows, he floored the crowd with his own Ludwig drum set and his playing along to the highly popular "*Theme from S.W.A.T.*" by the American funk group, Rhythm Heritage.

Invited over to his house after school one day, he took me to a lower finished basement room where his kit was sitting there in full glory. My eyes coveted it – the pearl shells, the polished aluminum rims, the Remo heads, the bright Zildjian cymbals.

When he gave me his blessing to take a seat on the throne and pick up the sticks, I was dumbstruck by fear, exhilaration, and pure joy. Fumbling through a basic 4/4 beat, I was happy

to see him nod approval but I soon froze and got up, feeling oddly unworthy to embarrass myself any further.

But I did go home with the courage to beg my mother to ask my father if they could buy me a kit. It didn't have to be new, or name brand – it just needed to be mine. *And they did.*

Coming second-hand from another school acquaintance who had given up on playing them, the red sparkled shell kit – consisting of bass drum and pedal, snare and hi-hat cymbal, along with a ride and floor tom plus smaller crash cymbal transported my fascination into the reality that I could now *become a drummer.*

Playing or practicing on them was difficult at best – it was a constant negotiation with the availability of the house being nearly empty. My second-floor bedroom was now home to me (having moved from the first floor where my mother took my old bedroom after my oldest sister, Nancy, had graduated C-A High School and had moved out of the house to attend the College of St. Rose in Albany full-time).

On the most rare occasion that I would have permission to play without pissing someone (usually my father or my older brother, Jeff) royally off, I would set up my stereo with an extended cord set of headphones, playing along to anything and everything I could possibly try out on the turntable. I would raid my brother's and sister, Amy's, record collections while they weren't home, even borrowing old big band records from my mother and Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass albums from my father.

And the beat went on – until one day I was talking to my trombone playing friend, Mark Gustavson, a talented keyboardist as well. We had been sharing our passion for Rush, talking about their latest album when I mentioned the drum kit.

“We should start a band,” he suggested, surprised to learn I was now drumming on my own. One of our mutual friends, Greg Musial, was a guitar player, as well as Wayne West, who owned a bass guitar.

Interestingly enough, our disastrous first practice sessions weren’t held in a garage or a basement but in the luxurious surroundings of the Musial’s house, a literal mansion on the banks of the Hudson River in Coxsackie. Greg’s family had succeeded in various industries and was related to the Major League baseball legend, Stan “The Man” Musial (himself a poor Polish immigrant’s son).

Mark came up with our band name – *Glass Star* – and the rest was, well, less than a year of obscurity.

Our only *official* concert was held in Mark’s living room in his family’s home near the prison. We invited a number of girls from C-A school. When they actually showed up, we were forced to play – a cover of Deep Purple’s “*Smoke on the Water*,” Elton John’s “*Crocodile Rock*,” and an instrumental jam we had been cobbling together.

When Debbie Bruno smiled at me, it was as if I were blinded by the spotlights up on stage at Madison Square Garden and thousands of fans were screaming our name. In that moment, *I became a drummer*.

Near the end of that year in 1976, our family made the decision to leave Coxsackie to move to Louisville, Kentucky. Another best friend, Julian Starr (no relation to Ringo but still fucking cool enough), was given the seat to replace me.

The second-hand drums came with me on the move, yet I never played with another band.

Glass Star, sadly, didn’t last – but, for me, the beat always went on, shining bright.

***“Cause there’s one thing I know turns a man of sixty / Back into a child of six /
Watching Dunninger, Houdini, or Doug the magic man / Up to his old tricks.”***

Stephen Schwartz from the Broadway musical *“The Magic Show”* (1974)

In my youth, much of the television I was watching surely had subterranean influences on what my dreams of becoming “...when I grow up...” anchored themselves into.

Between the ages of 12 and 13 I found myself mesmerized by magicians – starting with actor Bill Bixby’s portrayal of the stage illusionist-turned-crime solving sleuth, Anthony Blake, on TV’s *The Magician*.

From that inspiration, I was gifted with a set of *TV Magic Cards* and *TV Magic Show* performing set marketed by the magician, Marshall Brodein. In addition, I sent away through the mail for a catalogue to the legendary New York City magic shop, *Flosso-Hornmann Magic Company* (once owned by Harry Houdini).

With these in hand – and my imagination run wild – it was the discovery of 1974’s Broadway musical cast album for *The Magic Show* (starring the young, enigmatic Canadian stage illusionist, Doug Henning) which catapulted my penchant for learning magic tricks into a collision against the deep feelings of shyness and fear buried deep in my youthful psyche.

All of this wonder in the world of magic – learning about the history of legendary stage magicians through books checked out from the Heermance Memorial Library in downtown Coxsackie, being captivated by television appearances of Henning, Brodien, and other magicians such as Mark Wilson, and buying used books on card tricks and stage magic kept my dreams of one day becoming a world renowned stage magician floating in the air like the levitating woman illusion that tricked the eye into believing it was real.

Harkening back to my early days of handwriting horror stories based on the *Universal Films* monster movies, I began to create full-scale, handwritten magazines based on magic and magicians that I would share with my family and friends for the simple pleasures of delving deeper into the myth and lore of famous magicians and the construction of a dream that would buffer me from the harsh realities of my family's own damaging dysfunctions.

It was during this period of creative risk taking that I also penned one of my earliest *fan letters* to Doug Henning in care of the theatre he was performing *The Magic Show* at on Broadway. Much to stunning joy and delight, he replied with a short yet inspiring handwritten note – recognition, on some minor *and* major level of that hope within a shy boy's heart that anything was truly possible.

Out of her love for me, my mother also encouraged me to “...*keep practicing...*” the basic tricks I was learning (cards, simple sleight of hand illusions, tricks from the magic set I'd received), as well as fashioning a magician's cape and top hat for me with her own hands and sewing machine. With all this inspiration, preparation, and imagination in hand, I began to gather my family (somewhat reluctantly) to witness brief magic shows held in our living room.

Out of a sense of their support – whether it felt real to me or not – I dared to dream big and petition my C-A school principal, Mr. Jones, to schedule and put on a real *stage show* in our school cafeteria.

Both fear and ferocity of spirit kept driving me into and towards the realization of this idea: *somehow, I could become someone in the spotlight, recognized, applauded, and no one near like the shy, insecure youth that walked the world in the shadows of invisibility and unimportance.*

Fertile ground for the imaginations of a twelve-year old boy...

Even as a practicing *amateur* magician – one fascinated with the masters of prestidigitation in their field – I was also introduced to the principles of *practice*, *patter*, and *presence*. All three, valuable to any magician, help bring about the deeper art of misdirection – the main key to many illusions, sleights of hand, or various close-up magic where it's imperative for the watchful eye of the audience to be skillfully led into the realization that *magic* is actually happening in front of them.

So, in this realm, I began to foster *dreams* – and they felt like invitations to become something better, someone better. Much like a time when I would dream about being an FBI agent or a rock drummer, the desire of becoming a magician – even on a small stage in my elementary school cafeteria for an audience of perhaps dozens of people – was a dream bigger than my mind could hold. In some respects, it required me to believe in Something or Someone bigger.

Of course, I knew *of* God, *about* God. Prayer was something, to be honest, that was rote or forced or some archaic ritual – even to a young boy – that really was more mystical than magical. Yet in fostering dreams in my head and heart, I was beginning to give permission to those places in my story that needed to build big, towards the sky, above my abilities.

And it also became a lesson in how dreams *can die*...

One day, a letter arrived from C-A school, addressed to me and from our school's principal. When I opened it, I remember reading the short few, simply worded paragraphs over and over, trying to find some other meaning to their straightforward message: due to the current energy crisis hitting our small village and the entire country, the school would not formally sign off on the use of the school's resources for the scheduled weekend performances of my magic show for the community.

Inconsolable, I once again experienced an anger that was paradoxically looking for a target outside of me to be unleashed upon yet inextricably found its bullseye internally set against my own heart and soul. *Arrows in and arrows out, I subconsciously set the mold for the cement needed to become an angry young man in place.*

I was fucking angry at the world – and I would have my revenge.

“Webster’s International Dictionary defines murder as the unlawful taking of human life by another human being. On a November evening in 1955 the definition became obsolete. A mass murder was being planned.”

Jimmy Stewart’s opening narration from “*The FBI Story*” (1959)

Dreams of becoming a rock drummer were cool. The daydreams of becoming a world-famous magician were utterly fantastical.

Becoming a *G-Man*? I was dead serious.

From the imaginations and calling of immersing myself in *The Hardy Boy* mystery novels, I soon also discovered that my love for television and movie stories centering on crime fighters of all calibers – uniform patrol officers, detectives (both homicide and private), the early “buddy cop” dramas, and also the higher echelon of law enforcement.

It was the discovery of *The FBI Story*, written by Don Whitehead, and *The FBI Story Adapted for Young Readers* that cemented my boyhood and adolescent fascination with becoming the next Melvin Purvis, fighting the early gangsters and criminal gangs that permeated American culture during the 1920’s and 30’s.

Of course, I was galvanized by so many television shows of my time: *Adam-12*, *Mannix*, *Kojak*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *S.W.A.T.*, *Vega\$*, *N.Y.P.D.*, *Banacek*, and *The F.B.I.* with Efrem Zimbalist Jr. On the silver screen, the decade of the 70’s held such classics as *The Godfather*,

The Godfather, Part II, Serpico, The Getaway, Dirty Harry, Bullitt, The French Connection, The Seven-Ups, and Three Days of the Condor to name just a sprinkling of movies that mesmerized and awakened this tale of good versus evil, cops versus robbers, the meanest of streets and the anti-hero loyalties of criminals, crime families, and the ying-yang attraction between the police and the outlaws they were sworn to oppose.

Shortly after moving to Coxsackie – and totally addicted to my collection of *The Hardy Boy* mystery books penned by Franklin W. Dixon in classic, page-turning style that fascinated me and was the seedling for my own later passion to write – I found out that a neighbor down the hill on Church Street was actually a retired detective from the New York City Police Department.

Whenever I would mention my passion for mystery – and having NYPD in my own family history – he would give me old copies of *Police Magazine* to me. Taking this literary treasure home, I would pour over articles on policing, investigation, scientific evidence collection, and so much more.

Around the age of 11, I was also given *The Hardy Boys Detective Handbook* as a birthday present. This special edition outside the canon of mystery novels focused on Fenton Hardy (their father, himself a detective) and brothers, Frank and Joe Hardy, solving mysteries in and around their fictional town of Bayport. The book incorporated and explained in detail many traits of the detective – from surveillance to making plaster casts of footprints and tire tracks, to investigative methods, and – to me – the most fascinating aspect: *the study of fingerprints and their identification*.

My retired detective friend, once he couldn't shut me up about how intrigued I was with this aspect of police work, gave me a gift I never would forget: a small kit of actual fingerprint

powders, brushes, and lifting tape. He challenged me to take the rather extensive information in *The Hardy Boys Detective Handbook* and really dive in and *learn* how to dust for prints, take my own with an inkpad, and begin to master the various identifying patterns and matching procedures used by real detectives.

In a few words: *fucking fascinating!!*

And so, a young boy fell in love with arches, loops, and whorls – and was like a dog on a bone to learn the subclasses of each: *plain and tented arches; ulnar, radial, and double loops; plain, central pocket, and accidental whorls.*

I would take my own fingerprints and spend hours – either after school or during endless summer days – pouring over them with a magnifying glass, examining the similarities and differences in each pattern. I would bug the shit out of my own parents and siblings to let me fingerprint them so I could even more intently see and learn the differences in each pattern and its subclass.

To the extreme, I even challenged my family to have one member secretly break an old, white coffee cup so I could dust one of the shattered pieces, secure and lift the latent print, and examine it against the records of family prints I already had secured in order to determine the culprit. When my retired detective friend confirmed my fingerprint identification, I was one of *The Hardy Boys*, *Serpico*, and every cop I'd ever seen on T.V. or the movies wrapped up in the dream of one day joining the FBI to become a Special Agent.

So, one day in late 1973 I put pen to paper and wrote then Director of the FBI, Clarence M. Kelley, a letter of intention to one day join the Bureau to become one of its future's "*...greatest G-Men...*"

A few months later, a large mailing envelope arrived at our house, addressed to me.

Its return address was too hard to believe:

Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington D.C.

Inside was a beautiful four-color history brochure of the Bureau, along with a short, handwritten note from Director Kelley himself. He praised me for my interest, my youthful dedication to such a stringent and challenging life career path, and celebrated my zealous support of the Bureau.

It felt as if – at the age of 12 – a door was opened in my heart and a road was being paved from there and into my mind that, against all odds, *my dream could one day actually come true*. I hadn't a clue – latent or obvious – of how fiercely the own criminal elements of my own flesh, themselves fledgling traitors to my capacity to dream, would one day do battle, the good versus the evil inside of me, to wreak havoc in my own destiny.

“Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends. Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends. Oh, I get high with a little help from my friends. Yes, I get by with a little help from my friends.”

Lennon & McCartney *“With A Little Help From My Friends”* (1967)

It wasn't until the time when my story was nearing its end in Cocksackie that realized life had no closer friends than this:

Mark Gustavson.

Greg Musial.

Julian Starr.

We were close knit and full of grit. Musically aligned, it was Mark, Greg, and me that helped form our rock band, *Glass Star*. When the departure from New York was imminent and undeniable, it was Julian I turned to and asked to replace me on the drums.

Each were different from each other and way cooler – in my adolescent mind – than I could ever be, but none of that shit really mattered to us. I’ve always been fascinated with how friendships come to be, how they live, and how they die.

Off the cuff, I remember hanging out one day with Greg at his parent’s mansion on the banks of the Hudson River – it was in this day of just jamming...him on his guitar and me on my drums...and later just hanging out in his room that I first tried smoking pot.

He had a thin joint, politely asked if I wanted to try some, and I joined in – a secret ritual between friends, something cool and forbidden, and nothing really came of it. I didn’t feel *any* effect, and the funny part was that his mother – at one point – knocked on his bedroom door and Greg hilariously threw the half-smoked doobie right out his bedroom window.

And maybe I *was* stoned, because I couldn’t stop laughing at his panic...and he couldn’t stop laughing at my laughing at him.

His sense of humor was ribald, hip beyond his young years, and he was musically adept and that goofy adolescent mixture of bravado and awkward around all of the girls we knew and went to classes with.

There were times when he and I would sit in the back row of one class or another, shooting spitballs at anyone who mocked us, cracking *sotto voce* dirty jokes about the beautiful girls and their developing bodies, or just cutting apart the teachers for the fuck of it.

He was one of my first close friends. Greg was the type of trust confidant who could hold water when I confessed that my life at home wasn’t quite a script from *The Walton’s* or just to shoot the shit with about what I was dreaming about. Of course, we both wanted to be rock and roll stars, loved the band Rush when it was *never* cool to do so, and he had a crush on my older sister, Amy.

When it came time for my family to sell the house in Coxsackie in order to pull up stakes and move to Louisville, Kentucky, Greg was the first one I went to with the news.

“*Fucking bummer,*” he said to me, looking away in that faux-manly way of avoiding the tears that were just beating the shit out of him from the inside out, desperately wanting to come to the surface. It was a gut punch to him, and to break the ice his trademark humor blasted out to lighten the severity of our moment of truth.

“*Kentucky?*” he incredulously asked me. “Do they even wear fucking shoes there?”

Classic Musial...

In testimony to the gossamer bonds that sometimes cannot be rendered whole once stretched and broken, we exchanged a few letters after I left New York while we both were advancing in our separate high school journeys.

Sometimes treasures last because they are kept hidden – sometimes they survive the ravages of time because they are *treasured*. One such letter somehow, magically or providentially, followed me through the ensuing years and decades, now tucked into one of my *Journal* collection.

It’s resting place is in the pages where I had to record the news of Greg’s death at the age of twenty-five in 1988. My sister, Amy, had visited Coxsackie-Athens High School for what would have been her 10-year reunion gathering with all her left behind classmates. Someone there broke the news to her, and when she returned to our Louisville home she tearfully delivered the news to me.

She didn’t have the words to say anything in her obvious grief. Amy just handed me a copy of the mass card from his funeral she had gotten from Greg’s sister as a keepsake. Turning it over and seeing his name – *Gregory Musial* – was like getting a part of my heart fileted.

Little did I know she, too, had a secret crush on Greg – they just never told each other about it. I remember getting high later that night, alone in my bedroom, letting the rivers of tears flow through my eyes as if they were somehow from that day long ago when we last saw one another.

Listening to The Beatles' "*The Long and Winding Road*," Paul's vocals somehow morphed into Greg's voice – the song more poignant now that I could understand what they meant in the rearview mirror of my life apart from old friends and how he must have felt when I moved on without him:

"But still they lead me back

To the long winding road

You left me standing here

A long, long time ago

Don't keep me waiting here

Lead me to your door

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah..."

Julian Starr was the youngest in his family, too. Having this in common with Greg as well, we both shared that unspoken language of innocence and displeasure of being considered *the baby* of our respective clans.

In those few years in Coxsackie, no one made me laugh harder than Julian. I swear to God, once he got going on anything humorous between us, he would channel the most intensely contagious laughter. Long before I would know or appreciate the comic genius of men such as Robin Williams, George Carlin, or even someone *old school* like Steve Allen or *new school* like Steve Martin, there was Julian – class clown, court fucking jester supreme, the Boy with a

Thousand Laughs, and a cackle that would make me do a spit take at the cafeteria lunch table nearly once a week like clockwork.

Always too cool for school, Julian also played the drums. While no relation to Ringo, that was my nickname for him, one he wouldn't deny or run from, a fine stickman in his own right and always willing to let me wail away on his kit whenever I would visit his house to escape the doldrums infesting my own.

He was the second best friend I told the news to when our move from Coxsackie was in the crosshairs. I remember we were in the hallway by our lockers, in between classes, and the look on his face when I told him was as if I had kicked him squarely in his nuts. With long, dark hair, olive skin, and dark expressive eyes, Julian just stared at me as if he could make the truth disappear if he just looked at it long enough.

Then I saw the anger rise in his dark eyes, his hands taking his locker door and repeatedly slamming it shut, opening it again, and violently slamming it shut. *Rage, repeat, rage, repeat...*

I was sure the metal door was going to explode off its hinges. Other classmates and students began to turn, look, point, wonder what the hell was going on. He finally threw his books in, slammed the door shut one last time, locked it, put a deep footprint into the metal front of it, storming off. I didn't see him at class the rest of the day.

When we did meet again it was after the weekend.

"Didn't see that one coming," was all he said, and we didn't talk about it again. I wasn't sure if he meant my news thrust upon him or his reaction I had a front row seat to. Regardless, he felt was I was incapable of *expressing* – and I knew how he felt because I wanted to do the same to my parents for making such an asinine decision to rip my heart and life from the surest foundations it ever had.

Much like the friendship with Greg after I moved to Louisville, there were a few, sparse letters exchanged between Julian and me. Ever the practical joker – and long before everyone had a cell phone – making long distance phone calls were a rarity. Julian, at one point, tried to use a toll-free service connected to the Runaway Hotline of America to reach out and contact me, puzzling my parents and leaving me perplexed until I realized it was him that attempted to reach me.

Later in our separate journeys past high school, he ended up at Hunter College in New York while I was attending Manhattanville College in Westchester County, about 25 miles outside the city. During my freshman year, I was befriending this vivacious blonde freshman co-ed, Cathy Collins, when she mentioned that she was going to visit friends in Manhattan who attended Hunter.

“Really?” I asked. “I have a friend who’s going there.”

“Who?” she asked. When I mentioned Julian’s name, her face lit up more brilliantly than her beauty already shined upon it. “*No fucking way!*” she screamed. “I know him, too!”

One tiny street in the small world of Spellman Hall at the ‘Ville.

It was later in the fall semester of my freshman year at Manhattanville that I was able to plan a weekend trip to spend with Julian in the city. Surviving on a bare bones stipend that my parents provided me with for each month, I cashed it in at the Manhattanville bursar’s office and took a bus from campus into nearby White Plains, then hopped a Metro train into Grand Central Station in Manhattan.

Packing a small duffel with a few changes of clothes, I was ready to see him again. Enjoying a few Sabrett’s hot dogs from street vendors and a 20-plus block walk, I arrived at Hunter College to see his grinning face. We hugged quickly and I found out even more rapidly

that our plan was to join his older brother, Peter, for a trip out to Syosset in Long Island to help disc jockey a wedding reception.

His brother arrived in this old passenger van filled to the brim with speakers and other sound board equipment. The only place for me to ride was squeezed into the back with all this shit – and with the long ride and the after effects of the street hot dogs, I battled nausea until we finally arrived at the reception venue.

Bolting from the back, I quickly vomited on the sidewalk as Julian and Pete couldn't help but cackle and laugh at my misfortune.

“That’s usually most people’s reaction to Long Island,” he chortled.

“Yeah,” Pete threw in, shaking his head at my massive pool of vomit, “*welcome to the Island!*”

Obviously I felt much better and was capable of helping them get the gear in, set up, and the rest of the next few hours was swapping tales with Julian as to our freshman year of college adventures and having a few drinks provided by the marriage couple.

After the gig, I fell fast asleep in the van ride back to Manhattan, arriving at Julian’s apartment well after one o’clock in the morning. In the city that never sleeps, it was time to go out for a quick slice of pizza and another one of Julian’s great off-the-cuff ideas.

“You wanna score some weed?” he asked, that twinkle shining in his eyes letting me know that I was being enlisted in something I’d readily want to volunteer for.

Consenting without much forethought of choice, I kicked in a sawbuck to the effort and followed him as we hoofed it about eight blocks from his pad, stomach full of pizza, the streets abuzz with hookers, cabbies, people enjoying their nightlife activities, and a thrill coursing inside

of me that was a vibrant reminder of actually being with Starr again and there we were – *out and about in NYC*.

When we arrived at the apartment building, Julian turned to me and said, “Listen, my guy is a bit *paranoid*. You have to wait down here,” meaning outside the building on the street. And so I did – just a guy sitting on a stoop, minding his own business at nearly two in the morning. Of course, my adrenalin is pumping – after all, it’s the first time riding shotgun on *a drug deal*.

As the five minutes seemed to last for twenty, suddenly two New York Police Department uniformed foot patrol officers approach from up the street. *Busted*, was my first thought – then I found myself laughing. *No dude, foot patrol ain’t like they’re Serpico, undercover and all that shit. Be cool.*

So just as they were walking past, I stood up. They waved and offered a pleasant “*Evening*,” and I responded with a wave. And Julian – at that moment – burst from the front doors of the apartment building, lightly sweating, giggling.

“We’re good!” he exclaimed, not seeing the cops. I pivoted, shooting him a glance, but being smaller in stature than me and my six foot-five frame blocking his view, he couldn’t see them past me.

“*Evening fellas*,” I then heard over my shoulder, blood curdling cold but more amused by Julian’s face screwing up in concern as he then saw them, now the pair walking right over to us as we moved off the stoop.

“*Don’t say a fucking word*,” I whispered to Julian, turning to greet the cops with a wide smile. “Officers,” I said, “evening.”

As good beat cops do, they engage their patrol neighborhood. My plan was simple: *Cool Hand Luke, all smiles and grins, casual as the breeze, just shoot the shit and be gone.*

“You guys okay?” one asked, Julian now off the stoop and by my side.

“Just out for some pizza before heading home,” I said. I looked at them, they looked at me, then looked at Julian. Not daring to see if Julian was still covered in his flop sweat, I just kept it breezy. “Came in from Manhattanville College for a couple of days to meet my old high school buddy here,” I said, casually nodding at Julian. “Quiet beat tonight?”

“No problems,” the other beat officer said. “No *problems* here, right?” he said, grinning, looking at me and then Julian, who now had both hands nervously stuffed into his pants pocket, probably with a death grip on the two dime bags of weed he had just copped.

Please, fuck no, don't run, dude. Don't panic. And for fuck sakes, take your damn hands out of your pockets right now before they ask you to.

“Pizza and a beer,” was all Julian said. I looked at him and laughed, now able to breathe again when I saw his hands out of his pants pocket and in plain view. Cops get nervous about shit like that.

“Alright then, fellas,” the first beat cop said. *Maybe he knew, maybe he didn't care.* “Have a good night.” As they moved on, I remember just standing there casually, like Michael Corleone on the hospital steps with Enzo the baker, calmly lighting the cigarette for the man with trembling hands right next to him. *It's cool.*

Walking back to Julian's apartment, we enjoyed a few bowls of the Colombian smoke, talking shit about our freshman years at Manhattanville and Hunter, respectively, and rapping about everything post-Coxsackie, music, and girls.

That weekend in Manhattan with him would be the last time we saw each other.

It was 27 years later while living in Louisville that I got a phone call from my sister, Amy. Much like with Greg Musial, she was the bearer of bad news – at the age of 44, Julian had

died in Albany, New York. A popular radio disc jockey, he had kept in contact with me via some random letters, the last one received just about a year before his passing.

And it contained a memory rich in comical treasure, *pure Julian Starr*.

He recounted a practical joke he had played on his sales manager at WRVE The River radio station. While the guy was out on vacation, Julian raided his small office and went to work on his desk. For an entire overnight shift while he was one of just a few people in the station offices, Julian painstakingly yet craftily made a copy of everything on the sales manager's desk – his phone, pens, pencils, computer keyboard, mouse, and monitor, even the outside of the file folders, along with stapler, even the framed photos of his wife and kids and the paper clips. *Everything*.

Hiding all the original items, he then set up all the copied materials on the desk and waited for the guy to return from vacation, giggling and laughing and having let everyone else in on the secret, just so they could gather around his office door when he walked in and found Julian's mirth in full Xeroxed glory.

Yet of these three amigos, it was Mark Gustavson that bore the reflections of both true friendship and a mirror into my own story of a boy becoming a young man with dreams.

Both of us were tall for our young age, sprouting up over six and a half feet tall, bespectacled and lovers of music, yet Mark was a true prodigy – playing piano, able to compose, as well as holding down the first trombone chair in the C-A school band (also during our tenures in both marching and community band as well).

In Mark, I could see the mirror of my own painfully shy self – that part of me that felt alone in the world around me. Mark was an only child, so he actually *lived* that existence. In

some ways, from the time our friendship began to click in the fourth grade upon my moving into Cocksackie, I envied him. *All that love and attention from his parents, truly the apple of their eye.*

That envy would be palpable whenever I was invited over to his house near the Cocksackie Correctional Facility where his father worked. The home - and his parents - were pleasant reminders of *Leave It to Beaver* - the wholesome nature of Ward and June as parents and Mark substituting for the conscientious and well-mannered Wally.

It was also Mark's cerebral attributes - a recognition of how smart he knew he was and how smart he could *get away with* around others - that I also began to recognize and nurture in my own personality.

Those years of elementary and junior high school were lessons in how cool we actually weren't but always dreamed we could be.

Maybe I could understand Mark's gangly running in gym class because I was the same height and weight, all arms and legs and missteps in coordination aplenty. Our affable yet determined Physical Education coach, Howard Solvin, was a force to be reckoned with during any particular gym class. Tough, fair, inspiring, and ferocious in his anger when provoked by the folly of his charges, I sympathized with Mark when Coach Solvin busted his nuts or told him to "*...run harder...*"

Of course, we were always split up when it was time to choose the center position for any P.E. pick up basketball games. Having three older brothers who I had extensive asphalt time with on the courts in West Cocksackie and our gravel driveway outside the garage on Church Street, I knew I was always better than him but, when pitted against each other, wouldn't showboat or be too aggressive against him under the glass. *The grace of the awkward towards the graceless just as awkward felt righteous.*

During our 8th grade year together in junior high, we both fell hard for the same high school goddess. Patty Salvino was a grade ahead of us, all curly brown hair frosted with blonde highlights, a body that captivated us, and eyes that when cast upon me I would feel the earth move from just one glance.

It got competitive as the year went on, each one of us trying to engage her in idle conversations whenever possible. Having her in our school band made contact accessible, so part of my Bronx came out – brash, teasing her, not shying away from talking to her about the orchestra pieces we were practicing, *anything* to get near her and smell her perfume on that lightly tanned skin of hers.

Mark made the mistake of telling other guys at our table about his pining crush on her. *Boys will be boys, of course.* Whenever she would enter the cafeteria for lunch with her other girlfriends and walk by where we all were sitting, one of us at the table would inevitably call out “*Check her out, Mark!*”

Patty and her girlfriends would turn and giggle, she would smile, Mark would turn beet red and dive his head into his lunch as if searching for an exit he couldn’t find. I kept telling him to ask her out, but he wouldn’t summon the courage even though she was casually dating a member of the baseball team.

Our love of music – The Beatles, Rush, Led Zeppelin, KISS, and other bands – eventually led us into the boyhood dreams of starting our own rock band. He was gracious after coming up with idea for *Glass Star* to invite me in as the drummer. It was after a practice session at his house one day when I told him about my family’s plan to leave Coxsackie.

Butterflies and nausea filled my stomach. *He’s my best friend*, I remember thinking.

Waiting on my mother to come by his house to pick me and my drum set up, I was hanging out with him in his bedroom, waiting on the blaring horn from our family station wagon in the Gustavson's driveway for my signal to bounce.

"My parents have decided to move to Kentucky," I told him. It was due to my oldest brother, Mickey, having married a woman named Ronnie, whose mother had passed away and left her home in Louisville for sale. My brother and his wife had just had their first child, a daughter they named Kama, and were living in Indianapolis, Indiana at the time – close enough to Louisville for regular visits with the grandparents.

Mark was quiet after I said it. My voice had been soft, tentative, almost apologetic as the words came out. Somewhere in the back of my head and the depths of my heart, I knew I was the best friend he had in the entire world – and in that moment, I realized that friendship was *very real and mattered*.

"When are you leaving?" was all he asked.

"Within a month," I told him. He never said anything if Greg or Julian had spilled the beans in their finding out before him. I asked them both not to say a word and they had never mentioned anything in front of Mark when we were all together.

"I'm gonna miss you, John."

I'm not sure if it was his saying my name aloud or him taking off his glasses to wipe away the tears that began to fall from his eyes. I heard my mother honking the horn from his driveway, much like that night with Karen and wanting to say something more.

Getting up to leave, he grabbed me into a clumsy hug. When we parted, he smiled at me.

"I guess Julian will have to replace you, but it won't be the same." We laughed, knowing he was right in his choice and even more so in his evaluation.

“No shit?” I asked in admiration.

“No shit,” he replied in confirmation.

Nearly two decades later, after my mother, Rita, died of lung cancer, Mark reached out via a sympathy card to offer his condolences and prayers. He had married, created a life of still loving, writing, and performing music and also raising championship show dogs.

To me, he would always be the band nickname he penned for himself:

Maestro Bonzai.

While quite odd – the juxtaposition of fierce mastery and unhindered courage in the face of death – it was, perhaps, the latent destiny of that shy young man I saw in myself that he was who would someday say “*Fuck it!*” to the worldly fears and capture a bit of the moon with a whole lot of lasso.

“Some are bound to die young. By dying young a person stays young in people’s memory. If he burns brightly before he dies, his brightness shines for all time.”

Author Unknown

Something in me never understood the allure of motorcycles and how they call a man to both exhilaration and danger.

My oldest sister, Nancy, had an older boyfriend near the end of our stay in Coxsackie. Ed Vanderburgh was pleasant, respectful, paid attention to me even though I was *the baby* of the family, and commanded a certain respect. With a disarming smile, sturdy build, and quiet, strong character, he was well-liked within our family and, obviously, smitten with my sister.

And he rode a Harley-Davidson.

Whenever he came by the house on Church Street, I would find myself transfixed just looking at the bike – all gleaming chrome and leather and *power* in that chassis with two wheels.

Somewhere in the story, Nancy moved on from Ed – and we later learned he died in a motorcycle accident, tearing that part of her heart and story to shreds in grief that revealed some feelings for Ed she wasn't able to move past or forget.

And I could understand why pain – in relation to death – was a part of the grieving process that sneaks up on a heart, capturing both the loss of life and its celebration.

John Scott was one of my older brother Jeff's closest friends at Cocksackie-Athens High School. Jeff was extremely popular – Senior Class President, lettering in basketball and football, and very popular with the co-ed beauties that were drawn to his flowing red hair and New York City charisma. In the line-up of brothers, Jeff was my *hero* – even with his own foibles and character defects I got to witness firsthand.

It was a quiet weekend, rainy and stormy, that we received the news. John Scott had been killed while riding his motorcycle – a freak accident on a muddy road to his family's property, throwing him and the bike in a violent upheaval that catapulted John's body into a telephone pole, killing him instantly with blunt force trauma.

Jeff, of course, was devastated. And our small village community – in Cocksackie and especially at the school – reverberated with the pain of his sudden and unexplainable loss.

The funeral was set for St. Mary's Church on Mansion Street during a school day. Most of Jeff and John's senior class were excused for the solemnity. I had never seen Jeff so broken up about anything or *anyone* – yet his despondency was a cloud inside of our home on Church Street, and there wasn't anything any of us in the family could do or offer to console him.

He had, after all, lost one of his best friends.

And so on that day I asked one of my teachers if I could be excused to attend the funeral. I knew that it was already in progress, and something deep inside of me kept hearing a call to go

and be a part of it – perhaps to show my brother, Jeff, that I somehow cared about his pain or just to be a witness with the community in their shared sense of loss.

When my teacher firmly said, “*No, John, you can’t,*” I took it upon myself to simply exit school without any further permissions or pleas for mercy, taking the short jaunt down a bike and walking path behind our campus and towards nearby St. Mary’s Church.

When I arrived, I was a bit scared to enter the church doors – not readily surprised to see all of the pews filled to capacity with family, friends of John’s, and almost the entire senior class. The air was full of grief – both young men and women openly weeping over the loss of their dear friend and classmate, John.

Frozen in my place inside the entrance doors and just beyond the vestibule, I stood timidly at the back of the church, feeling like an intruder on something I wasn’t invited to and certainly like a criminal for having left school in an uncharacteristic act (for me) of straight out rebellion.

From out of my sight, I felt the comforting hand of a stranger grab my shoulder. I looked up to see Billy Piggott, one of Jeff and John’s running buddies in Cocksackie. Together with Wayne Deo, the four of them were, indeed, like *The Musketeers* of our sleepy hamlet – causing mirth, merriment, and certainly mischief whenever they gathered as a band of brothers and wherever their course took them.

“Little Jamo,” he whispered to me, using the nickname Wayne Deo had given to me one day when we were hanging out with Jeff. It stuck – and I didn’t mind it.

Not knowing what to say, and realizing the funeral service would soon be completed, a sudden wave of emotions took hold of me, shaking me inside my spirit as tears began to well in my eyes and flow freely. I knew John just through his associations with my brother – but inside

St. Mary's the spirit of grief, the mix of somber funeral organ music, and the background noise of others crying was too much for me.

Billy simply hugged me a bit more firmly around the shoulder and said, "It's okay, man. *We're all hurting today.*" A few moments later he excused himself so he could move towards the front of the church to take his place as a pallbearer for John's closed casket.

Remaining in the back of St. Mary's, I was now wedged in a corner of the entrance vestibule, standing there – a young adolescent facing death as it was slowly paraded past, first in the procession of John's coffin and then his grieving family, friends, and loved ones at school.

When Jeff walked by as one of the pallbearer's in a slow walk of honor through the open doors of St. Mary's to guide John down into the hearse for a final ride to his burial site, he simply looked at my crying eyes and face, gently saying, "*Go back to school. Don't get in trouble.*"

I remember touching John's casket in the wake of my brother's charge, feeling that it was – as Piggott had said – going to be *okay*. I cried all the way back to my last class of the day and didn't bother explaining to anyone who asked what was going on.

"On my honor I will do my best to do my duty, to God and my country, and to obey the Scout Law; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight."

Traditional Boy Scout Promise

He was the brother of Denise, a fellow classmate at C-A School. Paul Conolley was *a big deal* – an *actual* Eagle Scout. This was the pinnacle, the highest level of achievement in the Boy Scouts of America...and he lived in our village. Merriam-Webster would define Paul as "*...a straight-arrow and self-reliant man.*"

And he inspired me to want to be a Scout.

There was really no history in our family of the men venturing into either Cub or Boy Scout paths. Somewhere, I got my hands on a worn and well-read copy of *The Boy Scout Handbook* published in the late 1960's. It was a bible to boyhood adventure, excitement, training and knowledge of how to live and *survive* as a Scout.

Reading through its exhaustive 448 pages was like giving myself permission to – once more – follow the unknown path into my own developing personality. Even though I had a massive crush on his sister (who, actually, was an on and off dating interest of Mark Gustavson's), Paul was gracious enough to offer his encouragement to me in considering joining our local Boy Scout troop in Coxsackie.

And that meant getting *the uniform*.

Khaki pants, shirt, neckerchief with the Scout wolf logo knot, and the garrison-styled cap with Scout insignia.

Part of the dream in wearing the uniform was to have it, eventually, emblazoned with the sash holding merit badge patches each Scout could work for and earn in his advancement within the troop and his personal journey through the *Star*, *Life*, and *Eagle* Scout levels of accomplishment. Originally, there were a total of 57 merit badges available for Scouts to earn, encompassing such diverse areas of learning as agriculture, bugling, conservation, electricity, lifesaving, marksmanship, and signaling. Shit, they even had a merit badge for *fingerprinting* – and that was part of my desire to join...to show them what I knew.

Our local Coxsackie troop would meet at the C-A cafeteria under the guidance of our local Scoutmaster, the troop – obviously – a ragtag group of young boys making the turn into adolescence in all of its geeky, awkward, and cocky transitional ups and downs. *And it was one*

of the first experiences of my soul feeling a part of something and not apart from everyone and everything. In this troop, I was a member in good standing – which meant *I belonged*.

In the beginning, it was the joy of transposing seeing Paul as an Eagle Scout and my *dreaming* that one day, yes – I could be one, too. It was the fascination with reading and imagination and having *The Scout Handbook* to pour over during the day or into the night, starting to fuel those boyhood adventures in my mind with the realistic goals of achieving life skills and habits that could turn me into something *different* than I saw modeled in either my father or older brothers.

We had a few Scout adventures, one of them going to fish at a local pond. With no gear of my own, I had to brave asking my father if I could use one of his old fishing rods. Unused, dusty, somewhat rusted in parts, it was really more suited to some deep sea fishing off the Eastern seaboard instead of lake-style casting.

When I showed up at the event, a part of me was embarrassed – and, as boys will be boys, some of my fellow Scouts even teased and laughed at my ineffectual equipment.

Emasculation at the hands of the masculine.

To make matters even worse, I was unlucky enough to bait a catfish onto my line. When I pulled him up to retrieve him, I was unawares of the proper way to hold it...so its pectoral and dorsal spines gave me quite the sting. Again, the laughter of my peers was disabling, shaming, and even one of the other local Scoutmaster's on our combined troop outing made a comment.

“Don't you *know* that's the wrong way to grab him?” he asked.

Something inside of me shifted after that day on the lake. I began to feel the presence of a story that wasn't mine, authored by unqualified scribes who *knew* nothing about what was going

on inside my head and heart – they didn't care or want to take the courage to know me as I was.
Me. John. Yes, imperfect – but I was a work in progress just like them.

My final foray into the Scouts came when we had a merit badge ceremony at the C-A School cafeteria. I was going to be awarded my Fingerprinting merit badge and I was beyond the moon, beaming with the light and pride of accomplishment seven suns in intensity. Of course, we could invite our families to attend, so I asked both my mother and father to be in attendance.

I knew my brothers and sisters wouldn't give a fuck – they were too busy or too cool or too important in living their own lives at that point to carve out an hour to come support or applaud me.

When the ceremony time came, I saw the look on my mother's face out in the audience. The look in her eyes said volumes to me, a young man among his peers yet alone.

Your father won't be here.

The reason or excuse didn't matter. The shame washed across my cheeks, hot anger and deep inner ridicule. *You fucking idiot. You trusted him yet again and yet again he failed you! Shame on you, John – you're such a loser. He will never care!*

To a Scout in our troop, they all had their fathers in attendance that day. Not me.

In my heart, I felt the cement truck backing up, its vast dump of wet, rock filled mixture tilting back and cascading down into the depths of caring, love, and connection to him. As that cement of hate and abandonment and aloneness was filled and overflowed with both the pain and shame, I was not a Scout.

I was fatherless. I was on my own. I was apart from, not a part of – not even my fucking family.

And as the boy became a young man, he was given a mission to *never* be like his father.

“Just thinkin’ about / Tomorrow / Clears away the cobwebs, and the sorrow / ‘Til there’s none.”

Charles Strouse & Martin Charnin from the Broadway musical “*Annie*” (1977)

By 1976 and the early years of my adolescence, I was radically awakened to *the beauty* that was deep within the captivating allure of women – the stars in their eyes, the undulating contours of their bodies, the latent sexual promise of union with them, and all that and so much more.

In a word...

Infatuation.

If it were truly a short-lived passion or admiration for girls and women who, although older, were seductively attractive to me, I was clearly – and gladly – willing to be a prisoner in those chains.

And all of those young goddesses of Cocksackie and at school held me captive quite well: from Kelly Vosburgh to Kelly Plant, Stephanie Korzon, into the Karen’s (Misuraca and Meyer), as well as Cheryl Bruno, Leslie Armor, Liz Bushey, and even *older* girls at school like Mary Haegele, Patty Salvino or even teachers like Deborha Joss and Mrs. Kipp.

During those five years in upstate New York, I certainly felt the boyhood pleasure of *crushes* and also, without apology, *fell in love* with the idea of falling in love...someday...with a damsel in distress who was looking for a knight in shining armor named *John*.

I was twelve and she was ten – but I was just a schoolboy and she was an Academy Award winning actress. In 1974, Tatum O’Neal captured the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in *Paper Moon* (starring alongside her father, Ryan). Finding a black and white picture in *Time* Magazine of her on Oscar night, dressed smartly in a tuxedo and wearing the same pixie-short

haircut from the film, I was slayed. Her smile took my breath away and so I cut the picture out and carried it around in a small photo wallet I had.

She was just 16 months younger than me, but her beauty became a muse for my imagination. Of course, I was a *normal* adolescent boy – in The Bronx I was in love with Barbara Eden as *Jeanie*, and what young man wasn't in love – *or lust* – with Sabrina Duncan, Kelly Garrett, and Jill Munroe (those heavenly *Charlie's Angels*, played by Kate Jackson, Jaclyn Smith, and Farrah Fawcett-Majors and later to include the supernova hot Cheryl Ladd as Kris Munroe) during the heyday of the 70's.

Now, for certain, the mature feminine of Lynda Carter (*Wonder Woman*) and Angie Dickinson (*Police Woman*) got things cooking, too. For sheer masturbatory pleasures, they were dyn-o-mite!!

And as my ages of innocence were quickly turning the pages of infatuation, 1976 also brought a thunderbolt on ice into my heart.

When Dorothy Hamill captivated a nation with a bob haircut and a red velvet skating dress, I wasn't immune. Transfixed by the Winter Olympics on television, I was toast. When she won the ladies skating Gold Medal, up on the medal stand, that smile, those dimples, *such beauty to behold*, I found my young heart breaking apart to let its lover loose on the steed of desire.

Simply put, I was both a fan and a fool for such feelings of love.

Spurred by loneliness, I gave free rent to the beauty of a young girl or a woman in the unoccupied mansions of my heart. I had my first kiss with Cathy Mayforth while at C-A school, but it was Karen Misuraca I wanted to experience the first *true kiss* with...and didn't. Making up romance in the imagination is fun, but nothing of the reality of having it occur.

I was a stranger to these feelings – yet they felt decidedly real to my awakened heart.

Dorothy Hamill was six years *older* than me when I wrote her a letter and sent along a small gift of scented stationary that I had purchased. My plan was simple yet stunning – she would use it to write back to me, and somehow – *someway – the fairy tale of love could begin.*

When I first moved to Coxsackie, a hauntingly beautiful song by Bread invaded my heart in a way many songs never could. Entitled “*If,*” the lyrics – I found out a few years later – were a love story encapsulated in the aching a man feels for his lover, the woman he wants more than anything else:

*“If a picture paints a thousand words,
Then why can't I paint you?
The words will never show the you I've come to know.
If a face could launch a thousand ships,
Then where am I to go?
There's no one home but you,
You're all that's left me too.
And when my love for life is running dry,
You come and pour yourself on me.*

*If a man could be two places at one time,
I'd be with you.
Tomorrow and today, beside you all the way.
If the world should stop revolving spinning slowly down to die,
I'd spend the end with you.
And when the world was through,
Then one by one the stars would all go out,
Then you and I would simply fly away.”*

David Gates, *If* (1971)

Of course, there were others – the doe eyed innocence of Kristy McNichol as the tomboy youngest daughter Letitia “Buddy” Lawrence on television’s *Family*; the beautiful Bradford sisters (Connie Needham/Elizabeth, Susan Richardson/Susan, Dianne Kay/Nancy, and Lani O’Grady/Mary) portrayed on *Eight Is Enough* (and their gorgeous stepmother, Betty Buckley/Abby); and the exquisite Jane Seymour as Elise McKenna in the film *Somewhere in Time*.

If love stories are timeless, then my heart was indeed lost in such thin places.

Traveling on a boat with no oars through the raging waters in the tunnels of love, my heart – young and innocent as it was during those adolescent transitional years – was telling itself a story as old as time itself, the promise yearning to be realized: *to love and be loved*.

And so when the decision was finalized that the move from Coxsackie, New York to Louisville, Kentucky in 1976 (at the age of fourteen) was a certainty, with no turning back or my having a say in any of it, there was a rent in the fabric of my heart and burgeoning romantic's soul that could not be mended or repaired.

Gone would be my friends such as Mark, Greg, Julian, and so many others. Broken and left shattered would be the endless opportunities to step away from the shadows of my older brothers and sisters in order to take the first steps in the journey of my own identity being revealed in the light of its truth. And, for certain, it would be the *death* of whatever I was hoping for or dreaming of – the rite of passage and rituals of a young boy becoming a young man, a Romeo in search of his Juliet, a Lancelot without a Guinevere, a heart that was now to become truly and irrevocably *a lonely hunter*.

There was no way for me to see into the future of the unknown, the move, the upheaval it would cause in me and to me. I had no inkling that public school in Louisville would be a wasteland of strangers and curriculum that would bore me and cause me grief, motivating my parents to decide and sacrifice to enroll me in a private, all-male Catholic high school for the next four years.

The strong heart that those five years in upstate New York was fostering in me was to be set adrift, not knowing how to swim in the breaking waves of oceans of loneliness, separation, isolation, and a banishment from the daughters of Eve that my young Adam inside was naturally seeking.

There was no one to light up the darkness, no tender lass to hold my hand. Infatuation had no choice but to gravitate into *fantasy* – making the lonely dreams into a bittersweet reality that was built out of a desperate need to have intimacy that was stolen by a family I was now enraged at, hated, and determined to wage war against in order to gain my freedom...and the parole for my heart that was, now, seemingly sentenced to either a life in a cold prison of *alone* or a certain death – a capital punishment for a young teenage boy who was on the path to manhood.

And if I were to be an orphaned boy, it made sense that my heart would not be looking for the parents that abandoned me – I would be searching high and low for an orphaned girl, one who knew what it felt like and one who might be seeking in me what I was desiring in her.

Somewhere – in the place of the owls – their evocative calls signaled as I left them behind.

Original