

GLORIOUS RUINS

A photograph of a narrow, dimly lit tunnel or hallway. The walls are heavily textured and show significant signs of decay, with large patches of peeling paint in shades of brown, red, and green. A bright light source, possibly a flashlight, illuminates the center of the tunnel, creating a strong glare and casting long shadows. In the middle of the tunnel, a simple metal bed frame or cot is positioned lengthwise. The floor appears to be made of concrete or stone, with some debris scattered about. The overall atmosphere is one of desolation and historical decay.

A MEMOIR OF
MAXIMUS HEART

John Jamiolkowski

FORWARD

Forewarned Is Forearmed

If a man truly listens to his heart, he can learn the language from which to write his life's story. It's a narrative of beauty and affliction, triumph and suffering – and life will gracefully and ruthlessly edit it down to what needs to be told.

This is a memoir for men – written by the man I'm still becoming and dedicated to the man I used to be. Frankly, it's a tale that both good and evil took decades to compose from out of my head, heart, soul and balls.

Realistically some men may find it to be inspirational, others offensive. You get to choose – just like I did across the unfolding story countless times and ways.

As a man among men, the hardest lesson I've come to learn is every choice has its consequences. And school is *never* out – this student is prepared for the teacher to appear because the lesson can be stolen, killed or destroyed in a heartbeat.

The language I have deciphered – and some of what I use – will be at times raw, unfiltered, and disruptively honest. I offer no apologies or defense. The characters, settings, and events I can share all have their roots in the kaleidoscope of fact yet, if you look with a discerning eye, the images may not seem what they appear to be. Life can sometimes be the valley between intention and impact for any man willing to chase wild into his own story.

No one in this memoir – with a singular exception – is innocent. While confession may be good for the soul and the truth will always set one free, this is perhaps more of a cemetery to the stories that broke my heart and a nursery to those which gave life to it once more.

As a man who has been initiated and bloodied by the fierce battles across both the spiritual and masculine frontiers, I hope and pray that – as a man (or even for those women taking the sojourn cover to cover) – you may be introduced to or recover the passionate bonds with your own heart language.

In the Ridley Scott film *Gladiator*, its central character – Maximus – tells his men before charging into war (a journey some may survive where others will perish), “*What we do in life echoes in eternity!*”

May the true Author of all my stories find you – the man he meant when he meant you – heroically alive with a sword in one hand and a pen in the other when standing at the gates of eternity...for both in the hands of any man are, indeed, mighty.

And you will need Maximus Heart to wield both and harvest all your stories for their intended glory.

Strength & Honor!!

John Jamiolkowski – 2022

INTRODUCTION

Into the Madness of Faith

“Memory seeps from my veins / Let me be empty / Oh, and weightless and maybe / I’ll find some peace tonight.”

Sarah McLachlan – *Angel* (1997)

If the story is true I came into life covered with bloody placenta after my mother, Rita, lost consciousness, witnessing a brilliant light and the visage of Jesus saying, “*Go back.*” The fragmented memories of a young boy recall how she casually first invited me into this tale, her face no more concerned for the truth of how the doctors restarted her stopped heart than dispelling the sickly fog of Pall Mall cigarette smoke ringing her face with a wave of her hand as she recounted it to me.

It would take decades of discovering and recovering the terrains of my heart and story to realize my initial heartbeats of survival began with great breaths of fear as I screamed with an indecipherable language of anger. Somewhere in my Play-Dough-like bones and balls the first twisted roots of unanswered questions took root: *This is how it all fucking begins??!!*

What it became was a sojourn of the sacred and profane. There are things I came to forget about myself as a man, the ancient paths lost. And it’s been a lifetime of befriending both God and manhood – *the spiritual and masculine* – which has enabled the stories from the wellspring of my life to now flow into vessels of grace within the thin places of redemption.

In late adolescence I began to notice the ripples in the pond, more questions than answers. *“How will I ever find my heart – who I am – if I live my life in fear of being/not being who everyone else wants me to be/not to be? What have I been chasing? What have I been running from? Am I just chasing what I run from?”*

Sometimes I feel as if I were born to be a cartographer of the heart and its story. That’s probably where my discipline of journaling found its origins in 1980. Boots on the ground exploration of the emotional and spiritual maps I unearthed has always been a dangerous for good proposition. As a young boy, I loved pouring over the family’s encyclopedia collection, sitting dusty and unengaged on a bookshelf. Those leather-bound volumes were imaginary tickets to new frontiers, introductions to my first teachers and mentors. Cautionary tales abounded: yes, Magellan helped discover the true scale of the unknown world but in the end it only led to his being hacked to pieces for his courage.

To the fertile mind of a five-year-old boy this was an invitation to escape what I already perceived was the dangerous territories of family and love. I began to fantasize myself *whoever I wasn’t, someone different than what I was intentionally born to be*. Somewhere – in those first whispers of both beauty and affliction – I knew that the wounding was unnatural, something unimaginable when compared to the promises of safety a father, mother, and a tribe of siblings should provide.

As a young man of seventeen, my innermost being answered a call to begin chronicling the mazes of memories and tunnels of love my heart had drifted through while the ship took on water long before it ever capsized. Little did I realize, at the time with that first *Journal*, that I would steer countless Titanic’s into the unsparing icebergs of my spirit, soul, and body, my

heart, mind, and will. *There were never enough lifeboats – and the frigid waters of reality were filled with the screams of my spirit helplessly thrashing until silenced by the drowning of hope.*

Yet there was something in pursuit of my heart, my story...always tracking them, watching from afar, picking up the trail through the darkness and destruction as if the scent of my tears and fears were a masculine musk that only Someone who had designed such ancient paths could possibly sniff out from the winds that came tearing down from the four corners of my world.

Everyone has a heart. And everyone's heart is rooted in story. From those seeds comes a fruit, I believe, called faith.

One biblical author breaks it down for anyone to understand: “The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd.” (Hebrews 11:1-2, *The Message*).

My journey into the madness of faith began at the end of my family line as the youngest son, our foundation a five-story walk up apartment on the busy thoroughfare of Sedgwick Avenue in The Bronx, New York City. My paternal grandfather, Michael – a steel faced émigré from Poland who, from only faint childhood memories, faded and washed out black and white photographs and coarse-grained 8mm home movies – was my mother’s chauffeur to the hospital during those early morning hours of mid-July 1962.

In those family films (usually captured by an aunt also named Rita), one saw Michael holding me in his strong arms the day I arrived home from the hospital. I was a peanut wrapped tightly in blankets of white, my cherubic face peeking out and squinting against the harsh daylight. He was smiling – a simple expression of joy, one measured in the economy of feelings

he most likely didn't know how to express in full. As a young boy I remember *loving* to see my own father, Michael, when he smiled, knowing it was rare, like shoveling buried treasure from his heart.

There were home movies taken of my father returning to the sidewalks of Sedgwick Avenue from an overnight shift driving the city bus that he would do for over a quarter-century. My infant face beamed with an unfiltered joy of the Golden Child. My hair was a brilliant blonde, my smile full of baby teeth and squeals of pleasure to see him. *In those moments I was truly the apple of my father's eye, his adoration and love of me unconditional.*

At birth I was given the middle name of both my grandfather and father – *John*. The President, John F. Kennedy, was a mere 16 months from being assassinated while a Beatle named John Lennon was just weeks away from joining his Liverpool mates at the famed Abbey Road Studios where they would begin to turn the world upside down.

Born and baptized into the Catholic faith, I could have borne a legacy to the biblical name of either John the Baptist or the Revelator. In those inquisitive years searching encyclopedias, I was also fascinated to discover that my first name was given to popes and kings, poets, writers, philosophers and actors, artists, astronauts, and athletes.

But I was connected – by history or family – to a name that meant “*God is gracious.*” And – like father, like son – I would both need and covet the grace and mercy of God, more so during that first decade of life inside the walls of our Sedgwick Avenue apartment. No one believes the first arrows piercing a heart of faith would – or possibly could – be bowed from the progenitor of sonship, the seed giver of the father himself.

If there is a way things work in life, and if there is a well-worn path to both the spiritual and masculine journey, perhaps better late than never is one way to learn. Decades of telling my

own stories to the pages of my *Journals* was convicting evidence that all men are not created equal – and God truly does not have favorites. He’s after the heart and story of every man created in his image.

And if I looked in the mirror reflected between the lines of all that handwritten truth?

Wounded boy. Unfinished man. Liar. Thief. Full of fear. Cloaked in shame. Shaking with napalm the village rage. Pornographer. Addict. Narcissist. Dreamer. Quitter. Friend. Enemy. Lover. Brother. Son. Initiated. Abandoned. Leader. Desperate follower. Betrayed. Brass balled. Warrior. Writer.

Glorious Ruins.

While all my stories are mine, perhaps within their skeleton you’ll find some familiar bones. From the wellspring of my life, the ripples in the pond of redemption, initiation, loss, death, renewal, life, love, forgiveness, hope, courage, valor, disruptive honesty, and fierce intentionality will lead you to the acquainted streams, waterfalls, rivers, and oceans of truth that every man in his own story must ford.

The archetypes of the masculine journey exist in all men. In his book *Fathered by God*, author John Eldredge defines these quintessential stages as Boyhood, Cowboy, Warrior, Lover, King, and Sage. Every man is a descendant of Adam, the Bible much more than a compendium of stories which illustrate the victories and defeats capable and culpable to the soul of man.

Initiation – in this culture and hour – is a forgotten and nearly lost mythology responsible for the spawning of boys in men’s bodies running amok. The initiatory journey consists of one dangerous road with the same critical off-ramps that scribe a reliable map of integration.

As I began to chronicle the stories given to me, I heard the call to adventure – and refused at first to answer it. Providentially, I received guidance from an ally – and became ready to go. A

choice was given: to stay in or leave the known world. In the wake of my decision, a descent was required. There came a road of trials where my heart's desire was rediscovered and ancient emotions rose up in opposition. Then came the ordeal – and victory. There was a gift to be accepted – and celebration to engage. The birth of integration followed – with a return to a renewed world. Re-entry was required, a new life awaiting. Then – and only then – did the practice of manhood begin – and this man's choice to be the gift he's received from his Creator.

And each man – initiated or not – must confront the fact that God and Satan are in a street fight to the death over his heart and story. *The stakes are real – and most certainly eternal.*

“Is this the real life? / Is this just fantasy? / Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality / Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see / I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy / Because I'm easy come, easy go / A little high, little low / Anyway the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me, to me.”

Queen – *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975)

Memories of my story began to take root in early boyhood.

It was just another early evening in our apartment living room, playing with an army of those small, green plastic toy soldiers that were passed down from three older brothers. I was their captain, their king, ordering them into fierce and fiery battles on behalf of a kingdom that I could begin to see even with a child's eye. My father – himself a World War II veteran – cat napped in a reclining chair across the room, snoring away precious minutes before he would be roused by my mother before his preparation to work the normal overnight shift driving a bus route in The Bronx.

Full of the hushed enthusiasm of a boy constantly scolded for making too much noise while he slept (“...*don't you dare wake your father up...*”), I ignored my own wisdom and pretended a small platoon of my green charges had been hit by enemy mortars. I joyfully grabbed up a small handful of the mighty mini-men and tossed them into the air, spraying my

arms and fingers wide in the imagined destruction. One of the soldiers went flying across the room, smacking into my father's face and startling him awake.

My heart and entire body tensed with the muscle memory of fear. He scoped the room and caught my face with dark and angry eyes. *I had seen that look before – cast at me or another sibling in the moments before his rage surfaced.* For a moment he looked away and at the green soldier cupped in his big, beefy hand.

“Come here,” he whispered, a throaty growl with little doubt of its interpretation.

Frozen.

My head shook involuntarily from side to side. The words stumbled from my lips, caught deeper below the ice of panic as I watched his face for mercy.

“No,” I finally stammered. “*You’ll hit me.*”

His face – an emotionless yet handsome set of features shaped by his late 40's age - softened, almost imperceptibly. His next words fooled me into a child's definition of trust.

“No,” he replied, offering a mere wiggle of his open hand, his fingers silently offering a rescue in the form of their openness to me. “Come here, son,” he declared. “*I won't hit you.*”

My feet conned my legs to move, my heart thumping inside of me as I believed in a truth that somewhere in my marrow wasn't negotiable. I began to relax, figuring he would hand me back the wounded soldier in his left hand. I never saw the right hand coming.

The force of his blow knocked me back several feet. I tumbled onto my back and felt the white-hot tears of terror, rage, and shame begin to stream from my eyes and down my cheeks, the living room floor crushing the air out of my lungs.

He didn't say a word, just rising from his chair and walking into the kitchen to eat his pre-work meal cooked by my mother. I didn't cry out for her. I simply lay on the floor, turning

over on my side, my trembling fingers reaching up to touch my red cheek, wet eyes looking across the carnage of war that had struck down my imaginary troops. *I felt the tears stop, replaced by a shame of having fallen in front of them. I had failed all of them and they watched me do so without strength or honor.*

Like father, like son. In that moment, it seemed as if faith – the spiritual cement that bonded hope to love – was meant to hurt the boy I was and destined to break the heart of the man I would become who would be given no choice but to eat the sins of the father so he could become the prodigal son.

The stories began to write themselves in the blood of my heart.

In reality, this memoir is just lipstick on the mirror – the truth of what you see past its crimson lettering merely a reflection of a beast looking back with eyes searching for the beauty of someone to love.