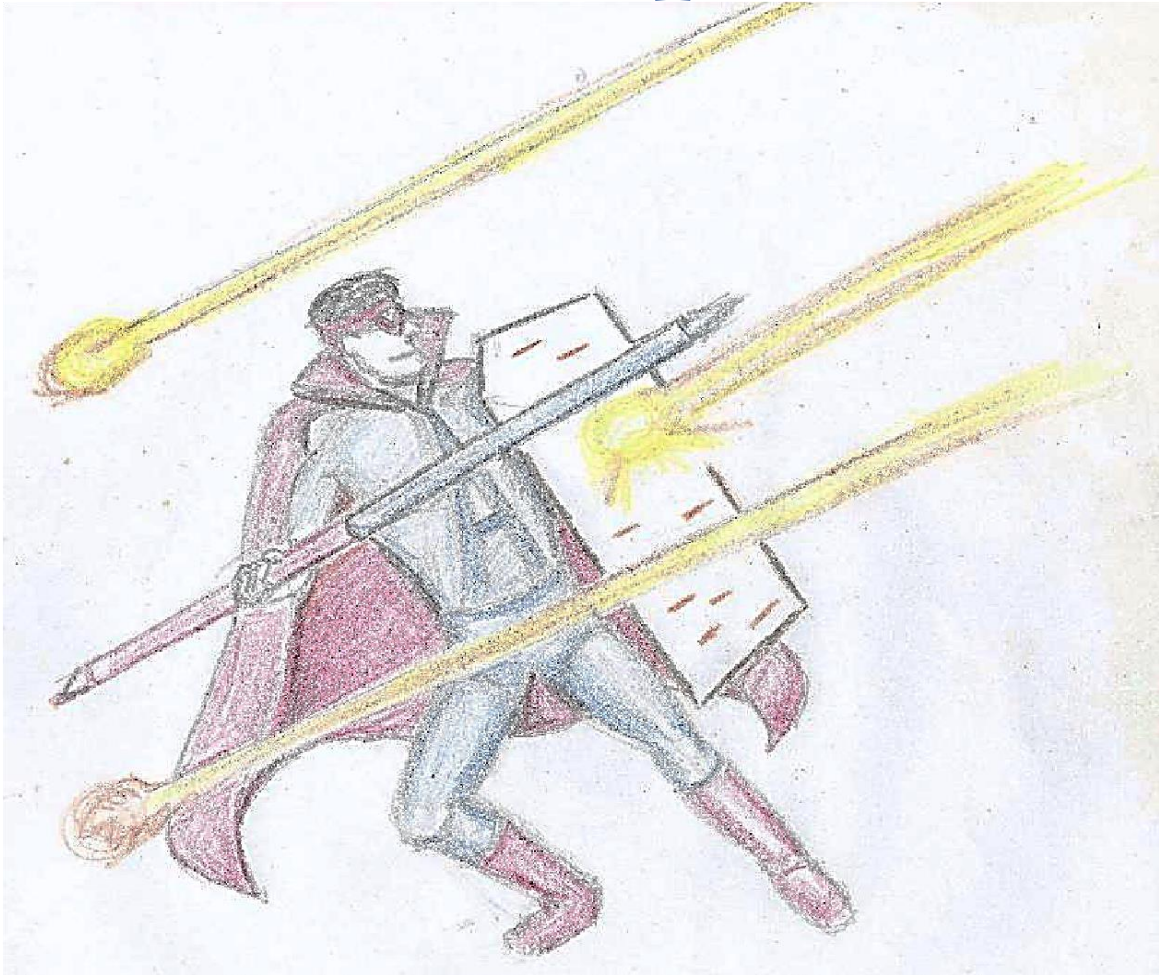


I was a
TOP SECRET *Superhero!*



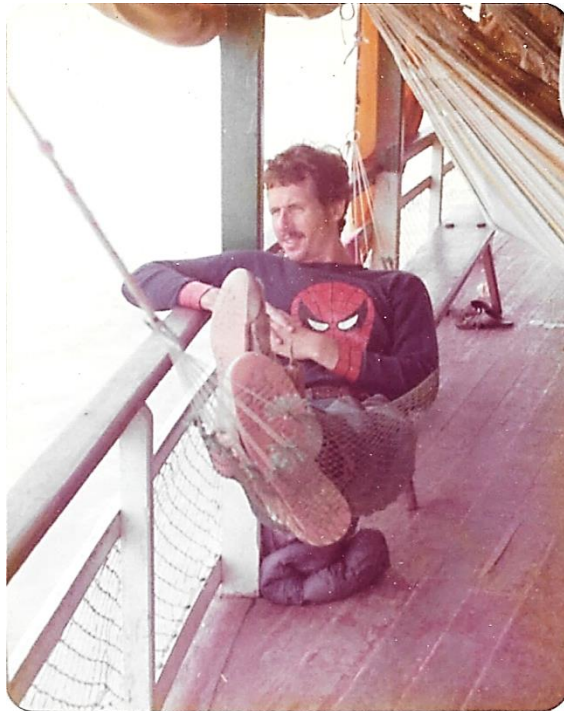
“First, ya gotta care!”

by Kevin Ahearn



© Siegel & Shuster 1938

“There is a superhero in all of us, we just need the courage to put on the cape.”

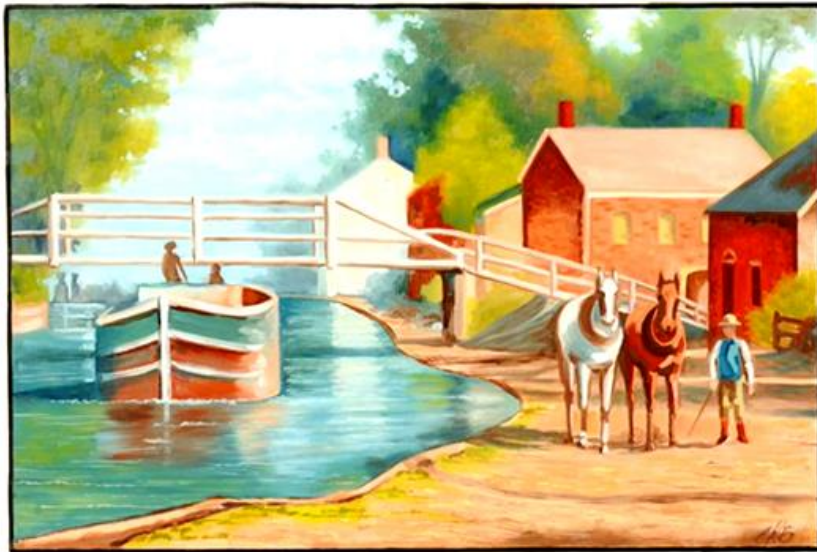


“The essence of being a superhero is the impact it has on the rest of your life.”



*For Thomas Ahearn, father and son
&
"The Fabulous Ricky"*





WELCOME TO HIGH FALLS

Settled
1669

1955



© High Falls D&H Canal Museum

THERE'S ALWAYS THE AQUEDUCT

I set out to become a hero when I was nine, the moment I saw the Aqueduct.

The old stone bridge had "double arches" and looked like the ancient Romans built it. More than a hundred feet long, 15 feet wide and maybe 25 feet high, the Aqueduct was going to make me fly!

My beautiful grandmother, a worldly Vaudeville performer generations ahead of her time, refused to associate with the local 'riff raff' and never did it. Mom couldn't; she had a 'perforated eardrum,' which had to be worse than cancer. The doctor said she could die if she went underwater. My father didn't need to; World War Two had made him a hero.

I'd be the first in my family to...I imagined the everlasting, unbuyable moments 'tween off the Aqueduct and far below, the waters of the Rondout Creek; I was gonna fly like **Superman!**

Like millions of other American children in 1955, I was a 'Baby Boomer,' the son of a hero who had saved the world. As we grew up, our 'greatest generation' parents didn't want their kids stuck in the hot city for the summer. Mom made connections with old friends of her mother, and got us a place to stay. A couple of days after school let out, the five of us and Mom and Dad got into the family car, a dark green 1951 Pontiac with a flathead V-8 and a busted grill, and headed north out of New York City.

The 90-mile ride rolled on and on and on until Mom pointed to a stone tower atop a distant mountain to spot forest fires.

"We're in the country!" she said.

A little later we pulled into *Paul's Crystal Spring Lodge*, a big wooden house on Mohonk Road with ten numbered bedrooms, built back in the day to board *canal workers*, whoever they were.

The next morning Dad took the bus back to the city and we went into High Falls, a tiny town with fewer people than *53rd Place*, our little street in Woodside, Queens. But down the hill along *Bruceville Road*...

That same July thousands of miles away, Disneyland, 'the happiest place on earth,' with its four fabled 'lands' was about to open. Little did 'Uncle Walt' know; compared to this stretch of the Rondout Creek in High Falls, New York, his 'Magic Kingdom' was strictly Mickey Mouse.

From downstream up: first there was 'The Rapids', 40 yards across, shallow but fast, we'd ride the rushing water down a chute, first in tire tubes and then on our backs, paddling underwater to keep our feet up. Best in July. When the Rondout dropped in late August, strictly for babies.

Just a little upstream, the 'Crick narrowed. Called 'the flat rocks' ten months a year, during the summer, best for sunbathers and waders, it was 'Jew Beach' (Hey, this was the Catskills!). I never got into fishing, but catch a carp and you could sell it - in certain circles, 'Rondout trout' was a summer delicacy.

Then came the 'Sandy Beach' where Mom, a knock-out in a one-piece almost as black as her hair, would spread out the blanket every morning. Most was flat rock, but there was a short stretch of sand where kids could walk into the shallow water to wade and play. Out a little bit under the water lay 'First Rock' and then 'Second Rock' where novice swimmers could stand easy.

The water was crystal clear. I could throw a can and then go underwater and read the label as it sank. On weekends, 'Sandy Beach' could get pretty crowded. It would be years before the first African-American family would come and I'm ashamed when I remember how much they stuck out.

Then the 'High Rocks' which were flat and wide and low; it was the 'Crick' that was high which made for safe diving. In later years, this would be the late night party place.

The Rondout curved into 'Smith's Beach' which was larger and sandier than 'Sandy Beach,' but rocky and hardly anybody entered the water there.

'The Ledges' loomed over the 'Crick' like a staircase. Step by step, swimmers would work their way up to jump off the top one. The water was deep and the current could be strong. No beginners here.

If the Garden of Eden had a 'swimmin' hole', we were in it. Later I'd sail on the Hudson and the Mississippi and spend nearly a month on the Amazon, but the Rondout was my Birth Water - a good part of me was born in it. 'Adam', I know how you felt!

"There's always the Aqueduct," Mom would say; she, too, saw it first as a child.

From another age, the Aqueduct jutted out from the far side in a double span...'Somewhere over the rainbow', Oz had its Yellow Brick Road; the Gray Stone Bridge was ours, right here over the Rondout.

The Aqueduct was finished in 1826, half a century after the *Declaration of Independence* and the same year the 'Granite Railway', the first chartered railway in America, began operations. Unlike other architectural wonders made of imported materials, the stone bridge was homegrown; the granite blocks were cut in the local quarry. Cement from nearby Rosendale held it together.

On September 2, the 43rd anniversary of the evacuation of New York by the British, workers and sightseers, in carts and on horseback and on foot, lined both sides of the Rondout for the laying of the keystone. Inserted in the masonry: a copper box containing current coins and engraved plates with the names of D&H officials and the Kingston chapter of the Royal Arch Masons.

In full regalia of their ancient order, the High Priest, King, and Scribe and Captain of the Host of the *Mount Horeb Chapter 75*, gathered at the apex of the arch as the band, set up on the left side of the Rondout.

As if baptizing a newborn or perhaps christening an oceanliner, the High Priest poured corn, wine, and oil on the sacred keystone as the band struck up a solemn tune.

Drummers, strummers and hornblowers led the procession to a triangular table laden with food and drink. The celebration went on to Simeon DePuy's Stone House Tavern, in business since 1797, where the revelers were served by black slaves. (The *Emancipation Proclamation* was nearly two score years away.) Best toast at the bar: that the new stone bridge "never want an adequate supply of water to transport the wealth of the interior to the Hudson."

Never a train or a horse-drawn cart or coach or car or truck would ever cross the Aqueduct. An iron lattice supporting wooden walls, not unlike the hull of a ship, was then constructed atop the structure and filled with water to float 20-ton coal boats over the Rondout, 50-plus per day, from dawn to nightfall, six days a week.

A bridge for *boats*! Pulled by mules straight out of Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*, through the Delaware & Hudson Canal to the Hudson and then downriver - The 'Big Apple' got its early glow via the Aqueduct.

A quarter mile upstream roared the falls, fifty feet across and twenty feet high, which gave the town its name.

Only two kinds of people lived in High Falls: those who had jumped off the Aqueduct and those who were going to 'one of these days'.

My day was coming, but first I had to learn how to swim. My first week on the Rondout I was out in the deep water off 'Second Rock' in my froggy tube when its legs came apart and I went under. Drowning is like climbing a ladder without rungs. When I fought my way to the surface, I saw someone swimming for me. It was Mom.

Many years later, I would be her caregiver in the last stage of her life. When things got difficult, I'd see her as the brave lady I twice owed my life to.

Winnie Williams, the 'Grand Dame' High Falls, had jumped off the Aqueduct before most of our mothers were born. She also performed under it--puppets, singing and dancing, and charged the city kids five cents a show.

Together she and Mom used to 'police' the Sandy Beach, sweeping up shards of glass from broken beer bottles. Later they'd team up to clinch the deal that transformed an abandoned local church into the Delaware & Hudson Canal Museum, a must-see for townies and tourists alike.

And don't forget the seasonal Sunday flea market (Old Lock #18) which helped pay the museum's mortgage.

If New York State had a 'Roman Forum', it was High Falls. Stone reminders of the Canal Age are spread out in and around town like the petrified bones of a gigantic dinosaur.

It was the D&H Canal that gave rise to the Aqueduct. Conceived in 1823 to ship anthracite coal from Rondout-on-the-Hudson to Honesdale, PA and then to New York City, the state's first super-highway would be four feet deep, 32 feet wide, contain 108 locks, 137 bridges, 26 basins, dams, and reservoirs. Unlike the Erie Canal, the D & H was backed by private money, making it one of the first million-dollar enterprises in American History, bankrolling through the tiny hamlet by the falls.

Overloaded with rules and regulations, by-laws and traditions, crime and corruption, child labor and 'payday ladies', cock and dogfighting, and a lore awash with ghosts and witches, through drought and flood, epidemics and strikes, accidents and disasters, canal work was long, hard, dirty and dangerous, a low-paying seasonal job without security and benefits. From this hearty stock came the 'High Fallonians' who would jump off the Aqueduct.

"Dig we must for a better New York" began with canal builders. By the 1840's, dozens of water-ways laced across the state. Ill-conceived from the start, most would flounder and fail. While The Erie was the bigger and longer, and more famous canal, the D&H proved to be a sound investment ready for upsizing.

In 1850, a second water-way was dug through High Falls bypassing the original canal and the Aqueduct. Cut off on both sides, the former engineering marvel was left to begin and end nowhere.

In a couple of weeks I was swimming, underwater, too. But the Aqueduct was still way upstream. Soon enough I swam with the current from the 'High Rocks' to the 'Sandy Beach' and then back against it.

Come early August I was ready for a 'scouting mission'.

Setting out from the 'High Rocks' in a big, black inner tube, for the first time I paddled up towards the Aqueduct. But it wasn't the only bridge that had crossed the Rondout here.

Between 1847 and 1851, John Augustus Roebling, who would later build the Brooklyn Bridge, designed and constructed four unique structures. Like the original stone bridge, it was as much a bathtub, each filled with water to float boats full of coal from lock to lock.

The larger, "second generation" 50-ton canal boats were equipped with tiny kitchens and beds, allowing whole families to live onboard. Pulled by a team of mules, as they crossed over the new Roebling structure, they could look down at the 'old' Aqueduct, stripped of his latticework, as naked as the day the Royal Arch Masons had laid in the keystone.

In 1850 the canal company, which owned most of the land, formed the village into streets and lots. When drunken railroad laborers, driven from their jobs on a Hudson construction site, attacked D & H Canal workers, the combatants were called 'High Falls Rioters.'

The Roebling Aqueduct burned down in 1917 and its ironworks were sold as scrap. Only the stone abutments, towering over the original stone bridge, remained. Jumping off 'The Pier', as it was called, was no mean feat; 'The Ledges' had to be cleared on the way down.

Bill Blakely, a redheaded local kid (Mom called him a 'nut'.), rode off on his bicycle. With a victorious scream, boy and bike separated in mid-air. Both survived to ride back up to town.

Under the Aqueduct looking up at the stonework, if Camelot or Olympus had a skywalk...

"Colossal!" said the sea captain in *King Kong*, which I'd see a hundred times on television. "It could almost be Egyptian."

Not only were kids jumping and diving off, but there was a rope from above and they were swinging on it.

The Aqueduct had no guardrails. There was a one-inch hollow pipe embedded in the surface stones. First somebody stole a length of barbed wire that was quickly replaced with a safer rope.

A little later, the 'Sandy Beach' would have a rope of its own. To take the best ride, you climbed a small tree, pushed off and *zoom!* Playing *Superman*, I wore a big red towel and off I went, peaking high and letting go. Weighing a ton dripping wet, my 'cape' wrapped around my neck and again I almost drowned.

"Little boys and little girls jump off the Aqueduct," went the homespun homily.
"Young men and young women hit the 'Crick'."

"I was terrified that first time," one jumper told me.

One boy went off holding a big beach umbrella which tore apart before he hit the water.

"I blessed myself before I went over, a lot of the kids did," a young girl told me.
"The second span where the water is deep, but away from the whirlpools. Look before you go 'cause you don't wanna hit anybody down below. And after you hit, spread your arms and legs. You'll come up faster."

She might have been a full year older, but of a different class - an 'experienced woman' mentoring an innocent virgin.

Not soon enough and never well enough, I'd be finding out about girls. How wonderful it would be if I kissed my first one on the Aqueduct. Later we'd be married on the stone bridge, and after the ceremony, sneak back in the middle of the night with one of those double sleeping bags. Many, many years later, my family would gather as one of my grandchildren sprinkled my ashes from the Aqueduct into the 'Crick'.

I was going to heaven!

And on a new moon night; the Aqueduct's twin arches, shadows blotting out the stars, became like wings as if it could fly away to anywhere in the world.

Aqueduct, take me with you!

Day after beautiful day, the sun hot and the skies clear, the water got lower and lower, the current slowing to a lazy crawl. Great news for new swimmers; the whirlpools under the Aqueduct became mere eddies.

My plan took shape. I'd tell Mom I'd be going to the 'High Rocks' for a while, then keep going. No towel or sneakers, I'd take the path up behind 'Smith's Beach' and there I'd be. I wondered how long it would take me to build up the nerve to jump.

And when I went off, would I close my eyes and hold my nose?

Mom would get 'hiss-tickle'! Sit me out of the 'Crick' for a few days and take away my comic books, but later on, for years and years, I could hear her bragging to the girls.
"My oldest jumped off when he was nine...and hasn't been the same since."

And she'd be right. 'Cause when I got back to the city and saw the other boys, bigger and stronger and older...

"I jumped off the Aqueduct," I'd tell them. "I'm a Man!"

Hardly slept a wink before the big day. Nothing could possibly go wrong.

"You win some, you lose some, and some get rained out," they say in baseball.

I got rained out. Again and again and again. As the rain came down, the 'Crick' went up, higher and higher. After a couple of days, we drove down to the gravel parking area near the 'Sandy Beach'. It was completely underwater and so were the 'High Rocks.' 'Jew Beach' had disappeared and 'The Rapids' had waves, *breakers* bigger than Rockaway.

Upstream, enveloped in an eerie mist, the falls roared like Niagara. Once slow, clear and beautiful, the life-giving and forgiving Rondout had become fast, dirty and deadly, its sudden power ripping out trees, summer docks, parts of houses and people's lives.

"The 'Crick is whippin'!" said my baby brother.

Four people were killed. A dozen bridges were destroyed and still more heavily damaged. Homes, farms, and businesses flooded, the county would be declared 'a national disaster area' and millions would be spent on flood control, an overdue investment that would later pay dividends.

"It's like the end of the world," said Mom.

The Aqueduct was gone! Was it just underwater or had it been swept away by the flood?

We went back to the city only to return over the Labor Day Weekend. The water had receded and there stood the Aqueduct. The last titan of a lost technology, the old stone bridge had whipped the 'Crick'.

A huge tree trunk lay on the 'High Rocks' and would serve as a fireplace for years to come. As for swimming..

In New York history, 1955 is most remembered as the year the Brooklyn Dodgers won their only World Series. 'Dem Bums' would soon be gone to California.

"Wait till next year!" vowed frustrated Yankee fans.

Me, too.

I graduated from elementary school in 1956, a baby step up. In the country, I'd be taking a giant step *off*.

First day back I ran up to the Aqueduct, but couldn't go on it to jump off; a steel gate trimmed with barbed wire blocked the way. Nose pressed against the gate, I could see that the flood had wiped the surface stones free of grass.

I couldn't go any further, but tomorrow would be another day. Wouldn't it?

"Central Hudson says the Aqueduct's a hazard," said Mom. "They're going to knock it down,"

"It was a different world back then," I'd be told more than half a century later. "Central Hudson was like God."

Following the flood, engineers from the Central Hudson Gas & Electric Corporation closely inspected the old stone bridge and concluded it might suddenly collapse 'with possible tragic results to swimmers and fishermen.'

Bad enough, but the Aqueduct posed a far greater danger. A link to the past, it represented a bridge to a future the big power company was totally unprepared to deal with.

'The Children of the Aqueduct' numbered maybe a dozen locals, and a growing number of city kids up on summer vacation. The Tappan Zee Bridge, spanning the Hudson had opened in late '55 and the New York State Thruway, the longest toll road in the country, would soon be finished, cutting the drive from the city to an hour and a half. The Aqueduct was the greatest thrill ride (Free! Very little waiting!) north of Coney Island. Allowed to become a teenage Mecca, it would be a disaster in the making, and Central Hudson would be liable.

The High Falls Civic Association, a concerned group of citizens who placed the interests of their town above all else, was trying to save children's lives and property values. They wrote Central Hudson letter after letter, calling the Aqueduct a 'beautiful nuisance', petitioning the power company to take it down.

The Civic Association was afraid. As more city folk came north, the Aqueduct could become a notorious landmark, an adult-free paradise only children could dream about, turning their town into a cheap tourist trap, overrun with *hundreds* of out-of-control teenagers. Safety and sanitation costs? When insurance rates skyrocketed, who would pay? God forbid anybody drowned; the resulting litigation could break High Falls.

Morning after morning throughout July, I'd be craning my neck to get the first look when we drove down to the Rondout, to see if the Aqueduct was still standing. Mom watched me like a hawk, refusing to let me out of her sight.

Looking back, if only I had...

"Mom, I want to jump off the Aqueduct. I *need* to do it," I should have said. "I know how to swim, know where the water's deep. Other kids are still doing it, why not me?"

"Don't you ever listen to anyone?" she would have shot back. "*Engineers* said that a 'touch' in the right place could bring the whole thing down. With your luck, it'll be you...Do you want to be known as the boy who destroyed the Aqueduct?"

Motherly logic would have been absolute.

Mom would go on to earn two Masters' degrees, teach and retire early as a reading coordinator for 33 NYC schools. With her wonderful second husband, she'd travel throughout North America via RV and then take a trip around the world, but High Falls would always be home.

Only John Davenport (of the 1697 Davenports), the owner of the High Falls Hardware Store, took a stand. When he heard of Central Hudson's plans, Davenport took his movie camera down to the Rondout and made films of children jumping off the Aqueduct.

Mom didn't know, but seeking community support to save the old stone bridge, Davenport assembled local parents at the High Falls Firehouse for a free show.

"I had no...*idea*!" gasped one mother for many.

"One of these days, one of our kids is going to get killed at that damn fossil," said an irate father. "Not one of mine!"

Alone against Central Hudson and the Civic Association, there was nothing more Davenport could do.

(Where *were* the 'High Falls Rioters'?)

During the 1870's, millions of tons of anthracite coal floated through High Falls, but dating back to Eve's Apple, the canal was a biblical technology facing Armageddon.

Proverbs 26:27 "He who digs a pit shall fall into it..."

The light at the end of the tunnel - The Train was coming. Early locomotives were slow, crude, unreliable, expensive and dangerous, but they kept getting better, while the canal was long past its high water mark. And when it got cold, when the coal was needed most, trains kept chugging along while the canal would freeze over.

In 1899, the D & H Canal Company, its "franchises, rights and privileges" was sold for \$10,000. A few years later, the *Ulster Queen* was the last boat to make a scheduled run.

With the D&H done, as well as the local cement industry, for the first half of the Twentieth Century, High Falls had only two things going for it: peace and quiet. Then came the 'Baby-Boomers.'

In early August, 1956, all the world focused, not on the engineering marvel spanning the Rondout facing imminent destruction, but on a man-made sea-level waterway in Africa, a big ditch connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Armed with Soviet weapons, the Egyptian dictator outraged America and especially Britain when he seized the Suez Canal, calling for a 'United Arab world', whatever that would be.

A method used by the ancient Romans for removing an icon suddenly in disfavor: Central Hudson's engineers secured heavy chains and cables to the span, strapped them to the back of a bulldozer, and with a step on the gas, would pull down the 'beautiful nuisance.'

"Don't be alarmed, ladies and gentlemen," the guy in front of *King Kong* assured us. "Those chains are made of chrome steel."

Snap!

Same with Central Hudson's.

On that fateful day, no vast multitude gathered on both sides of the Rondout. There was no band and no refreshments. The High Priest, King, and Scribe and Captain of the Host were long dead and buried with the rest of the *Mount Horeb Chapter 75*. No procession to celebrate at Simeon DePuy's Stone House Tavern, empty and decaying, perhaps a near-future target of the wrecking ball.

Only a young woman and her three-year old watched from 'Smith's Beach'.

"My mother always told me to be where things are happening," said Jessie Feth, my neighbor fifty years later. "To see history."

"Have this down in a couple of hours," boasted the crane operator, kin to the future president of the D&H Canal Society.

Not so fast. The pride of the Royal Arch Masons wasn't about to give up its stones. Again and again the big, heavy ball slammed into the stone bridge without effect. Not until the 'keystones' were attacked, the wedge-shaped pieces at the summits of each arch. It was as if each span were the jawbone of a living thing getting its teeth kicked out.

The battering went on for three days. Finally the central base was dynamited.

Except for a couple of ugly brick stumps on both shores, not a clue remains that the Aqueduct ever existed. Not every fallen stone wound up in the Rondout; a few were brought up and became gravemarkers in the High Falls cemetery. One of the 'keystones' is on display in Grady Park.

Mom would let none of us see and she was right. To watch, helpless as a little boy, as the way to the Man I wanted to be was beaten, busted and broken down to the last stone. It was as if Krypton had exploded and nobody, not even a single baby, ever escaped.

My very first quest and I had failed. Not because I was too timid, I'd rationalize, or too afraid or too scared to everlovin' death, but because, dammit to hell!, I was *too late*.

Winnie Williams wept for a week.

The first time I returned to the Rondout without the Aqueduct, the beauty of the trees, the rocks, and the water still shone, but it was like looking at Mt. Rushmore with the four faces removed.

"It's the end of an era," said Mom.

Within a few years, the Jet Age would launch a mass exodus from the Catskills to Florida. 'Jew Beach' would be left behind in name only. From 'The Rapids' to 'The Ledges,' 'The Garden of Eden' would flourish through the sixties and seventies, but sludge from local factories (later closed) would pollute the Rondout and over-fertilizing by farmers (still a problem) would damage its ecosystem. Once clean and clear, the 'Crick' became yet another dirty New York stream more and more parents refused to let their children swim in.

After a couple of drownings in the early eighties, the land was sold and posted.

Some twenty years ago, I went down to the "Sandy Beach" and was struck by how small everything looked, like returning to elementary school. As I stood on a flat rock from where I had jumped into the 'Crick' a thousand times, a thousand memories flooded by.

"If you go in the water, you'll be arrested," said the NY State Police officer.

Banished by The Law; again I understood how 'Adam' must have felt.

"We really didn't care enough about history," admitted one old-timer. "To many of us, the Aqueduct represented a past we wanted to leave in the last century. Farmers and craftsmen made our town what it is, not canal workers."

"But if it happened today," said another firmly. "Every man and woman, child and babe in High Falls would be standing together on that old bridge. Central Hudson, the National Guard, and the Supreme Court combined wouldn't get us off."

Earlier that year, my brothers and sisters and I gathered at the rocky shore just downstream from the falls. As I sprinkled our mother's ashes in the 'Crick', I couldn't help feeling that Mom would have wanted to go off the Aqueduct just once.

Imagine if...

Opened in 1947 where the present-day post office is, 'The Aqueduct Sweet Shop' would still be in business.

Spring is wedding season. With all due respect to churches, temples, and mosques, 'High Fallonians' get married on the Aqueduct. And so do many others. The rental fees more than pay for security and cleanup. Summer brings the vacationers and the tourists for "The Aqueduct Experience -- The New York Rite of Passage" - Season passes, T-shirts, caps, postcards, calendars. The town might even get its supermarket back.

Come autumn, with Ulster County ablaze in fall foliage...The annual "Aqueduct Marathon" and "Leaf-peeping" from the old stone bridge. The expanded D&H Canal Museum would be running tours year-round.

Only two kinds of people live in High Falls: those who have made love on the Aqueduct and those who were going to 'one of these nights'.

The twin spans, beautifully sloped like the top of a heart, whetted over the water...On a warm summer's evening, bathed in moonlight and cooled by a 'Crick' breeze. Just once and feel its stones forever!

An era without an end: 'The Children of the Aqueduct' would have been our own.

Life went on after the Aqueduct came down. During the 50's and into the 60's, the Fireman's Carnival was the event of the summer. In the 1970's, Bernie Spar's 'Fly- Ins' were held at the nearby High Falls 'International Airport' . Both are long gone and probably never coming back.

There were two fires and a string of openings. In the center of town, at the crossroads which, God willing, will never have a traffic light, Eli Zwick's supermarket looked bigger than the Pentagon to a little boy. When it burned to the ground, Mr. Zwick became the High Falls postmaster. For more than half a century, the supermarket site has been a vacant lot. Recently the plot was purchased by a city antique dealer, but groundbreaking is still a long way off.

In 1960, Richie, the 'Tom Swift of Kripplebush', chugged into town on the "Motorbike of The Future" a twenty-inch Schwinn bicycle fitted with a lawnmower "dish" engine he claimed could break the local speed limit. While Richie was enjoying a famed 'Pizzarette' at Novi's corner restaurant, the owner's son, ('A punk with nothing else better to do', said Mom.) started throwing lit matches at it. Suddenly the bike was ablaze and High Falls was hopping.

The young arsonist soon developed a rare affinity for fire, went to Europe and became a renowned chef. In 1964, he returned and bought the old stone tavern, located at Lock #16, where so long ago, the opening of the Aqueduct had been celebrated. (The whole town thought he was out of his mind, except of course, Mom.)

Within a few years and countless hours of hard work, the *1797 Depuy Canal House* boasted the finest cuisine between Manhattan and Montreal. Do make reservations for a fabulous dining experience and just before dessert, propose a toast to TIME magazine's 'Father of New American Cooking' and the 'Motorbike of the Future', the only "dish" John Novi ever burned.

And don't dare miss the annual tree-lighting ceremony in December!

On the other side of Route 213, the former Parsonage for the Reformed Dutch Church of Clove (now The High Falls Community Church) became a succession of forgettable bars until Richard Murphy bought the dilapidated building and miraculously transformed it into the renowned *Egg's Nest*, featuring superb food and drink and even better conversation. A consummate host and niche historian, Richard knows more about the 'secret Rondout *submarine*' than anyone else on earth.

Up the road a bit stands the heart and soul of High Falls, the legendary Rock Cliff House, built more than a century ago to house, feed and inebriate D & H Canal workers and run by the best bartender a little town ever knew. Dottie Parkin had the style and the strength of Amanda Blake on TV's *Gunsmoke* and I couldn't help but call her 'Miss Kitty.'

Dottie wasn't offended; those who slighted her no longer drank at her house. (Wait at least a week before begging her to accept your apology. *Wildflowers!*) We lost Dottie a few years back and her daughter Suzy, who had jumped off the Aqueduct when she was ten, took over but was soon forced to sell. Work began immediately to restore the Rock Cliff House, but then hard times hit and the place has sat empty and idle.

A new era will dawn the night I can drink a beer at the 'Cliff'.

The only place in the world where you can have a soon-to-be world famous 'Rondout Burger' is the High Falls Cafe smack dab in the middle of town. Good food, fine spirits and the best 'live music in Ulster County'.

Hard times and high rent had the High Falls Cafe to move a mile and a half way, up Berme Road from my place, to the Stonedock Golf Course.

Fore!

And then there's the yearly High Falls Fair Day and the Whiffle Ball Championships, the renown Pet Show, plus Crazy Hat Bingo.

Be advised, however, that High Falls lacks a supermarket, a pharmacy, a laundromat, a movie theater, a gas station and a traffic light, and hopefully, it always will.

I'm living in our family home, once a locktender's cabin at #21, a mile upstream from the falls. From my studio window, I can see deer and woodchuck, fox and ducks in the woodland. Rondout Creek, cleaner than it's been in decades, keeps flowing by, and the day I'll be going with it, I do hope it's whippin'.

Even if you have a degree in psychology, don't think for a minute that the destruction of that old stone bridge more than fifty years ago somehow inhibited my personal growth or interfered in any way with my maturity. Right out of high school, I'd be off on adventures around the country and around the world.

There's always The Aqueduct!





CHOATE ROSEMARY HALL

Choate cultivates a school environment in which all members of the community feel valued, safe, and part of something greater than themselves.

1957



The RED GLOW

A CHOATE LEGEND



When I was very young, one of my first teachers was a 17-inch black and white television.

On Saturday morning came *Howdy Doody*, the kiddie show starring a freckled-faced marionette. Buffalo Bob, the MC clad in buckskin, offered an amazing challenge to the ‘Peanut Gallery,’ two dozen kids my age in the ‘live’ audience.

“Boys and girls,” said Buffalo Bob. “I have a riddle, and if you can solve it, you’ll get a special prize from Howdy himself.

All the ‘Peanut Gallery’ leaned forward in anticipation.

“What kind of *new* coat is always...*wet*?”

Hands shot up, voices rang out. “A raincoat, a raincoat, **A RAINCOAT!**”

One little girl on the left side in the back raised her hand meekly, but didn’t say a word.

“What do you think?” asked Buffalo Bob.

“A coat of paint,” she said.

Aha, a life-shaping moment! No matter how many people believe otherwise and however loud they yell, what's right is right. Not because you are pretty or polite or privileged, but that you are *right*.

Being right wins, Howdy Doody taught me.

Little did I know that I had another lesson coming; I was about to be enrolled in the finest, fanciest 'prep school' in the whole country!

Well, sort of...

Located in the lush woodlands outside Wallingford, Connecticut, *Choate* was founded in 1896 by Judge William G. Choate. By 1904, enrollment had grown from 4 to 40 boys. But except for an athletic field in front, wooden houses separated by private homes, there was little that 'bespoke a school.'

After WW II, *Choate* grew to 550 male students. More houses were purchased along with hundreds of acres of land. Then came the Andrew Mellon Library, the Chapel, and the construction of seven new dormitories. Growth also focused on broadening and deepening the curriculum, and solidifying *Choate's* national reputation. By the early 1950's the prep school was recognized as the finest in the nation, its graduates heading for Harvard, Yale, Princeton and other high-class Ivy League universities.

A center for progressive thinking, through the St. Andrew's Society, *Choate* initiated a special summer program in 1925. Two dozen 'underprivileged' New York City boys, ages 11-13, would be brought to the campus for a two-week 'learning experience.' The campers were chosen specifically for their differences-- athletes and scrubs, big and small, extroverts and wallflowers and two Negroes:

How would these diverse intelligent children react in the *Choate* environment? Would they play well together? Would they feel the *Choate spirit*? And if faced with adversity, would they team up and face it head on or run away in fear?

Staffed by eight of the school's finest scholars, plus a headmaster and a kitchen staff, *Choate* was going to find out.

With help from the **Red Glow**.

My mother was a hustler, god bless her. With five kids to feed, she was teaching and looking to go to summer school for her Masters. Seems she knew someone who knew someone involved in the *Choate* program and got her oldest and 'very smart' son enrolled.

I had gone to CYO Day Camp some summers before, but this would be the first time I'd be away from my mother overnight. Two weeks at a place I'd never heard of? Mom reassured me that all would work out. Besides, except for the train ticket, it was *free!*

Joe and Jack Kennedy had gone to Choate. Edward Albee, the playwright, too. If James Bond had gone to Eton, then Bruce Wayne would have graduated from *Choate*. Maybe I would get something out of this.

(Mom said later I'd gained ten pounds.)

Four tents had been set up on one of the athletic fields. Six boys and two staff per tent. The counselors were *Choate's* finest--young, fit and dedicated. Twenty-three other boys, and I couldn't find one friend because I was a smart-ass city punk who couldn't play softball or basketball worth a damn.

But I had learned how to swim. Taking a wooded path to the swimming hole on the Quinnipiac River, a snake popped out of the water with a fish in its mouth.

I liked nights the best when we'd be in our tent and the counselor would read a story by flashlight. Ray Bradbury's 'Usher Two' was cool, but my favorite was 'Voice in the Night' which may have been the inspiration for the later Japanese film, *Attack of the Mushroom People*.

Midway into our second week, someone uttered those fateful words: "The **Red Glow** is out there. **The Red Glow** will come for us."

According to the legend, Jedediah Choate, 'long of beard and short of fuse', the 'bad seed' of the founder's family, was a trapper in these woods long before Connecticut became a state and America became a country. A giant of a man, he strapped a trademark lantern to his belt, claiming the crimson glass gave off a blood red light that scared away 'Injuns and bars.'

One night, alone in the forest he'd staked out as his own, Jedediah was awakened by an ominous rustling. Ready for trouble, the trapper lit his lantern and the darkness glowed red.

Whether it was Mahican Indians or a bear, Jedediah's body was never found and it's said, even by 'Choate scholars', that the **Red Glow** still roams the woods, his lantern bright, hell bent for trespassers.

Yeah, I thought. And the 'Mushroom People,' too!

I'd switch tents to be with the counselor who'd be reading William Hope Hodgson's 'Voice in the Night.' Two audio versions so far. Halfway into the third, a cry rang out.

"It's the **Red Glow**! The **Red Glow**'s come for us!"

We charged out of the tents like soldiers going to war.

In a cloudless, new moon sky, a billion stars lit the heavens. Deep in the forest, the **Red Glow** shone like a distant traffic signal, but *moving*, as if the light had come to life.

A dozen flashlights burning, the counselors assembled the boys.

"Follow the **Red Glow**. Chase the **Red Glow**. Get the **Red Glow**!" echoed through the camp.

Off we went not unlike the torch-bearing mob pursuing Frankenstein's 'monster.'

Then came that 'Howdy Doody' moment...

We'd be running *after* the **Red Glow**, but the service road beyond the tree line...if we took a shortcut across the athletic field, we could cut off the **Red Glow**...Together we could face...we could stand up to the **Red Glow**!

"This way!" I shouted and broke from the pack.

My first experience as a leader, or so I believed. On the other side of the tree line, we'd come out in front of the **Red Glow**.

I looked back. I was alone. The beaming flashlights shone farther and farther away. And the **Red Glow** kept coming...

If I had stopped in my tracks and thought about what I was doing...The first son of a disabled WW II flyer, did I long to be the hero my father once was? Mom would be so proud. Or had I been brainwashed by TV and comic books?

But I didn't think. Didn't have to; I was *right*. I kept going.

Years later, after waiting nearly a decade, I finally got my Peace Corps appointment: Costa Rica - to teach softball. Two groups of five volunteers would coach swimming, volleyball, basketball, track and field, and softball in ten different villages, revolving every four months.

The swimming guy quit halfway through training. I volunteered to take his slots. Dozens of Costa Rican children drowned every year. If I could save just one life...

At my first town, my classes were an immediate success complete with a waiting list. But as I could only stay for four months, I took a hard look at the program. Of the six villages I'd be teaching in, only three of them had any water while other towns with swimming pools would get no teacher. Three of the Costa Rican politicians sponsoring the program came from the towns without a swimming area.

The program was a scam! I voiced my concerns to my fellow volunteers. None stood by me. When I was called to meet with the country director, I went in alone.

Peace Corps threw me out of Costa Rica. Returning to headquarters in Washington DC, I had to meet with a government psychiatrist.

After telling him about my father and my life so far...

"When are you going to stop taking these beatings on your head and shoulders?" the doctor asked me.

"But I was right!" I insisted.

"The program must be followed." he said, backed up by diplomas on the wall. "You're wrong because you're alone. Who is the lone volunteer to demand change...from the Peace Corps?"

Within a year I'd get another Peace Corps assignment. The Costa Rican 'sports' program would be disbanded.

The **Red Glow** seemed to float in the darkness unlike the jumpy flashlight beams of the counselors and the boys far behind.

I got to the trees lining the service road and stepped onto the gravel. The **Red Glow** was coming and I alone was going to stand up to him.

Wasn't I?

Adding five points for being a veteran, I scored 105 on the State test for 'recreation leader' in the prison system and got a position at a brand new 'maximum security' jail which would soon earn the highest accreditation in Department of Corrections history.

So how come so few of the guards were doing their jobs? On the afternoon/evening shift while I was reffing a basketball game or coaching up softball, the Corrections Officers would gather in my office to wile their shift away.

"That's the way it is," I was briefed. "The way it'll always be."

I took the sergeant for a walk around the gym and told him how I felt.

"I can't control my men," he said.

The gym area now had a security problem: me.

Mounting a combined effort to get me fired, the Corrections Officers wrote me up for every conceivable thing and within a year, an innocent man had been thrown out of jail. Disgraced, I could never work in the system again.

The other civilians, teachers and counselors, knew full well that security was lax, but not one took a stand.

Three days after I had closed on my house, the inmates rioted in the recreation area. The prison handled it poorly and blamed the civilians. All were transferred to other jails and the facility became a 'special housing unit' with the inmates locked in their cells 23 hours a day.

Six months later, the inmates took over part of the prison and held hostages. After the crisis was resolved, an investigation revealed that seven Corrections Officers had left their posts without proper relief. All were transferred and kept their jobs.

That's the way it would always be.

I saw the **Red Glow** as a subway train coming down a leafy tunnel formed by the trees. And I was in front of him, standing on the tracks.

For a fleeting moment, I thought of the 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow,' of Ichabod Crane facing the headless horseman.

...What would *Bruce Wayne* do?

With classes of adults from around the world, I was the most successful teacher in a New York county English as a Second Language (ESL) program as well as a GED teacher. As most of the students lived on the poverty line or barely above it, the classes were paid for by the State.

The commissioner, the executive director and the program leader had big plans.

Taking students' tuition money from other classes, they took expensive field trips to Washington DC and then to Japan. A glossy pamphlet was published. Additional thousands were paid to Japanese agents to recruit students for our 'Intensive Language Institute.'

We had no charter, no language lab, nowhere to house the students. No one on the staff spoke Japanese. The 'Institute' was a single aluminum-sided building behind a car wash at the end of a strip mall.

Only I objected and was fired. No student ever came from Japan to attend the 'Institute'. Based on his 'ESL expertise and experience,' the commissioner got a higher-paying position on Long Island. The program leader left for a better job. The executive director ran for the county legislature.

Never again would I be allowed to teach for the State.

As a social worker with a full slate of clients for a Mental Health Day program, my reading and GED classes were always full. For the first time, disabled clients passed the GED test.

But when they got no Christmas gifts from the program I became concerned. The clients ran an in-house canteen, selling sodas and snacks, earning money for their benefit. The secretary in charge was an habitual gambler. The county had been warned not to let her handle cash.

"How much money is in the client canteen fund?" I asked at a staff meeting.

My supervisor went berserk, pounding his fist on the table, shouting at me, threatening.

"You're a brave man," one of the doctors told me.

"So was Custer," I said.

Courage had nothing to do with it; I was right.

But I was alone.

They fired me.

Thousands of dollars unaccounted for, the clients' canteen fund was entrusted to other staff. The secretary was transferred where she continued to promote employee gambling trips to Atlantic City.

The **Red Glow** came closer and closer. I could make out the black bands holding his lantern's crimson glass.

I didn't run. I didn't hide. I stood my ground as if frozen to the spot.

He was a big man, just like the legend said... Closer...

"Oooooow!" He let out a howl as he aimed the lantern at my face.

I could see him beyond the glow. He had no beard. He was the same age and so fit and clean cut...just like counselors.

The **Red Glow** was...The **Red Glow** was...*Choate*!

In an instant he was by me, running like a halfback. Had I hidden behind a tree, sprung out and tried to tackle him, I would have been trampled.

(And my Mom brokenhearted.)

The big man circled around and ran at the flashlight beams. I caught up as the boys jumped him like lion cubs on a cape buffalo. The counselors quickly ended it, introducing the *Choate* alumnus who had volunteered to show us all a good time.

Looking back, I wish one of the boys or one of the counselors or the big man himself had come over and maybe patted me on the head and given me a talking to.

What if I'd been *wrong*? Had I gotten lost in the woods, at least someone would have been relieved when they finally found me

"Good work, boys. Well done!" The chief counselor addressed the group. "You came together, stuck together and triumphed!"

Everybody cheered everybody else.

"Let *Choate*'s infamous legend become a symbol for the challenges of life you cannot face alone," he said. "Trust and work with others--The *group* wins!"

"The **Red Glow** is still out there," he warned us. "And always will be."

The St. Andrew's summer camp program closed down in 1965. The *Choate School and Rosemary Hall* merged in 1974. Women were admitted, including Ivanka Trump and Jamie Lee Curtis.

At this year's Commencement and Baccalaureate Services, the president of the student body addressed more than 500 of his fellow graduates and their families, saying "Choate is a gift. A gift none of us have truly earned or deserved. It is an act of grace that will carry us forward."

I got a job with a small publisher and printing company. Apathy and incompetence had rendered its Books Division a disaster. It took me nearly a year to get it running. An author I brought in and edited sold thousands of copies.

For a marketing campaign, the boss ordered me to steal copyrighted data from a rival publisher. I told him what the consequences could be.

He fired me and scrubbed the plan. I don't think he'll be in business much longer.

My last job had me working online for a writers' literary agency as an evaluator, editor and writing coach. The agency had manuscripts submitted electronically and my mission was to convince the customers to pay for a variety of authors' services provided by the company.

Many thanked me for my honesty and I'm still in contact with a couple. But most wanted only professional confirmation that their novels or autobiographies were worthy of being published at any price.

"You're either determined to be writer or you've already written," I'd imply. "If you've 'already written,' what do you need me for?"

The company fired me. Not long after, the CEO and three of his directors were indicted for fraud. A class-action suit by disillusioned customers is pending.

At the finest prep school in America, the **Red Glow** had taught me to stand fast on my own. But never a hint how much it would cost me.

"Hey kids!" said Buffalo Bob back in the day. "What time is it?"

"It's Howdy Doody Time!" shouted the 'Peanut Gallery'.

And always will be.

1963



For the very few, the very proud and the very old veterans of the

USAF SECURITY SERVICE

CATCH-202



© James Heyworth

My **TOP SECRET** Life



'If happy little blue birds fly, beyond the rainbow, why, oh
why, can't I?'

Judy Garland in *'Wizard of Oz'*

Throughout the Cold War versus the Soviet Union, Kelly Air Force Base, a sprawling complex outside San Antonio, Texas, served a full arsenal of transport and combat aircraft, including the massive B-52 Bomber, America's prime nuclear deterrent.

Also at Kelly was the headquarters and primary tech school of the USAF Security Service, the top secret 'electronic trip-wire'; the first to alert the dashing young President in the event of a full scale attack by the Russians.

Future intelligent analysts were chosen from the top .5% of enlisted personnel, a motley collection of college drop-outs. Rarely did a candidate come straight from high school graduation.

Because I'd set an iguana loose in 7th period study hall, I was not allowed to attend my high school graduation. Two weeks later, I was in the Air Force.

I'd taken a battery of tests, but being colorblind, electronics was out. My mechanical skills were lousy and I didn't want a desk in administration. That left 'General': cook, cop, and...*intelligence*.

"Two-Oh-Two, Radio Intercept Analyst," I said to the recruiter. "*What's* a Two-OhTwo?"

"I don't know," he said. "It's classified."

"Okay. I'll take it."

Becoming a 202 became a quest, a journey into a Top Secret world 99.99% of America knew absolutely nothing about.

At Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, I barely got through basic training. Then I got my orders.

In September of 1963, across the United States, thousands upon thousands of high school graduates attended their first college class. At Kelly Air Force Base, 28 new students ('jeeps') reported for their initial briefing.

Only one of us was black, a devout Baptist 'parachute rigger' who'd reenlisted to become a 202. He didn't graduate. Only seven would.

We faced a huge map of Russia and Warsaw Pact nations marked with symbols like a gigantic gameboard--an alien world stretching across eleven time zones bristling with fighter planes, bombers, and missiles. Soon enough, we'd be seeing it all in our sleep.

"A Two-Oh-Two in the most unique, most important, most secret job in the Air Force. You're going to be *spying* on the Soviet Union, and if you tell anyone what you're doing...ten years in Leavenworth!"

The first 202s were CIA agents.

In 1951, Radio Free Europe, a radio station set up to penetrate the 'Iron Curtain', began launching hydrogen-filled balloons from Western Europe to drift eastward.

The balloons carried two to seven pounds of 'propaganda leaflets'-- messages of support and encouragement to citizens suffering under Communist oppression, satirical criticisms of Red regimes and leaders, information about dissident movements and human rights campaigns.

Over five years, nearly 600,000 balloons carried more than 300,000,000 leaflets, posters, books, and other printed matter over Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland.

From day one, the Communists protested vigorously and began shooting down the balloons with anti-aircraft fire and fighter planes, just as the planners had hoped.

The 'leaflet campaign' was cited as 'a major part of the post-WWII psychological warfare battle between East and West'.

Such was the 'cover story' to mask the greatest intelligence-gathering operation in history. The CIA had set up 'listening posts' across West Germany, Scotland, Crete, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan to monitor Soviet communications. Staffed with Russian linguists and radio intercept operators, the data was passed to the analysts.

As the Soviet air defense system tracked the balloons, CIA 'Sherlocks' mapped out the entire network. Had war broken out, B-52 bombers, loaded with H-bombs, would follow routes avoiding Red radar to nuke Moscow, Leningrad and other Russian cities.

At the end of the 'leaflet campaign,' the Air Force Security Service took over the listening posts. The B-52 bomber crews would now be counting on us.

"To become a Two-Oh-Two, you must learn how to think like one," said our instructor that first day. "The 'Sherlock' goes his own way, using his 'cipher brains' beyond theories and figures to discover truth."

'Huh?' I wondered. 'What the hell is he talking about?' With that he wrote on the blackboard:

8, 5, 4, 9, 1, 7, 6, 3, 2?

"You smart-ass college boys know all about number sequences. What's the last number and why?"

Like I had a prayer? As the rest of the class did the math, I decided to make my own code, seeing the numbers as words, printing them out in block letters...

EIGHT, FIVE, FOUR, NINE...

"Zero!" I shouted out. "The numbers are in *alphabetical* order."

Had the instructor praised my breakthrough, like the later Obi-Wan Kenobi 'You have taken your first step into a larger world' or perhaps that I had conjured up a moment of Harry Potter magic, things might have been different. Instead he was pissed that after six years of teaching, some punk had solved his pet puzzle.

"That fuck-up thinks he's some kind of Super Analyst," ran through the school.

'*Super Analyst*'! My quest had a name. No typical 202 would I become, but a Top Secret *hero*!

Later that week, we started on simple-substitution cryptograms, not unlike the kind in newspapers' puzzle sections. I had never seen one before, but my highly- competitive parents took great pains to teach me *Scrabble*. I knew all about alphabet frequency and letter groupings.

In ten seconds, I scanned the first coded 'military message', noticing the two and three-letter groupings, identifying the letter 'e', then hit the long word.

"Reinforcements!" I shouted out, breaking the code.

The whole class looked at me.

"Elementary, my dear Watsons," I said.

Roger Wilco. Remember that obnoxious, wise-ass punk from 3rd grade, always clamoring for attention? I hadn't changed much.

After the third week of class, we began to lose guys. I never saw them go; they were just *gone*. UFOlogists wrote about the 'Men in Black,' a mysterious government agency who 'cleaned up' after 'flying saucers'. I began to wonder if the Air Force didn't have 'Men in Blue' whose sole mission was to make 202s 'disappear.'

After 'boot camp', Kelly was the 'real' Air Force with the best mess hall in the country. I'd spend a lot of free time down near the runways watching the planes taking off and landing. A couple of times I'd get lucky and a mammoth B-52 *Stratofortress* would roll down, eight jet engines roaring, its span so great it needed an added landing gear, like an ostrich's leg, near each wingtip. The sight on that bomber taking to the sky made me feel so *safe*.

The school's first sergeant was full of enthusiasm and made us feel as special and as needed as bomber pilots. Unlike ordinary colleges and universities, we had no textbooks and never got any homework. We weren't even allowed to talk about class unless we were in a secure area.

Turn it off, turn it on until it became a reflex.

Becoming a 202 meant buying into the mindset---get it fast, get it right. Who?, What?, Where?, How? and Why? were not enough. What does this *mean*? Not what is, but where it's *going*. Logical inference, deductive reasoning, electronic detective work against the biggest, most dangerous military machine in the world--What the rest of America didn't 'need to know,' we were going to find out.

Then came that Friday no American ever forgot. We were about to break for lunch when a sergeant burst into the class.

"Everyone outside, *now!*" he ordered. "Double-time!"

The whole school emptied out to stand at attention on the tarmac. In a slight Texas drizzle, all eyes zeroed in on the main runway. Like freight trains with wings, the B-52s rumbled down and lifted up, one after another.

It didn't take *Super Analyst* to figure out that...

"President Kennedy has been shot," said an anxious captain. "Return to the barracks and await further orders."

The Air Force had gone to 'Yellow Alert', and was ready to go to 'Red'!

We went to our rooms in shock. Not to listen to the radio or to wait for the next newspaper as our parents might have; we watched it all unfold on black-and-white television

Kelly was only our primary school, designed to weed out the wannabees. By the last week, half were gone. One by one we were called in to meet with a group of officers and guys in suits.

At seventeen, I'd never been arrested. No drinks or drugs. I didn't even know how to drive or screw. And wouldn't learn how to do either for much too long. The Air Force knew all about the iguana and (Surprise, surprise!) my parents had sent me to see a psychiatrist for a while.

However 'intelligent' a 202 candidate may be, he'd be useless unless he had a 'Top Secret Codeword' security clearance. The FBI had sent a Japanese-American agent to interview my former teachers and my neighbors, including the batty old lady three houses down. When told I had enlisted, she asked, "*Whose* air force?"

More than a few were surprised that I had survived the school at Kelly, but the next round would be much harder. And just four hours up the road.

Because it was responsible for nuclear weapons, Kelly's security was high and tight 24/7. Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Texas, had an old runway, few airplanes, but plenty of barbed wire. 'Goodbuddy' was a Security Service *training* wing.

By the AF Specialty Code, 203s were Russian-speaking linguists who had attended American colleges and then came here. 292s were radio intercept operators, 'Ditty-bops' who carried their cumbersome gear on their belts.

"Gee, I wish I had a set of earphones," I'd mock them. Way ahead of their time, the 292s had the last laugh; now half the world can't function without being plugged in.

We all got security badges, black-and-yellow with our photograph. Legend had it that two 'weather analysts', 'flash-dashers' whose training only lasted seven weeks, decided to switch badges as a joke on the Air Police at the school entrance. Within seconds, both were on the floor with guns to their heads and never seen again.

Every weekday morning after breakfast in the chow hall, we'd walk along the fence to the security gate. All around us was the flat, barren, dusty Texas prairie except for a single squiggly tree maybe half a mile away.

I can still see it.

One afternoon, coming back from lunch, our 202 group approached a dozen officers, 2nd lieutenants training to be Watch Officers coming out of class. Standard Operating Procedure called for us to salute them and they would return the mandatory courtesy.

But I held back. The 202s saluted the officers, the officers saluted back. And when their hands came down, *then* I saluted and all those second lieutenants had to salute me.

I needed that.

Permanently labeled as 'a fuck-up,' I was constantly in trouble with the school and the squadron for 'chickenshit' stuff and wound up pulling groups of 'extra duty', two hours almost every day.

In the day room closet I found an old dart board and darts and brought them back to our three-man cubicle. Seven times we'd miss the board playing darts. When the Squadron found out, I wasn't given some filler and a paint brush; the three of us had to *pay* for the wall, in two installments taken out of our meager paychecks.

San Antonio had the Alamo and every airman turned tourist to see it. The San Angelo 'skyline' consisted of a single 6-story hotel, quite a comedown from New York City. Mexico was a constant attraction. Gas dropped to *19.9 cents* a gallon. Guys would pile in a car and head south to be with prostitutes. An innocent Catholic, I didn't see my virginity as

something 'to be towed away at owner's expense.' Or was it because I was too cheap. Or afraid? It would take me a while to work out things with women and girls.

On February 9th, 1964, a bunch of us gathered in the recreation room to witness an event that would be watched by 73 million people across America: the television premiere of The Beatles. Later in the month, a 202 from Rhode Island bet his paycheck against 7-1 odds that *Cassius Clay* (Who?) would defeat Sonny Liston to become the heavyweight champion of the world.

We spent a week on rudimentary Russian and I don't remember a word of it. I'd taken the 'Language Test' in basic training to qualify for a linguist job and failed it. Later I'd learn German, then in Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese.

Soviet Air Defense Forces were known as *Voyska PVO Strany* (National Air Defense Forces - *Voyska Protivovozdushnoi Oborony Strany*). (Mikoyan-Gurevich) Mig- 15s, 17s, 21s and the super-secret MiG-25, plus *Yak* and *Sukhoi* fighter aircraft whose mission was to shoot down attacking American B-52s. The 202s would know their capabilities by rote, where every airfield was and how long it would take each squadron to get into the air. Because the 'Sherlocks' had broken the grid codes, we got so good and fast that often we knew where Soviet aircraft were going and why, even before the Red pilots did.

Our instructors knew the most unbelievable secret of all; that we owed our jobs to 'space aliens'! When one of the balloons in the CIA's future 'leaflet campaign' crashed in an early test, the Company was spooked that their Top Secret mission would be blown, so they ordered the base intelligence officer to report that the Army Air Corps had captured a 'flying disc.'

Then they showed the whole world that the 'flying saucer' was actually a harmless 'weather balloon'. Dismissing the balloon as a 'CIA cover-up', UFOlogists have been looking for the Roswell 'space aliens' ever since.

My father and thousands of other WW II flyers had *trained* at Roswell.

'Soviet Supreme Rocket Forces' rated a week and a half. The Russians had the lead in long-range missile technology and the 'Space Race'. How many operational intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) did they have, where were they and how quickly could they launch them?

'This looks like a job for...*Super Analyst!*'

For a solid week, we were taught how to use a typewriter. I just squeezed by and have been typing 'the Air Force way' ever since.

We lost a couple more classmates, but not because of low test scores. Seems the FBI discovered, not arrest records or divorce problems, but that their families had friends or distant relatives living in Russia or Eastern Europe. The 'Men in Blue' made them disappear.

One afternoon, alone in my cubical, I thought I found a dollar bill in my back pocket. About the same size, the paper strip was a 'swamp' printout of the latest Soviet coded traffic. The 292s hacked in and the 202s broke it.

In a flash, I lit up the Top Secret text and watched it burn in my hand, then flushed the ashes down the toilet.

Every weekend half the base would go into town, trying to score with Texas women. Few succeeded. A classmate would marry one. Being a punk from NYC, I got nowhere.

In the last week of school we filled out our 'dream sheet', where we wanted to go. Most guys made Crete or England their first choice. 'The needs of the Air Force come first,' we were told. Most of the class before us got Pakistan. We got West Germany. I was ordered to the 6901st Special Communications Group in Zweibrücken.

With six others, I graduated and got my second stripe. At 18 years, 2 months and one week of age, I had become the *youngest* 'Sherlock' in American history. That never gets old.

I got a 30-day leave before reporting overseas. In uniform I felt proud in front of my family and neighbors. I visited my high school. My iguana was the star of the biology lab. Everybody looked so young.

Four miles away, the World's Fair was in Flushing Meadow. A 'Universal and International' exposition, its theme was 'Peace Through Understanding,' dedicated to 'Man's Achievement on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe'. Admission, in uniform, was \$2. I took full advantage.

The lavish IBM pavilion was an introductory lesson about...*computers* and how these machines were going to change the world---circuits and memory cores, binary language, the principles of probability, logical structure and abstraction.

In the egg-shaped "Information Machine," I watched a 15-minute show explaining 'How both the human brain and the computer obtained sensory information, fed it to the brain (central processor), and through a program interpreted it to make some decision of what to do.'

I was seeing the future and couldn't 202 how a 'fuck-up' was going to fit into it.

Seeing me in uniform, an IBM suit singled me out. "Did you know that we are working on a program for the Air Force that will instantly translate Russian into English? Are you a part of that?"

Linguists replaced by computers? No damn machine was ever going to outdo a 202! Had I told him what I knew, I'd probably still be in Leavenworth.

On June 6th, 1964, 20 years to the day Americans had stormed the beaches on D-Day, I was on a flight to West Germany. The Red Army and Air Force vastly outnumbered the democratic forces in Europe. If the Commies attacked, *Super Analyst* could be the 'Paul Revere' of World War Three!



"Listen. Do you want to know a secret? Do you promise not to tell?"

The Beatles

'If you don't use your brain,' went my family mantra. 'You're gonna hafta use your back.'

I sure showed them! I'd become a Radio Intercept Analyst, a 'Sherlock', the most vital job in the whole United States Air Force. On the flight across the Atlantic, I imagined being 'Super Analyst - The TOP SECRET hero' at a frontline air base, with a full fighter squadron at the ready as I broke Soviet code matrixes in defense of American freedom. One drawback: if the massive Red tank armies surged into Western Europe, base commanders had standing orders: 'Shoot all the 202s.'

I lucked out. My 36-month tour would be with the 6901st Special Communications Group (SCG), a second-echelon outfit in southern West Germany, far from the front lines in the town of Zweibrücken. Not on an Air Force base, but hidden away on an Army subpost, perfect camouflage for an intelligence command center.

'Sunny Zwei' was a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) garrison town. The *Bundeswehr* (German Army) had a post up the road from us. The French Army was close by. (They'd pull out in 1966.) Canada (3 Wing) had an air base on the other side of the valley. The biggest player was the US Army with 3,000 truckers and support personnel.

Pentagon and Intelligence experts predicted that the Russians would start the next war *without* nuclear weapons. A gigantic *blitzkrieg* of millions of soldiers, tens of thousands of tanks and hundreds of jet fighters and bombers would thrust into West Germany, seeking to conquer the entire country in less than a week. France would then fall even more quickly than it had in World War II.

Only American long-range nuclear missiles launched from the United States could stop the complete Communist takeover of the continent. While the Soviet Supreme Rocket Forces waited, fingers on their H-bomb triggers...Would the US trade New York and Washington for Moscow and Leningrad? Would we sacrifice millions of American lives to save Europe?

Super Analyst added a crucial factor: the initial 'commando' strike. Flown by the prototype of the MiG-25, the 'Foxbat' would blow by NATO air defense at 1,500 mph and at 200 feet to beat radar. Loaded with rockets and bombs, in minutes the MiG would reach the Number One Target and let loose its full inventory. With the 6901st SCG destroyed, the Free World was lost!

Main Operations was two huge brick buildings linked by a 'leaning' ramp, a covered bridge connecting uneven floors. I was impressed by ordinariness of it all. Not an intercept site and before satellite communications, there were no 'dishes' or fancy antennae. A tall fence topped with barbed wire surrounded the complex. From every other fencepost, a mounted speaker played music as broadcast by the nearby Royal Canadian Air Force Base.

I'd be told soon enough that the KGB's Eighth Directorate, the Soviets' communications intelligence branch, had infiltrated West Germany to aim listening devices at the 6901st. Rock n' Roll jammed the Commies' 'ears.'

Up the stairs to the gatehouse manned by the Air Police. I got my yellow-and- black 'Top Secret Codeword' badge with my picture on it. (Later we'd get pure green.) Up three flights of stairs, above admin and crypto and the comm center to the Watch Command, the very heart, not only of the SCG, but of NATO's Early Warning System.

As advised, I gave the duty sergeant my firmest handshake. Shown through the Watch Command, Top Secret maps and Soviet aircraft photos, the elite 202s were at their desks, analyzing the combined data from the Western Europe Theater. A New York City boy, I felt like I was being given a tour of the Yankee dugout. These were the best Radio Intercept Analysts in the world and one of these days, one of those desks would be mine.

But first I had to prove myself in the place where all 'jeeps' got their start.

"I didn't start using e-mail until I was eighteen," sounds unthinkable today, but in Opscomm, it was standard operating procedure.

Two rows of a dozen clattering teletype machines, the whole intelligence network was seemingly alive with flowing data, breaking texts with yellow 5-level perforated tape winding round and round. Bells sounded as messages were sent, including football scores during the season. Long reports were ripped off, separated into the different colors of paper, and put into bins to go where I didn't 'need to know'. Carbon paper was shoved into paper bags blackening our hands.

To become an elite Watch Command 202, 'jeeps' had to spend months and months toiling in Opscomm. Not me. I was out in three weeks. Because I had shown the 6901st that I was Super Analyst?

Exactly the opposite. I couldn't do anything right. So bad that I had to be removed.

"You've been transferred to the EDP division," said the Watch Commander, happy to be rid of me.

"EDP?"

"Electronic Data Processing," he said bluntly. "With the rest of the fuck-ups."

EDP was in the second building. The first time I walked down the tilted walkway, I felt a bit like Dorothy starting on the Yellow Brick Road.

The sergeant in charge was taller than I with flaming red hair. He'd married an English woman from an earlier tour. Introductions were somewhat awkward. All were 202s and drunks.

The thin, gaunt airman who beat up a West German music machine was 'Jukebox.'

'Harry High School' was almost twenty, but that's what they called him.

'King Dude' was the Country & Western lover who wore cowboy boots out of uniform.

None were about to call me '*Super Analyst*.'

'Notre Dame', a proud alumnus from California, had it all 202ed.

"We're the white collar executives around here," he said. "Those guys in Machines are nothing but blue collar keypunchers."

Opening the heavy door, entering the big, air-conditioned Computer Room, I found myself in the second largest data processing center in Europe. Two giant IBM mainframe computers made a buzzing sound I'd quickly get used to. Rows of whirring tape units, boxes the size of telephone booths, ran in two rows on the carpeted floor. The giant printer could be programmed to play, of all things, 'Anchors Aweigh.'

Later I'd watch sci-fi movies and TV shows with futuristic sets and remark, "I used to work there."

Work clattered off the printer--The 'DRIVE'--A thick run of data on big, connecting pages compiled by 202s throughout the USAFSS network, up-to-the-minute info--Soviet air defense, bomber wings, missile bases. My job was 'quality control'--to proofread the proof--that the Russians could attack at any moment.

On the job training took about an hour and half; Super Analyst was ready to roll.

I tried to believe that being a 202 was a little bit like being a fighter pilot.

Reporting for work, showing my badge to the AP at the security gate was like coming on the flight line. 'Machines' was my 'cockpit'. At my desk with my special half red, half blue pencil working the DRIVE, I was defending my country with all the vigor and brains I could muster.

One night, halfway through a midnight shift, an incident about which I didn't 'need to know' brought the Watch Commander and his elite 202, plus a couple of other officers called to duty, into the computer room.

'Jukebox' was out sick, yet another intolerable hangover, and I was alone, a 'teenage trick chief.'

Had the KGB hacked into our system and corrupted the intelligence?

As the DRIVE was placed in front of me, all looked over my shoulders and I felt like I was holding the original manuscript of *War and Peace* and I was the only one in the room who could read it. But I didn't know what it *meant*! Intelligence reporting had become a gigantic, unbreakable number sequence.

"Looks good to me," I said and there were immediate sighs of relief. The sergeant patted me on the back. A few handshakes and back we went to deterring Communist aggression.

Only the privileged worked 'straight days', a forty-hour week. The rest of us were 'trick trash' on a set schedule: four 'swings' - 4PM till midnight, 24 hours off, four 'mids' - midnight till 7AM, 24 hours off, four 'days' - 8AM till 4PM, *96 hours off*. The knot in the string was coming off that fourth 'mid'--how many times do you go to sleep before working the next day?

When the weather was right....Softball game!

Parkbrau, the local brew, cost \$2.35 a case after deposit. We'd buy a stack of beer and...playing the field while drinking a bottle of beer has become a lost art. Just before the pitcher goes into his wind-up, take a good slug, then place the bottle to the side and assume the 'NY Yankee infield crouch.'

If the batter doesn't hit, grab and drink, repeat, repeat.

The first game would go okay, but in the middle of the second, play got a little sloppy. That's when I hit the only home run of my life!

Every Wednesday at the beginning of Lent, you could tell the practicing Catholics by the ashes on their foreheads. And by the ash residue around the eyes or fingernails, who had 'burn detail' the day before.

The 6901st was a paper-heavy operation--texums, reports, print-outs, administration forms and reams of carbon paper. In the secure area, all paper waste was put into paper bags, then dropped into chutes in Building One.

In the basement was the incinerator, a furnace that resembled a cast iron boiler on a steam-engine locomotive. Fired up, bag after bag was thrown in, all day, day after day. One rule: never open a bag of chad, the tiny paper chips from thousands upon thousands of punched IBM cards or tiny circles from five-level tape.

The bag was to be tossed into the fire unopened, then 'duck and cover' as it ignited and roared like a bushel of dry pine needles.

After eight hours of feeding the furnace, the two-man 'burn detail' staggered out, looking like they'd been fighting a forest fire. Rub-a-dub-dub all you want in shower after shower, but the ash residue took a couple of days to wash away.

'Burn detail' was the bane of 202s, but the 'burn bag' cart almost made up for it. A four-by-eight 'flatbed' with a rear 'rollbar' handle, the front wheels rotated like a supermarket shopping basket.

I'd volunteer to push the cart loaded with bags up the connecting ramp and then, one by one, drop them down the chute in Building One. Then I got to ride *down* the ramp.

Standing on the cart, I start rolling down, feeling like a surfer, a juke of my body to the left or right, steering the front wheels. 'Back to the Future' on a giant skateboard, rolling back to Machines. It was the air-conditioning assembly that stuck out into the hallway which took some avoiding.

The National Security Agency (NSA), not the CIA, maintained civilian control over the USAFSS. One morning, an NSA GS-14, the equivalent of a brigadier general, arrived at Machines to upgrade our operation. Mr. Smith was short and wore glasses and looked like Joe Flynn, the frustrated captain in *McHale's Navy*. He and our sergeant would be working together on a program to simplify the DRIVE and eliminate 202 jobs.

Mr. Smith briefed the rest of the shop and then stepped into the hallway.

"Howya doin', Smitty!" I waved, rolling by on the burn bag cart.

After an introduction like that, we almost got along,

I lived on the third floor of the barracks building which also housed squadron headquarters, the commander's and first sergeant's offices and the orderly room on the first floor.

In front of the entranceway stood the sign displaying the USAFSS emblem, designed by an airman and chosen from a command-wide contest of entries. The blue and yellow shield was divided into quarters. The globe represented our worldwide reach, the sword and shield symbolized strength and the winged foot and the lightning bolt our most important quality: speed.

There was no symbol in the USAFSS emblem for truth, but you can't please everybody.

I passed by the sign daily and it made me proud to belong to be part of a Top Secret mission defending America and its NATO allies.

The best beer in the world is free beer. The best parties: *promotion* parties! Every four months when the added stripes were announced, we'd gather at the NCO/Officers' to celebrate or freeload.

That's where I premiered my 'stage act.' I'd been writing 'ditties' since basic training. Jimmy Dean's 'Big John' became 'Big Sarge', the Orlons' 'Don't Hang Up' - 'Don't Re-Up' and the classic Barry Sandler's 'Green Berets' - 'The Ballad of the Green Badge' which concluded, 'Make my son a college grad, don't make him wear the green badge.'

Not that I was any good. It was my timing--waiting till everyone was even drunker than I was.

Singing songs about USAFSS was nothing new. Years before, Airman Jim Lowe became frustrated and curious about the super-secret 'CommCenter', a mysterious, restricted place he was not authorized to enter. That inspired 'Green Door' ('What's that secret you're keepin'?) which he wrote and sang to 'Top 40' fame.

Then there was this Radio Intercept Operator stationed in Landsberg, who brought his guitar and country band and sang on the very same stage. A 'dittybop' by the name of Johnny Cash.

We got a new First Sergeant, 'Tommy', who laid out his policy on Day One.

"I don't play favorites, won't tolerate favoritism," he told us all. "You obey, you'll do fine. But if you screw up, you pay the price, I don't care who you are."

Our older Squadron Commander shipped out and was replaced by a young lieutenant. "You want to survive here," he was told by a superior officer. "You put that First Sergeant in your back pocket." Then came the *Beetle Bailey* comic strip reference.

'Lt. Fuzz,' he became.

The very first time 'Lt Fuzz' reported to work, we almost collided as I came sliding down the long banister rather than walk down the stairs. He promptly ordered me into his office and gave me '2 & 2', two hours of extra duty for two days.

In my four-year Air Force enlistment, I pulled nearly 1000 hours of 'extra detail'. A consistent 'fuck-up'.

For my first three months in Zweibrücken, I went into town only once, with other 'jeeps', to a *Gasthaus* where 'the natives pissed against a wall'. I had too many delicious beers, and had to be helped back up the hill. After that, I stayed on post and drank, still in uniform, like almost everybody else.

Was this going to be my life for the next three years? Cigarettes cost \$1.20 a *carton* and a bottle of beer over the bar, fifteen cents. What's not to like?

It would have been so easy to be like so many other guys, but it wouldn't have been me. I bought some clothes and began exploring a world as new and as strange as the EDP computer shop. Around Zweibrücken, through the beautiful, green meadows wound a walking path, and every couple of hundred yards loomed the broken remains of a reinforced-concrete bunker from the Nazi *Siegfried Line*. After the war ended, the French first filled them with water, then blew them up.

For the most part, I found Germans of all ages to be friendly and polite, and I'm sure they were to the French and the Canadians, too. We weren't quite family, but way better than having the Red Army run their lives.

In downtown Zweibrücken, a couple of blocks from the church with the highest steeple for miles, lay the burnt and gutted ruins of a three-story building, victim of the war. Looking at it I hoped it would never be rebuilt or built over, but left to serve as a memorial, and a *reminder*.

In WW II, my father had flown 57 missions in four-engine bombers, earning a DFC and an Air Medal with clusters, and came home 100% disabled. Which made me wonder how Americans might have felt, their county bombed to rubble and then occupied by the sons of the bombers.

'Deaf and dumb', I felt disabled. I enrolled in the onpost branch of the 'University of Maryland' to take German, a 'system of systems' which I attacked as if it were a Russian crypto-language. I worked and I studied and practiced downtown. Within six months, my drinking buddies would swear that I was 'fluent.'

Serious drinking in Zweibrucken was a pick-and-chose process as there were bars that catered to American soldiers, American and Canadian airman, and one strictly for African-Americans. I preferred the genuine German *Gasthauses*, especially the *Winzer Stube* which stayed open till 3AM, and best of all, would sell me 'bottles to go'.

And after getting very drunk, very late during the summer...skinny-dipping!

A lazy, polluted river some forty yards across flowed through Zweibrucken, past the town park, and the *Schwimmbad*, the public swimming pool and the best place to ogle German women.

But in the middle of the night...As we had done before, 'Andy', 'Bronco' and I left the bar at closing, carefully carrying full bottles of beer, and needing a 'quick dip' to sober up. (*Nein*, we never did persuade any *Fraulein* to join us.)

Climbing over the fence, a tragedy occurred; a beer bottle fell and broke. On we went, stripped naked and jumped in the pool. Noisy drunks playing and splashing like little boys...That's when the *Polizei* car, its toplight flashing, pulled up to the front entrance.

Out of the water in a flash, we dressed and made for the bushes on the river bank. Flashlight in hand, the cop came closer and closer. Not about to get caught, I ran, leaped over my startled buddies and shallow-dived into the river. Swimming madly for the other side, I looked back once. 'Andy' and 'Bronco' had been caught, but the *Polizei* would let them go, perhaps embarrassed by the one that got away.

I scrambled ashore on the other side in the bowels of a muddy construction site. Slopping through, I lost a shoe and had to dig for it. Out of breath, I got behind a heavy bush and hid there as dawn broke.

A couple of hours later, the walk up the hill seemed to take forever. I arrived at the gate covered head to foot in caking mud just as a lone car pulled up. The driver was an officer reporting early for work: 'Lt. Fuzz.'

I snapped to attention and gave him a muddy salute. He just shook his head and drove through without returning it.

Every airmen in the 6901st SCG knew two things for sure: his AF service number and how many days he had left, a longtime military tradition especially overseas. Machines would print-out every month telling every man his number. I started below the heading near the bottom of the chart. *What! Nobody goes home in 1967!*

Other guys left early to join the '2T Program' which meant a remote assignment and an added stripe to go with it. If you married a German, you automatically lost your TOP SECRET Codeword clearance and got shipped out.

And then there were those who 'disappeared', courtesy of the 'Men in Blue.' One old roommate told a bunch at the EM Club that he wanted to climb the church steeple and shoot people like that fanatic sniper in Texas...*Gone!* A 'jeep' reported from the States packing two pistols and a couple of switchblades...*Poof!*

But neither was 'Enemy Number One.' In 1960 a pair of high-level codebreakers defected to the Soviet Union. Both were homosexuals and the intelligence community had been homophobic ever since.

When a pair of Watch Command 202s got so drunk that they passed out in the same bed, their clearances were suspended until an investigation confirmed their heterosexuality. Another 202 built a snow woman with boobs and added stones for nipples...*Gone!* A new guy 'showed feminine tendencies'...*Poof!*

Were any of them queer and subject to Soviet blackmail? National security was taking no chances. Any time we met a civilian who even appeared gay, we ran the other way.

Across the street from the *Jeagerhof*, a *Gasthaus* that served Lowenbrau from wooden kegs in monogrammed half-liter glasses (Of course, I stole one and brought it home. When it broke, I almost cried.), was a cafe that served no alcohol and was frequented by young shopgirls.

It was there that I saw *her*. She was maybe a year younger than I with a clear, quintessential German face. And those incredible blue eyes! The sight of her hit me like a Russian H-bomb.

As she was wearing a smock and her blond highlights looked professionally done, I 202ed that she worked at a nearby beauty salon. I would soon find out her name, but to me, she would always be 'Betty Barbershop.'

What used to be a hassle became a joy. Every two weeks without fail, she would cut my hair. Oh, 'Betty Barbershop'! That lovely teenager had no idea of how lucky she was going to be.

'Oh!' said the GI in Paris. 'You mean Notre Dame's a...*church*!'

The 'Fighting Irish' had returned to legendary prowess in 1966 and about to play Duke, a 24-point underdog. Going beer for beer with my fellow 202 'Notre Dame', I got him to give me 30, then 35, and finally forty points.

If I had truly wanted to take advantage of a falling down drunk, I would have pushed him to 50, even 60 points. Imagine, five dollars on Duke and 60.

Notre Dame beat Duke 64-0.

To see a movie at the post theater cost \$.25, but we had to pay a full dollar to see **Ten Commandments**. Finally, around Thanksgiving in 1966, the film I had been dying to see: **Ghidrah, the Three-Headed Monster**. I arrived about ten minutes before showtime and was astonished; the theater was crammed, all seats and standing room full up except for a single chair in the first row. Then again, the film co-starred Godzilla, Rodan and Mothra.

Lucky to get a seat, I stood for the National Anthem, then sat for *News of the World*, black and white clips from DC, Vietnam and maybe 30 seconds from the Notre Dame, Michigan State 10-10 tie.

During the coming attractions, I turned around; the theater was almost empty! The guys just wanted to see the college football highlights and then left, leaving **Ghidrah**, mothers, young children and me behind.

One lunch, going through the 'chow hall' line, one of the soldiers said, "You're a pleasure to serve"; the other Army cooks nodded in agreement--I was in the habit of saying 'Please' and 'Thank you' and always cleaning my plate.

Working midnight to 7AM, I'd eat at 'Midnight chow', again at 3AM and then have another breakfast after the shift. I fell in love with SOS, 'Shit on a Shingle', cream beef on toast with scrambled eggs on top.

One Christmas Eve, 'Notre Dame' and I had 'lunch' at 3AM. When I went back for my usual third serving, Dan, 'the Scrambled Egg Man' threw two dozen on the fryer and said, "You're going to eat every one of these or you're never getting seconds here again."

Later, for Christmas dinner at a sergeant's house, his wife had heard about my legendary appetite and was somewhat insulted that I barely touched the meal she had worked so hard to prepare.

The mid-1960s was a great time for music. The coming of the Beatles, the Stones, and the Kinks. I'd also learn to love the Drifters, the Impressions, and the Temptations. Then there was this folk singer whose name we never heard spoken. We called him Bob *Dye-lan*.

My music collection was paltry, but I did have '*Victory at Sea*, Volume III,' the Richard Rogers' score from the WW II TV documentary which opened with big naval guns booming and bombs exploding, which gave me an idea...

Almost every morning the German Army would come marching by on the road behind our barracks. This time we were ready for them, with Hi-Fi speakers positioned at the windows.

In full combat gear, the *Bundeswehr* was still a fearsome sight less than twenty years after WW II. In lockstep, weapons on their shoulders, the column approached. At just the right moment, we hit the '*Victory at Sea* 'sound effects.'

I was hoping the German soldiers would scatter in panic, but we did get a lot of helmeted heads looking around.

We slept six in a room, six beds, six lockers. When two airmen shipped out, we knew the beds wouldn't be empty long. My personal area was a mess, part of my 'lack of military bearing'. Was that why my other three roommates suddenly moved, leaving me alone? I should have '202ed the situation' and known better. My new roomies arrived; both were black.

Back in basic training, I had bunked on the first floor of a two-story barracks. After screwing up and spoiling an inspection, that night my fellow airmen decided I needed some justice; a 'blanket party'.

They surrounded my bed, threw a blanket over my head and were about to beat the shit out of me, when the guys from upstairs came charging down.

"No," said one of them. "You leave him alone."

I never did find out why these men had put their own Air Force careers on the line to save my life, but all were black.

For welcoming my new roommates, I got a promotion, sort of. Before I had just been 'a fuck-up'; my new rank: 'nigger-loving fuck-up.'

"What did you expect?" thought many of my fellow airmen when race riots broke out in 1966 and we saw Negroes burning and looting. "You know how *they* are."

In the eyes of my black roommates I saw shame and fear, as if they wanted to cry out, "Not us. We're not like that!"

'202ing the situation' - White people have been committing unforgivable atrocities throughout history, yet I never felt the need to say, "Not me. I'm not one of *them*."

Our redhead sergeant shipped out and we got a new boss. And new orders. From now on, 202s would correct and *keypunch* the DRIVE.

None of us were happy with our new job description. 'Notre Dame' was outraged; 'keypuncher' wouldn't look good on his resume.

As the Air Force had taught me to type, how hard could keypunching be? I had some problems at first, especially my right hand with the numbers pad, but within a week or so, I got the hang of it.

Then one 'mid', I loaded a full deck of IBM cards into the hopper. Instead of first using my special red at one end, blue at the other end pencil to correct the DRIVE, I'd do it straight on the keypunch machine.

A full ream of *PVO Strany*, Supreme Rocket Forces, Long-Range Bomber Wings...Each format embedded in my head. Code sequence, Consec Number, quick correction, but usually *Delete*.

Dupe, Consec Number, *Delete*.

Dupe, Consec Number, *Delete*.

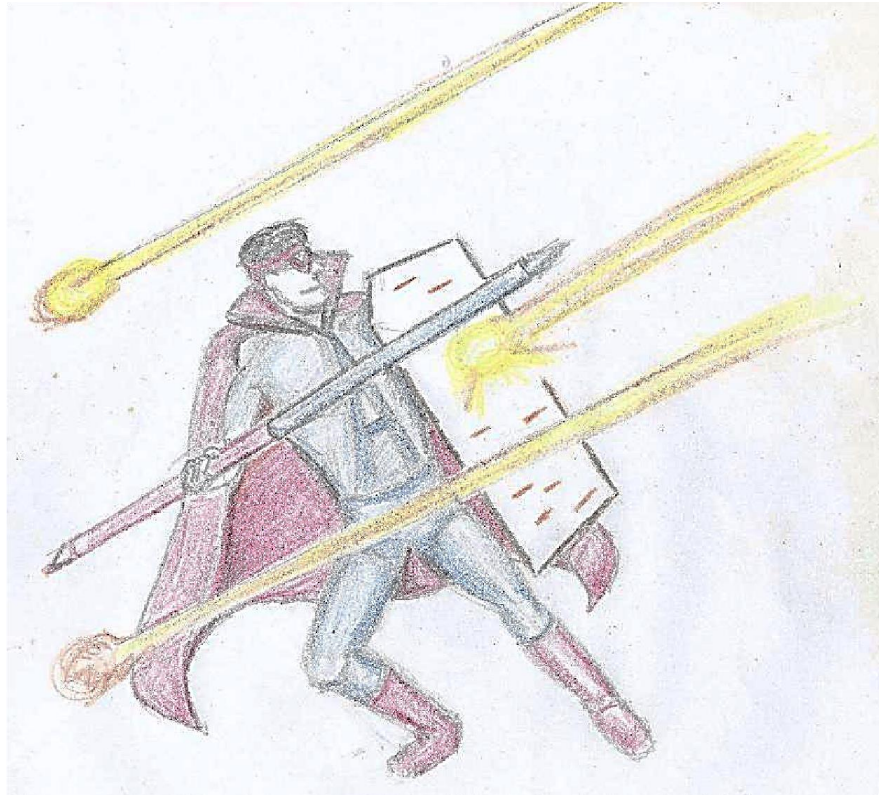
Dupe, Consec Number, *Delete*.

I couldn't help myself. I started to daydream, about frolicking joyously with 'Betty Barbershop' or maybe Raquel Welsh. When I came back to my senses, I had gone through more than fifty cards. What the hell was I doing?

Checking every last one, I found I had punched them all correctly.

That's when it hit me: I could be a 202 without using my brain *or* my back. I had enlisted to be a TOP SECRET hero, only to become a common 'blue collar' keypuncher.

'Mother of Mercy!' Was this the end of *Super Analyst*?



**“Superman or Green Lantern
ain't got a-nothin' on me.”**

Donovan

In every American boy who volunteers to defend his country against a merciless enemy, there burns the dream of becoming a hero. Maybe not like Sergeant York or Audie Murphy, brave soldiers who won the Medal of Honor fighting at the front, but in some way, making a difference.

My father, and so many other men who never got to be fathers, took on the Nazi *Luftwaffe*, and fought and sacrificed so that the next Air Force generation could be...at the dawn of the Computer Age, common keypunchers? Were we all doomed to become nameless, faceless cogs ruled by Machines?

Not me! I was specially chosen from the 'cream of the crud' and expertly trained to be a Radio Intercept Analyst. Was it all a lie? Or worse, a joke? No way was I going to stand by as the legacy and tradition and honor and glory of being a 202 faded into the dustbin of Cold War history.

But what could I do?

Back in 5th Grade I had drawn a black duck and a white duck, who looked a lot like Daffy and Donald, shaking wings. My teacher saw it and remarked 'Birds in their nest agree, why can't we?'

Her catchy slogan rather than my mediocre artwork won first prize in a 'Brotherhood' poster contest sponsored by B'nai B'rith, a Jewish youth organization and in the eyes of my parents, got me anointed as the 'family artist.'

In sixth grade, I played the title role in the class play, *Johnny Has Comicopia* ("Gimme some blood 'n thunder!"), about a boy addicted to comic books, (Mom took pictures.).

I kept drawing. I was hardly a rare talent, but I could *copy* well, and in high school, sketched portraits of my teachers.

My 'comicopia' had no cure. My favorite was *Blackhawk*, a team of heroic fighter pilots, six white guys from different countries and a Chinese cook who first took wing against the Nazis and then the Commies to fight for the freedom of all of us.

The *Blackhawks* wore cool blue uniforms topped with 'bus driver' hats, almost like the Air Force...but I didn't join up to become a common keypuncher.

If I *could* be a hero, defending humanity, not just against Communist Aggression, but the new, burgeoning power of the computer, a heartless technology threatening to rob us of our souls and spirits, and worst of all, our jobs...*Who* would I be?

With a 'No.2' pencil on standard typing paper, I began sketching on a 'mid' shift. Of course, my comic book-inspired character would wear a mask and have a cape, and an 'initial' on his chest. For protection against the fierce foes he'd be fighting...an IBM card shield. And because his 'secret identity' would be a 202, he'd be armed with a special red and blue 'Piercing Pencil'.

As I only had two colors, his superhero tights would be blue, and his cape and mask and boots, red. I made a couple of sketches and then a few more. Finally, just as the sun was coming up, my alter ego had been born...'*Super Analyst - The TOP SECRET Hero*'!

During my next three 'mids' in the Computer Room, I made 'still life' sketches of the various machines and giving the technology evil faces and menacing arms and legs, had them attack my fledgling hero.

'The Terrible Tape Unit', 'Pernicious Printer,' and the 'Malicious Mainframe' battling in red and blue with *Super Analyst* were drawn on separate pages and each resembled a comic book cover. I wasn't ready to do a story yet, but the individual cartoons with captions were somewhat amusing. I inserted each in a plastic liner that fit into a loose-leaf book reserved for classified manuals.

What was missing...an 'origin tale'. *Superman* and *Bat-Man* had theirs. How did *Super Analyst* come to be?

In the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the *Article 15* is 'non-judicial punishment' awarded for minor disciplinary offenses by a commanding officer. I don't remember what I got my first one for. Not work or downtown stuff, but squadron 'chickenshit'. My drinking was at the core of it.

I got a suspended bust and 14 days of extra duty. The *Article 15* meant I'd get no 'Good Conduct' medal and killed any chance I had for a third stripe. But as things shook out, being a 'fuck-up' may have saved my life.

From the day I arrived there'd been buzz that the group would be moving. By the spring of 1966, maybe the Air Force was getting serious. Every 202 was interviewed individually and given a 'dream sheet'. Anywhere from Crete to Japan, even Hawaii was open for reassignment. For my top three choices, I wrote VIETNAM.

Because I had an *Article 15*, I didn't 'qualify' to go to a war zone. Four others did. I don't remember any of the names. All are etched into that long, black wall in DC; their helicopter was shot down before they got to ops.

On the first floor of Building #1, in the hallway of the Admin Section, framed pictures on the wall personalized the 6901st SCG chain of command, including the 'Airman of the Year' (A Negro!). Above the others was Colonel Carl B. Munson, 'CB' to his airmen, the Group Commander, a tall, skinny, graying 'full bird' who could have flown with my father had he earned wings.

"The mission is paramount," he would begin his speech to inspire the troops at the monthly 'Commander's Call.'

Which gave me an idea...

The *Super Analyst* 'origin story' would run six pages, beginning with a young 202 overwhelmed by computerization. Facing a national security crisis, how could an ordinary keypuncher hope to save the world?

Just when all seems lost, the 202 begs the heavenly 'Radio Intercept Gods' for help. Suddenly there is magic from the sky --- a bolt out of the blue turns him into 'The TOP SECRET Hero'!

The first airman to see it was a 202 I had graduated with. I gave him the 'book' to read and walked into the hallway.

"Holy shit!" he shouted. "You're gonna get court martialed!"

On Page 5, 'Nosnum,' the Savoir of Security, a well-copied portrait of CB, complete with his chestful of decorations, shot lightning from his open hand to create *Super Analyst* .

Then it hit me - the badge rack. I had every face in the 6901st at the tip of my 'Piercing Pencil.'

An erratic athlete, in my three years with the 6901st, I only had one 'ESPN Highlight.'

I grew up playing stickball in NYC, and had a quick, accurate arm, but I was nowhere near good enough to play on the post softball team. The *Jaguars* were carried by Watch Command 202s. One year they won a championship.

Early on, I tried karate in the gym, sticking with the program through the tough opening phase. But 'playing' began to interfere with my drinking; I missed too many sessions and the coach cut me.

Because I was tall, had a good arm, could speak German, and the American coach was desperate, I made the 'Team Handball' squad. An Olympic sport, a soccer/basketball hybrid played with a volleyball, I did a lot of singing and drinking, but I never scored a goal. *Scheisse!*

When snow fell, men thought of the hassle of driving and the thrill of skiing; little boys only cared about the 'packing'; I *loved* to throw snowballs. And I had plenty of targets. Going for 3AM 'lunch' on a 'mid', I searched out the Army barracks on the way to the chow hall, looking for open windows. My accuracy impressed even 'Notre Dame.' One winter's morning,

I was heading to the Orderly Room with Maurice, a 202 I'd later be locked up with. I was feeling cocky when I spotted an Army window ajar on the third floor of the barracks some 30 yards away. I pointed to my target, maybe 6 inches by 3 feet and let fly a well-packed snowball.

Touchdown! Nothing but Army floor. Maurice looked at me like I was Alabama's Joe Namath.

Major Brumfield, the commander of the newly-renamed *Automatic Data Processing* (ADP), was a smart guy with a few extra pounds and an easy face to draw. As the legend goes, after a few beers, he had hoisted one at a shop party and exclaimed, "**IBM**. Isn't **B**rumfield **M**agnificent!"

His arm around the Top Secret hero, the caption: *'Isn't Super Analyst magnificent!'*

I got a full box of colored pencils from a 'Sheens' sergeant whose young daughter had 'outgrown' them. Before 'Tommy', the First Sergeant and 'Lt. Fuzz', got to see their 'badge portraits' as cartoons in a comic strip, I went on a 30-day leave with my good friend 'Ditchie,' a small 'swamp' 202 with a faraway look in his eyes. With money in my pocket and \$368 in my American Express savings account, every capital in the British Isles was ours for the exploring.

But the *real* reason I wanted to go to Great Britain was not to see Big Ben or Buckingham Palace, but...*Bat-Man!* The BBC played the new American TV show and West Germany didn't.

London, Dublin, Liverpool, Glasgow, after staying at a 'bed & breakfast' in Edinburgh, I went to the American Express office with my bank book to get some needed cash and was told that they did not honor 'foreign savings accounts.'

Suddenly, we were dead broke and out of *cigarettes!*

We went to the American consulate and got no help at all. Heading into a three- day weekend, he could have advanced us some money with my bank book as collateral, but did nothing.

We were hungry with no place to sleep. I approached a Scottish 'Bobbie' and briefed him. Taking pity on a couple of stranded Yanks, he invited us to lunch at the main police station on the Royal Mile, then offered us 'accommodations': a jail cell.

During the day, we had the run of the city, and for three nights slept in an old stone jail, making me feel like Robin Hood. And the 'Sheriff of Nottingham' - the American Consul.

When the banks reopened, American Express phoned their Zweibrucken branch, confirmed my savings account, gave me \$100, then charged me for the call.

Back in the black, 'Ditchie' and I should have skipped, but we returned to the Consulate to straighten things out. No way. The 6901st had been telegraphed, and the message sat in a box all weekend.

"Your leave has been cancelled," said the Consul. "You are ordered to report back immediately."

"My god!" said 'Ditchie' on the way home. "I've never been in trouble like this in my life. When my parents find out..."

Tears came to his eyes. I was afraid he'd lose it.

"We're gonna be all right," I assured him. "Not our fault. We didn't do anything wrong."

"Well, you've really done it this time," said Lt Fuzz as I stood before him in Class- A blues. "What the hell happened?"

He and the JAG captain wanted answers. The Consul had named me 'The spokesman of the group.'

I took the 5th and was told to change into fatigues. When I left, they interrogated 'Ditchie'. Under pressure, he cracked and gave up the whole story.

The Air Force had nothing to charge us with and sent us back to work.

"Super Analyst in jail," said 'Notre Dame'. "That's the biggest news to hit the squadron since a two-oh-two ran with the bulls in Spain."

The 'Men in Blue' let him finish his tour.

Would they be coming for me one day?

For Christmas, I had given 'Betty Barbershop' and her staff cards and inside, the silver profile of the most popular American in Germany: John Kennedy half dollars.

Still I didn't ask her out because I was afraid; one more rejection might have broken me.

As for my virginity problem, I considered a 'professional solution'. Not in West Germany, but in the Holy City.

The Squadron Chaplin's Assistant was a blond, blue-eyed, Irishman from Boston, and a drunk. One night, downtown at a *Gasthaus*, a table of Americans sang a verse of their favorite country tune. West German soldiers then did a song in *Deutsch*. Not to be outdone, the French soldiers did a number in their tongue.

What language was left?

"*Sallas honor bit tu por grey*," I began a hymn in Latin I had learned in Novena.

The Chaplin's Assistant chimed in and we brought down the house.

When he had to go back to the States on emergency leave, the squadron was compelled to replace him temporarily. In alphabetical order, the First Sergeant checked the roster, and chose the first qualified candidate.

Miracle of miracles! For 30 days, I was the Chaplin's Assistant.

Which meant I got to go on a *second* 'religious retreat'. God bless the Air Force! For \$55, hotel and train travel included, an airman could spend a week in Rome and it wouldn't count as leave time.

The first time I went to the Eternal City, I took in all the sights. In St. Peter's Basilica, standing with a huge crowd waiting for a glimpse of Pope Paul VI, a woman put a move on me. This little, old French lady shoved a camera in my face and begged me in a language I didn't understand, to reach up and take a picture of the Pontiff. After I did, she gave me a lovely smile and an innocent kiss.

We drank as the Romans did, paying a quarter a liter for 'railroad wine' at the train station. On the ride home, I downed six *fiascos* of *Chianti*. The next morning, I had a horrible headache and couldn't see my teeth. My tongue was black and for two days I shit 'tar'.

My second trip came with a sinful mission. On *Via Veneto*, one of Rome's most famous streets, a fellow 202 and I were sharing a bottle of wine at a sidewalk cafe.

Not far from here, on a previous 'religious retreat', 'Notre Dame's' father had flown over to meet up with his son. At a pricey nightclub, Dad paid the band to play a very special song.

"Cheer, cheer for ol'...", the alumni duo sang in 'Fighting Irish' harmony.

I was the one who saw her first. Young and alluring with golden Italian skin, her long shapely legs owning the street. Then she began twirling her hotel key. A 'pro'! Would she be the one?

He who hesitates is lost. While I contemplated, my fellow 202 took off after her. Not too much later he reported back. Her naked body was as beautiful as we both had imagined. She knew two phrases in English she kept repeating: "More money" and "Are you done yet?"

Better him than me. Never again would I consider paying for sex.

Was the 6901st, with its computer-generated intel 'texums', at the very 'nexus of a new technological paradigm'? For some reason, the Air Force must not have thought so. Instead of injecting young, ambitious hotshots into ADP, the 'Sheens' division became a dumping ground for overweight, undertrained 'dead end' sergeants counting the days to retirement.

One got to me; with the 'Piercing Pencil', I went after him. From his badge, I got his pudgy face, then dressed up his bloated body in a Super Analyst costume.

The caption: *'Is this the man behind the mask? **Fat chance!***

Had the offended made a case, I could have been court martialed for insubordination. But instead, the 'dead end' sarge caught me completely by surprise.

"First thing you've said in weeks," he congratulated me. "All the rest is a waste of paper."

I took a hard look back at my work. Dammit if he wasn't right.

Super Analyst was created to embody the fighting spirit on the 202, the humanity in all of us threatened by the new technology. Was 'The TOP SECRET Hero' relevant to anyone beyond the secure area?

Was I?

As USAFSS seemed to believe, if the computer was a 'dead end', then so was Super Analyst!

Speaking *Deutsch* had another 'bennie': it got me a part-time job *downtown*. John Deere Lanz, the West German subsidiary of the American tractor company, had a factory in Zweibrücken producing combine harvesters, and was converting to 'automatic data processing' and needed keypunchers at 16 *Deutsche Marks* (\$4) an hour.

After my Air Force shift, I'd go down the hill to my 'other job'. Maybe computers would catch on. When word got out, I had sergeants begging me to get them an interview, but none of them had bothered to learn the language.

Alas, I was a lousy keypuncher and didn't last long, but I did get a chance to flirt with the female staff. Every one of them shot me down.

My African-American roommates shipped out in the same week. I got three new replacements, led by a 202 from Kansas.

"One good thing about the Vietnam War," said 'Jayhawk', first off. "It kills a lot of niggers."

Lt Fuzz was not one of those 'chickenshit' squadron commanders who'd pull a surprise inspection and then hand out 'extra detail'. When he came into my room one morning, I was either sleeping off a 'mid' or a long night of drinking.

"It's 'Ditchie,'" he said, shaking me awake. "He's had a breakdown. They took him to Landstuhl."

"The 'loonie bin'?" I said.

"I have to visit him," said Fuzz. "I want you to come with me."

The ride took a half hour and I can't remember what we talked about. The trip back would be worse.

'Ditchie' was confined with a half dozen mentally ill soldiers in the 'Behavioral Health Division'. One young corporal stood in the corner, facing the wall and mumbling.

We sat with 'Ditchie' and tried to figure out what had happened. Was it the drinking or the job pressure?

"I don't know anymore," said 'Ditchie.' "It's all Top Secret."

Calm, serene, and completely lost, the 202 I knew had shipped out, the 'faraway look' in his eyes gone to a new place only he could call home.

If 'Ditchie' ever recovered, the 6901st was not advised. We never saw him again.

On June 8th, 1966, the XB-70 *Valkyrie*, the prototype of the nuclear-armed deep penetration bomber for the United States Air Force's Strategic Air Command, crashed. Already canceled as 'obsolete,' the future of the manned bomber as a prime first strike weapon was over.

Originally conceived and created by the CIA to support the B-52, USAFSS was becoming as redundant as a 'weather balloon.'

The 6901st 'social event of the year' was the Fourth of July Weekend when the whole squadron, especially wives and families, would throw a picnic, complete with a full keg of beer under a tent borrowed from the Army. The main attraction was a softball game between 'flights', the ragtag 'Dogs' of 'D-shift' versus the fearsome Baker Flight 'Bombers'.

And I would be the starting pitcher. But just showing up was not enough. I had to show the 69 'Oh-worst' that they were not a faceless, anonymous group performing a vital classified mission nobody else knew about. Not us! The USAF Security Service was America's frontline defense in the Cold War against the Commies, embodied by 'Super Analyst - The TOP SECRET Hero!'

I had this heavy bright red cotton shirt better suited for a lumberjack that got me imagining. I took a scissor to it, cutting around the collar and top button. That would be my 'cape.' From one of the discarded long sleeves, I cut out a 'mask' with 'triangle eyes', just like my drawings, held together behind my head with paperclips.

It would have been fabulous if I could have made an IBM card 'shield' out of cardboard and painted a long broom handle for my 'Piercing Pencil', but in full regalia, Super Analyst was classified; I'd be compromising national security.

The picnic area was packed, wives mostly on one side with children serving food and gossip, the men on the other side in front of the beer tent talking shop. What would they make of one of their own wearing a mask and cape?

I proudly strode out to the mound, hoping for a standing ovation or at least a few good-natured laughs. Instead I was either ignored or mocked.

"Who's that, Mama?" a kid may have asked.

"Some Yankee 'foul-up' tryin' to be somebody," a parent might have replied.

Didn't anybody understand? No Dickens' boy who'd 'set out to be the hero of my own life', but the superhero of my imagination! Up against the Baker Flight 'Bombers'!

I got shelled. Every guy who stepped up to the plate killed my pitching. It got so bad, I couldn't even walk anybody. The ballfield became a driving range. By the third inning, the game was called via the 'mercy rule'. Made to feel like 'Charlie Brown' pitching for *Peanuts*, Super Analyst would never again appear 'in person'. Only on paper and his pages were numbered.

The morning of my second *Article 15* began when I awoke in the West German Army barracks. Drinking with the *Bundeswehr*, I crashed at their place. Walking back to the 6901st, I was late for something or guilty of 'conduct unbecoming a member of the Air Force.' I lost a stripe, got 14 days of 'extra duty', and worst of all, my TOP SECRET 'codeword' security clearance was suspended for three months.

"How *does* it feel?" asked 'Notre Dame'. "Now that more than one hundred million Americans no longer trust you?"

My schedule was straight days. I pulled a couple of weeks at the rifle range and the motor pool where the captain kept his red 1956 Thunderbird that he raced during the season.

Then I got to be the most powerful airman in the 6901st - the 'Company Clerk' who typed up the duty roster. All in turn, every airman pulled either 'hall detail', a janitorial joke, or 'burn detail.' I would choose which. Revenge served hot - Watch Command 202s, the elitists who constantly put me down, got 8 hours feeding the furnace.

I returned to Ops to start a brand new job arranged by Major Brumfield, who wanted to promote ADP in new way. I'd be the 'Group Artist', creating all kinds of charts and graphs for the 6901st. My 'studio' was just across the hall from 'Quality Control' and I was the 'Airman in Charge'.

Super Analyst got me this gig and I wanted to 'Push the envelope'. Created at the very epicenter of the new computer age, I could have a career here. Roger Wilco, my drawings were crude and my stories primitive at best, but early on, so were *Bat-Man's* and *Superman's*.

I dreamed of becoming a comic book artist and writer. I'd send samples of my work to Marvel and DC. They'd take one look at my 'alter ego' and hire me the moment I got my discharge.

But there was a catch: I was a 202. USAFSS had officially designated Super Analyst as 'classified material.' Drawing, writing, even talking about 'The TOP SECRET Hero' outside the secure area - ten years in Leavenworth!

Thirty miles away by shuttle bus, Ramstein was a 'real' Air Force base with a big BX, the closest thing we had to a shopping mall. Every year, there was an air show.

My new roommates and I went to see the Thunderbirds, the precision aerobatic team, flying F-100 *Super Sabres*. Heading back to the bus, an older man came by. Afflicted with multiple sclerosis, his gait like a gyrating corkscrew.

"Some people will do anything for attention," said 'Jayhawk.'

My studio was operational less than a month when the order came in. Should take me less than hour, but I'd first have to change into fatigues. Instead of going back to my room to switch uniforms, I reported to Lt. Fuzz.

"Sir, the motor pool captain wants me to paint his name on the side of his Thunderbird for this weekend's drag race," I said. "On Air Force time."

"And you refuse to do it?" said Lt. Fuzz. "Is that it?"

"No, sir. I'll be happy to paint the captain's race car *after hours*," I said. "Cost him a couple of beers."

The first sergeant heard it all. "You really want to go through with this?"

"If I don't, what's next? You and the lieutenant want your cars painted? No reason the captain should get favorable treatment, right sarge?"

'Tommy' smiled.

"I'll inform the captain," said Lt. Fuzz. "Go back to work."

"Super Analyst disobeyed a direct order!" buzzed through the group.

The 6901st 'art studio' was shut down immediately. Next day, I was back in my old slot, 'trick trash' yet again.

Should I have kept my mouth shut and painted the damn car? Heroes don't bend over to be exploited. Besides, once a 202, always a 202.

I should have done an 8-page 'Super Analyst versus Captain Thunderbird' story. Instead, at the next promotion party, to a Beach Boys' tune, *"And he'll have fun, fun, fun, till the colonel takes his T-Bird away-yay!"*

There was a new hairstylist in the downtown beauty salon. I hardly saw 'Betty Barbershop' anymore. What a pathetic joke. I'd been eying her for years and never had the nerve to even talk to her.

Imagine if I had had the confidence and the charm to pursue and win her. Our consummation would have been glorious! I'd have married her, taken her back to The States and ruined both our lives.

She's probably a grandmother now. How much better that I'm not even a memory.

'CB' left and was replaced by a 'light colonel,' not a 'full bird'. Major Brumfield's successor was also a rank below. The status of the 6901st SCG was sinking fast.

'Sonny' was a churchgoing, Bible-raised 202 and the Number One Fan of the Space Program. On January 27, 1967, I saw him crying; a fire in the *Apollo 1* test capsule had killed three astronauts.

Bob Dye-lan had it right: *'The times, they are a-changin''* America were striving to beat the Russians to the moon with a giant rocketship while 'radio intercept analysis' dated back before the Wright Brothers. Spy satellites, advanced radar and computers had left us behind. Once the prime weapon of the Cold War, the B-52 had been downgraded to 'carpet-bombing' missions in Southeast Asia.

'Freedom Through Vigilance,' said the USAFSS emblem. 'In God we trust, all others we monitor.'

An attitude set in, with a slogan, delivered in a cynical, sarcastic tone: *'First, ya gotta care!'*

So prevalent did the malaise become, that words were soon unnecessary. A shrug, a roll of the eyes, or a throwing up of the hands said it all.

Even Super Analyst felt it. I hadn't drawn a decent page in far too long.

When I went under 1000 days a couple of years before, it called for a celebration, yet another excuse to get drunk. Under a hundred days, I was officially a 'short-timer.' Plus, as I was the only lowly airman eligible for a second stripe, I got promoted.

What to do with the days I had left? I had both money and leave time and longed to travel, but nobody would want to go anywhere with me. Take 30 days and tour the continent alone? I didn't have the confidence or the courage to do anything like that. Not yet.

Lt. Fuzz came up to my room again, but this time he had great news. A committee of officers had gotten together and voted me the minimum points; I had been selected for reenlistment - the Air Force still wanted me.

"If you stay in," said Lt. Fuzz. "They'll probably give you choice of assignment."

For a moment he had me. Crete, Taiwan, Japan, be a USAFSS 'lifer' and see the world.

"Roger Wilco, sir," I said. "Send me to the moon and I'll re-up!"

He shook his head and walked away. The next time we talked he would not be in a good mood at all.

Hard and soft drugs of all kinds would soon be having a devastating effect on American armed forces around the world, but in my three years in West Germany, I never had, nor was I ever offered, coke, heroin, hash or grass.

Imagine ordering 30 12-ounce bottles of cold *Lowenbrau* over the bar; your beer tab - \$1.50. Welcome to 'Nickel Beer Night', every Thursday from noon to midnight at the onpost Rod & Gun Club. That's how many bottles a three-stripe lifer bet me I couldn't drink.

I came in when the bar opened and kept going.

"I had a couple of cheeseburgers and went with you for eighteen," said 'Jayhawk'. "Then I went home and rested my eyes."

Drinking had become a ritual; I'd rip a crease in the label with my fingernail to mark my bottle. Happy, loud, confident, I was a great drunk, so how could I have a drinking problem?

The last ten got counted down, and sticking with tradition, as the club closed, the final bottle got stuffed in my pants. The barracks was less than 100 yards away. I reached for the last bottle, got it, but my pants fell around my ankles. I gave a toast to the USAFSS emblem as I shuffled by the sign.

I remember getting to the second floor. Problem was, I lived on the third. Later they'd tell me that I had thrown about my comic book collection, ranting on 'the Sixty- Nine Oh, Worst and Super Analyst, the TOP SECRET hero.'

An alcoholic 'black-out.' The first time? And next time? Was this the way 'Ditchie' went?

On a springtime Friday afternoon, I had the weekend off. After lunch at 'Mom's', I went directly to the R&G Club. I never ate at the Club; free food was just a walk away. I either played cards or just drank and shot the breeze. I really don't remember what started it.

I was depressed and frustrated sober. Some Super Analyst I turned out to be. A 'fuck up' forever on 'extra duty', I'd buffed more hallways and cleaned more toilets than anybody else in USAFSS.

The more I drank, the worse I felt. Took another walk for dinner, then back, buying three bottles at a time.

I hadn't done enough. Zweibrucken was at the center of everything, and most of the time, I was in the middle of nowhere. I didn't even go to Paris. Not for the Eiffel Tower, the prostitutes! Seems like everybody else did. But not me, I never got to know a woman. I'd be going home a 21-year old veteran virgin!

Nobody's fault but my own, but I wasn't Man enough to blame myself. Had to strike out, wanted a target to show the whole damn group how I felt.

At midnight, I headed for the barracks. Looming larger and larger in my drunken eyes, the USAFSS emblem on proud display.

I went inside and returned with a broom. Swinging it like a hammer, I pounded the symbol again and again.

"I hate this fucking place!"

Blam!

"I hate this fucking place!"

Blam! Blam! Blam!

"Your 'Spidey Sense' should have warned you," said 'Jayhawk', waking me up with a comic book quip. "Super Analyst is in a world of hurt!"

"First, ya gotta care!" I shot back.

The Air Police could arrive at any minute to arrest me. 'Willful destruction of government property' was a mandatory court martial offense. Six months in Leavenworth and a 'Bad Conduct' discharge.

Or worse. They could take me to the Landstuhl 'loonie bin' and never let me out.

Or finally, I'd meet the 'Men in Blue'. I pictured them as a field grade officer and a burly tech sergeant. They'd be polite and professional and take me to that place 202s disappeared to.

No one came.

By regulation, a third *Article 15* meant a 'less than Honorable Discharge' due to 'inability to conform to military bearing'. And it took Air Force intelligence more than three and a half years to figure *that* out?

There would be no court martial. The Air Force had enough problems in Vietnam. 'Super Analyst attacks USAFSS!' The kind of trial the media might run with.

Or was CIA afraid that a disgruntled 202 would fall prey to KGB?

Ordered to report to the squadron commander, Lt. Fuzz had nothing memorable to say until, "You are hereby reduced."

That meant I lost a stripe. Then he called for the Air Police sergeant. He drove me to Ramstein where I'd serve seven days in jail.

A convicted child molester, a couple of thieves, and Maurice, a 202 who had thrown a punch at an NCO; when they found out that I had 'beat up a sign', they laughed at me.

I survived the week, but not my 'alter ego'.

'Top Secret Codeword' to 'Top Secret Codeword.' *Super Analyst* was gone. With the loss of my clearance, his books were stuffed in a 'burn bag' and first on the cart. Down the chute and into the furnace, his ashes amix with the charred waste of USAFSS.

'The TOP SECRET Hero' was born and burned ahead of his time.

I finished up as the squadron's chief lawnmower and groundskeeper. My last day in West Germany was the first day of the 'Six-Day War.' Catching USAFSS, CIA, NSA and KGB radio intercept intelligence by surprise, Israel launched a killer *blitzkrieg* against Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq.

The Israelis also attacked the USS *Liberty*, killing 34 Navy 292s, 203s and 202s. For much of the Cold War, USAFSS personnel have flown 'picket flights' close to the border of the Soviet Union. Those shot down by MiGs died TOP SECRET deaths. They are the genuine heroes whose sacrifice must never be forgotten.

The 6901st Special Communications Group was closed down in March, 1968. USAFSS was redesignated the 'Electronic Security Command' in 1979 and is now called the 'Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Agency'.

My 'lottery' Draft Number would be 363. If not for USAFSS, maybe I never would have served my country. Not for anything in the world would I have missed *being a 202!*

Welcomed back to NYC, I called a number of girls I knew from high school. All said, "Thanks, but no thanks."

I saw a 'Help Wanted' ad and went in for an interview. With my military experience, computer knowledge and language-learning skills, I'd make an ideal Peace Corps Volunteer.

Then came the question: "Have you ever been a member of an intelligence- gathering organization?"

"Yes, *ma'm!*" I replied eagerly. "For the last three years I was an analyst with the US Air Force Security Service!"

With that, she tore up my application. "Sorry, no *spies* in the Peace Corps. Try again in eight years."

My next quest would be delayed a bit.

It took me two years to flunk out of art school, but I started working with kids. That got me to VISTA during the Civil Rights Movement. Thanks to the GI Bill, I got my degree. Between teaching jobs, I spent nearly a year riding around the US alone on a bicycle.

Finally cleared, I served in Costa Rica and then Brazil with the Peace Corps.

Along the way, I got to know a fair number of pretty girls and beautiful women.

'First, ya gotta care!'

1967-1975





© 1956 NBC

Staying a Boy

The scariest moment of my young life came *not* when I almost drowned in the Rondout Creek.

On March, 7, 1955, NBC presented *Peter Pan* 'live' (with the show's original cast), the first full-length Broadway production on color TV. Like most of the 65 million Americans who tuned in, my family and I saw the 'special' in black and white.

After Peter saved Wendy and her younger brothers from Captain Hook and his pirate crew, he returns them home safe and sound. Many years later, that same young boy comes back to take Wendy for yet another adventure in Neverland.

But the little girl had become someone else.

"I've grown up, Peter," she said, studying herself in the mirror. "I have responsibilities. I can't go."

Oh, my God! I swore. That's never going to be me!

Twelve years later I returned home from Europe to discover that my childhood friends could no longer come out to play.

"They're *whir-king*," said Mom, implying that I wasn't.

Dad was in the veterans hospital. In uniform, I went to see him. For the only time in my life, he was proud of me.

Mom had been promoted out of the classroom to become a Reading Coordinator. One of her colleagues owned a summer camp and I got a job as a counselor. I'd wind up doing everything with the full range of kids, from riflery and arts & crafts to swimming.

What now?

I had applied to SUNY New Paltz, a teachers college. My high school tests scores got me a Regent's (aid) scholarship of a couple hundred dollars, plus the GI Bill, and the savings bonds I had bought in the Air Force would be enough to scrape by. As I was just back from fighting the Cold War overseas; they had to accept me.

SUNY turned me down; my 'permanent record' was that bad.

As the first son born to 'born here' Americans, my christening was the biggest blow-out in our family's history--I'd be the first man of a new generation!

I grew up with my two brothers and two sisters in a single-family, 3-bedroom brick house on 53rd Place in Woodside, Queens. We had maybe ten boys on my block. All were white. Two were Jewish. Negroes and Puerto Ricans lived on another planet in the nearby Projects.

In first grade, my teacher reported that I did not 'work and play well with others.' By third grade, I was sitting alone in the back of the classroom, away from the other kids.

In high school I was a skinny, wise-ass, pimple-faced punk constantly picked on and afraid to fight back. I didn't enlist; I ran away.

Back in Woodside from my camp job after the summer, Mom told me we were moving to Jackson Heights, a little more than a mile away.

Jackson Heights would be a step up from the middle and lower-middle class Woodside. And a new beginning. Doing what? I had no skills. I was scared to death that I'd get a company job and be '*whir-king*' for the rest of my life.

My younger sisters, Eileen and Kate, and my younger brother William had left home, rarely to return. Dad had moved out. Only my youngest brother, Mike, a high school junior, would be living with Mom and me.

Our new home was on 86th Street off Northern Boulevard. Three stories with a full basement and a garage. No one in my family would ever live in a bigger house.

Like 53rd Place Woodside, and thousands of other city blocks across America, 86th Street was not unlike an island, surrounded by streets and bisected by an alley lined with garages and small plots for gardens.

What was I going to *do* here?

Even though I'm colorblind, I had been ordained the 'family artist.' The School of Visual Arts in Manhattan could be the place for me. I went in for an interview and was told I needed a portfolio to officially apply. I went back to Jackson Heights committed to getting into art school.

In the fall of 1967, I spent my days drawing. Assembling a \$1 model of Tarzan, I sketched his plastic body over and over. It wasn't until my brother Mike got home from school that things picked up. In the alley we took up a lost American pastime: 'Having a catch.'

A couple of the local kids came out to watch.

"You wanna play 'running bases'?" I asked them and quickly explained the rules.

A simple game of 'catchers' and 'runners'. In Woodside, the older athletic boys had always been the 'catchers' and the younger boys the 'runners', racing back and forth to avoid being tagged.

In Jackson Heights, I promoted myself and my brother to 'catchers'. Like me, Mike had a quick, accurate arm. We made for a formidable duo.

Our new 'runners' were obviously Puerto Rican. Camilo was 8 and his brother Jose two years older. As the game picked up, Jorge and Carlos, another set of brothers joined in. Lighter-skinned, I knew Puerto Ricans when I saw them.

As the boys ran back and forth, for a moment I imagined my old Woodside friends, pointing at me and laughing. "How desperate can you get, playing with spics!"

I was having fun and so was everybody else. Forgetting his name, I called Camilo "Little Red Pants" after his bright shorts.

My brother Mike had a better idea. A TV cigarette commercial (Remember them?) featured a stereotype Hispanic who 'Never finished anything' with an easier name.

Mike called the little kid 'Paco'.

Then I called him 'Paco'. As did the other boys. Then his Mom and Dad. Forty years later, his wife, his children and everybody else know him as 'Paco.'

'Post-traumatic stress syndrome' did not begin with the Vietnam War and will not end with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dad was a 100% disabled veteran due to a back injury, but most of all, because he brought his combat memories home, and try as he might, could not drink them away.

He was staying at a motel near LaGuardia Airport. I'd take the mile and a half walk to see him, hoping to catch him sober. Tall, thin, frail and burnt out, we'd smoke cigarette after cigarette trying to come together.

My dream of becoming a comic book artist and writer didn't fly with him.

"Be a man," he said, coughing between sentences. "Do something *real*."

Football was real. As a child in Woodside, I never got to be quarterback. Instead I was stuck in a position where I couldn't screw things up. One day, in St. Michael's park, Doughy, one of the bigger, older kids broke free on a run. We had no equipment. I grabbed him high and brought him down.

For that he beat me up.

Before I joined the Air Force, the National Football league was in black and white TV. Three clouds of grainy dust and then a kick. When I returned, the game was in full color and Joe Namath was throwing the ball all over the field.

Mike had an old football and we began 'having a catch' in the alley. The boys quickly joined in and we had a game. No tackling, strictly two-hand touch.

All the boys wanted to play and learn. Foremost was how to *listen*. Those who ran the play as instructed got the ball thrown to them. Catching was one thing; *defending* was another. In the years ahead, watching pro and college football, if our favorite teams being overrun by a mediocre offense, Mike and I would exclaim: "'Paco' defense'."

During my senior year I had worked afternoons as a subway messenger for a photo engraving company off Greenwich Village.

"Best service we ever had," said one of the twin Armenian bosses when I went to see them.

"Free, white and twenty-one," said the other. "You got the world by the balls."

Only in SPUD, an alley game. Played with a rubber *spaldeen*, the boys and I formed a circle and chose names of cities. A colossus among children, I took the most intimidating berg in history.

The 'declarer' would bounce the ball hard on the concrete. If your city was called, you had to either catch the ball on the fly and then 'declare' another city or, catching it on a bounce, cry "SPUD!"

Everybody then froze and you had to hit one with the ball. Miss and get a 'letter'; four letters spelled SPUD and you were out.

To begin, the boys and I raised our right arms to proclaim, "Those who are about to die salute you."

Of the younger brothers, Phil was the most athletic, Paco the slyest. Jorge, who had first shot, ached to show everyone his pent up bravado. He wound up and looked around at every other boy and then up at me.

With a smile, the little boy we'd soon called 'Superstar' made the bravest of plays.

"I declare war on...SPARTA!"

I walked to see Dad at least once a week, and with each encounter, he seemed frailer, the war hero fading away. In his mid-forties, would this be me one day? On the way, I'd stop to smoke a cigarette by a large grass tract off the expressway. One day the boys would name the field after me.

A third duo of brothers joined in, Greek Americans. Ricky was 11 with big brown eyes full of wonderment and purpose.

"Well," said 'The Fabulous Ricky'. "Let's play."

Ricky's older brother was thirteen, thick, strong and game. And he brought a leather football with rawhide laces that made it easier to grip and pass.

After he made a nice catch on a long pass, my brother cried out, "The Incredible *Dean!*"

But on another pass play...

"Cross the middle," said 'The Incredible *Dean*'. "Throw it before I get there." I did and broke his finger.

His father came the next day. Had he decided to beat the hell out of me for hurting his son or worse, take legal action, a score of adventures would have never happened.

"It was an accident," he said calmly. "I understand that."

Dean's finger is crooked to this day.

Artist or not, I always wanted to be burning to make something. And when I didn't have any ideas or 'pieces' to create something new, I'd build a model. Mostly WW II airplanes. I was still in my amateur stage, but I'd get better as I went along.

The first time I saw Ronald, he was 12 years old and charging up the alley, thrusting out his leg as if he were posing for a football bubblegum card. Tall, strong with brown hair that would grow much longer, we called him 'Gorilla-Step.'

Counting the days until he could ride a motorcycle, Ron instantly became part of the group.

'Carlito' on his high school track team, was sprinter fast, but couldn't catch. One day he brought his teammate Tom, not quite a teenager. Blond and blue-eyed, Tom had a eager naiveté fresh from *The Waltons* TV series. 'Tom Boy' was his tag.

A second Joe showed to see what Phil, his younger brother, had been talking about.

"Can you play football?" I asked him.

Tall, slim and full of energy, the second Joe hesitated.

"He's great!" said the first Joe.

'Great One' he became and lived up to his nickname again and again.

Mom didn't like it that I wasn't 'whir-king', but she didn't mind me playing. A dedicated teacher, maybe she thought I did inherit her drive, that I'd learn a lesson from 'the boys.'

I had always been skinny and weak. I got a set of weights plus a weight bench. Mike and I began working out every day in my room at the top of the house. I was going to be a man!

My next visit to the School of Visual Arts got me accepted. I wanted to show them samples of my Air Force cartooning, but the character had been classified TOP SECRET. My 'Tarzan' sketches got me in, but just barely.

Mom was delighted. Her plan was for me to become a well-paid artist who'd meet a nice girl, get married and give her a first grandchild. That would be on hold for nearly twenty years.

Next door lived the Irish Macks, crewcut conservatives with eight or nine children, all of them overweight. Mrs. Mack called my brother and me 'sports fanatics.' Ten-year old Jack was the right age to join us, but his parents wouldn't allow it. Jack would watch TV football games only to see the halftime marching bands.

In a back alley or in the Super Bowl, it is the dream of every player to have that one unforgettable moment that would be 'instant replayed' forever.

The boys and I were in the middle of yet another game. I quarterbacked for both sides. Margie Mack, twelve and already fat, came by on her bicycle with Stefanie, Dean and Ricky's sister, riding on the back.

"Little boys think they're real football players," Margie mocked us as she pedaled through our field. "You can't get us."

The boys looked to me as Margie rode away laughing. Is she right? Are we just pretending?

"Gimme the ball," I said.

Ricky handed it to me.

"You're not going to hit my sister, are you?" asked 'The Incredible *Dean*'.

I wasn't thinking, calculating: two girls on a bike riding away, 20 yards, 25 yards... Had I reared back and thrown a line-drive 'bullet', I might have hurt them. Instead I let the ball go high.

Connecting with a receiver, a quarterback can tell by his target's eyes if the ball is too far, too short, to the left or to the right. The girls never turned around. Like a bomb, the ball dropped out of the sky and hit Margie on the top of her head.

More in shock than in pain, Margie was pissed.

Paco was in awe.

"Who *is* he!" he said.

The other boys looked up at me.

I was home.

Mike and I were lifting weights every day in my room at the top of the house which didn't leave me much space for my budding art career. Mom had never been a 'garage parker'; she couldn't be bothered with the hassle of opening and closing the heavy wooden door.

The boys helped me clean it out. That's when I found a box filled with the leftovers of my electric trains. Mom had given away my 'childish things' while I was overseas, three full sets of trains and accessories, but somehow these remnants had been missed. A wooden station, an 'ice station' with boxcar, a few other cars and a string of tracks.

"Well," said Ricky. "What do we do *now*?"

Surrounded by the boys, a childhood Woodside tradition took hold.

"We could burn them," I said, remembering the dozens of models we had burned in my old neighborhood.

"Burn, burn, burn!" shouted 'Tiny Tim' and Paco, Ricky and Jorge joined the choir. We set things up as if this were a 'real' train diorama.

A few squirts of lighter fluid would ensure a hearty blaze. I touched it off in three places and like campers in the woods, we gathered around the fire, a baptismal blaze of melting plastic spewing charcoal smoke.

When it was over, the boys took great pride in cleaning up the charred ruins. And couldn't wait for the next one.

"With that 'ceremony'," observed Ricky. "We became a tribe."

The fire had forged us. Later I'd find out that old Lionel stuff was worth a fortune to collectors.

There'd be many more. 'Tiny Tim' would scour the neighborhood for abandoned models and toys, leading the call to "Burn, burn, burn!"

It would take 'Tiny' a while to get his adult life in order and find himself; he became a New York Forester.

According to Jackson Heights' scripture, when Moses came down from the mount with the holy tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, he also received a special gift from God: the keys to the St. Joan of Arc's gym.

Just a few blocks away, St. Joan's church and school was the Catholic center of the community. In Woodside, I had attended *Corpus Christie* church religiously, making First Holy Communion and being Confirmed. I'd also made a Novena and nine First Fridays of the month masses; anything to get the soul of my beloved grandmother out of Purgatory. No longer a practicing Catholic, I still saw the church as a special place.

The boys' parents were active in the church. The pastor was an unapproachable old man, but I did get an introduction to Father Mike, the new young priest.

"Very well," he agreed as if speaking from heaven. "You may use the gym on Saturday mornings, but no one is to go up on the stage."

I took his every word as Gospel. None of us would dare to do anything to compromise our holy privilege.

Seven boys and I assembled that blessed morning. With the turn of the key, I felt like I was opening the Pearly Gates.

Paco, Ricky, Jorge and Jose were hardly experienced basketball players and neither was I, but 'Gorilla-Step,' 'Tiny Tim' and his brother 'Great One' could shoot almost as well as they could dribble.

We all wore sneakers and treated the church gym as if it were sacred and I looked forward to weekly games.

That's when 'Tiny Tim' went up on the stage.

Oh, my God! I thought. *This whole thing was going to hell!*

Like an avenging angel, I hopped up on the stage, grabbed 'Tiny Tim' and in front of the other boys, spanked him.

Assault in the first degree? Blatant child abuse?

Had this been about a single boy defying an overzealous adult, when the parents found out, I'd have been led away in handcuffs, but 'Tiny Tim' had openly disobeyed church law and received corporal punishment.

He wasn't hurt, but he was embarrassed. The spanking had one positive effect: nothing like it ever happened again.

"I'm going over to Kevin's house to watch TV," one of the boys would say.

"You're not going to be alone with him, are you?" a cautious mother would ask.

"Oh, Mom. Nothing like that. All the kids are going to be there."

Before the VCR and the PC, the power of television peaked in the late sixties with a monopoly on eying the universe, local news and foreign wars. Too many children were being raised not by Mom and Dad or single parents, but by a gray glass screen.

Time to take out our frustrations, especially on weekends when Mom and Mike would be at the High Falls country house.

Early on, I had made a dump run with Mom to get rid of stuff left behind in her new Jackson Heights home. An old TV set sat atop a garbage pile. At my feet, a pile of rocks. With the second throw...

The boys set up the discarded TV they had found in a neighbor's garage behind my house with the screen facing the sky. Then they got the best views from my kitchen window.

"Three, two, one..." went the countdown.

BOOM! The screen would implode when I dropped a blue 20-pound weight from the third floor.

One errant drop caught the wooden trim on the garage. We painted it up and Mom never caught on.

Paco led the other younger boys to seek out and bring back discarded TVs, from full consoles to small portables. Almost every weekend we'd have a 'TV show'. Years later, Paco would make big bucks as a television executive.

The first snow fell in late November.

"The packin's great!" said brother Mike.

Snowball fight! Mike and I would get behind a car in front of our house against six to eight boys on the other side of the street. Throwing and dodging, no charging, no faces washed in snow. A 'serious' streetfighter, I wore no gloves and after a good work-out, my hands looked like raw hamburger.

"Packed this one like stone," said Mike at the height of an early fight. "If it hits somebody..."

It did.

"Iceball!" cried 'Tiny Tim', clutching his wounded leg. "Iceball!"

That fight was over, but next snowfall, the boys were back for more. And I gave it to them. They said my snowballs 'whistled' as they zoomed across the street.

Then came that day when a dirty white missile slammed into my right eye. With my left I could see who threw it: Paco, looking like he'd just shot the family hamster.

If one of mine had hit him...? I thought.

The fights went on, but with a little less intensity.

For Christmas in 1967, my sister Eileen gave me a present I'd treasure for years: a 'real' NFL football. In the middle of the night, Mike and I went out in the street for our first catch.

On the second day of art school, my father died. Suddenly I was the man of the family; and unready to be one.

The School of Visual Arts in Manhattan wasn't a 'real' college yet. It wouldn't offer degrees until 1972. And I wasn't a 'real' artist, but I'd try to be.

Growing up with a couple of sisters, my first nude came as no surprise. Most were plain, but a couple looked right out of a girlie magazine. The trick was to capture light and dark, shape and shadow, face and form as I alone saw them. I struggled, searching to find my line, my perspective that would set me apart from everybody else.

"Your first attempts at anything will be mediocre at best," Telly Savalas, the Hollywood actor, once told my waitress sister. "If you want it bad enough, you'll keep working and things'll get better."

Would they? The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War were tearing the country apart. An Air Force vet among hippies, and desperate to fit in, I let my hair grow long.

The boys began lifting weights with my brother and me in the garage, imitating our various exercises. One day Jorge's father walked up the alley to check on his son. "I am strong," bragged Jorge, lifting 40 pounds on a bar over his head. "Are you?"

His father picked up the bar with one hand and pressed it over his head.

"Yes," said Dad. "You are very strong."

Queenie's was the best, and cheapest pizzeria in Woodside. \$1.20 for a big cheese pie. Read the sign on the wall: *'Try our world famous salad.'*

"Mom," I asked. "Is it true?"

"Oh, everybody says that," she replied.

And in Jackson Heights...

"We lift weights to get stronger," I told the boys. "Not to show how strong we are."

From the art school store I brought home a big piece of white poster board and graphed in a list of exercises, a succession of graduating weights, and each boy's name as well as my own.

The only 'art' I would create in school, for the first and last time, our names were linked. Together we'd be lifting weights to complete the 'world famous chart.'

Mother Nature endowed all men with X-ray vision. With veterans, the power is especially acute. Art students, of course, acquire taste.

And nothing is more beautiful, more inspiring than the feminine form. I never forgot the first time I saw her, running to me. Those pert, lovely breasts and colty legs, her dark eyes alight with enthusiasm.

She reaches for me, shaking me with her desire.

"I wanna play SPUD!" said 12-year old 'Mousy'.

Her friend Diane was a budding willowy blond. Beth, a year older, would probably show them both up before she turned 21.

In my eyes, they were children; I restricted my X-ray vision to art school and the subway back and forth.

In springtime, a boy's attention turns to softball. And I knew just the place to play.

I went to 'Tiny Tim's' house first. He had an old fashioned gold bicycle with bright whitewall tires. I would ride it with him on the top frame tube. 'Great One' was ready to go. We had gloves, a bat and a ball. The game was halfway there.

Paco, Jose, Jorge and Carlito joined up on their bikes, then 'Gorilla-Step' and 'Tom Boy' met us at my garage. One last duo to go.

"It's too far," whined 'The Incredible *Dean*'. "It's too cool and it's too cloudy."

Persuading him and Ricky to come to 'Kevin's Field' became a ritual.

On April 4th, 1968, the Civil Rights Movement took another violent turn; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Riots broke out across the country. Mom was afraid that 'Negroes from Jamaica and Corona [poor black neighborhoods nearby] would come and burn Jackson Heights.' Nothing scared her more than the image of her house on fire.

Bernie, the coordinator who owned a summer camp, became the new man in Mom's life. Without a word, my former boss moved in with us. The opposite of my tall, Christian heroic father, Bernie was short and believed he'd been barred from combat because he was Jewish.

Bernie was a terrific guy. He made Mom happy and would later travel with her across the country and then around the world.

"One of the good ones," a lifelong anti-Semite would tell me.

Mom and Bernie went upstate for the summer. I stayed home; the School of Visual Arts had a 'community course' and I helped build a playground for 'underprivileged' kids.

None of that in Jackson Heights. As far as I knew, the boys came from strong families with solid, secure incomes. Poverty and racism seemed as far away as the Vietnam War.

September had the boys and me back in school, and every afternoon we'd gather in my garage to play or lift weights.

I'd discover later in life that I was at my best when I wasn't conforming to a set text or following an established program. No 'by the book' because I was writing a new one as I went along.

What was going on here?

The 'world famous chart' came with an unforeseen side effect: discipline. To fill in a box, a boy had to perform three sets of five repetitions with the designated weight in front of witnesses, often humming the ABC Olympics theme. One slip or error meant instant disqualification.

Or embarrassment. Once we were playing in the alley when we heard screams coming from the garage. Paco had been bench-pressing alone and couldn't lift the weight of his chest.

"Paco," said 'Gorilla-step' as he pulled up the bar. "You can't walk and chew gum at the same time."

"I *can*," came the reply. "I tried it."

'Ooh-rah!' is the battle cry of the US Marines.

'Yes!' says the basketball player when he hits a long shot.

And in Jackson Heights...?

'Great One' was on his third set of 'military' presses; legs straight, bar up from the shoulders, no pushing. And when he got the last one up, he set down the weights, and threw up his fists.

"Who *is* he!" shouted the boy in triumph.

At Visual Arts, I was nobody. Only once do I remember a teacher complimenting my work and then chiding my "inability to handle a little praise."

Halloween is a boy's holiday. But no one in the group went to any trouble to make a costume except 'Great One'. Wearing a period fedora, fake glasses and mustache, and strumming an unlit cigar, he walked and talked like 'Groucho Marx'. But sadly, he wasn't funny.

Two years later, 'Great One' would make a legendary comeback with a performance that would rock half the Heights.

For Christmas, Mom and Bernie went to the Bahamas and got married. I had no money to buy them a 'real' present, but they both had an interest in sailing and history and there was an empty shelf over the fireplace.

At the local hobby shop, I bought a big model of the only sailing ship they had, a plastic Spanish galleon. After many hours painting and building, I got to rigging the sails and hit a wall.

Jose never got a nickname; he already had one: 'Joe'. He came over with his pretty girlfriend. He'd *always* have a girlfriend. Intense and intelligent, Paco's older brother burned to take on new challenges. Later, as a business manager, he'd get things done around the world.

The assembled model sat on my dining room table. The instructions and the thread and the tiny parts lay ready, but I felt dead in the water way over my head.

Jose took a hard look at the task at hand.

"This is easy," he said. "Rope by rope, mast by mast."

It took us two nights, but we did it beautifully and the ship sailed proudly on the mantelpiece until the fire.

"We'll give this game a couple of minutes and then go out and throw the ball," I said to my brother at the start of Super Bowl III. Everybody knew the Jets were going to get killed and I didn't want to watch a predicted rout.

But in the middle of the second quarter and up by six points, after Namath just missed on a long bomb...

"I think the Jets are going to win," I said. And it's not that I was right, but that I saw the reality of it and it was like standing up in St. Joan's and saying that God was dead.

'Majority Rules' doesn't make the Majority right.

Trying to impress the other boys he wasn't allowed to play with, the overweight Jack bragged that he had a 'whole fleet' of plastic ship models.

This set off 'Tiny Tim', Paco and the 'Fabulous Ricky' who would sing like a choir under Jack's window. "We want the 'mystery fleet'! We want the 'mystery fleet'!

Jack finally gave in and we lined up the half dozen models, none of them assembled very well, and burned them.

A classic blaze, it was Jack's single moment as one of the boys.

Would I ever have one at art school?

To paraphrase a poet 'The lightless asteroid exists for billions of years while the meteorite will burn to nothingness in mere seconds. Given the choice, I take the latter, if just for an instant, to light up the world.'

Asked what that meant, the quarterback of the Oakland Raiders replied, "Go deep."

"Deeper than you've ever gone!" I'd say to one of the boys who'd go tearing down the alley as I rocketed a 'Jackson Heights' Rainbow' forty, fifty, sixty yards, more often than not, accurate, and more than I'd care to remember, dropped.

Try, try, try again.

So must the artist if he can find the courage and confidence to reach *into* himself and let his truth be seen. I couldn't find mine. My paintings and drawings lacked that indelible, unique touch that announced that a 'real' artist was arriving.

I teamed up with another student who wanted to get a job as a comic book inker. Together with sample scripts and artwork in hand, we visited the big NY companies.

My naiveté and my work were equally obvious and I was rejected on the spot.

Should I have compromised national security by revealing the classified character I had created in the Air Force?

Just imagine me pitching to Stan Lee, the God of Marvel...

"At the dawn of the computer age, to take on the new technology before it takes over humanity, the youngest 202 in America becomes...

"Protected by an IBM Card shield and armed with a Piercing Pencil...Super Analyst, the Top Secret Hero!"

With professional courtesy, Stan 'The Man' would have turned me down, then made the call. The Feds would have picked me up in a New York minute.

'Gorilla-Step' got his motorcycle and brought it to my garage for temporary storage. He'd later park it down the block in Jose and Paco's. Proud as can be, he did his own custom lettering on the back of his leather jacket, announcing to the world the newest member of 'Hell's *Angles*'.

For some reason, we never saw that jacket again.

Instead of watching cartoons on Saturday morning, softball games at 'Kevin's Field' became the weekend neighborhood pastime. But soon, it was not enough; the boys wanted to play 'Johnny Airport.'

Back in Woodside my friends and I would ride our bikes to nearby LaGuardia and explore all the ticket stations and boarding areas, gathering up stacks of pamphlets. Then we got bold, sneaking around to crouch behind the landing lights on the main runway. The airplanes came in, their whirling propellers less than 30 feet over our heads. One pilot quickly alerted security; the cops came and chased us away.

With the Jackson Heights boys, I kept looking for the massive terminal building and couldn't find it anywhere. Had my earlier adventures all been a dream?

"They tore down the terminal last year," a cop told me.

We went up and down the old escalators, observed on the Observation Deck and picked up a bushel of pamphlets.

Try that today...

Jackson Heights' 'Terror Recon' at LaGuardia

Blame game? 6 Kids, Adult plead 'Johnny Airport'

I got to first base with a pretty Fine Arts sophomore, but she dumped me when I tried to go further. Another student brought in a football and I began spending almost as much time playing in the street in front of school as I was in class.

At home came the meaningful time. Every afternoon the boys and I would gather in my garage. Not as a team or a class or a gang, but always with the need to do something. To play or to plan, there was a spirit to us. Responsibility, girls, and careers were in the future we'd all get to soon enough; here and now we were boys and feeling every moment.

At the local Toy City, I had bought a couple of chess sets and then painted them up special. The boys took to the game right away.

Paco would become an excellent player, beating me, and later, my brother Mike. But in his early days, when the fate of the game craved a bold thrust at the heart of the conflict, Paco would flee to a safe and riskless spot to advance a pawn. And quickly lose.

Such avoidance was termed 'a Paco move'.

Was that what I was doing?

Not Bernie. The science coordinator had begun a new challenge: Aerospace Education - 'Johnny Airport' for school kids. He got a classroom and all kinds of neat stuff from the local airlines eager to have children learn about flying. What he wanted, spanning the wall facing the students, was a series of paintings showing the history of aviation.

Even if I had real talent and a burning obsession to express myself visually, the chances my becoming a self-supporting professional were slim. Art to help children learn? As Visual Arts offered no degree, graduates were unqualified to teach in city schools. The only jobs available were 'paste-up' positions, gluing together other people's ideas.

I wasn't going back. Creatively, there was no place left to go. Most important, the 'aerospace project' would allow me to continue...*playing*.

My third floor room became a painter's studio. Smoking Camel after Camel and watching a portable television, I was 'whir-king'. First, *Icarus and Daedalus* on a bright blue sky with a burning yellow sun. Mom and Bernie liked it! Then the first balloon and the first glider. I stole Joe Kubert's art from a comic book to create the Red Baron and from a second comic, planes of WW II.

I'd proudly show the boys.

"Oh, wow!" said 'The Incredible *Dean*' about one. "It looks like a real artist did it."

Me? Cut-and-paste, then straight by the numbers, churning out 'real' aviation paintings? So much for being the quarterback of my own life.

Then...what was I going to *do*? Work in a factory or a retail store? Maybe a student at a 'real' school? With the war going full ablaze, I could go back in the service.

And wind up like my heroic father?

In the summer, I was again a camp counselor and got involved with a sexy arts & crafts counselor with large, soft breasts and a loving tongue. Alas, *Apollo 11* astronauts walked on the moon while I blew up on the launchpad.

When I got back to Jackson Heights, 'The Incredible *Dean*' had graduated from the Bronx High School of Science and enrolled in college. We'd see less of him and miss him more. Vinnie was still living at home and having a tough time in school. I'd rarely see him. All the other boys came back, ready and eager to play. With a couple of 'burns' and a 'TV show', we were back on track. And then there was 'the world famous chart' to complete.

"When I first met you, I was Paco's age," said Jose. "I can't believe it."

And Carlito, Jorge 'Superstar', 'Tiny Tim,' 'Tom Boy', 'The Fabulous Ricky,' 'Gorilla-Step', and 'Great One'...each had his own eagerness to grow. Violence, theft and racism were unthinkable and except for my constant smoking, so was drug use. For more than two years, we had been rolling down the runway together. Would we ever take off?

Autumn started the football season and with Mike, I'd go to Woodside and play 'touch' in the big schoolyard. "What a quarterback must have above all else," said Johnny Unitas, "is consistency."

I never did. Brilliant or horrid, rarely in between.

My paintings were pretty and eye-catching, adequate for a classroom, but hardly professional illustrations for a book or worthy of an art show.

A portrait of the *Boeing 707* showed the beginning of the jet travel. Then the *Helicopter/Apollo Astronauts* depicted the Space Age. Painted as a postage stamp, a bi-plane and a Jumbo Jet told the story of Air Mail.

So what? Air Force intel analyst, amateur artist and back alley quarterback made for a flimsy resume.

As Ricky would say, "Well, what do we do *now*?"

An opportunity came on television. The 30-second spot featured two young white men playing touch football with poor city kids. The coaches wore distinctive t- shirts...VISTA fighting 'America's War on Poverty.'

I applied right away. For references I gave the boys' parents. They must have written glowing reviews.

"I've been chosen to be a 'community organizer' to work with underprivileged Negro youth in Huntsville, Alabama," I told the boys just after Christmas.

"Who *is* he!" said 'Great One'.

I'd be leaving, flying away to a new adventure, a couple of days after Super Bowl IV. A part of me wished I could sprinkle the boys with 'fairy dust' and take them with me.

I thanked the parents for their recommendations. Or had they exaggerated, anything to get me away from their children?

Like Peter Pan, would I ever be coming back? And if I did, would the boys I had known be gone forever? As men, who would they see in an older me?

I didn't say good-bye as a coach might with the season over or as a teacher at the end of a semester. Not yet ready to be a man, Jackson Heights had given me a new boyhood and because of that second chance, a much better one.

"See you around," I said, just like back in Woodside.

Bernie and Mom drove me to the airport. Mike went along for the ride.

The youngest in the family, Mike had never been given any credit for his unorthodox wisdom, his way of plainly expressing what needed to be done. His older brothers and sisters were always too smart to listen.

As I walked to the plane, he had only two words of advice:

"Go deep!"

"And..." I replied, suddenly full of confidence. "I know Paco!"



Finding My FATHER





Fifty plus years ago, I was alone on a hot autumn morning, pumping my overloaded bicycle at the start of my first road trip that would lead to me pedaling more than 15,000 miles around the United States, Canada, Costa Rica and Brazil.

I was in great shape, but a couple of miles out of Huntsville, Alabama, something was wrong. I thought I was just sweating heavily and then I realized...I was breaking down.

I pulled off to the side.

"My god, I'm...*crying!*"

Like never before in my life.

I should have cried when my father died. I rode with him in the ambulance to the veterans' hospital. The doctor asked him who the president was, the year, and who I was. Dad still knew me, but not much else.

Tall, lanky, *sharp*, 'The Big Mow,' his crewmates had called him.

"Bad pilot, bad bombardier, *good* navigator," he'd told me often enough.

Fifty-seven missions in four-engine bombers in World War II, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with clusters. Had he been any of 10,000 other young, brave, white American airmen, I'd have never been born.

After the war had been won, the hero was lost, fathering five children and drinking himself into oblivion. I remember his empty eyes, his inner fire out.

"That's not gonna happen to me!"

When the hospital called very early the next morning, I was still wide awake. Dad was 46.

Two years later...

I believe in Santa Claus. Not the bearded guy with the flying reindeer pulling a sled, the *spirit* of the season: the most precious gift can come from the most unlikely of givers.

On Christmas Day, 1969, in Jackson Heights, there came a knock at the door. A stranger handed me a telegram; I had been accepted as a **Volunteer In Service To America** (VISTA).

The next morning I called the VISTA number again and again and kept getting the same woman in Brooklyn. The US Government had typoed the area code; a harbinger of snafus to come?

I flew out early to visit my aunt and uncle in Atlanta where I got so sick I couldn't smoke for two days. After seven years, might as well quit.

Reporting to the US Government office, I filled out a bunch of forms, then joined nearly two dozen other new VISTAs in a big room. All were close to my age except 'Gypsy' at 83, the oldest Federal Employee.

'Gypsy' looked like 'Gabby' Hayes and sounded like John Wayne. He and his wife had visited every National Park in the country. After she died, he wanted to motivate other seniors less enthusiastic about living.

I was the other exception. Many young men became Vista Volunteers to get out of the draft and Vietnam. I was an Air Force veteran.

The training staff introduced themselves, telling us we'd soon be 'professional activists' and 'community organizers,' 'frontline patriots' in America's War on Poverty.

"The first VISTA members started in January 1965," read the official history. And by the end of the year more than 2,000 members were working in the Appalachian region, California migrant worker camps, and Hartford, Connecticut poor neighborhoods.

By 1966, more than 3,600 VISTA members were serving the country. By the end of its first decade, VISTA had helped develop a range of projects around the United States, including block watch clubs, credit unions, agricultural cooperatives, community groups, and small businesses.

Many of these entities still thrive today—including some of the first Head Start programs and Job Corps sites. As experience with poverty issues grew, VISTA also recruited lawyers, doctors, and architects to work in underserved areas."

A small, young, light-skinned Negro woman took the stage. Edith's resume was headlined by multiple arrests during demonstrations and sit-ins all over the South.

"Who's here to help poor black people?" she asked us all.

Twenty-two white hands shot straight up.

"Hands down, every one of you!" said Edith. "You are here to help yourselves, because if you can't help yourself, you can't help *anybody*!"

I would have killed for a cigarette.

On Sunday we attended services at the Ebenezer Baptist Church where the Reverend Martin Luther King had been the co-pastor and where many of the Civil Rights Movement's mass meetings, rallies and strategy sessions had been held. The room had a

holy electricity ignited by the congregation singing with the choir, especially the song “Higher Ground”.

Ralph Abernathy took the pulpit and talked about the ‘Young Lords,’ Hispanic activists who had taken over a church in NYC and began an 11-day occupation providing free breakfast and clothing programs, health services, a day care center, and a liberation school.

The reverend’s words psyched up us VISTAs, but we could feel the energy draining out of the church. Abernathy felt it too. Then he said...

“And we thank Jesus...”

“Amen,” said someone. “Make it plain.”

It all became about Jesus.

During training in Atlanta, I lived with a cab driver’s family in a housing development. He had a young daughter having trouble adjusting to being called ‘black’ rather than ‘Negro.’ Either way, she was beautiful.

A couple of guys quit VISTA during the first week. Maybe they went to Canada. The rest of us headed for ‘Rocket City.’

I went with ‘Gypsy’ in his van, the most beautiful, dangerous, crazy drive in my young life. Growing up in NYC, I never drove anything, but I had to be able to drive better than ‘Gypsy’ who was off the road half the time.

Finally, the Alabama State Police pulled us over.

“You keep weavin’ like that, boy,” the angry officer told the old man. “I’ll put your ass in jail.”

Years later I’d find out that ‘Gypsy’, a spry 90, had been killed by a hit-and-run driver in Jerusalem, on Christmas.

“Welcome to Huntsvu!!” said the state official who’d coordinate with the federal VISTA program.

The northern Alabama city of 50,000, was founded in the days of _King Cotton’. After the upheaval of the Civil War, Huntsville promoted itself as —The Watercress Capital of the World.¶

In 1950, Huntsville got a team that would remake the city; 118 German scientists (—Nazi war criminals!! some insisted.) arrived in the watercress town to launch the Army's new rocket program. Prime players in America's Space Race against the Communist Soviet Union, the West German group was warmly welcomed and quickly integrated into Old South society.

Twenty years later, the billion-dollar Marshall Space Flight Center aimed Huntsville at the stars. Opening in 1970, with celebrated NASA fanfare, the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, a spectacular museum displaying hundreds of rockets and missiles, including a mammoth SATURN V moon rocket, would be the hottest tourist destination in the state. Located on a prime site donated by the U.S. Army's Redstone Arsenal, the headliner was NASA's Space Camp geared to educate and excite young people - *"You can be the astronaut!"*

VISTA had alerted the media; we did interviews for TV. "In Europe with the Air Force, I didn't feel I was helping America," I said. "As a VISTA in Huntsville, I hope to be able to."

At six foot, four, I was the tallest trainee. My VISTA supervisor, Stewart was taller, and a flaming radical burning white hot. With long stringy hair and a flowing beard to match, he looked like Jimmy Stewart meets ZZTop. We rarely saw eye to eye. Stewart had a prestigious degree as an optical scientist, but didn't know a damn thing about optics'.

Training had a single task: to instill in each and every one of us...the VISTA *spirit* — the rage to kick The Establishment in the ass from coastal ghetto to coastal ghetto, from the Everglades to the Arctic Circle...on the front lines, in the trenches around the clock, fighting illiteracy and racism, improving health services, and rallying local groups.

VISTA volunteers were saving America!

From what? I didn't get it. Within a month, my fellow trainees were fully ablaze; I remained an all-wet vet, yet to get with the program.

Halfway through, I got called in.

"You've got an inferiority complex," Stewart told me face to face.

Why shouldn't I? The other VISTAs had college degrees. They were —qualified.!! I was an art school drop-out with only limited experience and success organizing a 'tribe' of boys in Jackson Heights.

My mission as a “community organizer” would be to help poor, young black boys through recreation. Or was I just a PR pushpin? VISTA was a liberal-backed haven for draft dodgers. I was an Air Force vet who had defended America against Communist aggression!

“Find something to *do!*” said Stewart. “Set a goal, get it done, make it *last!*”

A story I never found out who wrote: An idealistic young man points to an undeveloped tropical island off the bow of a huge yacht.

“Put me ashore with just my toothbrush,” he says to the tycoon. “Give me a year, and I’ll revolutionize the place.”

The tycoon agrees and returns twelve months later to discover that the young man had unified the many tribes to create an industrial paradise centered on the headquarters hut which branched out to support a chain of thriving workshops.

Just before the young man is welcomed back on the yacht, he says. “Wait, let me get my toothbrush.”

Reaching under the headquarters hut, he pulls out his toothbrush...and in a chain reaction, everything he had built falls down.

“Doing something” as a VISTA is not enough. Leave your “toothbrush!”

My “underdeveloped isle” was the West End, a collection of small houses, mostly shacks, a Negro “Dogpatch” in the heart of “Rocket City”. West Germany had been foreign; the West End of Huntsville was the dark side of the moon.

I bought a used 3-speed bicycle. On a “white street,” just outside the West End, there was a dilapidated string of apartments. I rented one for \$30 a month. Catholic Charities furnished it.

A couple of white guys had access to a city gym where the West End boys played basketball. I met with the boys after their choose-up game. My bike was locked up; I was afraid one of the kids would steal it.

“We’re the West End Bluehawks,” said Dolphus Atchison, who at age 13, had the physique of Marvel Comic’s African superhero, the *Black Panther*.

“Why the ‘Bluehawks’?” I asked.

“‘Cause nobody else’s got that name,” replied Dolphus.

“What kind of team are you?”

"Get us a game, you got yourself a team," said one of them.

"You play in a league or in school?" I asked.

"Well, we've never been an 'official' team, you know."

I knew. And basketball season was done. "You guys play baseball?"

"You mean the West End Bluehawks could be a *real* baseball team?" said the *Black Panther*.

"Sure," I said.

If Jesus is a sports fan.

I was the only volunteer living alone. Sally, Pat, and Claudia, the three women I was working with, rented a house in West End. We never got along, mostly my fault. They were 'qualified' college grads 'community organizing to promote positive change' while I was this arrogant, afraid Air Force ass with no idea how to help them or himself.

Joyce, Jude, and Nancy got a place in town. I painted 'mall monsters' on their windows for beer. We'd play bridge there. Across the street from 'The Parkway Church of God', Betty, Mary and Kathy's house on Oakwood Drive became the unofficial VISTA headquarters where we would gather -- young, idealistic commandos parachuted into 'Rocket City' to save America.

The VISTAs burned. I drank.

We had an anthem we played incessantly.

"*No, you cant always get what you want,*" the choir opened for the Rolling Stones.
"*You cant always get what you want.*"

I drank some more.

I got a couple of bats and balls from Catholic Charities. The West End had a beat-up field. The boys and I would 'practice' after school and on weekends. I'd never played on a baseball team and never coached anyone; the 'Bluehawks' were as far from being a 'real' team as I was from being a 'real' coach.

Cue the choir: "*But if you try sometimes, you'll find, you get what you need.*"

President Lyndon Johnson had to be the most hated man in America. Less than two years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the fires from the riots were still

smoldering. The Vietnam war was out of hand and in the streets and Nixon would begin bombing Cambodia. We VISTAs saw LBJ as Santa Claus; he gave us 'Model Cities' – *money* for anti-poverty programs.

In late February, I made an appointment and pedaled downtown to see the 'Model Cities' guy.

"Twelve baseball gloves, including a first baseman's and catcher's mitt, a dozen baseball hats with 'BH' on them, and twenty-four white T-shirts of all sizes....," said the middle-aged white man from behind a big desk. "For a neighborhood baseball team?"

"The West End Bluehawks!" I said.

"Understand that you have to be practical here," advised 'Model Cities'. "This is nineteen seventy. Nobody wants an all black team. The city won't let you play in any of their leagues, and forget about Little League. If you've got kids that can play, have them try out for already established teams. Move them out and up, that's VISTA, right?"

"This is about the West End," I said. "Creating something the community can be proud of. Who and how the team's going to play I'll work on when there *is* a team. I need to show these kids they can be one."

"How? The West End's been a dead end since the Civil War," he said. "You think *you* can change that? I get you these gloves and hats, they could be gone in a week and the t-shirts used for toilet rags. I won't be part of another VISTA scam shaming the federal government."

"One, two, six, nine, two, six, eight, seven," I said. "My serial number. Four years as an intelligence analyst in Air Force Security Service."

(Had I told him I was *Super Analyst* on a Top Secret mission--that would have been a *felony*.)

"As a VISTA, I'm still serving my country," I said. "You?"

"I'll see what I can do," said 'Model Cities.'

"When?"

"Give me two weeks."

"Thanks, and congratulations," I said with a crisp salute. "'Model Cities' just bought its first baseball team."

The West End 'Citizens' Committee' was composed of a half dozen old women. Not a man in sight. The three other VISTAs and I met with them once a week. I had news, but nothing they hadn't heard before. Ever since they could remember, well-meaning white people had all kinds of ideas and made promises and nothing had changed.

One man alone among so many women, I got a nickname: 'Mista' VISTA.'

After I rode all over town and sold \$50 worth of tickets to the 'Citizens' Committee's' chicken dinner, Thelma Lou, the oldest member, invited me over for morning coffee. I felt honored.

Every dusty road in the West End was a side street. Thelma Lou's small, wooden home had a worn neatness about it. She'd lived here all her life. At the front door, I felt like an American foreigner.

"Yeah, we 'Negroes' are *different*," she said as we sat in frayed, stuffed chairs in her living room and I wondered when was the last time she had bought something new. "We have to be, been on different roads ever since we got here."

"We whites got the high road, didn't we?"

"You all *took* it and ain't no way you're givin' it back," said Thelma Lou harshly.

She was at least twice my age, maybe three times. I could feel the added years she'd lived. If I were watching her in a movie, she'd be somebody's maid. Who was I in hers?

"You're down with our boys," she said. Overweight, every sip had a slim sense of purpose. A fire burned in her eyes... "This game you all're playin' gonna get them up somewhere?"

"The West End Bluehawks have nowhere else to go."

"You don't know nuthin' yet, 'Mista Vista'," she said and I winced at the sound of my neighborhood title. "You're new to the low road. You don't know where it's goin', where it's always gone."

No, I don't," I admitted. "But one day, Thelma Lou, our roads have to converge, combine. What a highway this country'll be."

"Ha!" she laughed, her eyes twinkling. "That's a bridge we can both jump off if we ever get to it!"

The coffee stayed hot. Later I'd find out Thelma Lou always had a pot brewing. If she ever had a husband, he was long gone. Her sister lived nearby and would drop in once in a while. No way could I imagine living her life.

But we had one thing in common.

"When I was born, I came out sickly and discolored," she said. "They used to call me 'Li'l Red'."

'Thelma Lou' no more. Now we both had nicknames.

'I'd rather be lucky than good,' said Paul Brown, the hall of fame coach. Down to my last out, I'd go down swinging.

I called up the Huntsville Boys' Club, told the director who I was and what I had and asked for a meeting. The next morning I'd go in.

Had I been a 'qualified community organizer' instilled with the VISTA spirit, I'd've found out the Boys' Club needed me as much as I needed them. Located in the white section of town, the Club was supposed to be fully integrated, but only two Afro-American boys had signed up for their summer baseball league. To make matters worse, the Club only had enough players for five teams. This VISTA calls with a sixth team and they're all black – the West End Bluehawks could be the answer to their prayers.

Not so fast. A big, thick man with a bulldog face and temperament, the Director was taking no chances.

"We want every boy, regardless of race, color or creed to become a member of *their* club," he said. "But we will not tolerate a gang of hooligans comin' here to bully our boys!"

The West End's reputation had preceded me. So had VISTA's.

"I'm still getting the team together," I said. Only five or six boys were showing up for 'practice' while an older group turned out only to laugh at us. "The West End Bluehawks need a lot work."

"Why don't you bring'em all in and sign'em up," suggested the 'Bulldog'. "If enough come in, we'll have six *integrated* teams."

He made good sense, but...

"This is about *community*," I said. "The West End has to have something homegrown they can be proud of. Give the Bluehawks a league to play in and they'll do just that."

'Li'l Red' was praying, I was sure.

Berne Hogarth (1911-1996) was the greatest American anatomist of the 20th Century, the definitive *Tarzan* artist, one of the founders of the School of Visual Arts, and the best teacher I ever had.

"The reason you're not doing anything in my class," he singled me out in a room full of students. "Is that you're afraid to find out that you're not as good as you think you are."

Time to show some guts; the 'Model Cities' stuff arrived in the middle of March. I bought some brushes, five tubes of acrylic paint and an Xacto knife. Then I got a bunch of open-ended boxes used to ship cases of soda and beer.

On a piece of unbroken cardboard I drew two concentric circles. On the top half, in simple lettering - *West End*; the bottom half – *Bluehawks*. The team logo...a hawk's head profile, beak closed, with a feathery border. Then I cut out the letters and the logo silhouette and *viola!* I had my stencil.

"What you all fixin' to do?" asked Mike, walking into my always open apartment.

Mike Jacobs was 11 years old with honest black eyes and a face that mirrored truth. Born with a club foot, he walked like a corkscrew. The kids called him 'Twister.'

I stretched the first t-shirt over one of the boxes. Pen in hand, I stenciled in the lettering and the hawk's head. 'West End Bluehawks' in red, the logo in blue with a yellow beak, trimmed in black.

"Oh, man!" said Mike.

The acrylic paint dried quickly. Then I restretched the shirt to do the back, a team number in blue.

The Bluehawks t-shirt was the first *art* I ever made. Better than 'beautiful' and 'professionally done', it had spirit. Would this be my 'toothbrush'?

Deservedly so, Mike got the first one right off the box and tore out on his bike to show the West End.

‘Ya’ shudda seen‘im,” ‘Li’l Red’ told me later. “Wearin’ that shirt, he came up to my house with eyes big as saucers, shoutin’ ‘We’re gonna be a *real* team!’”

One down, 23 to go.

A productive St. Patrick’s Day weekend - Setting up my table outside, I stretched and stenciled and painted over and over and over and got a sunburn to boot.

Two boys biked over Saturday morning.

Jerry Haley was tall and lean and longing to be on a team. The most dependable glove in the West End, he’d play only two games before leaving for the sidelines.

“I tell you a boy can play,” said Jerry. “That boy can *play*!”

Boys throughout the league would prove me wrong all season, but none ever fooled Jerry.

‘Tee’ (I never knew his full name.) started at third and left the field with Jerry. He came with an attitude; he never bought into me, but stuck with the team. Guess he had nothing else better to do, but he’d never admit it.

By noon, I was handing out shirts as fast as I could paint them. Jerry would bring in boys I’d never seen before.

“Give‘em a shirt,” said Jerry with a knowing smile. More the coach than I was, Jerry handed out the gloves and the caps.

I brought a sample shirt to the next meeting of the West End Citizens Committee. They liked it so much that they reimbursed me for the paint and art supplies.

But before I got to feelin’ too proud.

“Lookie here, Mista Vista,” said the chairwoman. “We all been working real hard long before you ever got here.”

“I second that motion,” said ‘Li’l Red’ with a smile. “But we’ve been playin’ ever since.”

On April 11th, APOLLO XIII blasted off for the moon. A couple of days later came the misquoted message: “Houston, we have a problem.”

Tell me about it. West End's first shot at anything had yet to take off. Come game time, would they be ready?

Wearing new shirts, more and more boys came to practice, but my efforts were going south; I couldn't feel *team*. It wasn't the players, but the coach who was lacking.

I was afraid, scared to death of failure and humiliation. I didn't see 'team' because I could only see 'race.' Not as individuals, but as 'poor black people' I was 'here to help.'

In a panic, impatient and angry, I yelled and screamed at them until I lost it, kicking a boy in the ass to get him off the field.

The Bluehawks should have taken off their T-shirts and pelted me with them, but they didn't. Had they become used to similar treatment from white people?

Stewart was pissed and told me so.

'Twister' made it plain. "You shud'na done that!"

The West End Citizens' Committee met without me. Word was they were looking for a black man to coach *their* team. Like the APOLLO XIII astronauts, I was running out of time. They had a 'lifeboat.' I didn't.

Nothing interfered with my drinking. Riding a bicycle drunk comes with a blind and stupid invincibility that can end in an instant. One night riding back to the West End, I crashed through a row of mailboxes, flew over the handlebars and landed in a ditch.

On the first evening of my father's wake, an older man I'd never met came up to me.

"You know, you look just like that body lying in there," he said. "Where's the bathroom?"

Seems Jesus had other plans; I got up and rode home without a scratch.

NASA resourcefulness and heroism rescued the astronauts of APOLLO XIII.

Another night, another two six-packs. Pedaling home half-gassed, I spotted a fire in the West End. Half the neighborhood had turned out. I pulled up in front of an abandoned shack fully involved, flames ripping into the dark with a startling beauty.

"The most beautiful thing in the world is a B-Seventeen blowing up," the 'Big

Mow' once told me. My father had seen it happen at least once. The Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was the bomber he and buddies were flying and the Nazis were blowing them up by the score. Ten men gone in a flash so beautiful it blotted out reality.

A quick look and I knew the wooden house across the narrow, dusty road would quickly catch. The way most white fire departments responded to calls in poor, black sections, half the West End could go up.

I turned around. Instantly I was stone sober. To this day I can still feel those poor, black eyes looking at me as if I were an astronaut.

That was the moment the *spirit* came into me.

"Who's got a garden hose?" I asked.

The homeowner raised his hand.

"Hook it up, give it to me, and turn it on *full*!"

In half a minute, I was hosing down the wooden wall facing the fire.

Then I had to soak myself. I was never in any danger, but the intense heat enveloped my clothes and body, producing a misty aura.

There I stood, 'Part of the solution'! I kept spraying, backing away, and soaking myself over and over—a young, white, steamin' VISTA trying to save America!

The fire truck pulled up just as the corner of the roof of the wetted house burst into flame. One quick shot from the big hose and it was over.

From a back porch in the dark, an old woman cried out. "Calvin, you done good tonight!"

There were no cheers. The home owner shook my hand, but nobody invited me to dinner. An understanding had been reached: one fire had been put out--another had ignited... 'Mista VISTA' was the *coach* of the West End Bluehawks!

All I had to do now was win.

Over morning coffee, I laid out my problem.

"What are you doing about it?" 'Li'l Red' made it plain.

"I have to let Dolphus, Jerry and 'Tee' play," I said. "The Bluehawks wouldn't have become a team without them."

"But they're too old. You're playin' ringers. That's cheatin'."

"The Bluehawks have to win!" I insisted.

'Failure is not an option,' was NASA's adage during the APOLLO XIII rescue mission. 'A successful failure,' they called it when the astronauts returned safely to earth.

How would VISTA spin the Bluehawks if the team got beat bad and then quit on the Boys' Club League? I'd be gone and my T-shirts would be cleaning toilets.

"You got 'West End Disease'," said 'Li'l Red', refilling my cup. "Been on the 'low road' so long, you got no confidence. Some coach you are, you don't even trust your own team fair and square."

How right she was. I was weak and all the other stuff that comes with it. Most of all I was afraid.

"The Boys' Club's gonna find out," she said. "They're folks over there who ain't gonna want an all-black team winnin'."

"Let them win first and we'll worry about all else later!"

'Li'l Red' gave me her hardest eye.

"*You* are taking a short cut to get to the 'high road'," she said. "When you get to that bridge, don't involve the boys. You jump off alone."

Joyce left the house she shared with two other women and moved in with Dennis. David and Betty hooked up, then Bob and Faye, Stewart and Kathy, Dan and Nancy. I batted zero. One hot afternoon, I rode over, not wearing a shirt, to 'VISTA HQ' on Oakwood. Alone with Mary, she told me I looked 'like a Greek god.'

Sweet, lovely, slim, athletic Mary--not quite VISTA material, she'd leave in a couple of weeks for a religious cult that allowed no booze, drugs or sex.

Then came that day when one of my fellow volunteers touched my shoulder, gazed into my eyes, and said softly, "I love you."

Including parents and family, that was the first time anybody ever said that to me; had I been gay or bisexual, he and I might have had something special.

On game day, gloves at bats on their handlebars, the Bluehawks assembled in front of my apartment for the bike ride to the Boys' Clubs. All wore their shirts. They looked like a *real* team.

The B-17 bomber was more than a flying machine to its crew. Each got named and personalized. One of my Dad's ships was called *The Ruptured Duck* after the cloth insignia depicting an eagle inside a wreath. Worn on uniforms above the right breast pocket by WWII servicemen and women, it was issued to service personnel who were about to leave the military with an Honorable Discharge, allowing them to continue to wear their uniform for up to thirty days after they were discharged since there was a clothing shortage at that time.

"There we were at twenty thousand," the 'Big Mow' would tell me, 'flying' with his hands. When he was my age, he and his all-white crew flew with hundreds of other bombers, battling through Nazi fighter planes and anti-aircraft bursts.

"Boom! Boom! The *Duck* got hit again and again," said Dad, balling his fists. —Ratatatatat! We fired at the fighters as they zoomed by. Ratatatatat!"

The B-17 bristled with .50 caliber machineguns, big, loud weapons that shook with every shot. Firing the 'fifty,' Dad drew blood only once: the bouncing gun broke his nose.

"We live in fame or go down in flame," he'd sing hoarsely. "Hey, nothing can stop the Army Air Corps!"

Growing up, I'd built dozens of WW II model planes and read scores of war books trying to understand how, to know how the 'Big Mow' must have *felt*, rolling down a runway, off on a mission to save the world. I never came close.

If only Dad could see me now. The Boys' Club did and I can only wonder how the other teams and coaches felt as we rode up to the field and parked our bikes behind the dug-out.

The opposing team wore standard baseball uniforms supplied by the Boys' Club.

"Niggers without uniforms," said one boy.

"Ain't nuttin but a t-shirt team," said another.

'T-shirt team'? The Bluehawks were a squad from the 'hood, hungry for 'Higher Ground.'

"Play ball!" shouted the umpire and the West End team took the field.

Jerry was at first base. If I had appointed a team captain or if the team had elected one, it would have been him.

John Holden played second base from first game to last. His patience outdid his glove and his bat. A born lead-off hitter if there ever was one, his on-base percentage had to be over .500

"Pretty smart," he told me, just before taking his position in the first inning of the opening game. "Practicing us a full-size field when you knew we'd be playing on a small one. This'll be kid's stuff for us."

As if I had any idea.

Robert Earl Green started at shortstop and would play other positions from game to game. Big and strong, he rarely hit with power, but he talked and looked like a slugger.

"You'll lose your spot if you don't come to practice," I had to warn him once.

"Who's gonna take my place?" he asked.

"Your mother-in-law," I said.

"She can't play," he insisted. "She's too old!"

'Tee' was at third base. With every pitch, he'd crouch low and glare at the batter, daring the opposition to test him in 'the hot corner.' Two games later, he'd be tested in a way he never saw coming.

Reggie Haley, Jerry's younger brother, was in left field. Small, lean, and fast, he'd never forgive me for starting him in the outfield 'where players who can't play play.'

Dolphus, the *Black Panther*, got center field and would bang out a line-drive that'd roll for a homer in the only game he played.

Angry for not being in the infield, Greg Jacobs, 'Twister's' older brother, started in right field. He would have won the MVP Trophy if the Boys' Club had one. But not mine. Nothing was ever good enough for Greg, especially me.

The first boy whose family I met was Anthony Garner. He made a pitch for me to other kids, and now he was pitching for the Bluehawks. With every wind-up, I could see the joy and determination.

Behind the plate squatted the field general, Draper. “They’re just ball players. I’m a *catcher!*” he told me right off. Big, strong, hard, impatient, should one of the Bluehawks make an error...”Let me play shortstop!” or give up a few runs...Let me pitch!” and so many times I lost count...”Let me *coach!*”

When the Bluehawks took the field in a 'real' game for the very first time I understood that my *art* had found a team. The red letters and the blue bird on white cawed 'America!'; matted on black made them beautiful.

The game highlight would have made 'SportsCenter'.

Diehard baseball fans have a special homerun, a shot that becomes part of their lives. In May of 1963, weeks before I enlisted in the Air Force, friends and I went to Yankee Stadium. (The cost of roundtrip subway fare plus a grandstand ticket - \$1.65.)

I got my favorite seat, the top corner of the upper deck in right field. When Mickey Mantle came to the plate, he seemed a mile away. Then he swung and hit the ball so high and so far, the roof of the grandstand blocked it out; I had to get down to look up. I can still hear the ball hit the Yankee Stadium façade and swore I saw a mark on it as it bounced down to the field.

Nothing could beat that homer. Until Greg Jacobs swung at the first pitch in the second inning. **CRACK!** I watched the ball rocket off his bat and for a moment, it was as if the earth had stopped spinning—the only movement was a baseball ripping through the air.

“Watta squad!” I cheered as Greg rounded the bases. “Watta squad!”

We won going away and rode home in triumph. Dolphus left the team to try out for an older boys' city team. He wouldn't make it. A boy without a team, I always felt bad about that.

Thanks to Jerry and 'Tee' scouting the city, other boys looking for a team came to the West End.

“This is Larry,” Jerry introduced a boy already wearing a baseball uniform. A left-handed, sidearm, sinker ball pitcher, Larry was a big star on a white team, but wanted to be a Bluehawk.

“Give'em a shirt,” said Jerry. And I did.

'Straight ball' Ricky could pitch, but couldn't get people out. He could field and once in a while, hit, and he always showed up.

Then there was 'Punjab,' the blackest black boy the Bluehawks had ever seen. Legend had it that 'Punjab was born in a coal mine. He couldn't hit or throw or catch, but if had to pick a boy to *model* my T-shirt, it'd be 'Punjab.'

"Watta squad!"

The second game came and the West End Bluehawks won again, undefeated and alone in first place.

Suddenly the proud coach, I was riding more around the community talking to folks on their porches. One Sunday morning, I was surprised to see three older *men* sitting back in rocking chairs, letting words fly.

I pulled up and they nodded politely.

"You know there was a time," the oldest said. "When a black man couldn't walk in downtown Huntsville with a white shirt on."

"Oh, yeah," said the man, rocking next to him. "We all remember those days, but things are gettin' diff'rent now."

Music to my ears! I strictly listened.

"And you know, boy," said the third man. "How this's all comin' to pass?"

Mouth shut, I prayed for a Civil Rights answer.

"It's all Jesus," he said.

"Thanks to Jesus," said the second man while the third bowed his head.

Amen.

Changes had to be made on the team. God willing, the Bluehawks would keep flying.

For the third game, the Director of the Boys' Club was lying in wait for the boys to take the field. With school and city records he went from boy to boy, confirming their birth dates.

"Where's Dolphus Atchison?" asked the Director.

I told him. One down, two to go.

"Jerry Haley and 'Tee'?" he asked.

"When I found out they were too old, I made them my first and third base coaches."

Greg Jacobs and Jerry Haley got their infield spots.

The 'Bulldog' knew full well what I had done. In my position, he might have done the same.

"Your first two game are forfeits," he said, dropping us from first place to last.

"Play ball!"

The Bluehawks played like *Ruptured Ducks*. Nobody could hit or field and no one could pitch. We cycled home a beaten team.

The next game could be our last. Out of kindness and maybe a little pity, I started Mike Jacobs in right field. His first time at bat, the 'Twister' flailed at the ball and struck out on three pitches.

The next time he came to the plate, we were down 4-0. 0-3 and losing our fourth game, the Bluehawks were at the bottom of the 'low road.'

Mike got hit by the second pitch and some kids laughed as he did his wobbly walk to first base. The first pitch to the next batter skipped under the catcher's glove. Off went 'Twister,' corkscrewing into second.

"Watta squad!" I cheered.

The Bluehawks exploded. We'd never lose another game during the regular season.

Halfway through the summer, I sold my used 3-speed bicycle and bought a brand new blue Schwinn Varsity ten-speed. Then I got some enamel and painted a thick red and white stripe over the brand name. *The Spirit of Mighty America*, I christened the result. Every payday, I'd hit the bike shop before the beer store, adding big mirrors, a heavy backrack and rear highbar plus a light and a bell. More 'bomber' than bicycle, the 'Big Mow' never had it so cool.

The Bluehawks were welcome in my apartment any time. One came in through the kitchen window while I was out and ripped me off. The police arrested him for a couple of other thefts and he was sent away.

One morning, Jerry, Reggie, Anthony and John came over to find me taking a bath. We had a good laugh and they adjourned to the small living room. Then two brothers

showed up. Neither played on the team. Anthony was big and slow; younger David small and wiry, as bitter as black tea and as sharp as a cat o' nine tails.

"The most dangerous thing in the world is an intelligent nigger," I'd be told twenty years later in a New York prison.

"I don't care what that 'Mista VISTA' *thinks*," said David, his words zinging through the bathroom wall like fifty caliber bullets. "We're just a bunch of niggers and always will be."

I should have stormed out of the tub and soaking wet, made a speech every boy would quote to his grave, but I just lay there in the water, able only to utter a single word: "Jesus!"

I was down to my last painted T-shirt, a 'small.' Other boys and adults who wanted to join the team or show its colors had to give me a shirt of their own. After a game late in the season, a little kid came into our dug-out and asked me if he could be a Bluehawk. He couldn't hit or field or pitch or run; he got the last shirt and played some innings in centerfield because he was *white*.

The one kid we couldn't get that every Bluehawk wanted on the team: Michael Jackson - '*A-B-C, as easy as one, two, three.*'

There was a burly, fiery catcher on another team who was better than Draper and Draper knew it. Once he pulled off the coolest play at the plate: blocking out the umpire and selling a missed tag.

"Out!" cried Jim, the Boys' Club guy who umped the games and ran the baseball program.

Then that damn catcher winked at me.

Later Jim took me aside.

"Sorry for missing that call," he said.

Like me in his mid-twenties, Jim was Boys' Club all the way. In the years to come, the organization would become 'The Boys and Girls Club' and further expand across the nation. It was men, and later women, like Jim who made it great.

The regular season done, with two playoff wins, the Bluehawks would be champions. The team only got one.

It rained heavily the night before. As we rode out I was hoping that the wet field wouldn't be factor.

Not to worry. Not one kid from the other team showed up.

"They're afraid to play us," said Reggie, shaking his fist.

Not that I blamed them. What 12-year old white boy wanted to take on the West End Bluehawks, a team that had blown out the rest of the league 15 games in a row?

"They should'na let you play," a Boys' Club kid told me later. "You're too good."

"I can get us a game," said Jerry.

"Let us ride around a bit," said 'Tee'. "We'll find boys with guts enough to give us some practice."

The pair cycled away. By the time the rest of team got to the practice field, there was a group of black kids waiting.

As this would not be an 'official' game, some of the Bluehawks didn't want to play, which meant I could put in kids who'd been waiting for a shot all season, even 'Punjab'.

As I was the only adult, I'd ump behind the plate.

The opposing pitcher was a slight 12-year old. His first pitch blazed by the batter. His next was a curve that 'fell off the table'. With uncanny control and overpowering stuff, this *phenom* mowed down the Bluehawks.

Jerry smiled through the whole game.

"Who *is* he?" I had to know.

"That's 'Tee-Tee'. He stays up on Nasty Pulaski." (The pike named after the Pole.)

Then Jerry handed me a new white 'large' T-shirt.

"Number forty-five," he said. "Bob Gibson."

No way was 'Tee-Tee' as *severe* as Gibson. Nobody was. Koufax was *eloquent*. The next year a young black pitcher would dominate the major leagues and every time I saw Vida Blue, I thought of 'Tee-Tee.'

"You, you set this kid up to pitch against your own team?"

"Watta squad!" beamed Jerry.

"No, you cant always get what you want," sang the choir.

On the morning of the Boys' Club Championship Game, a beautiful day for baseball, it would have been nice if the West End Citizens' Committee had rounded up the players' parents and a couple of stationwagons...or if the local media had thought it news and sent a reporter and a cameraman...or if the mayor of Huntsville or anybody who was somebody showed up just to say he or she had been there...

"I don't need to see it," said 'Li'l Red. "The boys have to feel it---to see themselves as winners. They don't need nobody watching."

Work with young boys and you can't help remembering how you felt when you were their age.

Dad only beat me once. It didn't fly. If there's a greater pain than a boy seeing his father passed out drunk, I never felt it. In his living room chair, on the sofa, at the dining room table, on the stone steps of the back porch...not sleeping or resting, his face twisted, his body all akimbo, as if he'd fallen out of an airplane.

A *good* navigator, a bad drunk and a worse father.

Before they abandoned him and NYC, the Giants had been my Dad's baseball team. He loved Willy Mays and Sal Maglie.

If only he hadn't drunk so much so often. If he could have stretched out his power dive, if he could've leveled himself off to last three more years.

Imagine the 'Big Mow' being here *sober*.

I should have called that guy from 'Model Cities.'

For the first time all season, the Bluehawks were shut out in the first inning. Then 'Tee-Tee' took the mound and struck out the side on thirteen pitches. After his last strike, Jim, the Boys' Club ump, took off his mask and gave *that* look yet again: "*Where do you get these kids?*"

'A-B-C, as easy as one, two, three.'

By the bottom of the third we were up by four runs. I left the dug-out, walked away and went into the Boys' Club building and played a couple of games of pool with a couple of kids who weren't baseball players.

"But if you try sometimes," sang the choir. "You'll find, you get what you need."

I finally understood...it wasn't about me, but about them and they'd do just fine without me. Winning wasn't the only thing'; this was about *joining* and only the beginning. I trusted the Bluehawks.

By the time I returned, the team had the game in hand. With one last out to go, I called time, then motioned to the infield for a conference on the mound. Draper hustled out from behind the plate.

"Watta squad!" I said and every boy looked up at me. No longer an astronaut, I was one of them.

"You played like champions, now *be* champions," I said. "Show respect to the other boys who worked just as hard as you did to win this game."

A soft liner to John Holden at second base and it was over. The boys shook hands all around. The team signed the game ball which I have to this day. Never again would the Bluehawks play as a team.

The West End had won. The Boys' Club had won and so did Huntsville, Alabama.

If I didn't get lost soon, I soon would be.

"That's not gonna happen to me!"

It took me more than a month to work up the courage to leave. Not by plane or bus, I'd be riding my bike back to New York City.

On *The Spirit of Mighty America*, I took a last lap around and through the West End, saying good-bye to the boys and their families. Early the next morning I made a stop for coffee.

"Not the low or the high road, 'Mista Vista'," said 'Li'l Red, giving me a long, warm embrace. "You're gonna make your own way."

I made my way to Oakwood where the VISTAs held a breakfast for me. We talked and laughed over eggs, bacon and pancakes. How special we all were, united in purpose, our spirits raging.

Stewart gave me a plastic bag full of 'gorp', an energy concoction made of oatmeal, maple syrup, raisins, and added 'secret ingredients' which served only to rot my teeth.

Last hugs and kisses. I got on my bike and pushed out. Across from the 'Parkway Church of God,' one look back, a final wave, and I was away.

The 'Big Mow' *was* a good navigator. I saw the road ahead as a runway. Aboard *Mighty America*, I felt like my father when he was a hero. Off on a mission, I was going to save the world!

Cue the choir:



© Author

JOCKS

You *can* go home again...to get a BS degree and become a teacher.

Mom and Bernie had additional plans; aviation education had taken off. 'Mr. Aerospace' wanted more paintings.

As for those boys in the back alley...

'The Incredible *Dean*' and Vinnie were in college, but the rest showed in my garage. They were happy to see me again and I felt good about that. Later they'd tell me how I had changed.

"You quit smoking." said 'The Fabulous Ricky'.

"Hair like General Custer," said Jose.

"And a little bossy," said 'Tiny Tim'.

Quiet 'Carlito' gave me a welcoming wave.

His younger brother Jorge 'Superstar' shrugged. "You went someplace?"

"The 'West End *Bluehawks*'?" 'Gorilla-Step' read my hand-painted t-shirt.

I made the story short.

"Your bike," said 'Tom Boy'. "That was a surprise."

The *Spirit of Mighty America* was my red, white and blue ten-speed with a banana seat, an extra-tall sissy bar and inverted handlebars sporting big motorcycle mirrors.

Soon enough, we'd all have bikes, most with banana seats, do repairs in the garage, and ride all over.

"Once around the block," pleaded 'Great One'.

Off he went, terrified that he'd crash, riding the brakes all the way.

'Well, *what do we do now?*' went unsaid, but more of how it used to be meant going back.

We were *friends*. What could we *do*? Where could we *go*?

"Paco, Joe," I said to the brothers. "Can I come over after dinner? Got something to show you."

"...experience organizing local boys in New York City," read my VISTA intro.
"Especially Puerto Ricans."

A couple of weeks before leaving, I had discovered that the two Hispanic families on 86th Street were Colombians. The *madres* and *padres* always welcomed me into their homes, grateful for the attention I gave their sons, but because not every parent could speak English, there was a gulf between us.

Years later, after the families moved to Florida, I spent a weekend with them on the way to Washington when Peace Corps threw me out of Costa Rica. Around the dinner table, we got to know each other in *their* language.

Afterwards, the four sons cornered me.

"You, *you* speak better Spanish than we do," said a frustrated Jose.

"*Quien es el!*" I said.

With a tube of 'cadmium red' and 'ultramarine blue' acrylic paint, two brushes, a compass, a cut piece of illustration board, a cardboard rectangle and a white t-shirt, I went to see Paco and Jose.

Neither had a clue what I was planning and I had no idea how they'd react, but after tonight, things would never be the same.

With Jose looking over my shoulder, I compassed in three concentric circles on the cardboard, In the center, I drew the emblem, a 'shield' with stars.

"What in the...?" asked Jose.

"Who are we going to be?" said Paco.

Jackson Hgts. I lettered atop the 'shield' and below it, **JOCKS.**

No cut-and-paste, no copying, as an artist I had stepped out. I cut out the cardboard stencil, then stretched the t-shirt over the illustration board. First the red lettering, then the blue trademark.

"Jackson Heights JOCKS!" said Jose. "We are *somebody*!"

The paint dried quickly. I gently lifted the shirt off the board. Jose handed me one of his white t-shirts and watched carefully as I went through the procedure. By the time it was done, he had it down pat.

"I'll paint Paco's." said Jose, and did a careful, complete job.

Three shirts done, we painted team numbers on the backs.

The next day brought reactions.

"A jockstrap as an emblem?" said Jorge 'Superstar'. "You expect us to wear that in public?"

"My Dad's gonna shit when he sees this!" said 'Tiny Tim'.

His father and older sister were shocked, but not his wise and wonderful mother; her son had joined something bigger than himself and was happy about it.

If any of the other parents objected, none said anything to me.

Within a couple of days, everybody had a shirt except 'The Incredible *Dean*' who for some reason, never get one.

A 'coming out' was in order. Nearby was a schoolyard that bigger, older boys claimed it as their own.

"The 'Jackson Heights JOCKS'!" laughed one and the rest joined in.

"Touch football, five on five?" I asked.

"We're gonna kill you!" promised another.

As the JOCKS' 'official quarterback,' on the first play, I had everyone run around behind me and then downfield. Faking hand-offs, as the bigger boys watched in confusion, I threw a long pass...Touchdown!

"We didn't think he could catch," the other boys complained.

"We know Paco," said 'Tiny Tim'.

Fifteen minutes later, with the third JOCKS' score, the once-overconfident team bolted and ran away. We'd never play them again.

The new JOCKS never considered themselves a team. Joining a local league to play touch football or softball was not us; we'd joined together to do stuff and have fun.

My father had left me a legacy. As a vet, I was entitled to 36 months of GI Bill benefits, but because Dad had been a 100% disabled vet, I got 48 months and would use every dime.

Becoming a Physical Education major at Long Island University was a three-step process:

1. Submit payment to the Bursar.
2. The check clears.
3. Enrollment!

On Halloween, the boys wore their JOCKS shirts proudly, except for 'Great One' who came on again as Groucho Marx. He had a new hat and upgraded eyeglasses and mustache, and played with the same unlit cigar. But still, he wasn't funny.

Thanks to Jose, we got a new member. 'Big Billy,' not to be confused with the fat Mack kid, was a tough kid with a complexion even worse than mine. While the other boys wanted the JOCKS, 'Big Billy' *needed* to join. In the end, he loved the JOCKS

I hit the weights throughout the fall, and played football in Woodside with brother Mike, trying to find myself as a quarterback. I never would.

Bernie had wall space in his classroom for more aviation paintings - *The End of the American Airship* and *Breaking the Sound Barrier*. Both were cut-and-paste compositions, but to 'Mister Aerospace' and his students, they looked like a 'real' artist had done them.

In January, I rode the subway to school, an hour each way. I took 19 credits, bought all the texts, and made the honor roll. Having learned how to pass courses, I'd buy only one more book (anatomy), load up on credits and finished in three years with a 2.92.

I got a more relevant education in the alley. There was never anything 'official' about the Jackson Heights JOCKS. Not a team or a club. No rules or dues, no initiation or oath or charter. I didn't come on like a teacher or a parent or a priest. Just a bunch of boys gathered in a garage after school.

If only there were a way to combine my JOCKS' experience with my physical education courses?

Spring got me back on *Spirit of Mighty America*. School was nine city miles away. My first trip took 55 minutes and ended with a lock-up in front of the campus security office. Second trip in, I had a blow-out and Bernie picked me up. On the third, my beautiful ten-speed was stolen.

The loss proved to be a blessing in disguise; I bought a yellow Schwinn ten-speed with a white banana seat decorated with flowers, but no more clunky extras,

Playing touch football with the JOCKS took a step up the day I saw Carlos fiddling with his movie camera.

"Let's make a movie," I said.

The JOCKS chipped in fifty cents apiece to pay for development costs. Then we put on our shirts, rode to 'Kevin's Field' and filmed it.

Football films become memorable only if there is an incredible play - a great catch or pass or defensive move. Not the case with the JOCKS.

Five minutes in, one of the boys was facing the camera awaiting action when he reached behind him.

"It's Paco," said 'The Fabulous Ricky'. "He's scratching his ass!"

"No!" came the denial.

We must have 'instantly replayed' the highlight a hundred times.

I'd later submit the film for one of my Physical Education courses.

"I've started a kind of 'youth group' in my neighborhood," I told my 'Methods' professors. "We have t-shirts."

"Do you prepare lesson plans?" asked one.

"Have you established any concrete goals?" said the other.

"Not me," I said. "That's up to the Jackson Heights JOCKS."

That summer I'd take a counseling job at a rigid camp program, get fired the first week and then worked as a 'professional painter', painting tenements in the South Bronx. The experience made me more determined to get a college degree.

The JOCKS were growing up, some faster than others. The older boys--'Great One', Tom Boy, Jose, Vinny, 'The Incredible *Dean*', 'Big Billy', Carlito, and 'Gorilla-Step' saw themselves as senior members while the young quartet got nicknamed 'The Hasslers' and proudly lived up to it.

While we continued to lift weights and play in the alley, finding an activity all could participate in became a challenge.

Then came that special Sunday. When Mom and Bernie and Mike spent a weekend upstate, the JOCKS would gather in my living room after church.

Halloween can be a 'coming of age' holiday. As a kid in Woodside, I had gone 'trick or treating' in costume until I was fifteen. When I hit sweet 16, I moved up to the 'big boy' stuff.

And the JOCKS?

"We're gonna get dozens of eggs and have a war," said 'Tom Boy' and got nods all around.

"Whoa!" I said.

My last Halloween in Woodside had me 'egging.' One of my buddies hit a little girl dressed as a princess and made her cry. Later, we got into an egg fight and the cops came. Running away, I fell and broke my ankle.

"You want a really cool Halloween?" I challenged them. "Build a dummy."

"A what?" said Paco.

"You heard me," I said. "Get a pair of pants and a shirt, gloves and socks, stuff them with newspaper with a paper bag for a head plus a mask."

I rode to Woodside to play touch football and didn't get back till dusk. The JOCKS were waiting in the garage. Only 'Great One' was in costume, failing yet again to be funny.

We were not alone; on the weight bench sat their 'creation', big as life and solidly put together.

"Not 'made with a Hershey bar'," Jorge quoted me on previous projects.

"Let me introduce....," 'Great One' went into his Groucho impersonation. "The honorable 'Dr. Hugo Zee Quackenbush.'"

From the Marx Brothers' *Day at the Races* who famously quipped a patient as he was taking his pulse: "Either my watch has stopped, or you're dead."

"Well," asked 'The Fabulous Ricky'. "What do we do *now*?"

I told them the plan. They looked at each other aghast.

Off came the hat and the fake mustache and eyeglasses. Down went the unlit cigar.

"I'll do it," said 'Great One'.

"You sure?" I asked.

"Hey," he replied. "I know Paco."

'Gorilla-Step' lived on the fourth floor of the six-story building at the end of 86th Street. The superintendent once chased Paco and 'The Fabulous Ricky' with a knife.

But not tonight. The weather was cool with a slight breeze. Every JOCK took his assigned spot on the sidewalk and waited. Kids and people were walking by, some in costume, when suddenly, from the roof of the apartment house.

"I can't take life anymore," wailed the 15-year old boy, his long hair blowing in the wind. "The Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, the Transportation Bond Issue. I've got to end it!"

From all around, seemingly in a panic, we closed under him

"Don't jump!" we pleaded with him. "Don't do it."

Adults and other kids joined us. One little girl started praying.

'Hugo' wasn't listening. Off he went.

Screams let out in the night, but 'The Fabulous Ricky' never saw the dummy hit the sidewalk. On the concrete in the fetal position, he was laughing too hard to stand up.

The adults didn't know what to make of it. One drunken woman tried to remove 'Hugo's' mask to "Give him air to breathe."

"Wow!" said the other kids. "Are you going to do it again? Can we play?"

'Hugo' 'jumped' six more times from the roofs of three different apartment houses. For the final act, close to forty kids were pumping up the jump. The 'Transportation Bond Issue', yet another city 'borrow to spend' deal would be voted upon two days later.

After the last 'suicide', I shook 'Great One's' hand and gave him the highest of JOCKS' praise.

"Who *is* he!"

'Hugo' got the last scare. We left him sitting in a chair in Paco and Jose's basement. In the morning, their housekeeper screamed in terror.

"Beck's By-Law: *Always stop an activity at the height of interest,*" was the smartest thing I ever learned about teaching.

The next Halloween we did it again, but it wasn't nearly as funny. We had outgrown 'Dr. Hugo Z. Quackenbush'.

Bernie's 'Aerospace Education' program continued flying high. Connections with the industry led to the 'Aeroprints' - ten posters with lesson plans on the back to teach the history of flight.

A hard look at the work already done--some of the paintings just weren't good enough. The *Red Baron* needed a makeover while *The Spirit of St. Louis* and a couple of others had to be completely redone. Unlike life, creativity allows 'do-overs'.

Would I become a 'real' artist yet?

I still drank beer, but rarely in front of the boys who knew better than to ask me to buy them alcohol. But they were experimenting - Gatorade and scotch! With Mom and Bernie away for Christmas, I invited the older JOCKS and some of their high school friends for taped discussion on 'Alcohol and Confidence.'

I served white wine with water chasers. All responded in a frank discussion, but 'Tom Boy' got out of hand, sticking to straight wine. One of the boys said it all: "I don't drink to feel confident, but I feel more confident after I drink."

Grass, acid, and pills never entered the conversation and none were sold or were taken by the boys while I was in Jackson Heights. Or so I thought.

The tape got a few laughs and a passing grade.

Instead of taking class notes, I sketched teachers' portraits. Some were pretty good. One got me a cycling date, but it rained, and that was that.

So the next weekend, the JOCKS and I took a bike trip to the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. Other than some clown running a red light and almost killing 'Tiny Tim', it was a fun day.

For our next trip, we'd take the subway.

My painting was ongoing. A born fanboy, there was a fantastic airplane scene I had to do. In between other pictures, I worked on *King Kong atop the Empire State Building*.

Teaching is not unlike art: can it be *taught*?

The science of physical education is neverending and can be regurgitated for a passing mark, but art begins with projecting and engaging the viewer.

It was never my intention to instruct, program or evaluate the Jackson Heights JOCKS, but they were my first class and I learned more about teaching from them than at any college.

But there were times when my Visual Arts experience came in handy. I was in hardware store when I spotted them, steel washers the size of silver dollars. But it wasn't money I envisioned...

1972 was dominated by the war and Watergate and of course, the 'world famous' Jackson Heights JOCKS Olympic Games, filmed exclusively at 'Kevin's Field'.

Over the years, well-meaning churches, schools and parents groups have joined together to supervise athletic events for children; the JOCKS needed none of that. We chipped in fifty cents apiece for a bunch of washers, a couple of yards of cheap red, white and blue ribbon and a couple of small bottles of paint from the local hobby shop.

We left 1/3 of the washers silver. The other 2/3 we hand-painted gold and bronze. White ribbon with gold, red with silver, blue with bronze; our medals were ready. The torch started with a stick, then wrapped in tin foil to hold a candle.

A parade of bicycles set out for 'Kevin's Field'. Carlos would be our cameraman; Vinny would back him up. There'd be no 'second takes'.

For 'opening ceremonies', we lined up behind 'Tiny Tim' carrying the lit torch. With the camera rolling, the torch promptly came apart. The games went on.

Carlito and Tom Boy were on the Xavier track team. 'Great One' was a long distance runner. To make sure everyone won at least one medal, there were short and long relays plus short and long races, broad and long jumps and a 'wheelbarrow' race. As I'd be competing with them, football and softball throws.

As the games played on, hundreds, if not thousands of cars rolled by on the airport expressway. One can only wonder what those drivers must have been thinking.

The biggest upset was 'Gorilla-step's' Herculean heave that beat me in the softball throw.

The medal presentations lacked TV pomp and circumstance, but...

"I didn't win a 'real' gold medal," said 'Big Billy'. "But I felt like it."

Only a couple were filmed in the 25-minute show.

We watched in my living room wearing our shirts and bedecked with medals. Mom and Bernie joined us for the premiere. I backed the show with music from a 'Great Movie Themes' album. *Ben-Hur's* trumpets set the mood.

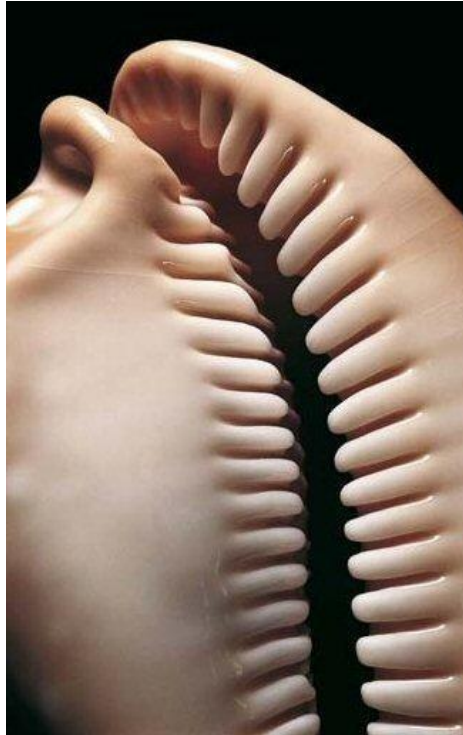
"Amazing," said Bernie.

"How cute," said Mom.

The Olympics was us, The Jackson Heights JOCKS. We felt proud.

"Well," 'The Fabulous Ricky' spoke for all of us. "What do we do *now*?"

Plenty.



© Paul Starost a

The *Cypraea leucodon*

The JOCKS were strictly apolitical, but we loved New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay. Not for his youth or Liberal leanings, for his *incompetence*.

In February of 1969, 15 inches of Sunday snow covered the Big Apple. Day after day went by and still the snow had not been plowed in Queens which made for the greatest snowball fight in the history of Jackson Heights.

His Honor was on a walking tour, campaigning for reelection in 1972 when I met him near school. Good thing I was wearing my shirt.

"Mister Mayor," I said, shaking his hand. "The Jackson Heights JOCKS have always supported you."

"Who are 'The Jackson Heights JOCKS'?" asked Lindsay.

I fumbled for an explanation.

Who were we?

My yellow ten-speed had run its course. I had never toured with it, hadn't slept with it, I felt no lasting connection. I gave 'Tom Boy' a good deal, got a blue Schwinn *Supersport* and put a banana seat on it.

Riding as usual at the head of the JOCKS, suddenly one of the boys caught up, and grinned as he passed me.

"'Gorilla-Step'," I shouted. "You got pedal clips!"

'Serious' cycling equipment. I bought a pair and have been using them ever since. From then on, I called him 'Ronald'.

After making two films, going to a see a movie together was never suggested, but movies did come to us.

Hitchcock's *Frenzy*, a lame stranger melodrama came with a memorable tagline...

One didn't 'choke' in Jackson Heights...'*The only clue was a gentleman's necktie.*'

From *Superfly*, about a pimp/crime-fighter, Curtis Mayfield sang, "Had a mind, wasn't dumb."

"Wasn't *too* fuckin' dumb," added 'Tom Boy'.

Do or say something stupid in front of a JOCK...

'Had a mind...'

In the early spring, Mom allowed Ronald and 'Tiny Tim' to spend a weekend upstate. Raccoon hunting with my local drinking buddies impressed the boys, but one look at The Island and they fell in love.

A 'seasonal island', the Rondout ran high with snowmelt and the six-acre tract of woods shrank by an acre when the creek rose. At the closest point, barely 15 feet of rushing water separated the island from the shore.

"Camping trip!" shouted the JOCKS when they got the word.

Mom and Bernie owned the property, but not *all* the boys could come.

I broke the news to 'The Hasslers.'

"Watta gyp!" said 'Tiny Tim'.

Paco, Jorge 'Superstar' and 'The Fabulous Ricky' would have to wait for another time. Ronald, Tom Boy, Joe, Carlito, 'Big Billy' and 'Great One', and their bikes would make the trip.

"My father says we have to have tents and facilities," said 'Great One'.

"I can get a six-man tent," said 'Big Billy.'

I'd sleep in my own. 'Facilities' would be the woods.

Camping during Easter vacation would be our 'cover story'; the JOCKS craved an adventure!

I laid out my plan and we went to work.

Repainting the Wright Brothers first flight became a search for authenticity. Most paintings got it wrong. I built a model of the original *Flyer*, then Ronald took Polaroid pictures. Still couldn't get what I wanted, so I used another artist's work and made it my own - 'Photo-shop' before 'Photo-shop.'

Getting boys and bikes to the island required family cooperation. Jose's father had a huge green Chevy stationwagon we called 'The church.' We piled bikes on top. 'Great One's' Dad also drove up.

Soon enough, we were on our own facing the rushing divide. The hero of the crossing was 'Big Billy.' Wearing highhealed 'pimp shoes', he strode into the chilly stream and like a rock, stood thigh deep and relayed our stuff to dry land.

We quickly set up our tents, tried out the 'facilities', started a fire, cooked dinner..."*Open* the can of beans before you heat it!"

As we got ready to sleep, Jose discovered he'd forgotten his sleeping bag. We gave him loose blankets. It got dark and cold.

From my nearby tent, I called out in the night. "Wow! Two sleeping bags *are* better than one."

Unable to sleep much, Jose was up at dawn and woke the rest of us. Our wet clothes had frozen on the line. But as the morning heated up, Jose cooled. We had a sacred mission to perform: today would be the JOCKS' moment in the sun!

Down the road a piece between two mountains, the 'world famous' Rosendale trestle bridge crossed the Rondout. One hundred feet over the water, the bridge had seen its last train 10 years before.

We parked our bikes near the railroad tracks. The boys would pull this off, not me. As I was over 18, if we got caught, I'd be the one in trouble. Ronald took the lead.

We'd chipped in 50 cents apiece for the paint. I supplied the bedsheet. Jose helped me paint a giant starry shield emblem. Under it big red letters, JOCKS. The banner on the trestle bridge would announce us to the world.

To mount it under the center of the bridge would be ideal, but dangerous. The boys tied it on an easy to reach support, visible to all of Rosendale. The JOCKS had arrived!

But only for a day. By the next morning, the banner would be taken down and vanish forever.

Is there no stronger love than a 'toilet paper bond' 'tween man and boy? 'Tom Boy' had lived in the city all his life. The only trees he had ever seen were the ones lining his block. The island was another world to him, and he was having difficulty performing one of its mandatory customs.

Distressed, he approached me with a roll of toilet paper.

"I tried the 'country squat'," he said. "And shit on my heels. Can you show me how to do it right?"

He had asked at an opportune time. Together we headed into the woods, seeking the perfect spot and found a felled tree. Quickly we dropped our pants. Side by side we sat bare-ass on the itchy bark and in unison, dumped our loads clear.

Some months later, a drunken 'Tom Boy' would show all New York City what he had learned, taking a 'country squat' between two parked cars in front of Madison Square Garden.

'Had a mind...'

On the way into High Falls, we pedaled past a little boy.

"Look at all the ten-speeds," he marveled and counted them as if we were driving Porsches.

On the Rondout where once spanned the Aqueduct, 'the Ledges' was a staircase-like cliff. I went to the highest, fifteen feet or so above the swirling water, and jumped in. Every JOCK did and would tell everyone in Jackson Heights about it.

When we got back, 'the Hasslers' ached to go. Come summer, with the older JOCKS, they did.

I couldn't go because I was 'whir-king'. On the 4th of July Weekend, I was told that I'd been chosen to run the summer recreation program at St. Joan's. Weather permitting, I'd take the children swimming at Astoria Pool in the morning, then supervise at the gym. I spent much more time with the girls rather than the boys. We played games, did art projects, even made t-shirts, but the *St. Joan's Supergirls* never got off the ground.

After a spate of misadventures, the JOCKS survived the second trip to the island. Early on the last morning, 'Great One' and Ronald got on their ten-speeds and headed south. Many hours later, they got lost in Harlem and found themselves surrounded by local teenagers.

"The Jackson Heights JOCKS?" asked one. "Where are you comin' from?"

'Great One' explained.

"On *bikes*! You're cool, man," said another and gave them directions.

Both boys would later take much longer treks.

"Bernie can't write," complained Mom as they struggled with lesson plans for the backs of the *Aeroprints*. Good thing she didn't read the comic book stories I'd been submitting. Form letter rejections were bad enough.

Wrote one editor: 'We can't use this, but the writing's pretty good. You should try prose.'

Prose? I had to look up the word.

Paco insisted we plug in TVs before we shattered them. We had a couple of gray screens flickering just before they imploded. The series became re-runs and was soon cancelled due to lack of interest.

Getting a degree in physical education was an education in itself.

"Next year, this 'Methods' course will be eliminated from the curriculum," announced our teacher. "You'll be able to take an elective, an art class or a foreign language, to broaden yourself."

"Why should I want to 'broaden myself'?" a 'jock' called out. "I'm a baseball player."

'Great One' and his high school friends challenged us to game of touch football at 'Kevin's Field.' The idea of this Groucho Marx wannabe thinking he belonged on the same field with the 'official quarterback' of the Jackson Heights JOCKS was laughable.

Playing quarterback, 'Great One' showed not only skill, but confidence and leadership, but how did he beat *me*?

'The only clue was a gentleman's necktie.'

Christmas and New Year's in New York City come with their own urban traditions, but back in the day in Woodside, there was another holiday event. Kids would round up discarded Christmas trees and drag them to a vacant lot for a massive bonfire.

I told the JOCKS about it, and right after New Year's, there were some forty trees standing in the backyard. One we stuck in the fireplace. The dry branches exploded and we were lucky the house didn't burn down.

Back from a trip, Mom never found out, but when she looked out the dining room window...

"What are those Christmas trees doing in *my* backyard?"

"Burn, burn, burn!" shouted 'Tiny Tim'.

With my luck, a single match and gust of wind...a flaming six-alarm, spreading like a heated Hershey bar, the headline with photos:

Community Burns to Ashes

The JOCKS who destroyed Jackson Heights

Disappointed, the boys made the trees disappear.

Mom's plan to have a 'normal son who would meet...' wasn't working out.

"You're married to your t-shirt," said a woman on the block.

Oh, to have 'a nice girl' alone in the house on weekends would have made so many fantasies come true, but would there have been the JOCKS?

For my birthday, Mom gave me a couple of tickets to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* on Broadway. Surely, I could finally get a date.

I was afraid to try. Instead I went next door and gave the tickets to the Mack girl I had hit in the head with a football many years before.

"You know, Kevvy," said Mom. "I think those boys in the alley really love you."

No 'Aerospace' painting ever made her feel like that.

The best portrait I penciled in class was of a lovely blond.

"You're going to be a gym teacher?" she asked.

Not that there was anything wrong with being one, but I never saw a gym as a classroom. Later, for a couple of years, I'd teach physical education in the South Bronx, but I'd do 'real' teaching at a swimming pool, in factories, in a hotel and in a couple of prisons.

I reapplied to the Peace Corps. With special clearance from the Air Force, this time they'd take me.

'Game of the Game' was the 'official rainy day game' of the JOCKS. Pencil 25 squares, five letters vertical, five categories horizontal. 'Disease' beginning with 'R'. Every correct answer earned 5 points. Name one nobody else had, 10 points.

Of course, I would always win. Until...Playing with the Hasslers, I was stumped on 'Household Appliance' with 'N'.

"Nightlight," said 'The Fabulous Ricky' and won.

As a reward, I gave him my Christmas Hershey bar.

Grinning ear to ear, he ate it in front of me.

A graduate of the Bronx High School of Science and back from college, 'The Incredible *Dean*' brought his expertise to the game, intimidating the Hasslers.

'Mammals' with 'T'?

"Titmouse," he answered.

"A titmouse is a bird," said his younger brother.

"Birds are mammals," said 'The Incredible *Dean*' who's yet to live it down.

Come spring and a JOCK's thoughts turn to adventure. Paco, Phil, Ricky, Jose, and 'Tom Boy' were up for one. We took the 7 Train out to Flushing Meadow, and within a couple of blocks, we were exploring the site of the 1964/65 World's Fair. Not much of the expansive and expensive futuristic extravaganza remained. The towering NY State pavilion, later featured in *Men in Black*, was a rusty husk of its former 'Empire' self.

The most ambitious building of all was a mammoth box with multi-colored windows all around and topped with a concrete frame. The 'United States' Pavilion, constructed at a cost of \$12.4 million, looked almost as imposing as it had at its unveiling, but as we got closer.

It was a beautiful day and the sun that used to bathe the building in an American glow now made us want to see the shadows and beyond. Cautiously, feeling like we were on the sets of a hundred sci-fi movies yet to be made, we entered the innards.

"It's been deserted by the whole country," said 'The Fabulous Ricky'.

The place was a huge emptiness littered with trash and smelling like an outhouse.

"Not everybody," said Jose, pointing to the 'window apartments.'

Signs of squatters, long and short-time, dirty sheets and torn blankets, empty wine bottles and piles of newspapers.

Then came the voice from out of the dark.

"Don't be afraid," it warned. "Don't be afraid."

In the shadows, the man looked huge, bedecked in a long heavy coat. But in the light, he was just an ordinary guy wearing a government-issue Air Force overcoat.

We took his advice and headed to the roof. We were on top, with a world class view of all Queens, when the police car showed up, and gave us a burst of its siren.

"Time to go," I said to Jose.

As ordered, we came down to the parking area.

"How old are you?" the cop asked me.

"Old enough, I'm afraid."

"What're ya doin' here?"

"We're the Jackson Height JOCKS," said Jose. "On a weekend outing."

"The Jackson Heights *what?*" "JOCKS,"

said 'The Fabulous Ricky'.

"It's kind of a youth group," I added.

"Back to Jackson Heights," said the cop and we were gone.

It was not our fist run-in with the police that day. Earlier, as we waited on the elevated station for the train, a cop came up and accused Paco of sneaking under the turnstyle. Then he laced into me, 'the adult who should be setting an example.'

Paco gave us that sheepish, sorrowful look, as if begging to be forgiven. The cop made him go back and pay full fare.

We didn't goof on Paco. Not *too* much.

Bernie invited me to go on a school trip for 'Aerospace Education'. Two elementary classes got to play 'Johnny Airport.' We even got to go inside an airplane. If only the JOCKS...

Cycling home on Saturday afternoon, I heard somebody in the house. Mom and Bernie and Mike were upstate...who?

I tip-toed upstairs to my room to find 'Big Billy' in my bed with a girl.

God, she had beautiful breasts! How did this pimply-faced punk rate...?

They got dressed and left in a rush.

Jose had brought 'Big Billy' to the block.

"Who *is* he?" I asked.

Jose gave me a rundown, spiked with drugs and violence.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Billy wanted to be a JOCK," said Jose. "That's how it's always been. JOCKS don't rat on each other, but I don't trust him anymore." That made at least two of us.

Take a vote and throw 'Big Billy' out? That would make the JOCKS *what?* Doing stuff and having fun was us, were we going to get *serious?*

"Once a JOCK, always a JOCK," I said.

Come June, Ronald, 'Tom Boy', and 'Great One' graduated from high school. They'd be going away to college.

Jose, Paco, Jorge 'Superstar' and Carlito would be leaving even sooner; both Hispanic families were moving to Florida together.

The night before they left, we had a party complete with strings of lights.

Jackson Heights JOCKS never say good-bye. We shake hands and kiss and hug like everybody else, but then...

The next morning both families got into the overloaded green 'church' and pulled out of the 86th Street alley, and stopped at the light, seemingly the longest in New York City.

All the JOCKS stood waiting. Maryann, Joe's girlfriend, was sobbing like her world were coming to an end.

Just before the stationwagon pulled away, the JOCKS rushed it, reaching in the windows for a tap on the shoulder or the touch of a finger or even a pat on the fender.

"Gotcha last!" rang out as if say, 'We're JOCKS and we're still playing!'

Well, what do we do now? we wondered.

I wanted to build a basketball goal in my backyard, but Mom said no. But Mr. Mack next door said yes. Ours would be no rickety project built with a Hershey bar. A couple of timbers would hold up the backboard; we needed a strong center brace.

At the end of 86th Street near 'Hugo's' apartment house stood a parking schedule sign like tens of thousands in the city. New York wouldn't miss just one.

Ronald, 'Tom Boy', 'Big Billy', 'Great One' and I pushing the pole back and forth until we could lift it out was not unlike the historic raising of the flag on Iwo Jima, but in reverse.

We chipped in for a plywood backboard, a heavy rim, and paint. The JOCKS starry emblem would be forever in the alley.

Two days later, Mr. Mack changed his mind and we had to take it down.

Weren't we ever going to be 'world famous'?

'Tiny Tim' and 'The Fabulous Ricky' were the last of the 'Hasslers'.

"Look," said 'The Fabulous Ricky' that special day, jutting his chin at me. "I shaved."

In the garage, both named their specific goals.

"I want to make the junior varsity this year," said 'Tiny Tim', spinning his basketball.

Said the 'Fabulous Ricky': "I wanna get laid!"

Now that you mention it.

I got a bargain on a bike in New Jersey. 'Tom Boy', the first JOCK to get his driver's license gave me a lift, talking all the way about Beverly, the love of his life. The white Fuji *Finest* would be my last bike. After 20,000 miles, we're still together.

A new generation of JOCKS was growing up in Jackson Heights. Diane's little brothers, Chris, age 7 and Russell 'The Hustle', 5, got shirts. So did the young Tommy and 'Bata' and Sasha. Chris's friend, Paul (Finally, an Afro-American!) got a shirt, too.

'Tiny Tim' and 'The Fabulous Ricky' called the little kids 'Tiddlywinks.'

My younger brother William and I had been very close as kids, but he grew up faster - he had girlfriends! While I was in the service, he sold my precious comic books, including the first appearance of *Spider-Man* and the *Fantastic Four*, to a Woodside dentist for a nickel apiece.

Contrary to popular belief, revenge is a dish best served funny, with an ironic appetizer.

The JOCKS had found a collection of cardboard and plastic little houses perfect for a neighborhood burn.

That would be the bait for my visiting brother. I told the 'Hasslers' and the 'Tiddlywinks' what I wanted done, giving them a bunch of my tent pegs and simple instructions. Eagerly they went to work.

It took a while, but when they were ready...

"Bill, the JOCKS want you to have a rare honor," I told him. "They've set up a model town and want you to light it up."

As William had burned all my models while I was overseas, he couldn't resist.

All the kids gathered around the tiny town, anticipating what my brother never suspected.

"Over here, Bill," I guided him as he and I used to lure brother Mike back in the day on the Rondout 'sandy beach.'

"Right here," I said and the 'Tiddlywinks' covered their mouths, afraid they'd give it away.

Closer and closer. He had a lit match in his hand as he made the fatal step.

Down his feet went as he fell into the dug trap. The JOCKS scattered, laughing as they ran.

"I'll get you for this!" he screamed, knee deep in the hole. "I'll get you for this!"

Get *me* last?

With William gone, we burned the town. The fire was somewhat anti-climatic, but there'd be another blaze to come, much bigger and for real.

Again I found 'Big Billy' in my house, with another girl in another bed: my mother's.

I wasn't *too* fucking jealous! This's what I should have been doing instead of 'playing with the boys in the alley'.

No. I'm a JOCK and proud of it!

Who *is* he?

For very different reasons, 'Big Billy' would return twice.

Mom and Bernie, and Mike and I were upstate for Thanksgiving. The next day a neighbor called.

"I don't know how to tell you this," he said, "So I'm just gonna tell you. You've had a fire."

Not the first time Mom had suffered a house fire.

Back in Woodside, I had my own room upstairs, the walls decorated with monster and sci-fi posters and my own copied versions plus a corner bookcase piled with comics and my many models.

The prize was a life-size human skull with a candle on top, the melted wax adding a sinister touch.

One day I went out and left the candle burning. The fire burned comparatively little, but the black smoke from the burning plastic spread a blanket of black snow everywhere on the second floor.

This time? Surely, it wasn't my fault, couldn't be.

We drove back. Fire Marshalls determined the fire had started in Mom's and Bernie's bedroom. Thankfully, the blaze had been contained. The burnt bed had been thrown out through the window and the damage to the rest of the house was minimal.

"This was arson," said the chief inspector.

"Someone tried to burn my house down," said Mom. "Why?"

A quick investigation led to 'Big Billy' being arrested. In the holding cell, he tried to hang himself.

"I've seen my fill of phonies," said the jailor. "Not this kid. He wanted to end it."

As repairs were being made, Mom put the house up for sale. She and Bernie would retire together in June and move upstate.

In my last semester, I was given a unique challenge while student teaching. A classroom teacher was putting on play about kids on a farm and needed a mural for scenery. I jumped at the chance, but couldn't find suitable artwork to copy from the school library or the one in Jackson Heights.

From the start, I should have sought out the best place for source material, the home of 'The Fabulous Ricky.'

Challenged by a quest, his dark brown eyes lit up like Bambi's. His room was full of books, and maps and pictures and his seashell collection; more than anything else, 'The Fabulous Ricky' wanted a *Cypraea leucodo*. The size of a little boy's heart, it was the rarest and most precious seashell in the world. Would he ever get one? So few of us do.

His guitar held a special place over his bed. Ricky would teach himself to play and join a number of bands over the years. Heroin addiction would lead to serious health problems and he'd suffer the consequences.

He had a whole shelf of Atlases and maps, and another filled with a children's encyclopedia.

"How about this?" he said, from a picture book about agriculture.

"Who *is* he!" I said.

The picture was simple, yet perfect. I graphed it in 4 by 8 squares, then drew a large 'master' with a 32 panel grid. Each boy and girl got a square to paint, then we taped them together from the back.

Thanks to 'The Fabulous Ricky', the mural was a great success.

After the fire, I never saw 'Big Billy' again. Mom and Bernie did. He came to the house and apologized,

"That took guts," said Bernie.

"Why?" I asked.

Mom looked me straight in the eye. "Because he was jealous of *your* life."

'Birds are mammals!'

Bernie was right; "Big Billy" had guts. He beat his addictions, got a fine education and worked in the fashion industry. Like so many others in this economy, he's being tested every day. To all of us, he's still a JOCK.

I graduated in January of 1974 and got a temp teaching gig till June. I got a second afternoon job running a rec program in Brooklyn. When Mom and Bernie moved upstate, I got an apartment in Greenpoint.

The *Aeroprints* were published as a series of posters plus a deluxe laminated edition. But they didn't sell and nobody got a dime.

The last time I saw 'Tiny Tim' was before the fire. He came upstate with me after the two island trips because he wanted to go back to Rondout Creek and jump off the highest ledge.

We went after dark night. It was still spring; I knew the 'crick' was cold.

I jumped. I hit. *Oh, my God! It's colder than the effing Arctic!* Is this how the passengers of the TITANIC felt, unable to get a lifeboat?

Freezing my gonads off, treading water, my legs felt like fresh popsicles.

"You know, 'Tiny'," I said calmly. "It's really not bad at all."

He jumped. I laughed. 'Tiny Tim' made a big splash and came up blowing out steam, swimming for his life.

We called him 'Phil' after that.

After budget cuts eliminated my Brooklyn job, I left my apartment, packed up my bike and flew out to California to meet Ronald. After trying to become a Catholic deacon, he had enlisted in the Air Force. I brought him a custom painted JOCKS shirt.

We dodged buzzing logging trucks up Route 1 for a week, then he returned to base. Dedicated, confident and sharp, Ronald would serve in uniform for twenty years and then as a national security advisor valued around the world.

In 1976, between Peace Corps assignments, I headed north by bike to Montreal and the Olympics. I took the long way through Niagara Falls, and then Buffalo. Getting to Toronto, I still had a week before the games would start. Maybe, if I got lucky.

I wore my JOCKS shirt, a sure 'chick magnet' and tried a few book stores and a few parks, but as usual, no such luck.

The afternoon wearing on, after a couple of burgers, I was heading out of town when I saw a bunch of guys on a big field throwing a football around. I pulled up.

"The Jackson Heights JOCKS," snickered one of them.

"I'm the 'official quarterback,' I said. "Can I play?"

"No, you can't, Yank," came the harsh reply.

"Okay, can I warm up with you?"

A guy gave me the ball and ran out. "Here, Yank."

I waved him deeper, then hit him in the hands with a thirty-yard rope.

"Hey, Yank," he yelled back. "You can play on my team!"

Six on six, one-hand touch. On the first down, I went with my 'world famous' play perfected in Jackson Heights. Dropping back to pass, I held the ball high in both hands, then my right arm came out throwing, but it was empty; in my left hand, I'd hidden the ball behind my head. The sideline defender was faked out of his cleats. I pulled my arm back, then threw a long touchdown pass.

The first of many; we'd win going away.

'Who is he!'

A month or so later, I got a call from 'The Fabulous Ricky'; Maryann, Jose's former girlfriend, was getting married.

"You have to come," he said.

"But I don't even have a decent shirt and tie, or a jacket," I said.

"We get them for you and meet you at the church," he said.

After the ceremony...

"I don't understand," said the new bride. "When I walked down the aisle, you were wearing a t-shirt, but when I came back, you were all dressed up."

Having changed in the confessional, I said with a smile, "'Bless me, Maryann, for I have sinned.'"

Not long after, I got a second Peace Corps assignment and headed to Florida on my *Finest*. Along the way I stopped in to see 'Carlito' in Maryland, 'Great One' in Virginia, then Paco at the Tallahassee campus of Florida State University.

The dorm address was easy to find.

"Do you know Camilo?" I asked a student.

"Oh," came the reply. "You mean Paco?"

Alert the media - FSU knows Paco!

Quiet, conservative 'Carlito' went on to professional success, but more rewarding, as a pillar in his church. 'Great One', like his brother Vinny, became a teacher at a Catholic school. Before 'Great One' got married and raised two daughters, he rode his bicycle across the country. In the Entertainment Industry, only the privileged and powerful know Paco.

I got to Jose's house in South Florida and got a bonus: the visiting 'Fabulous Ricky' and his older brother, 'The Incredible *Dean*.'

Crammed in Jose's canoe, we paddled to a tiny island a half mile off the coast and set up camp. Like boys back in the alley, we went looking for mischief and found an old boatwreck on the beach. Dousing it with stove fuel, we set it ablaze. The final 'tribal fire' of the JOCKS burned through the night to go out when the tide came in.

Back from South America in 1978, I enrolled in SUNY New Paltz, to pursue a Masters Degree in 'special education'. I was trying to get over an affair with a beautiful freshman.

'Imaginary Juliet, Snow White, Teen Angel, too.

'Whom have I lost by growing up?

'Do I look for her in you?'

.Then I got a teaching opportunity, sort of. Because I was a veteran, I was recommended to participate in a week-long program involving Army kids at West Point. The 'camp' was not on the Academy grounds, but nearby.

For free room and board, I volunteered.

First day I found out that I wasn't going to teach anything, but 'monitor' the children after class until lights out - an effing babysitter! (But I would get a 'letter of appreciation' that would look good in my 'permanent record'.)

There I was with a dozen boys waiting around till bedtime.

'Well, what do we do now?' I could hear 'The Fabulous Ricky', the spirit of the JOCKS, spurning me on.

"C'mon," I said. "We've got a couple of hours of daylight, let's take a walk and explore this place."

Only five came with me. Halfway up a road leading to the woods...

"Look!" I said as a rabbit hopped across the asphalt and zipped into the brush.

The boys were less than thrilled. Weren't we gonna 'Do stuff and have fun'?

We continued up the road. Coming out of the woods on a dirt road, an Army jeep stopped in front of us.

"Afternoon, soldier," I said. "Are there any good hiking trails around here?"

"Yes, sir," replied a sergeant in his twenties. "You wanna fire the machinegun?"

"Excuse me," I said.

"Got one with us, and an ammo box of blanks," he said, pointing to the thick, heavy rifle with a triangle mount under the barrel. "You and the boys wanna give her a whirl?"

I had worked on a firing range in the Air Force and had taught kids gun safety and shooting as a camp counselor. I was up for it.

The boys were jostling in anticipation.

"You listen and obey every word the soldiers say." I told them.

The boys nodded. The two soldiers set up the machinegun, the M60 was a belt-fed fully-automatic weapon that fired the 7.62 mm NATO cartridge commonly used in larger guns.

"I hope you never in your life have to ever fire a machinegun again," I said to the first boy and he lay down behind the weapon.

After double-checking that all were well behind the M60....

"Fire!" said the sergeant.

For ten seconds and fifteen shots, that kid was shooting for real, the copper casings flying.

After every boy took a turn, I finished up.

We thanked the soldiers. As they drove away, the boys pounced on the brass bullet casings. Soon their pockets were full.

When we got back to the cabin, the boys showed the others who stayed behind gleaming proof that they had fired a machinegun.

All the other SUNY volunteers got 'letters of appreciation' which stated they 'got to know the children's names.'

I never did get one, but I still have a couple of brass casings around somewhere.

About a week later, I got invited to Tom Boy's' wedding. I had some decent clothes, but only a pair of beat-up sneakers. I gave them a good cleaning and threw together \$20 to buy a Swedish Army knife as a present.

I wanted 'Tom Boy' to see me in my t-shirt, but it had been eaten through by Brazilian bugs. No others JOCKS came. 'Tom Boy's' college buddies looked so young and confident. I was a memory from his boyhood left behind. But that's how it had been with every JOCK; How it was supposed to be.

'Tom Boy' married Beverly, his high school sweetheart and they'd live happily ever after. He'd become a doctor, they'd raise kids and treasure their grandchildren.

As new man and wife headed away on their honeymoon, if I had known 'Tom Boy' wouldn't hear my voice again for more than thirty years, maybe I would have changed my final words to him. Then again...

A quick tap on his shoulder.

"Gotcha last!"*

*Six years later, at my wedding, much to my bride's chagrin, 'The Fabulous Ricky' got *me* last.

1975-1979



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America & Away



Kate Smith Sings God Bless America, Movie Short From 1943 - Bing video



West Side Story (4/10) Movie CLIP - America (1961) HD - Bing video



Whitney Houston - Star Spangled-Banner - Bing video



'My Home, Sweet Home'

*"We may have all come on different ships,
but we're in the same boat now."*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

When Mom was just a teenager, she got a tempting job offer: personal assistant for a young, up-and-coming nightclub singer.

Grandma, a show business vet, set her straight.

"Completely impractical!," she told her daughter. "Your boss catches a cold or gets pregnant, you're out in the street."

Mom listened to Grandma, got a regular job, married Dad and after the war, their first baby boomed.

Dinah Shore went on to become a TV star, singing 'See the USA in your Chevrolet, America's the greatest land of all!'

I took Dinah's advice. In 1964, my two Air Force buddies and I chipped in and bought a shamrock green 1939 Chevy and rode from San Angelo, Texas to New York City.

We then sold the car and, add in our Air Force 'travel pay', made a small profit. A lot of people owned cars, but I would know too many cars that owned people. Not gonna happen to me. I had traveled by bus and train and flew to Europe and back, but confined inside a machine, dependent on a gas-driven engine, no trip ever made me feel joined to the road and the country.

Blame it on *Wheaties*. I grew up eating 'The Breakfast of Champions' and reading the box containing the 'whole kernel' flakes. Bob Richards, the Olympic gold medal winner, was the first athlete to appear on the *front* of a *Wheaties* box in 1958.

Richards projected the image of the All-American hero, but I could never see myself polevaulting. Where was the *quest* in a split-second act? In 1969, as I was failing as an art student, Richards and *Wheaties* pushed the cereal bowl: a cross-country trip by bicycle. On the back of the box, I can still see Bob hunched over the handlebars as he took on the Nevada desert.

Not me, I thought. A Catskill boy, I'd take the mountain route.

Less than a year later, I got my first ten-speed. Pedaling out of Huntsville, Alabama on *The Spirit of Mighty America*, I'd first ride to my aunt's place in Atlanta, then on to New York City.

No job, no car, no house, no girlfriend, every morning I'd wake up with somewhere new to go, new places to see, new people to meet, feeling like Clark without Lewis and a little more like Huck without Tom.

Alone and independent, I'd be a knight errant riding out to discover 'the greatest land of all'. Or maybe that long-haired biker in *Easy Rider*... 'Looking for America and can't find it anywhere.'

What would I find out about my country and myself? After thousands of miles, cities and towns, mountains and valleys, bridges and tunnels, what would it all *mean*?

Full of confidence, I was ready and eager for my 'first time'. As so many Americans were killed every year on the highways, I'd be cautious and careful, but never afraid.

What a sight I was, long hair blowing in the wind, topped by an 'Aussie Commando' hat, with one side propped against my head. A lanky boy atop a red, white and blue bike, overloaded and unbalanced, off on a great adventure. I'd behave and

not do anything stupid and though there might be some pain at the start, losing my 'virginity' to the road would be a wonderful, blissful experience.

It was a disaster. Because I'd been stupid *before* I got to the road. *Spirit of Mighty America*, cluttered with heavy, needless accessories, including a 'kiddie' Alabama license plate with my name on it, plus a front basket and a backpack mounted high on the deluxe sissy bar must have weighed over 85 pounds. Taking a downhill turn became a death-defying maneuver.

That first day I passed through Scottsboro, Alabama, where in 1931, 9 black teens were tried and found guilty of rape by an all-white jury and became a landmark in racist judgment. On the way out, I wished all America could leave Scottsboro behind.

I didn't bring a tent and my first night out, slept only a little under a picnic table. When I hit the mountains, I found out the difference of being physically fit and being in 'road shape.' Pushing my heavy bike I was dying.

When I stopped to rest at a gas station, I was surrounded by a bunch of crewcut rednecks, who looked at me as if I had come from another planet. One fingered my vanity license plate.

"Kee-vin, Alabama," he said. "Never heard of it."

That night, I slept in an abandoned school bus. Off the next morning, the going was slow.

"Why?" I kept asking myself.

For the first and last time on the road, I paid to stay to at a motel. After a good breakfast, I trudged on, every mile an effort. After 3 Big Macs (55 cents apiece), I thought I'd be all fueled up, but I continued to break down.

At 'Big Mama's Truck Stop', outside of Rome, Georgia, I called my aunt and the family came and picked me up. My 'first time' had been an embarrassing humiliating failure.

But...there were these moments, alone on the road with the wind at my back, the complete *freedom*. I had to try again.

Back in New York City, I went from one bike and one book to another, researching 'bicycle touring', correcting my early mistakes. I took a 'century', a 100-mile trip to NYC, then a 250-miler to Washington DC, a 350-miler around New England and a 450-mile trek to Ohio. With each trip, the road would teach me new things. In between rides, at school or later, working a job, I'd get bursts of 'road fever,' and quickly sought relief.

Finally I had found 'the bike of my life,' a Fuji *Finest* with a 25-inch 'tall' frame, a Brooks 'pro' saddle and Shimano sidepull brakes. Over the miles I'd replace every part of the *Finest* except for the chain and frame.

I referred to the bike as 'her'; that's what men called ships, cars and airplanes. There'd be times, especially at night, when I'd gently stroke her tubes. Not like a man would a lover, more like a knight patting his trusty steed. And just before going to sleep, I'd gently fondle the tips of her tire valves and never once wake up to a flat.

The *Finest* wasn't a flashy bike, but she had a presence all her own. Years later, in the Peace Corps in Brazil, I'd ride my bike to the supermarket and load up the panniers with groceries. One afternoon, I found another bike blocking mine. I took the 24-inch 'kiddie bike' by the handlebars and...

That's when the owner came out, a big guy with a machete on his belt.

"This is your bike," I said, "And here's mine."

One look at the *Finest* and no way was I going to steal his bike and leave *her* behind.

Imagine being at a party or at a club, in the middle of an animated conversation with a woman, when suddenly her husband or boyfriend shows up. With just a tip of your head, let him know who you're with and all misunderstandings end.

Not just about beauty or youth or fashion, but the presence, the confidence of a woman who wants to go somewhere new *with me*.

On the road, my ears would wake up first, listening for drops of rain hitting my tent. Out of my sleeping bag, I'd check the wind. Behind me and I'd fly through the day, blowing in my face and I'd struggle. Worst was a crosswind pushing into traffic. That could get me killed.

Nothing upset me more than my own carelessness, and after leaving a couple of things behind at a campsite, after I packed up, I'd do a 'walk around' to make sure I had everything.

Breakfast would come with the first small store I came to: a box of cookies and a quart of milk while I studied my map.

Back in the day, gas stations offered free State road maps. With the scissor attachment on my Swiss Army knife, I'd trim what I didn't need. Every fraction of an ounce was critical.

Putting in anywhere from 60 to a 100 miles a day, eating was like shoveling coal into a steam engine. Lunch was fast food, but never with a soda, *free* water. But once, having taken a mountain shortcut to save a couple a miles, suddenly I was starving without a restaurant or burger joint in sight. Good thing I had a big can of kidney beans I'd been saving for dinner. But I couldn't get my camping stove started. Where the hell was my fork? I ate every last cold bean with my comb.

And haven't complained about a meal since.

Early on, I'd set goals, how far I'd have to go. Got over that quickly. Enjoy the road and camp when tired out.

I looked at every day as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' experience. Country roads took me to small towns. Used book stores, local museums and art galleries were prime excuses to stop and take a break.

A chess museum, the Policeman's Hall of Fame, the 'Golden Spike' museum; on a weekday, often I'd be the only visitor, and spend time with the curator.

Out west, I passed by an artist's studio and we talked painting. Watched and learned about taxidermy at another's studio.

Biking all day changes the body and the mind. Off the road, things slow down. The senses take time to adjust. At the bottom of hill, a free art museum beckoned. Inside, a man was sitting on a sofa. Long hair and glasses, he was holding a pamphlet. I studied the picture on the cover...it was *him*. An artist's model passing for a human being and I fell for it.

Bridges were my bane;; too many don't allow a cyclist to cross. I'd have to wait, sticking out my thumb, hoping for a pick-up truck.

In New York City, the 59th Street Bridge was an exception. Not the George Washington. At the end of a 100-mile trip in a torrential rain, I had to boost the *Finest* over a gate topped with barbed wire. Riding across, cars and trucks shot by, hitting puddles and sending waves over my head like a surfer in a 'pipeline'.

I had to pay ten cents to walk across the Bear Mountain Bridge. When I finally got a lift over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, I had to tell the driver that he had taken the wrong bridge. Another time, another state, a cop car pulled up as I was hitchhiking for a ride

across a bridge. When I told him how far I had come, he gave me a police escort, siren blaring.

But it was the overpass on Route 9 on the way to DC...No cops, no toll booths, no place to hitch and no shoulder. Traffic whizzing by at the speed limit and over it. I must have spent a half hour building up the nerve to cross it.

This had to be a sprint. The overpass was uphill to a peak of 80 feet above a river. Catching a short break in the traffic, I hit the roadway pedaling for all I was worth. Maybe I should have dared to take a car's slot and the hell with everybody, they could crawl behind me until I got to the other side, but I didn't have that kind of nerve yet.

I kept pumping, pumping. Once I reached the high point, I could coast the rest of the way. Suddenly a *screeching*. I looked back. An eighteen-wheel trailer truck had caught a road cone between his back wheels. Like the bad Roman in *Ben-Hur* with the killer chariot hubs, he closed on me.

Instead of panicking, a calm came over me, as if something deep inside me had triggered a preparation for a journey far beyond Route 9. Not just yet; the road cone scraped by, missing me by a good foot.

A couple of years later, coming from California, I couldn't wait to take on that overpass again. Until I saw it. Smarter this time around, I took a longer, safer route over a backroad county bridge.

"Never pay for anything you can get for free," is an old family adage, beginning with campsites. Rutgers, Bucknell, Penn State, and other campuses I don't remember; I'd pedal in, 'Easy Rider' without an engine, easily strike up a conversation with students, and have a place to spend the night. Try as I might, and maybe because I did, I never shared a one-night stand with a college girl.

An abandoned truck and a grain elevator protected me from fierce winds, but most of the time, a patch of flat grass was all I needed. Once, in the middle of the night, my tent was suddenly struck by a burst of water; hidden sprinklers had come on automatically.

Outside a small Great Plains railcenter without a mountain or hill in sight, on a spur of track sat a string of open, empty box cars. Had they been there a day or a decade?

I boosted myself into the closest one. A couple of shanks of hay and nothing much else. I sat crosslegged and stared out at the horizon. Didn't take too much to imagine rolling across the country. Had it been late afternoon, I'd have slept in the boxcar just to say I had.

In the Green Mountains of Vermont, I walked the *Finest* deep into the woods, set up my tent, read till dark with a box of oatmeal cookies, then slid into my sleeping bag, eager for the morning.

When I was awakened in the pitch black, I couldn't believe I had somehow disturbed someone. A hunter, a park ranger? Then I heard the breathing...A *bear*? I had read 'Night of the Grizzly' in *Sports Illustrated* just a few days before leaving. Innocent campers mauled to death. I was terrified, but I couldn't see anything.

Whipping out my Swiss Army knife, I yelled into the dark. The breathing sounded deeper, closer. Putting on my sneakers, I bolted, my tiny flashlight useless. In a panic I got back to the road. Then I looked up. Not a cloud in the 'new moon' sky. Countless stars twinkled. Rather than feel insignificant, I felt privileged. I'd go on to see so many wonders, but at that moment understood that no sight on earth matched the view from it.

In the daylight, American 'wild life' took a different turn. On the road, I'd see the mashed bodies of all kinds of animals, thankfully never a person.

Along a country road, a hawk perched on a telephone wire, suddenly dropped as I got closer. Shot? I didn't hear one. I stopped and carefully neared where the bird had fallen to discover that Mom was protecting one of her chicks that had wound up in the grass. Feeling like a naturalist, eyes squinting like a camera, I backed off, an image forever captured.

Zooming down a mountain, a pronghorn stood in the middle of the road, staring me down. Had I been driving a car, it would have been no contest. As I had no horn, I yelled. Only at the last second did the antelope bolt for cover, not nearly as scared as I was.

Every day came with a high and low point. There would be times when I didn't think I could pedal one more mile. Once, after a long, long ride, I wanted only a flat piece of earth where I could sleep till dawn, when suddenly a pack of dogs burst out of the woods and charged at me. A shot of adrenaline, I stood high and pedaled for my life.

My last trek started in the fall of 1976. For Thanksgiving, I was 'Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike'. I rode from Baltimore to DC in a snowstorm. Heading for Florida, I couldn't outpedal the cold. In North Carolina, when I woke up to the sound of my own teeth chattering, I headed for the Charlotte airport and flew to Atlanta. Yet again, my dear aunt Jackie rescued me. After a warming week with her family, I headed south again. It wasn't until I heard a miraculous sound that I knew I had finally escaped the cold...

Crickets chirping; on a Georgia road, I stopped and listened to an insect orchestra that played only warm weather dates. The hottest road band in the country.

The best free campsites in America have kept lawns, sometimes fresh water, and even shelter once in a while---Little League fields. Must have stayed at more than a dozen, but always in foul territory. Sometimes I'd eat dinner watching a game.

Any patch of grass will do in a pinch. I didn't know I'd found a special one until a car pulled up next to my campsite.

"Waddaya mean 'no'?" yelled the driver at his passenger. "It's only a fucking tent."

He pulled out for another spot. Not long after an open Jeep pulled in. The driver invited me out for a few drinks. The cute blond gave me a nice smile. After I took down my tent and threw my bike in the back, the other passenger, a guy in his thirties, pulled out his pistol and fired a shot in the air.

Off we went for beers and met a Native American.

"'Ugh'," said Pistol after 'Chief' had left. "Prairie nigger!"

At 2:30 AM, Blondie and I were alone in her second floor bedroom. The ramshackle house had gaping holes in the sheetrock; her brother would get angry and drive his fist into the walls. Not much left to get mad at any more. Hopefully, not me.

"You're riding all the way across the country!" said Blondie, her eyes alight. "I wish I could get outa here."

She wore a one-piece thin pullover outfit. She had lovely legs. Catching the light, the outline of her body revealed a nice ass and still-developing breasts.

A loving look, a sweet lie, one kiss and...

Blondie was sixteen.

Before dawn, I was awakened by an older woman brandishing a flashlight. Alone in her son's bed, after Mom confirmed that I hadn't screwed her underage daughter, she invited me for breakfast.

"Mom'll talk your ears off," Blondie warned me in the morning. Over toast and a single egg, Mom let into her long-gone husband and her crazy son.

As I rode away, I looked back, and for a moment, wished they both had bicycles.

Like 'Captain America' in 'Easy Rider', I had no need for a watch; I slept when it got dark, and got up with the sun. The road kept time.

In the spring of 1975, I was riding up to Crater Lake National Park. Often I'd have to get off and walk. Ten foot poles, plow-markers, were spaced on both sides. As I got higher, the winter's snow rose to Biblical heights like a parted Red Sea on ice.

Five miles from the top, I came to a fork in the road and took it, heading east and down. And down I went, faster and faster, the snow on both sides dropping inch by inch and I felt like I was in HG Wells' time machine, hurtling through the Ice Age. Fifteen miles later, I got a patch of grass near a lake, took a swim and got stung by mosquitoes.

Back to the present, the future would come at dawn.

Every state had a history remembered with memorials and monuments, revered sites and tourist traps. I saw, I learned, but *feeling* history...

On a country highway in Kansas, once the route of covered wagons, not a car, a truck, or even a cabin was in sight. The heat bore down. Not a speck of dust rose in the still air.

What was it *like* to be a pioneer? I wondered. Could I have been one?

I got off the *Finest*, took off my sunglasses and visor, and began walking my bike, imagining myself as a 'real American', braving the elements and wild Indians to make my dreams come true.

Not for long. Within five minutes, I was back on the *Finest*, understanding that I wasn't made of the stuff that made my country great.

The 'Fountain of Youth' and '*El Dorado*', the 'city of gold' are American legends. For the cyclist, was there a mythical 'Yellow Brick Road', a 'heavenly highway', a magical route across the country?

Never heard of such a thing until...

On a hot Saturday afternoon, beads of sweat dripping from my brow bounced off the frame tubes as I pedaled. Out of water, I pulled into a little shop in the middle of a forest. My lips parched, my mouth dry, I filled my canteen from the outside faucet and drank deeply.

"Awgh!" the water was terrible, undrinkable.

Inside a lovely young blond sold me a quart of grape juice. Mixed it half and half with the water and still couldn't get it down.

That's when I met Mr. Pigg, a local in his early forties who admitted he'd done a lot of fighting over his name.

"They got water problems here," he said and we talked a bit about where I had come from and where I was going. Then he told me...

"If you had a car or a truck or were riding a motorcycle, you wouldn't be able to go," he said. "But on a bike, you can take it."

This I had to do. I put my bike in the back of his pick-up and a couple of miles later we came to the site.

"Been workin' on it for years," he said. "It's gonna be open in a couple of weeks."

Laid out before me was the 'Holy Grail' of cross-country cycling: A 'virgin Interstate'.

"You can go for about ten miles," he said. "Then use the exit to get back on the main road."

The almost-finished Interstate stretched out before me, four lanes, clean and open and empty.

"Why?" I asked Pigg as I set out.

"Millions of cars, trucks, buses and motorcycles will be taking this road," he said with a country smile. "I wanna be able to say I saw the guy who drove it first."

I don't remember the Interstate's number; as if a number could serve as a memory. Beyond the guardrails, trees lined both sides. Swept of gravel, not a cigarette butt or candy wrapper marred the road. It was the silence that struck me. Shifting gears, the clatter of my chain seemed to echo up and down.

There was no wind. I could no longer feel the heat. No riding on the shoulder, hunched over as cars and trucks whizzed by me. Straight down the middle, following the double yellow line, I felt like Dorothy Gale, but not wanting to go home just yet.

After nearly an hour, I coasted into the exit. Getting back on the route soon to be bypassed by anybody and everybody going anywhere, I knew that one day, when I learned how to drive and had a car and maybe a family, that I'd take to the Interstate. But with a special feeling; Mr. Pigg saw to that.

One Fourth of July, a family let me pitch my tent in their back yard. Nothing ever made me appreciate freedom more than waking up to a panoramic view of Leavenworth Prison.

Like a leaf blowing in the wind, was I on the verge of forgetting my roots? Like a little boy away at summer camp. I'd call home once a week to let Mom know where I was and that I was doing just fine, thank you.

Years later, Bernie would tell me that when Mom talked to her friends about her children, the first thing she'd bring up, "My son went cross-country on a bicycle.*twice!*"

Cleanliness being next to Godliness, when I passed by a lake or a stream, it was bath time. Down went the bike and into the water I went, wearing a bathing suit, of course.

Only once was there a problem.

"I saw your bike lyin' on the side of the road," said the angry cop, looking down at me as I washed up in a shallow stream. "Thought you'd been hit and runned. I was looking for a body."

Back in the day, getting a bicycle on an airplane at the beginning or the end of a trip was straightforward. A heavy cardboard box cost \$20. Twist around the handlebars, take off the pedals, and up, up, and away.

But after crossing the toughest state in the lower 48, Pennsylvania, 'up-downs', for 302 miles, at the Ohio airport, I couldn't get one of the pedals off!

The ticket clerk brought in the airport manager.

"No," he said adamantly. "Can't do it."

"Sir, are you telling me you won't put a *bicycle* on your plane?" I said. "This is Canton, hometown of the Wright Brothers, *bicycle-makers* before they were the first to fly."

Away we went.

'Culture shock' is defined as 'a state of bewilderment and distress' often experienced by Americans serving overseas in uniform or as Peace Corps Volunteers. But in my own country, in my hometown?

Returning to New York City after four months on the road, I got on the ferry in Staten Island. In the late morning sun, Manhattan gleamed like a magical place. I walked my bike off and found myself on Wall Street during lunch hour. Everywhere around me were people

of all ages and sizes and races, a sea of life so crowded I couldn't ride through it. Talk about 'Not being in Kansas anymore.'

From San Francisco to Kittery, Maine, from Buffalo to Miami, 39 states over nearly a year on my bike. Where *is* America, 'Land that I love'? 'From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam', where is 'My home sweet home'?

On one of my early treks, I packed a notebook and kept a day to day diary. Descriptions, mile count, observations...I quickly got tired of it. Feeling, *knowing* freedom from coast to coast and I lacked the words to say it.

Was America a land, a country, a government? After thousands of miles had my quest to find the essence of my country failed? Had I been a naive fool to believe I could find it?

Years later, not on my bike, but on a *boat*...

In 1986, I went with Mom and Bernie to the Fourth of July unveiling of the 'restored' Statue of Liberty. Hundreds of thousands would show up, but we'd get the best seats in town for only 25 cents.

We parked the van in an overnight area and walked to the harbor crowded with a ocean's worth of ships and boats, tall ships, their sails unfurled, warships, yachts, and pleasure craft. And the one we wanted: the Staten Island ferry.

It was still light when we got on board and set out for Staten Island, just a couple of nautical miles away. The boat was crammed with Americans - whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, young and old, rich and poor, and I couldn't help but wonder how the millions of immigrants who created this country must have felt that very first time.

The Statue of Liberty had been unveiled by President Reagan earlier in the day. As the sun set, the party was only beginning.

More people got on for the ride back. The Statue stood unlit. We couldn't see it. Above New York City, only a few stars could penetrate the metropolitan haze. The boat had to pass a big ship that blotted out Liberty Island.

The ferry listed as hundreds of passengers went to the starboard side, awaiting the Statue lighted for all the world to see. And then, there she was, the Lady of Liberty, all fixed anew and aglow in the night.

I didn't know who started it. Maybe an old man, maybe a kid began to sing..."God bless America."

All joined in. We knew the words, felt every last one of them, a spontaneous chorus proud and grateful and honored. The largest fireworks display in US history couldn't light a candle to us.

“From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam...”

America is not a statue or a mountain or a plain. Beyond a nation, America is a spirit burning within each of us.

“God bless America, my home sweet home!”

As for the African-American 'community', the Irish-American 'community', the Native American 'community', and the Hispanic-American 'community', Asian-American, Jewish-American, Gay-American, Catholic-American and Muslim-American 'communities' -- any 'community' that puts 'American' *second* in its title...

First and foremost, we are *Americans*, descended from cultures around the world. And singing together on the same boat, 'through the night with the light from above', American children will *ascend*.

My last night on the road was in Brazil. My Portuguese was so good that Peace Corps allowed me to spend the last week of training on my bike, taking a 150-mile trip to visit an experienced Volunteer.

In America, I had taken a glass of water and a toilet for granted. Not so in Brazil. I'd sold my tent, so I'd use my Air Force raincoat for night cover.

Two days later I arrived at the Volunteer's house, but no one was home. At a sidewalk cafe, I waited over a big pizza and a string of beers. As the afternoon waned, I got drunk and reasoned like one: if my host didn't show, I'd have to pay for a hotel. None of that. I staggered to my bike and a couple of miles out of town, found a flat grassy spot back off the road near a barbed wire fence.

I had barely covered up when it started to pour. Then the beer and the pizza made my stomach and my bowels rumble. From under my raincoat, stark naked, I bolted to the barbed wire fence and holding on for my dear wet life, began spewing from both ends.

I prefer to remember my peak. Not as a cyclist. Best I ever got wouldn't have earned me third string on a fourth-class racing team. But as a knight errant on a quest, free and going somewhere...

Route 40 out of Denver, the Rockies behind me, biting at the sky like snowcapped teeth, made me want to shout, "*Wheaties* this, Bob Richards. I took the mountain route! Who's the 'Champion' now?"

The early pain in my butt and legs and hands had long passed. I had become my own engine making myself go. Full of confidence, an aura of invincibility surrounded me, as if my wheels were making the earth spin.

That's when I saw him coming over the rise. At first I thought he was riding a motorcycle on the shoulder, but as I got closer, I saw it was a bicycle, loaded beyond belief. I coasted across the road to meet him.

Over the miles I had met other cyclists touring. I always checked their bikes first; is there anything I can learn? One guy rode a clean bike and carried a full pack on his back.

"If you and a mule were going to the mountains," I asked him. "Who'd carry the gear?"

A guy and a girl just packed raingear and stayed every night at a different motel. She was wearing a green halter without a bra. Typical what little boys remember. Her large breasts must have been so soft.

Others reminded me of whom I had been before I learned from the road, but this guy! His big, black machine was a British 'cast iron clunker' that had to weigh nearly fifty pounds clean. Its saddlebags were immense and he even had a 'paperboy' basket in front. However far he had come couldn't be much and I doubted he'd ever make Denver, but I was polite as I stopped next to him.

We shook hands. His name was Hans. In his middle thirties, short and stocky with clear blue eyes and a weather-beaten face, he reminded me of one of Rommel's elite Africa Corps from WW II.

"*Sind Sie Deutsch?*" I asked, eager to show him how worldly I was.

We spoke in German for a while about where he was born and the town I had been stationed in so many years before.

"Where are you coming from?" I finally asked, figuring maybe fifty miles at most.

"Alaska," Hans said.

"And where are you going?"

He showed me the book in his basket - *500 Spanish Verbs Fully Conjugated* - he would flip the pages as he rolled along. "*Tierra Del Fuego.*"

The tip of South America!

"On this bike?" I asked.

"Ja," said Hans. "I keep going. Before Alaska, I rode across China and then Borneo."

"How long have you been on the road?"

"Nine years."

"I don't understand," I said. "What do you do for money."

Hans' face lit up when he smiled. "I have two arms and two legs. When I need money I go to work."

Nine years! Borneo! I pedaled away wondering where I'd be going next, for how long and *why*. Within a year, I'd be studying Spanish in Costa Rica with the Peace Corps, but as good my *Espanol* got, I knew I'd never be in Hans' class.

I spent nearly a full year on the road, made no money, had no sex, and earned no college credits. I had a responsibility only to myself; who *was* I going to be?

"Completely impractical," said Mom repeatedly.

She and Dinah Shore lived long, full lives.

It cost me more to get my *Finest* repaired than to buy *The Spirit of Mighty America* forty years before. Can't ride as fast or as far as I used to, but back in the saddle, I feel as free as I ever was.

Took me a lot of miles to learn the road's lasting truth: *Consider the whole tour*. You're not going 25-30, 35 or 40 or even 60 years. Life's a long haul.

I always want to be on a quest, to wake up and go somewhere new, that every day will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience,

Three more stories and this literary quest will be done. Then there's this project that's been challenging me for years. I've still got somewhere new to go.

So do you.

MAKE AMERICA A BETTER PLACE.

LEAVE THE COUNTRY.



Ainda!



© Artist unknown

"Nothing carries the spirit of American idealism and expresses our hopes better and more effectively to the far corners of the earth than the Peace Corps."

President John Kennedy

Latin America Staging Site Miami, Florida, 1977

"Welcome to Peace Corps and soon to Brazil," said the regional director to more than twenty new arrivals. "Glad to see everyone's here, safe and sound and on time. Finally, the paperwork is done and I can introduce each of you to the group."

"Mary Abbott," he said and a small woman up front raised her hand. "Mary's been a nurse for six years, specializing in childhood diseases. She's going to be a big help in the Brazilian hospital system."

"Pete Adams," was the next name on the list and a wave from a guy in the middle brought friendly nods. "An hydraulic specialist with a master's degree in civil engineering. Pete will be digging wells in the Amazon Basin.

"Kevin Ahearn..."

In the back, I raised my hand.

"An Air Force veteran and former VISTA volunteer, Kevin has a degree in physical education and rode here from New York on his bicycle."

A lot of chairs moved.

"The journey has just begun," I said.

In Brazil, Peace Corps training was a full immersion in language and culture. Near the end of the four-month program, a government official came and told us the positions and the locations we special education teachers would be assigned.

The first place he mentioned was —so bad he didn't want to talk about it. As he reeled off the rest of the jobsites, not one was anywhere near a decent beach. That bummed us all out.

"What was the name of that first place?" I asked.

"Cuiaba," he said.

"Okay," I said. "I'll go there."

Glutton for punishment? Idealistic fool? Hey, this is the Peace Corps, an *adventure*! If I go to a —good placell and work very hard, would I be able to create positive change? Whereas, if I go to a —bad place, work even harder, but fail miserably, how much worse could I make it?

In the Third World, distance is not measured in miles or kilometers, but in time, *bus* time. Cuiaba was 17 hours away from our training site. I got on a bus and give or take a few minutes, 17 hours later, my bike and I were there.

Cuiaba is the capital of Mato Grosso, Brazil's largest state and sits in the geographical center of South America surrounded by endless jungle. In the heart of town was the big church with a four-sided clock tower, but two of the clocks had no hands, as if for half the city, time didn't exist.

When Brazilians complain that a city is *muito quente*, it's hot. The heavy heat hit me the moment I got off the bus. No one was there to meet me, so I hopped on my bike and started looking for the APAE school.

Like Air Force intelligence, the School of Visual Arts and VISTA, the Peace Corps comes with a unique challenge: adapt or go home. Exploring an alien city of 50,000, I felt like Captain Kirk, just beamed down from the *Enterprise*, 'boldly going.'

Thanks to training and Brazilian comic books, my Portuguese was excellent. After asking directions to APAE a couple of dozen times, I finally arrived at the school near the center of town. I got off my bike in front of a high wooden wall and knocked on the heavy double door.

A woman opened the door and in I went. The APAE was two dingy rows of single-story buildings topped with rippled sheet metal. A kitchen, a bathroom, the director's office on one side, a string of classrooms on the other, surrounding a dilapidated playground, a skeleton of what it used to be.

The staff of ten were all women of various ages, sizes and colors and fifteen or so young children. All were mulling about and I could feel the stillness of the place as if all the energy had long since left and time had stopped ticking.

"Beam me up, Scotty"?

Not a chance. APAE had no place to go *but* up.

First things first. As I was alone, I couldn't afford my own apartment in the city. The middle-aged director was willing to help out. With her permission, at the end of the day, I set up my tent under the bare swingset.

I had no idea what I was doing or what I could do, but no more conforming to strict guidelines'. I was the program!

Meeting the children would not be enough. The first thing they had to learn was how to have fun. I had to engage them, letting them feel the Peace Corps spirit, the American energy flowing from me. Each and every one was special, but one was more special than the others.

Twelve-year old Maria was a forceps baby', pulled from her mother's womb. Her head badly misshapen, the right side of her body was sadly stiff. Severely retarded, she could only

say one word: *agua*. Pale skin, ratty hair and wearing a garment resembling a potato sack...there are those who believe that disabled children have a special charm about them, a sorrowful cuteness. Maria was ugly, angry and belligerent, and as distant as a veritable space alien. No wonder I fell in love with her.

And the other children accepted it, figuring, —If this guy loves *Maria*, he *can* be our teacher.

The director assigned me to the largest room, a drab, lifeless space. I bought some paint, and not only added color, but giant Peanuts characters on the walls. The place became my home. I'd sleep on a gym mat protected by mosquito netting, courtesy of the Corps.

Then I got some flat pieces of smooth wood and a length of rope and made a swing. As I set it up, the children gathered around, wide-eyed with awe.

Up and ready, it was as if I'd cut the ribbon opening Disneyworld.

Maria charged through the others to be first.

"No," I said. "Wait."

She began stomping her feet, her twisted face reddening with frustration.

"Wait for permission," I said.

After ten hour-long seconds. "*Por favor*, Maria!"

She lit up full of joy, seized the swing and like a bird suddenly able to fly for the first time, took to the sky, back and forth.

I couldn't help myself; only music was missing and I broke out in song.

"Who loves you, pretty baby," I began. "Who's always there to make it right!"

I clapped my hands to the beat of her swinging and kept on. "Who loves you, pretty mama, who's gonna help you through the night!"

The children started clapping with me. The song became ours.

Every morning when they came in, they'd gather around me and I'd call roll. "*Neval-doh! Eneal-doh! Orlan-doh! Lorin-doh! Ensign!...y Maria!*"

Then with a clap.

“Who loves you, pretty baby!”

They’d soon learn the first verse by heart and within a month, be singing and clapping with me.

Teaching, taking care of and cooking for ‘exceptional children’ was 100% woman’s work. A tall, white American on a field trip with a gang of kids learning how to cross the street was a sight not seen every day in Cuiaba.

One day, a couple of Brazilian men on the street invited me and the children to the nearby outside restaurant for soda and a beer.

We talked politely until one got to the point: *Why?*

“I’m an American,” I said proudly. “If I can dream it, I can do it.”

“Cuiaba is an American dream?” he exclaimed.

They laughed. I laughed. I had to.

But very soon, a dream I’d never dreamt of dreaming, was going to come true.

There probably wasn’t a man taller than I with blue eyes for two hours around. That got me a lot of stares, especially from women. One night I got *that* look. Selena was 19 and as beautiful as she was black. A ‘Nubian Prize,’ she reminded me of the young Lieutenant Uhuru on the original STAR TREK. With a glance I invited her to my table. Minutes later she was on the top tube of my bike frame being chauffeured back to my classroom.

Selena was clad in sexy shorts and a halter, but the first thing I took off her was the stringy, straight hairpiece she wore, as if to cover up her natural Afro.

“*No necessita,*” I said and she never wore it again.

Then, as they shout triumphantly in Brazil, —Goal... **GOAL... GOAL!**

Selena would come almost every night. While dinner cooked, we’d work up an appetite, then dine and have ourselves for dessert. She wouldn’t be gone five minutes than I’d be finishing up the leftovers.

If Maria was my cover girl, Nevaldo was the poster boy. A chubby, white 10- year old, he lived in a nearby orphanage and only recently found out his real name. The sight of his beaming smile every morning readied me for the day.

There were times when I'd get down. Nevaldo could feel it and he'd come over, reach up as high as he could, and pat me on the back.

"*Mi amigo*," he'd say to the world. "Who loves you!

Selena never did anything like that.

Nobody knew about Selena. Had Peace Corps found out I was doing at night while living at the APAE school, they'd take actions I didn't want to think about.

There's a certain 'look' a man treasures even above his mother's eyes filled with love and pride or his lover's gaze, happily aglow...

A new volunteer had come to Cuiaba, and we met for lunch at my favorite cafe. Halfway through our meal, heads turned when Selena entered.

She came and kissed me on the cheek.

"*Hola, amor*," she said with a smile.

"*Sete hora* (Seven o'clock)?" I asked.

"*Exatamente na hora*," she said, but I knew she'd come a little late.

Every man watched her walk away. The astonishment in that new volunteer's eyes....

"She, she's..." he said, his mouth agape. "She's *pretty*!"

Memory is a layered mound of moments. Selena came, apparently, before I did. One evening, after an intense series of appetizers plus dessert, she looked down at my naked body and her eyes opened wide.

"*Ainda!*" she said with a clenched fist.

I smiled back; irrefutable hard evidence confirmed that I was *still* rarin' for more.

One morning I woke up early and immediately felt homesick; there was a coolness in the air, almost like Labor Day Weekend in New York.

I got on my bike and rode around a deserted Cuiaba. No one on the streets anywhere. It was like a *Twilight Zone* episode: a lone, confused survivor trying to figure out what had happened to his world.

Everybody came to school late, bundled up under layers of clothing. By noon the temperature had doubled and all was normal again. Winter had come and gone in Cuiaba, Brazil. And it was a bad one!

Maria could throw tantrums, hitting other children or breaking things. I would then take her firmly by the hand and face her to a corner.

“Stay here...*alone*,” I’d command.

Going back to the others, I’d make an extra effort to have fun while listening for Maria’s frustrated grunts as she stomped her feet.

After maybe a couple of minutes, I’d call out with a happy tone, “Maria... *Maria!*”

She’d immediately bubble over, bounding joyfully to return to the group as if nothing had happened.

Maria’s father was long gone. Her mother was a drunken barfly who showed up at school only once and came on to me.

I’d taken so much for granted about Maria. The most important thing I ever taught her was how to use a device she was completely ignorant of: a toilet.

There came that night. After a wonderful work-out, a homemade dinner and a terrific dessert, Selena told me that she was leaving for Rio.

I looked into her eyes as I digested her words. A fantastic body and an incredible lover and I couldn’t believe that I wasn’t mustering up my copyrighted American charm to persuade her to stay.

No begging or pleading. I didn’t even bother to lie.

A quickie good-bye and I never saw her again and was surprised how little I missed her. As sensuous as we had been, I hadn’t touched Selena and her exotic beauty had aroused only the standard part of me.

After a week of preparation, the school was as ready as it could be for an inspection by APAE bigwigs from Brasilia. This would be the director’s show and I knew better than to upstage her, retreating to watch from my room.

The teachers played the children like dogs in a carny act. With every trick, the visitors became more enthusiastic. Then one suggested that the children sing.

The national anthem or a popular tune?

Suddenly, Nevaldo jumped to his feet, spun around and sang out, "Who loves you, pretty baby!"

"Who's gonna help you through the night," the other children joined in, clapping their hands, and dancing. "Who loves you!"

I will always hear them.

The school must have gotten a grant from Brasilia: the director bought a fancy new couch for her office. She had two daughters who worked part-time at the school. Anna, the taller one, had a sneaky smile and a body the shape and shade of Beyonce's.

One afternoon, she got me aside.

"I have some marijuana," Anna whispered. "If I come back here tonight, we could experiment."

Getting high and experimenting' with the director's daughter? Would it be like pushing and pumping that long, heavy sofa through the tight front entrance of her mother's office? How blissfully satisfied the director had been when the deed was consummated. Her daughter would get so much luckier...only in my dreams, always worth having, sometimes with her older sister.

Anna was sixteen.

During the Cuiaba summer, every blade of grass in the city withered and disappeared. Leaves would shrivel up and drop from the trees like stones. May was rainy season, so wet the school would close. My first vacation' was spent on the Amazon, and I came back full of energy and enthusiasm for the new school year.

In 90 short minutes with the director and staff, every shred of hope had been sucked out of me. They just didn't get it. The APAI wasn't just a school. Together we were having an adventure!

My second vacation took me on a tour of the country. When I got back, I was determined that no one would dampen my spirits. In less than a half hour they had drained me dry.

But no way would I let the children find out.

The APAE got a new director, a man whose first task was showing the female teachers who the Alpha Male was, ordering me around in front of the staff just to watch me obey his strict guidelines, beginning with the removal of the swing which spoiled the esthetics of the school.

Not long after, one of the teachers showed up with her hands together as if praying and deep sadness in her eyes; over the weekend at the orphanage, Nevaldo had gotten sick and died.

Someone had bought him shoes to wear in an open coffin, but I couldn't bring myself to go to his wake. I will always see him smiling and hoped that before he passed away, he knew who loved him.

A week later I left the school and moved in with a couple of newly arrived Volunteers. For three months I taught English as a Second Language at the city university.

My last morning in Cuiaba was free. I'd packed up my bike the night before and my flight didn't leave till after lunch. Plenty of time to say my last good-bye.

Around the city, at the jagged edge of the rainforest, rotted the *barrios*, where no American would house a dead lawnmower. The roads were dirt. The homes were tacked together planks topped with sheet metal. Few had windows and fewer running water. Piles of garbage outnumbered streetlights 5 to 1; rats to people about the same.

I had a pretty good idea where I was going, but not exactly. The late morning sun began its baking as I pulled up in front of a clump of patchwork shacks.

"Maria...*Maria!*" I called in my happy tone.

When she came bounding out of the second one to the left, I realized what a selfish jerk I was! My wallet was full of *Cruzeiros*, Brazilian money that would be worthless in the US. Instead of spending them all on soccer shirts for myself later at the airport, I could have bought Maria...a toy, a doll, a pair of shoes, *something*. I've never forgiven myself

"Who loves you, Maria," I sang as I held her in my arms. "Who's always there to make it right!"

She made a grunt that almost sounded like a giggle.

Whatever I said after that I've forgotten in two languages. Maria tilted her grotesque head as if she could see me better one eye at a time. The indelible beauty within her touched me all over.

But I could do no more.

As I rode away, I heard her crying. I could look back only once. God only knows what happened to her.

I pedaled to the airport feeling that my life just might not work out as well as I would like. Sooner or later I knew that I would settle down, marry and maybe have a son and *teaching*. But if things went bad, what would I do? Would I have changed so much? Would life no longer be an adventure?

And if they got *real* bad?

Forty years later, wife and job gone, and now I've got cancer, stage four!

So I'm gonna feel sorry for myself?

Ainda!

1979-2009



I M P O S S I B L E D R



"Anyone who doesn't write doesn't know how wonderful it is; I used to bemoan the fact that I couldn't draw at all, but now I am more than happy that I can at least write. And if I haven't any talent for writing books or newspaper articles, well, then I can always write for myself.

"...I want to go on living after my death! And therefore I am grateful to God for giving me this gift, this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me.

"I can shake off everything if I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn. But, and this is the great question: Will I ever be able to write anything great, will I ever become a journalist or a writer? I hope so very much, for I can recapture everything when I write, my thoughts, my ideals and my fantasies.

"...So I go on again with fresh courage, I think I shall succeed because I want to write!"

Anne Frank



The headquarters of America's largest, most expensive, and most secret intelligence-gathering organization is located just outside Washington DC.

Topped with an array of satellite dishes, the massive complex is surrounded by a triple-fence barrier, the middle one electrified. Guarded by its own security force, the National Security Agency (NSA) is on constant on alert for outsiders who could pose a threat to its paramount mission.

On the day after Thanksgiving in 1976, NSA was on a holiday schedule. Just before lunch, in front of the main entrance, an unauthorized *cyclist* was spotted taking photographs.

Two NSA security officers responded. Both were armed, but did not draw their guns. They brought me inside, just as I had planned.

For identification, I showed them my Peace Corps passport with the State Department seal. As I studied the place, they questioned me, but no way was I telling them my 'Top Secret identity'.

This 'Black Friday' marked the beginning of my greatest quest - to write The Great American science fiction Novel!

I was born a 'fanboy' and developed a football bend. Three things I swore by:

1. Godzilla should not be destroyed; he should be studied.
2. The Romulans do not take captives.
3. Never give up on the *Oakland Raiders*.

Seven years earlier, in art school English class, I had written a short story about a 'flying saucer' landing in NYC. A robot steps out and quickly duplicates, a 'self-replicating android'. Soon standing on every other street corner, the robots are about to kill everybody

when, just in the nick of time, the original one decomposes, and so do all the others, victims of the corrosive power of air pollution.

"I don't know whether this is good or crap," said my art school professor.

Good enough for *me*! I submitted 'Miracle Army' to a bunch of science fiction magazines. All rejected it. So did a comic book company.

"Too much like 'War of the Worlds'," they said.

'Invent the impossible, domesticate the impossible, and while the illusion holds, get on with story,' wrote H.G. Wells.

'What if...?' The first to spot an alien spacecraft coming to earth was NSA's DEFSmac, its satellite surveillance branch. And its Russian rival, the KGB's Eighth Directorate. To save the world from annihilation, competing intelligence services would combine to break the alien code and defeat 'The Miracle Army' - A Cold War, thermonuclear, science fiction thriller!

I'd packed half a dozen books to research while in Peace Corps training and compiled a ton of hand-written notes, but I didn't start writing until I got to my assigned school. The director let me use a fifty-pound typewriter. I was on my way to being a 'real' writer!

To keep myself psyched, I started a bulletin board, pasting up William Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech and James T. Farrell's piece on the 'temerity of the young writer', but the first quote that went up was by my 'ideal writer', Anne Frank and her picture.

The Diary of a Young Girl was written during WW II, but it wasn't *about* the war or the Holocaust or history or family, but about *writing* - being alone in a little room trying to get out.

That very first evening alone in my Brazilian classroom, I was *writing*. The idea of creating my unique vision of the world...was this how Hemingway felt in Cuba?

Right out of the box, I was thinking *immense*! The greatest 'alien invasion' in history began in 1941 when the 'technologically advanced' Nazi army charged into Russia. Four years later, the Soviet Union won their 'Great Patriotic War' at the cost of 28 million lives.

This was news to me. In high school, I had learned all about the Holocaust and the Six Million. I had been a Cold War warrior, trained to believe that at any moment, vast Soviet tanks armies were going to roll into Western Europe. After *28 million* dead, the Russians wanted another war?

Against 'The Miracle Army', what chance did the US have?

I outlined the story. Thirteen chapters - The 'robot' appeared in chapter 4. I took a 15-hour Brazilian bus ride each way to see STAR WARS. Science fiction had gone big time and I was going to be a part of it!

Returning home, I declared, "I'm writing a novel."

My brother William, who had his own literary ambitions, read my first fifty pages and uttered a prophetic understatement: "It needs work."

Work I would, tirelessly, on a ricky-tick portable typewriter, but I had to create a 'cover story' while I pursued my quest. I enrolled at SUNY New Paltz to get my Masters Degree in 'Special Education,' but after summer classes, I started taking English and 'creative writing' courses.

My English teachers were men I didn't want to grow up to be. One woman inspired me, another I slept with for a while. Robert Thornton, an older Harvard grad, was the exception. Called 'Mr. Paper Chase' because of his unwavering demands, he made a lasting impression.

After quoting a classic poem, he'd tell us, "Write that...and die!"

Up on my bulletin board he went.

"I'm researching my first novel," was a line I used a dozen times in the New Paltz college library; it never got me anywhere. NASA put out a thick, red book on the VIKING landers on Mars. I had to be the only author in the world reading it over and over.

"The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence [SETI]," said Carl Sagan, "Is a science without data."

'UFOlogy' is the reverse - shelves of books and tapes and eyewitness reports - Data without science.

Or was it? For \$2, I attended a lecture by J. Allen Hynek, the number one UFOlogist in the world in NY to meet with the United Nations! The astronomer termed 'Close Encounters' and later got a cameo in the movie.

I wore my handmade STAR TREK t-shirt, just like one of the *Enterprise* crew.

"I am psyched!" I told the woman I was with.

Hynek's presentation was 'ker-rap'. I asked about satellite surveillance and if there had ever been any 'Unidentified *Orbiting* Objects'.

He gave me a glib non-answer and then had one of his assistants get my name and address. I never heard from him. The UN later listened politely to his UFO spiel, then blew him off.

My first three chapters done, I submitted 'The Miracle Army' to science fiction publishers expecting to hear great things. My wacky roommate who paid half the rent, opened my mail and posted it on the door.

"You got rejected!" was scrawled on five different notices.

"Writing is like hitchhiking," I told myself. "If you're not prepared for constant, impersonal rejection, you're never going to get anywhere."

In trying to find the right filament for his electric light bulb, Thomas Edison tried more than 1,000 substances without success.

"Not failure," he said. "I've discovered what doesn't work."

"Rewriting in the magic of writing," said Mario Puzo on my bulletin board.

The Good Witch of OZ set the law: "It's always best to start at the beginning."

Yet another 'sci-fi robot'? In the early seventies, I went on a school trip with other teachers and three fourth grade classes to the Bronx Zoo. After making the rounds we came to a special exhibit: a hidden cage.

'Behind this curtain is the most dangerous animal on earth,' read the sign.

I went in. On the other side of the bars was a full-length mirror.

What *kind* of man? Taking to the dictionary, what word beginning with 'M' said 'the stars'? Got it...THE MILKY WAY MAN.

And what did he look like?

'The gleaming man stands eight feet tall,' the novel blurb would read. 'Completely masculine except for his groin; between his legs flowed a near-feminine smoothness'.

In my Jackson Heights' days, I had built the VISIBLE HEAD, a life-size anatomical model. The head got burned, but I still had its two-piece skin which looked like a mannequin. My original 'robot' was 'the color of the morning sky'. That would no longer do.

I set my 'head' up outside my New Paltz apartment and spray-painted it silver. THE MILKY WAY MAN was *real*.

I spent my last semester taking a 'mentor' course with Mr. Thornton which meant no classes and plenty of time to write. By the fall of 1979, my novel was supposed to have been done and published and I'd be awash in fame and fortune, but I was close to starving and being thrown out of my apartment, so I took a Christmas season job at BARKER'S, a second-rate Woolworth's. Management required that I work a 6-day, 48-hour week in the Sporting Goods Department with *no* overtime.

Halfway to Xmas, I noticed two girls who worked like dogs. Come to find out that they had been purposely hired *late* so they couldn't qualify for a Christmas bonus of \$25. Typical of the heartless, penny-pinching management.

The store had a unique marketing ploy. As you were shopping, a manager would get on one of the intercom mikes and spiel, "In the BARKER'S tradition of unannounced sales, I'd like to call your attention to the ten-packs of Milky Way candy bars located near the check-out counter.

"For the next fifteen minutes only, we are reducing the price by thirty percent. Thank you for shopping at BARKER'S where shopping is a family pleasure."

Every couple of minutes he run through it again until time ran out.

Desperate for work, I would have stayed with BARKER'S if they wanted me after the holiday season, but...

"No," said Management. "Christmas Eve will be your last day."

Yet another rejection. This one I wasn't going to take very well.

'Twas the day before Christmas and all through the store, shoppers were shopping for bargains galore.

Upstairs, away from the staff in the 'bicycle assembly' room, I got on the intercom to address my holiday audience.

"Good afternoon, everybody and Merry Christmas. I'd like to call your attention to the Sporting Goods Department located at the rear of the store. There you'll find a full assortment of gifts."

Then I got nervous, the microphone shaking in my hand.

"In the BARKER'S tradition of unannounced sales, everything in the Sporting Goods Department is now half price! That's right, ladies and gentlemen, fifty percent off...

"For the next two seconds. One, two the sale is over!

"The sale is over and you missed it, but thank you for shopping at BARKER'S where shopping is a family pleasure and employment...*sheer ecstasy!*"

(Click.)

I went downstairs onto the floor. Management was outraged, but a couple of customers shook my hand.

"You will be forever barred from BARKER'S," huffed the security guy as he escorted me out of the store which soon went out of business.

Years later, I'd look back at that Christmas Eve and call it my 'Ash, Housewares' moment. Everybody ought to have one

"There are jobs everywhere!" said Mom more than once. And unless I had one, living with her and Bernie 'writing my novel' was unacceptable.

I moved in with an old friend in the former studio of Marc Chagall when the immortal artist lived outside High Falls. I didn't have money for typewriter ribbons. My brother Mike got me a big one-time spool from his jobsite and I strung it out around the room like Christmas tinsel.

My buddy had a record player and a collection of old Country and Western music and Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. I loved the second part and played it over and over, the 'Milky Way March.'

A phenomenal typist, my sister broke into publishing and moved up quickly. Inspired by Capote's *In Cold Blood*, she set out to write a true crime novel. After doing extensive research, she interviewed the convicted murderer in prison.

"Writing is hard work!" she told me.

Soon after, she decided she 'didn't have it' and moved on to other literary matters with continuing success.

Did I have 'it'? What could I do to get 'it'? How long was getting 'it' going to take?

"Write what you know," went the adage. I knew all about the intelligence game. My hero was James Peterson, an intelligence analyst from the 'Radio Age' about to retire and still haunted by his only son's death in Vietnam. Colonel Alexander Kabakov, a childhood survivor of the Siege of Leningrad during WW II and a former cosmonaut had been his career antagonist. Rounding out the trio was Dr. Philip Hargrove, a renowned astronomer and frustrated science fiction writer. Each would have his own vision of THE MILKY WAY MAN.

Surviving on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and White House cheese, I got a job at a laboratory facility breeding mice for medical experiments. The commute was a five-mile bike ride. After three months, I was let go before I could qualify for Unemployment Insurance. They claimed, as an animal handler, I didn't have 'the gift.'

Zusammen (Together) is my favorite word in German. In Spanish and in Portuguese, *Ainda* (Still) In English, *story*.

Picture two pieces of rope, common clothesline and mountainclimbing rope. The strength of the weave is *not* the defining difference. Inside the mountainclimbing rope is a thin cable. Should the weave fray, that cable will save your life. In writing, that 'cable' is what the story is *about*.

Mine was the Milky Way Man. And until I discovered what he was *about*, I was climbing with clothesline.

Unable to afford paper, I would type on the other side of my rejected manuscripts sent back by dozens of publishers. Comparing both sides, I'd like to hope that my new stuff was so much better.

I hadn't seen my buddy's sister in 18 years. Maz and I had spent childhood summers on the Rondout. She had married, had a daughter and adopted a girl, then went through a messy divorce. One thing led to another and I moved in with her and her daughters in Valley Cottage, within commuting distance to NYC, but the best I could do was at a mental health halfway house for teens, a 'babysitting' position. As I kept pushing for change in their stagnant program, I was fired 'for cause'; at the Unemployment hearing I won my case and got benefits through the summer of 1981.

Maz was a dog lover. When her old pet died, she brought home a puppy from the pound. The little thing was a constant nuisance. Maz's daughter named it 'Babe', but that didn't work for me. We like to make 'trivia bets' for breakfast in bed. Which musical featured the song 'Secret Love'? I picked 'Annie Get Your Gun'. We went to the library to find out.

"Calamity Jane!" said Maz, already tasting her breakfast.

Then we smiled; the dog was *Calamity*.

"Two things absolutely necessary to write the Great American science fiction Novel," said a college friend who visited me. "A silver robot and a beige dog!"

'*Needed to Write*' went up on my bulletin board:

1. Command of the language
2. Respect for the language
3. A story to tell
4. A library card (Because if you're not going to look it up and get it right, don't bother!)

At a job interview, the personnel guy gave my resume a quick look.

"VISTA *and* the Peace Corps," he said. "Was this your way of staying out of Vietnam?"

"My method for beating the draft was foolproof," I said. "I *enlisted* when I was seventeen."

So much for that.

Off the books I took a local job within walking distance: taking care of Princeton's oldest living graduate. Ninety-nine, slim and sharp, he kept me on my toes. I'd come over after breakfast, make him lunch, and sometimes, go outside and smoke. I had taken to the pipe while he puffed away on a cigar.

The space program fascinated him. Old enough to drink legally when the Wright Brothers first took off, he loved watching the astronauts on EVA outside the Space Shuttle, the TV volume so high the windows rattled.

After more than a century on earth, he died peacefully. What he taught me, though I had no way of knowing, would come in handy down the road.

I loved science fiction and hated it. Shelley, Wells, Swift, Orwell and Huxley were my giants. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' in less than three weeks.

"Write that...and die!"

But science fiction publishing was ruled by the troika of Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein, old men regurgitating ideas half their age. The 'community' had become a collapsing universe. How was I going to break in?

In the 'Typewriter Age', 'cut-and-paste' meant cutting and pasting. A twenty-page chapter with typos and a sentence or paragraph to be added or deleted? Start at page 1 with scissors and glue to make the work ready for the copier. Then 'White-Out' the cut lines and run the copy through again.

But I had to get a job.

To be 'Certified' as a teacher of English as a Second Language in New York requires a four-year degree in English or Education and a Masters. In the Peace Corps, I had become an 'English as a Second Language' teacher in one day.

The Brazil country director sent me to talk to the local college president who was in a jam; their English teacher had gone to San Paulo for three months to be 'certified'. . Could I take over his four daily classes, starting tonight?

That first time I faced two dozen young students.

"Hello," I introduced myself. "I'm your English teacher."

They had been studying *written* English for years, but were never required to *speak* it; They stared at me in absolute terror.

Then I added in Portuguese, "Don't worry. I speak your language, too."

A combined sigh of relief enveloped the classroom.

Before any language can be taught, it must first be *engaged*.

Without further ado, I did my best Peter Townshend imitation, strumming like a 'guitar hero'..."*Who, who, who are you? Who are you, you, who are you?*"

Their eyes widened.

"Who are you?" I asked a boy in front. "*Fidel Castro?*"

"Jose," he answered.

"*I am Jose*," I said, then pointed to the girl next to him. "Who is she? *Madonna?*"

Around and around the room I went, making the language flow out of them. English became a living force among us. In short order, all were speaking and eager to learn how to speak more. The weeks and months flew by.

But all good things must...Their regular teacher returned from Sao Paulo with his 'certification'. About my age in a crisp suit and a flashy tie, he sat behind his office desk.

"Hello," I said. "I have been teaching English while you were away."

"*Por favor, falla Portuguese,*" he insisted. "*No fallo English.*"

'Certified', he did not speak English.

He lasted two days.

I flew home a week later.

At the local community college, I became a 'teacher's assistant' working 20 hours per week. All of it was teaching. My students from around the world did better on their tests than the other classes, but 'laughed too much.' As others more qualified sought the position, I was let go.

Not a 'real' 202 or a 'real' artist or a 'real' quarterback, because I wasn't certified, I wasn't a 'real' teacher either. How could I ever become a 'real' writer?

I got back in teaching night classes with a specific goal. For placement, students took a 50-question multiple choice 'chicken test.' At the end of the year, they'd take a similar test; 40 was passing. My class learned and laughed a lot and *averaged* 40 on the final. The college still failed half of them. That's how they stayed in business. As I began the next semester, knowing that no matter how well my students learned, half would fail. I couldn't go through with it. I looked for a job in the NY *Times*.

"You need two things to teach in the South Bronx," I'd be told later. "A college degree and a pulse."

But I had to take a test and get through a taped interview. I went into the city and took a seat next to a fellow applicant. If she passed, she'd be teaching Spanish with a little help from her seeing eye dog.

Maybe I *could* do this!

I was hired as a 'comp' teacher. Under contract, teachers got a 45-minute break during the school day. I would come in and teach during their break.

"Oh, no, not him," one fourth grader summed me up. "He's going to make us *think*."

Art, history, English, poetry, I'd come in full of enthusiasm, and pepper the class with all kinds of new stuff. Sometimes I'd bomb, and when I did, I'd learn more than the children did.

For a grand finale, we'd play a round of 'Game of the Game' or that South Bronx classic - 'Chalkboard of Fortune.' Too bad no one was taping. I might've gotten a 'Quiz Show' gig.

Equally important was that the class be prepared to learn when their 'real' teacher returned, which became a game in itself.

Tall and slim with the longest legs in the borough, Alma was over fifty, yet in front of her third-grade class, taught with the energy of a teenager. No one messed with Alma's class, especially some new 'comp' teacher.

One afternoon, after we read and talked about Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade', I sat back and told the class how their teacher and I 'behaved' when we were in school.

"This is the 'Best Behavior Position'," I said, sitting up, trusting my arms out in front of me, locking my fingers on the desk, eyes forward, not uttering a sound. "And this is the *plan*..."

Coming down the hallway after her break, Alma could hear shouting coming from *her* classroom. A look in the window--kids were running around. That damn 'comp' teacher!

The moment she crossed the threshold, thirty-two blurs raced for their seats and sat in their 'Best Behavior Position.' Their rigid silence rang a bell.

"Wow," I said to her, my eyes full of awe. "I'm really impressed."

Alma got it. She laughed.

"So am I," she said.

During November, not a turkey would be seen in many of the classrooms; the big celebration was 'Puerto Rico Discovery Day' when Columbus landed on the island. It was a bi-lingual school which seemed like a good idea, but too many of the Puerto Rican teachers couldn't speak English.

When the Puerto Rican principal spoke, the non-Hispanic teachers automatically shut him out. At a special meeting to discuss unruly behavior, the principal meant to say, "I'm not making this up," but instead, "This is not coming from my brain."

Wherever it was coming from, I was the only one who wondered.

Four years and counting, where was my novel coming from?

Loyal and loving to her gone father, Maz's younger daughter and I would never get along. She called my novel quest 'a fraud that would never get published' and me, 'a leach.'

With help from one of my sisters, she'd get a job in publishing and later write her own novel.

Every week I'd submit to agents and publishers. As long as I had something out there, I remained hopeful. Vindication and victory would come in the mail. Too often I'd get 'the mailbox blues.' No sooner had I sent stuff out, than I'd go back to Word One, realize it wasn't good enough, and start rewriting again.

I should have saved every last rejection. Most were form letters. As they kept coming week after week, I had to do something that would grab an editor's attention.

"To get published," I'd later tell aspiring writers. "First, you gotta get *read*. Write to be read!"

Saturday mornings we went 'garage-sailing'; I was always looking for WW II paperbacks. My wife came upon an old, unassembled model still in its box: the VISIBLE MAN, a kit I had once built for anatomy class.

What if...?

The plastic model stood 16+ inches on its base. The pose was perfect. As my 'self-replicating android' needed no reproductive organs, I performed the surgery. Using modeling putty and then fine sandpaper, I made the figurine smooth for a gloss silver painting.

Then the box...in the novel, the small spacecraft is topped with a 'coffin' cargo bay in which the man is created. Using the original model box, I covered it with silver stick-um paper. Inside I used black foam, cutting out the model's silhouette. Another piece of foam for a full backdrop. Beneath it was the first half of manuscript.

A note attached to the figurine: 'He's eight feet tall, alone and unarmed and we don't stand a chance against **THE MILKY WAY MAN!**'

I sent it to ACE, a longtime traditional science fiction publisher. A reply could take months. The one skill that diminishes with practice: waiting. I kept working.

I hardly rode my bike anymore, but staying in shape came with the job. As the 'gym teacher', I only had one rule: 'If you work, you play. If you don't, you stay.'

And no student wanted to miss 'gym'. It was too much fun.

I'd meet each fifth or sixth grade class in their room on the fourth floor, and they quickly lined up by the staircase.

"We're going down *non-stop!*" I'd say and take off running down the stairs. The children shot after me, a full-fledged cavalry charge for four full flights. That no one was hurt or seriously injured during these madcap runs was a New York miracle.

Punchball, 'off the wall', jumping rope, relay races, basketball, for forty minutes, the small schoolyard became a big playpen.

"Anybody for touch football?" I'd say during the season. "I'll be 'official quarterback'."

And when the period drew to a close...

"You came down non-stop," I'd say sternly. "Now we're going UP non-stop. And if we can't do it, we're never going down non-stop again!"

A few children tired out between the third and fourth floor, but staggering back into class, they had had a full workout and couldn't wait for the next 'gym class'.

ACE replied in a *week!* They had read my manuscript and would make a decision to publish within six months. Not a contract or an advance, but at long last, I had finally gotten a positive sign. Was I on my way to becoming a 'real' writer?

A fire drill in the South Bronx had students and staff outside on the sidewalk, even in the winter.

"Please let us go back in," pleaded a fourth grader. "We're gonna catch *ammonia!*"

"Keep your eyes on the children," said the assistant principal.

I obeyed and stepped in a pile of dogshit.

That was more like it.



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“It is not about the AGONY of the quest, but
the *rapture* of the revelation.”

Joseph Campbell

I've often wondered, had I stayed on in the South Bronx. No more 'comp teaching'; I'd have students of my own.

"Everybody else is in a 'class'," I'd tell a room full of third graders. "We're on a *quest!*"

Would twenty-five plus 8-year olds see me as a 'real' teacher?

"Each and every one of us has a purpose and a destination," I'd say, and hopefully, they'd listen. "We are going on a journey to learn about ourselves, our world and our universe!"

Teaching them to love reading would be the greatest challenge of all. And if I had worked very hard, and caught a few breaks, I might have measured up to *half* of the teachers in the South Bronx, Hispanic or otherwise.

I'd always have a long way to go.

Instead, Maz and I and *Calamity* moved upstate. Her teenage daughters were eager to leave the nest and so was she. For \$14,500 she'd bought a 3-acre property outside of Accord, close to High Falls and our parents, though her Mom and Dad had been divorced for years.

The acreage came with a free cottage from the era of the 'Borscht Belt': two tiny 'Jewish bungalows' sandwiched together. Two kitchens, two living rooms, two bedrooms, no heat, no water, no insulation.

I'd also have to get a job, and maybe, after more than eight years, finish my first novel.

During the summer we got a wood stove, blew in insulation, had a well dug and applied for local teaching jobs. Maz was a pre-school professional, *magic* with little kids. She got a job right away, but no school would hire me because I wasn't certified. Being a vet who had served overseas, a former VISTA and Peace Corps Volunteer didn't count; the best I could do was 'substitute teaching,' eight miles away by bicycle.

Man, woman, dog and a cat that'll kill 30-some mice, moles, and furry creatures that first winter--I tilled a plot in front for Maz's garden and with a stack of old white pickets bought at a garage sale, built a fence - Living the American Dream.

Working on the house was more rewarding than writing; I could see the results right away. I'd rewrite over and over, over and over. When was I going to get this right?

ACE, after reading only the first half of my manuscript, decided against publication. I'd built two more figurines and sent them. One came back. Somebody in Warner Publishing may still have a 'Milky Way' model.

I set up on one of the screened porches and typed away. When it got too cold, I converted one of the old kitchens into a studio, complete with bulletin board. Maz's picture went up with our favorite line from *Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street*: "I believe. It's silly, but I believe."

So did I. From the moment I put them on paper, I was in the world of my characters. Writing took me away, an escape to a place where I was in complete control.

But, and there was always a 'but' in this quest Readers found The Milky Way Man a 'great idea', but a stiff, mute statue. Who was he?

Rejections kept coming. One editor called it a 'UFO story', another an 'alien invasion' novel. That's what I'd been writing all these years?

I had to give the 'man' a voice and to do that I had to get *inside* The Milky Way Man. I went back to Word One.

As reconceived, the 'alien technological probe,' the size of an SUV, would land in the geographic center of North America, kill someone, then from the body's DNA, create the 'man'. Big and beautiful, standing among us, he *was* the novel!

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota; the 'man' would come from a young Lakota. The brave had fled the main reservation to live alone with his horse and dog, when suddenly... 'A thermonuclear, Cold War, science fiction thriller...with *Indians*!

In 1985, Carl Sagan, who had done more to promote science and the cosmos than all the 20th Century science fiction writers put together, came out with *Contact*, a novel about ET Intelligence. It was in my hands before it ever got to the library shelf.

A muddled mix of science fiction and soap opera, the novel sold well because Sagan understood the market. If publishing were to re-make Alice Cooper's 'Only Women Bleed,' the new title would be 'Only Women *Read*'.

Jody Foster played Sagan's heroine in the movie, as lame as the book.

"Teaching is a learning experience," I'd always thought. 'Substituting' should be no different. There were two kinds of teachers in the South Bronx: those who could control a class and those who couldn't. You control a class by *engaging* the students. To cover

themselves, most of the 'real' teachers left simple plans for the duller lessons. The last thing most returning teachers wanted to hear: "We know that already. The substitute taught us."

Like I was going to be in front of a class and wing it while watching the clock? My career as a 'substitute' would not last long.

"I'm pregnant," said Maz in 1986.

"Holy shit!" I said.

On August, 9th, 1987, my son Thomas was born. I assisted in the delivery room and held him just moments after he popped out.

"You're looking at the world's youngest *Raiders* fan," I told the doctor, but Tom never did take to football.

I had to look for a job on my bike: opportunity was not going to knock at the door. Then one day it did. Among other things, Steven, my sometimes drinking buddy, was a stone mason, a carpenter, a legendary lumberjack, and a Christmas tree farmer.

"I have to build a house for my future sister-in-law," he said. "You've been doing a little work around here. Want to go full time?"

It took the two of us four months to build a three-bedroom, two-story house from the ground up. Supervising us was a master carpenter whose arthritis had forced him off the job.

"You do good work," he told me. "Not much, but good."

Houseframing led me to a few roofing jobs. Then I worked with Ray, a Cuban contractor. We also cut and hauled firewood into his dumptruck. I'd get the first load, he'd get the second. He had a German-born wife. Visiting his home, I got to speak a little *Deutsch*. Prints of Native American art covered the walls.

"What tribe are you most interested in?" I asked.

"The *Sy-oh-ux*," she replied.

Months later Ray would tell me, "The Jehovah Witnesses came and took her away."

Unemployed yet again, times got tough. We had to go on Welfare for a while. As homeowners, all money received would have to be paid in full if we sold the house. When I got another part-time job and made just enough to scrape by, I had to insist that Welfare take us off the rolls.

I was always looking for readers. I left my manuscript at the Stone Ridge Library and waited. Soon after, a woman called.

Not thrilled with my story, she said, "At least give the Indian a *name*!"

Back to word one yet again. Through the years, I had tried all kinds of things to pump up the story, from a comic book format to (Gulp!) Sherlock Holmes. Surely I'd find out what was missing from my work.

Writing a science fiction/fantasy story is not unlike sending astronauts to the moon in the massive SATURN V rocket; if 99.99% of the parts are working perfectly, you blow up on the launchpad.

After ten years, I still hadn't cleared the tower. Why couldn't I get this right? What was I missing?

There comes a time in every American's life, as a grandparent, a father or mother, a son or daughter, when we begin to wonder if we are ever going to make a difference, not through fame or fortune, but by performing a quintessential American deed that will make our country a better place.

One afternoon, with Maz at her job, I was playing 'Little House on the Prairie', chopping and stacking firewood in the backyard when an unfamiliar car pulled up into my driveway. Salesman? Contractor? I lit up my pipe and greeted him.

"I'm running for the county legislature," he said, giving me a flyer with his picture on it.

Our eyes met and I awaited his personal slogan, that catchy soundbyte about 'Honest and prudent government' and 'Leadership the people could trust', the Great American Doctrine we long to believe in.

"Well," he said, springing back into his car. "There're lotsa other folks I gotta go see."

Son-of-a-bitch! Didn't take the time to lie to me. He lost by one vote, *mine*. As long as Maz and Tom and I were together, I'd never miss an election.

Mom and Bernie had seen my manuscript.

"I've read chunks of it," said Bernie. "The Man is the star!"

"I don't mean to be critical," said Mom who hated science fiction. "*But...*there are only two people in the universe who get your sense of humor. Your younger brother...and we're still looking for the other guy."

Mike must have told me a hundred times, "Finish it!"

Mom's political connections got me my next job. Given an interview at party headquarters, my qualifications, and Mom's influence, got me a part-time position as a recreation leader at a medium security prison.

"In adapting to a new challenge," somebody once told me. "The biggest obstacle you'll have to overcome is *yourself*."

As a civilian working in a 'facility', I was supposed to be afraid of the inmates and in constant need of protection by Correction Officers. Not me. The inmates soon found out I could beat them at cards, Scrabble, and man, could I throw that football!

Inmate sport was trying to get over on me.

"I don't mind you lying to me," I told them. "It's the BS you expect me to believe that pisses me off."

Ninety percent of the inmates were black or Hispanic. Spend enough time working in a jail and...

"You change," said a sergeant, a learned racist. "Sooner or later, you'll be just like us."

Would I?

'Read me, somebody, anybody! Please, I'm beggin' ya. I do have something to say!' screams the spirit of the wannabe writer. *Has* to.

As far as making any money, I only wanted enough so that Maz, who'd been working every day of her life since she was twelve, would never have to work again.

Mom had noticed a difference in me when I returned from Brazil. When she got the *NT Times* on Sunday, instead of the Sport Section, I'd read the *Book Review* first.

That's where I saw opportunity! A big-time literary agency would read and review unpublished novels in only a week for \$300! I scraped the money together, printed up my latest rewritten manuscript and sent it in.

When it came back a week later, my wife wept.

I must have read the 6-page report a dozen times and could tell a lot of it had been cut-and-pasted from science fiction tenets. 'Very well-written', a few of my passages were quoted. The Milky Way Man, as a character, was defined as 'evil.'

I had developed a procedure for reacting to criticism and rejection. First, I'd get alone and shout profanities, then I'd read the notice again and curse, but in a slightly lower voice. The crucial step was sleeping on the rejection and reading once again, first thing in the morning.

Maybe I can learn something for this.

Years later, it would be my turn. I'd become a literary agent myself, then a freelance 'book doctor', a ghostwriter and finally, a 'writing coach'.

"If I take the time to read your work and find one hundred things wrong with it," I'd tell aspiring authors. "And you agree only once, then I've done you a favor."

It's about what's on the page, *story* or not. 'Well-written' means absolutely nothing. Nor does 'style'. From Word One, does the author have a distinctive 'voice', a unique way of imagining the world?

According to the professionals, I had neither.

I took a State test for a full-time prison position, got the highest mark possible and was hired in a maximum security joint upstate.

We rented our house and bought a *Colonial* within cycling distance to my new job. About a week after we moved in, I got a Hallmark card from Mom.

"I'm so proud of you!" it read.

James Baldwin's Law -- *One cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own* -- should be posted in every prison.

Providing recreation for murderers, rapists and drug dealers was a thankless task, but the better the program, the more privileges the prison had to *take away* from the inmates. Sports was an opportunity to be men. To preserve it, maybe they'd behave, meaning fewer assaults on guards and fellow inmates.

But if I were successful, the corrections officers believed the prison would need fewer guards.

"That rec aide is trying to get our jobs," was the word.

Within a year, the Department of Corrections fired me. We sold the house and moved back to our cottage. The Berlin Wall had fallen. The Cold War had ended. Back to word one yet again.

The Soviet Union was suddenly history. Revolution, Civil War, massive battles in the world wars, heroism and barbarism, victory over the Nazis, and sending the first man into space...gone with the Gorbachev. Bad enough my writing wasn't good enough yet. Now it was the worst thing it could be: *too late*.

I wanted to believe that every time I submitted the novel to a publisher that I was really doing was applying for a job. How many times could I be turned down before I got accepted? How much longer could this possibly go on? Didn't anybody out there think I had a story?

When the prison that fired me was taken over in part by inmates holding hostages, I wrote a city newspaper. A couple of days later, a reporter called and we talked.

"You're not a bad writer, you know," said the *NY Times*!

When Unemployment Insurance ran out; I went looking for a 'real' job.

Teaching English to adults off the street was a whole new ballgame. No tuition, no diploma, non-speakers would hear about the program and give it a try.

The '3Rs' of adult ed: *Recruit, Retain, Reward*.

My first class had only four students. Within a month, I had four *classes* with more on the way. I wasn't 'certified', but the students understood that I had been in their chairs three different times for three different languages; they knew that I cared. There's no Masters' Degree for that.

Vibrant and enthusiastic, 'Good Shirley' was my supervisor. Second-in-command was 'Bad Shirley', uptight and conservative.

During the winter of 1991, Maz and Tom spent a week in the Florida Keys with Mom and Bernie. Taking a shortcut over the mountain to pick them up at the train station, I hit a patch of black ice, over-corrected, slammed through the guardrail, hit a tree, flipped over and dropped fifteen feet.

I can still see the bark pattern of that tree. Inside the car as it hit the mountain side, I felt like a walnut on Thanksgiving. I walked away. Insurance would have paid 2/3 of my salary for 30 days. I missed one class.

Luck or fate? George Lucas had his own single-car accident, miraculously survived and went on to create STAR WARS. Was my near disaster a good omen?

My teaching money allowed me to buy a word processor. No more paper until I was ready; in 1992, I began writing on a *screen*.

The only thing I missed about the typewriter was its creative noise loosed as I worked.

"You mean you'll have to retype your whole book into that machine," said Mom. "All that work..."

No, an *opportunity* for a rewrite, beginning at Word One.

"Everything's gonna be all right," I assured Maz for about the thousandth times.

Thanks to my sister in publishing, one Christmas Day I found myself watching STAR WARS with an older woman who had never seen it, Toni Morrison, the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In a huge overstuffed chair, she took on a Rushmorian presence. So, during commercials I'm going to tell *her* that for the past 25 years, I've been writing the Great American science fiction Novel?

"Ms. Morrison, I teach GED and many of my students are minority women," I said instead, setting myself in 'tape recorder mode', ready to remember her every word. "What should I say to them?"

"Tell them to work hard," she said, as powerful in person as she was on the page.

"'Work hard'?" I wanted to say, but didn't. "You mean that's it?"

I went home pissed. Not until the next morning did I understand. What else could she have said? *That's* how she won the Nobel Prize!

Alien had come out in 1979, *Terminator* in 1984. *Robocop* and *Predator* in 1987. Against the lot of them in a 'cage match' to the death, The Milky Way Man would have destroyed them all in a New York minute.

'Such power exists', Fanboys. '*Such power exists!*'

If only I could bring him to life

English I could bring to life in the classroom. My students came from around the world. The Hispanics were heartened that I spoke both Spanish and Portuguese. The Russians and Eastern Europeans were amazed that I knew so much about the Soviet Union. The Arabic and Asian students knew that I understood how much harder their task was because they were faced with a whole new alphabet.

But there was something else. Because of my service to my country, here and overseas, I'd thought of myself as a true American. Yet my students, who came to the US to begin a new life, often under harsh conditions, were so much like other immigrants so many years ago who made this country great; they were more *American* than I was.

Fed up with the bureaucracy, 'Good Shirley' left. 'Bad Shirley' took over. Though I had excellent attendance and test scores and started successful classes on my own in a factory and a hotel, because I wasn't 'certified,' 'Bad Shirley' wanted me out and I was gone.

Thanksgiving 1996 gave me much to be thankful for-A loving wife, a healthy boy and I'd just gotten a new job with benefits!

But the writer I wanted to be wasn't even at hand. 'Black Friday' brought a telling anniversary - Twenty years working on *The Milky Way Man* and I still didn't know what my story was about.

Mary Shelley was still a teenager when she finished *Frankenstein* and stunned the world. I wasn't creating a 'monster', but was questing for a new metaphor.

'Technology has as its basis, the creation of the inhuman human,' wrote Russell Means of the American Indian Movement.

Not a sci-fi robot in a made-up future or in 'A galaxy far, far away', but here and now in the United States. The Milky Way Man was coming and for longer than Anne Frank had lived, I still couldn't get him out of my little room.

What was wrong with me?

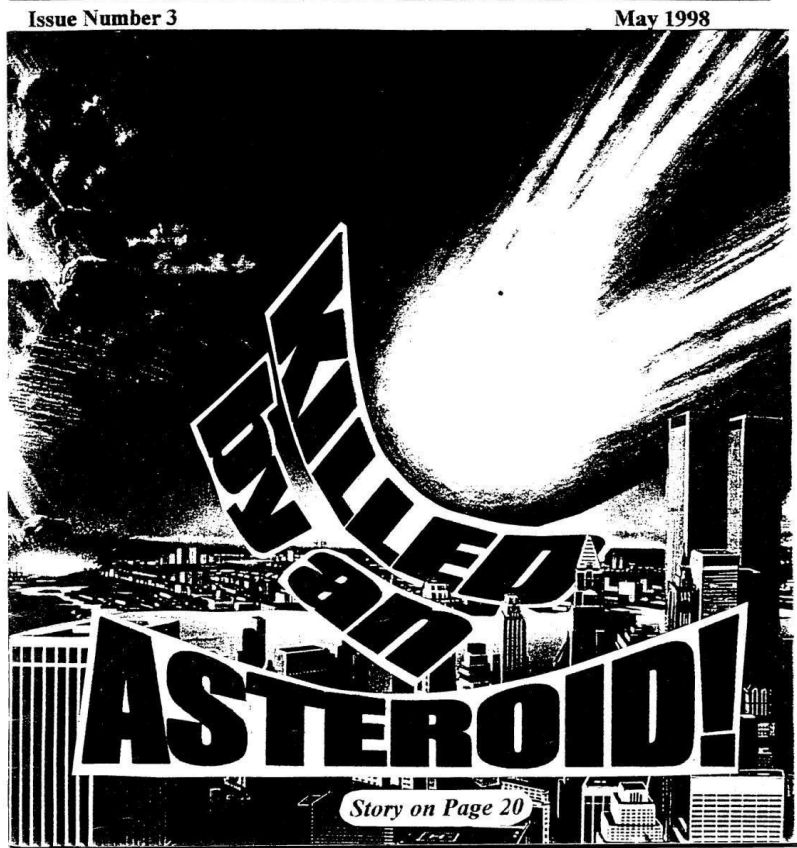
A well-attended GED class at a Mental Health Day Program part-time led to a full time position as a social worker/teacher.

Teaching 'crazy people' seemed a perfect fit.

The Inner Circular

for Cathy

"About us, by us."



© Author

With my very first word, I dreamt - A huge publishing contract, best-seller lists, a slew of awards, big movie deal, **The Milky Way Man** on the cover of *TIME* - but as the years wore on, I just wanted to be read.

I imagined my novel in the fiction section of a complete library. Shelved in alphabetical order, who would I be next to? A quick check revealed my immediate literary neighbor to be a novelist all America is still trying to forget: *Spiro T. Agnew*.

My first day as a teacher in the Mental Health Day Program, I reported early and found my way to the small employee break room. As I was pouring coffee, a pretty blond secretary came in and looked at me with mix of disdain and fear.

"I'm the new teacher," I said and she brightened with relief.

She had thought I was a 'client'. If the day ever came when I looked at mentally ill people that way, I'd get out and never come back.

"This is the one!" I'd declare with every new rewrite. "This time I'm gonna get it right!"

The word processor did not make my writing any better, though my words looked so 'professional' on a screen. Rewriting was the technology's greatest strength. No more 'cut and pasting' on paper. *Italics* and **bold** with the press of a key; at last, I was becoming a 'real' writer.

But as I didn't have the right degree, how could I be a 'real' social worker?

"There's only one difference between clients and staff," a longtime social worker told me early on. "Sometimes the clients get better."

My first GED classes were open to everyone and I drew more than a dozen clients early on. Many would never be able to take the GED test, but there were a couple with a shot, if they were willing to do the work.

Class decorum was a problem. Charlie, a heavysset man in his 30s, kept calling out.

"Charlie, please," I said. "From now on, if you know the answer, just say 'A head of Iceberg Lettuce, and we'll both know.'"

I started with an easy math question.

"A head of Iceberg Lettuce," Charlie called out.

When I asked the question again, an older man up front nodded knowingly.

"What do you think?" I said.

Without hesitation, he answered, "A head of Iceberg Lettuce."

There'd be a lotta that goin' around.

At 348 double-spaced pages, THE MILKY WAY MAN was finally done, *finished!* How 'professional' the manuscript appeared, printed up on my word processor. Better than benefits, my Mental Position gave me access to a wannabe's greatest boon: a free copy machine. (I bought the paper.)

Out went a bunch of copies (Sometimes only the first chapter or the first three chapters) to agents and publishers complete with SASE. All came back. I went on.

My second sister, Kate, a successful entrepreneur, believed my young son should grow up in the 'computer age' and bought him one. I set it up in my porch studio.

We had all kinds of trouble with it because my Air Force experience convinced me that I knew what I was doing.

Suddenly, I was in a new world. On this Sears machine, I had more functions, more memory, storage and speed than I had as an intel analyst 30 years before, at 1/50 the size and 1/50,000 the price!

"You're going to have to retype your whole book into a machine *again!*" said Mom.

Not having a scanner, back to Word One.

A social worker's job was 'to help the clients'. Not having a certified degree, like in VISTA and in Peace Corps, I set out to help the clients help themselves.

I set up a schedule that had me spending more time with more different clients than anyone else in the clinic. Five days a week I would teach GED for an hour and a half, then 'Pre-GED' (Basic Adult Ed) until lunch. My afternoon class was everybody's favorite because I was free to teach whatever I wanted. From magazines and books, I xeroxed full articles with pictures that we could read and discuss together.

Unlike most other groups, where the clients sat passively for lectures rife with psychobabble; my 'students' read aloud. Not my classes, *theirs*.

When I announced a class on *Titanic*, the room filled up a half hour early. No surprise later when James Cameron's blockbuster broke records.

The best I could do was the British Classic *Night to Remember*.

"Are you going to see the *Titanic* movie," I asked one of the clients.

"You mean, when it sinks?" he said.

Hmmm...When The Milky Way Man *does what?*

Dial-up Internet opened up my little room to the universe--I felt like a 'jeep' back in OPSComm--and saved me time and money. No more searching through the annual *Writer's Market* and sending out one-page queries to agents and publishers and waiting and hoping by my roadside mailbox.

I rewrote my query yet again and sent e-mails to dozens of agents and publishers; waiting would be done watching the screen. One agency's website was full of misspellings and typos. I wrote them with corrections; the president of the company himself thanked me, and requested a 'hard copy' of THE MILKY WAY MAN.

I was on my way!

Teaching the mentally ill came with the same challenge as the children in the South Bronx or immigrants from around world--'If it ain't fun, it don't get done!' More important than even learning was *enjoying* each class, to make each student want to come back.

My 'Pre-GED' class of ten was mostly African-American. They'd read a story and then we'd ask and answer questions. One morning, a pretty, young light-skinned woman of Caribbean descent, a former prostitute and drug addict, came upon a word she didn't know.

"Spell it," I asked.

She did: "R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

"Hey, girl," I sang. "Tee-Cee-Bee!"

Whereas the class exploded, jumping up and clapping their hands. "Sock it to me! Sock it to me!"

Funny? The woman did not know the meaning of 'respect' because she had never been given any.

As a writer, would I ever get some?

My agent, with contacts in publishing, sent out a slew of e-mail 'pitches' for *The Milky Way Man*. Only traditional science fiction companies showed any interest, but as each had rejected the manuscript multiple times over two decades, no surprise that it was rejected yet again.

If not yet the most rejected first novel in the history of American literature, *The Milky Way Man* had just begun the fight!

My agent and I would be together for ten years. We would argue constantly, and more than a few times, he'd be right.

Yet again, back to Word One.

As a teacher of the mentally ill, I made a serious mistake: *success*. My classes concentrated on *how* to take the test and pumping up the clients' confidence. Two of my young GED students took the test and passed it!

Of course, they passed. That's what I had been hired to do, right? Not quite. Teach, yes, but the idea that the mentally ill could succeed like 'normal people'?

Mental Health is a compartmental bureaucracy. All staff confine themselves to their niche. Mentally Ill Chemical Abusers (MICA) was run by a couple of social workers backed by doctors who, via their 'certified program,' bombarded a dozen or so young people five days a week with learned psychological principles. The goal was to keep the young people off drugs and prepare them to be 'mainstreamed' back into society.

As none of the MICA teens had been able to finish high school, I suggested that they be enrolled in my GED class. Out of my 'compartment', I had stepped over a line. Once an asset, I suddenly became a threat.

As Maz and I both had steady jobs, we could afford to make her dreams come true: to travel and camp around the country. Mom and Bernie gave us a great deal on their old van and off we went.

At home with Thomas when I was unemployed, my son had been raised playing with all kinds of building toys. He started drawing early and by the time he was eight years old, his artistic talent had left my own in the dust. I had built yet another Milky Way Man model as he watched.

"You're doin' a really good job, Dad," he said.

Too bad no publisher thought so.

The mentally ill were in a class by themselves and I got to teach them. Every class, we had fun, and my students kept coming back for more. There were people I *helped*.

By the spring of 1998, I longed to go beyond my classes and do something new. Every month or so, the halls of the Day Program would be littered with home-made papers; the client 'newsletter', two pages of text stapled together had come out, been looked out briefly and thrown away. Hmmm...how about a *magazine* the clients would be proud of?

We held a special meeting in my classroom. The clients came up with the name: ***Inner Circular***, after the program. The masthead '*About us, by us*'

They would do *all* the writing; about this place, their families, their lives. I would be editor-in-chief, art director and publisher, but my name would *not* appear on the magazine. Each issue would be ***For Cathy***, one of our social workers killed on the way to work by a sleeping driver.

I liked Cathy. She had guts. Had she lived, my life might have been different.

I wasn't writing much. My agent always had my manuscript out there, but there was little hope. After twenty years or so, *The Milky Way Man* had become a running joke in science fiction publishing.

I'd later submit with a new title: *One Giant Leap*. The results were the same.

Putting the ***Inner Circular*** 'to bed' took a combo of art school method, cut-and- paste, and airplane model builder. Lay a piece of 'legal size' xerox paper on its side, fold it in half, and that's four *pages*. A few clients wrote 50 or 100-word entries. I typed them up with a big font headline, then cut and paste them on the page. The first issue would be only eight pages with a picture of our clients in the Special Olympics filling Page 1.

Then I added 'ads' promoting classes at the Clinic. 'Anger Management' got the poster from *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman*. My son worked with me, absorbing the process. 'Published' on the Clinic copier, I ran off 50 copies of the premiere issue. Presented at the morning meeting, the other social workers stood up and cheered.

The ***Inner Circular*** had only just begun.

My agent allowed me to field queries from wannabe writers urging us to read their work.

"I am a CEO who's written a novel," read one. "And all my employees love it, even the ones who haven't read it."

An autobiography from an Iranian woman who rose to power in an Islamic State grabbed my interest. After she submitted the complete manuscript via e-mail, I'd question her after almost every chapter. At the finale, she dies of cancer.

Had I been communicating with a 'real' *ghost* writer?

The woman promised to rewrite, but for me, it was a dead issue.

Got a 125,000-word novel from an Indian woman whose prose I'd have killed for. Read it all the way through, hoping against hope that she had a pay-off with all these words. Everything but a story.

Some writers just didn't understand. It was all about *storytelling*, and they didn't have one. Sometimes they'd take it out on me.

"What can you possibly know about writing?" wrote a frustrated young man. "You're a literary agent, glitz and glamour all the time!"

The April 1998 *Inner Circular* ballooned to 28 pages with a cover story on clients' pets, with an illustration drawn by a client. *Superman* plugged the 'Self-Esteem' class. I borrowed a technique from OMNI, a highbrow sci-fi mag that quoted scientists, politicians and authors to break up text.

I added clients' quotes throughout the issue.

'If I had your brains, I wouldn't be here,' said one.

'Is this where you get money to go to DisneyWorld?' said another.

'I wish I weren't so into relaxing, but I am,' said another.

A client with a UFO fetish asked me, *'Are you a space alien?'*

Was The Milky Way Man?

I began networking sci-fi and UFO sites. On the cusp of the New Millennium, both were being left behind.

Written a hundred years ago, Wells' *War of the Worlds* was not about 'Us against the Martians' but Earth versus Mars. The stronger *planet* won. Humanity had next to nothing to do with it.

Of first contact with a cosmic intelligence, Carl Sagan said. "We will not find out who they are, but who *we* are."

Ever since Man became Man, he's 'invaded' every country on earth. As Mongols or Greeks or Romans or *Conquistadores* or Nazis or Communists or Americans 'Fighting for Freedom' as they have 'round the world' since their Revolution.

Is it because the United States has never been invaded that sci-fi writers and Hollywood churn out novels and movies and TV shows about 'Us versus the space aliens'? Or is paranoia vented on 'Illegal immigrants'?

Didn't we Americans get it? The 'invaders' have been, and, God willing, will always be, *us*.

"The United States has always had an immigration problem," said an anonymous wag. "Don't believe me? Ask any *Indian!*"

The third issue of ***Inner Circular*** came with a *science fiction* cover. A client in a nearby program had done some 'extra work' for Hollywood, including *Deep Impact*, a disaster movie starring Morgan Freeman. The front page took a lot of work, but it was worth it. *'Killed by an Asteroid'* looked like a 'real' magazine cover.

'Perry Como was a barber,' came from an old client who said it fifty times a day.

'We may be mentally ill, but we can do things,' said another.

Thomas and I would assemble the final 'pages' at home. On the first working day of the month, I'd go in early and xerox 50 copies. A couple of clients would help me setup the issues and staple them. Then I'd pass out copies as the clients got off the busses for program.

The ***Inner Circular*** would bring half the building to a halt, as staff and clients alike opened the latest issue. Every client who had contributed was being read and I envied every one of them.

Whether it was learning English as a second language or getting a GED diploma or just for a moment, to feel 'normal' in a classroom, my students got my 'quest attitude'. My fellow teachers and social workers never did.

Through the agency, I'd been giving aspiring writers advice. Must have e-mailed my favorite Anne Frank quote more than 500 times. I discovered I was getting good at it, when I started listening to myself.

And to my neighbor. Herb Trimpe, a few years older than I, an Air Force vet and alum of the School of Visual arts. Herb had been a comic book artist for more than thirty years. Successful, professional, a 'real' artist, Herb was the role model I wish I could have been.

Thomas brought out a bunch of comic book-like drawings and Herb was duly impressed.

"It's about storytelling!" said Herb, and then uttered what would be forever called 'Trimpe's Truth': *"That which does not add to a story takes away from it."*

Inner Circular #4 had the Woodstock Musical Festival 'Guitar and Dove' logo on the cover, commemorating the grand event from 30 years before. But one of the tuning pegs was the *Star of David*. My 'very Jewish family meeting beatniks and hippies when I was a young girl', a client wrote.

I did some research to see if I could find anything comparable in the Mental Health system - a couple of clinics had brief monthly newsletters, but a *magazine* written exclusively by clients! I mailed copies to different Mental Health clinics. None ever replied.

Not *my* magazine, ***Inner Circular*** was a vehicle for the clients to tell the world who they were and what they were going through and how they felt. I sent a copy to the county's public relations official. More than anything, I wanted the writers to feel proud of what their words meant. And I wanted somebody important to tell them that.

Nobody ever did.

Every day the agency would forward writers' queries in the hope that I'd spot something we could sell to a publishing house. 'Trolling', my agent called it. I wouldn't have any luck for a while.

Only a couple of the MICA teens wrote for the ***Circular***. The two social workers running the group made every effort to isolate them from 'the regular clients.' One MICA girl told me that she was 'sick and tired' of me asking others to write.

"Is that how you feel?" I asked her.

"Damn right," she said. "Good. Write it up and I'll publish it,"

I said and did in issue #5.

Depression is mental illness' constant companion. In a dilapidated building on a crumbling Main Street of a small city in a county dying of apathy, the mental health clinic could easily take on the atmosphere of a GULAG, the clients, POWs in a holding tank with no possible escape.

Except the ***Inner Circular***! Every new issue was in black-and-white, but authentic and alive, full of unique, personal vignettes, and memorable quotes. And of course, the ads: Dumbo and Howdy Doody and C3PO & R2D2 plugging weekly groups every client could benefit from.

When not teaching, I sought out clients who would never come to class or write for the ***Circular***, people seemingly oblivious to reality. One old woman never spoke and always sat alone. One morning, I sat next to her and sang a rhyme from a Billy Joel song that summed up my Mental Health experience. That first time, she smiled. Every day, I'd sing to her. By the tenth time, her eyes alight, her mouth quivering, she started singing with me.

"And they sit at the bar, and put bread in my jar and say 'Man, wadda you doin' here?'"

Not for much longer; MICA wanted me out.

What kept me writing was the dream that one day, hopefully very soon, I'd get the word: my novel was going to be published! A letter in my mailbox, an e-mail, or maybe some big company would send a limo.

Instead I got a phone call. Yes! A publisher wanted my novel! The less-than-ideal news was that it was a new e-book publisher. I'd had sampled their other e-books. None kept me reading. But this was about *my* book - The Milky Way Man would be 'out there' for all the world to see! I'd be a 'real' writer!

Was I? I took a hard look, not at this e-book company, but my manuscript. It just wasn't good enough yet. I'd come a long, long way, but I couldn't *feel* my story yet.

As no money was offered, I turned them down. My quest would go on.

Putting real life on the page was so much different than writing fiction. As a novelist I strove for originality, very clever about it, but to what end? The immediacy and the truth of the ***Circular*** put my imagination to shame.

A MICA woman came to me with a story; she had spent a weekend at a nudist colony. Her short article mentioned no body parts or even hinted at sex.

'I mean, c'mon. We're adults!' I quoted her.

Her story made for a great cover: an ancient Greek stone nude, with no nipples. But I was taking no chances. I copied only a half dozen copies and submitted them to staff. When no one objected, I published a full run.

MICA had a fit, condemning the ***Circular***. I pulled the article, made a new cover and put out a new edition, but to no avail. I had offended the bureaucracy and was ordered to end the ***Circular***.

Damn, I should have fought it, but...

Once a Top Secret superhero, I obeyed because I had bills to pay.

Getting fired for 'gross insubordination' meant no job and no Unemployment Insurance. Back on Welfare and Food Stamps.

I survived the ***Circular***, but when I reported again and again that I believed our clients had long been abused by staff, I didn't have a chance.

MICA wrote me up. The next day I was removed from my position and spent the next three months upstairs in a 'rubber room' where I built model airplanes while the 'charges'

were investigated. At the urging of my union rep and union lawyer, I took a 28- day suspension, then sat at home for an additional two months on full pay. Back at work, not allowed to do anything, they fired me within a week.

"You blew the whistle," a senior social worker told me. "And they covered it up to protect their casino interests."

Finally, the abuse was stopped, but no one was punished. Not much later, the town got its Gaming Permit for thousands of slot machines.

My marriage never recovered. I had thought of my clients first and wanted to do what was right, never considering the consequences for my wife and child.

I had to make changes. In my life and in my 'Miracle Army,' sci-fi robot, alien invasion New World Order (with Indians) Great American science fiction Novel.

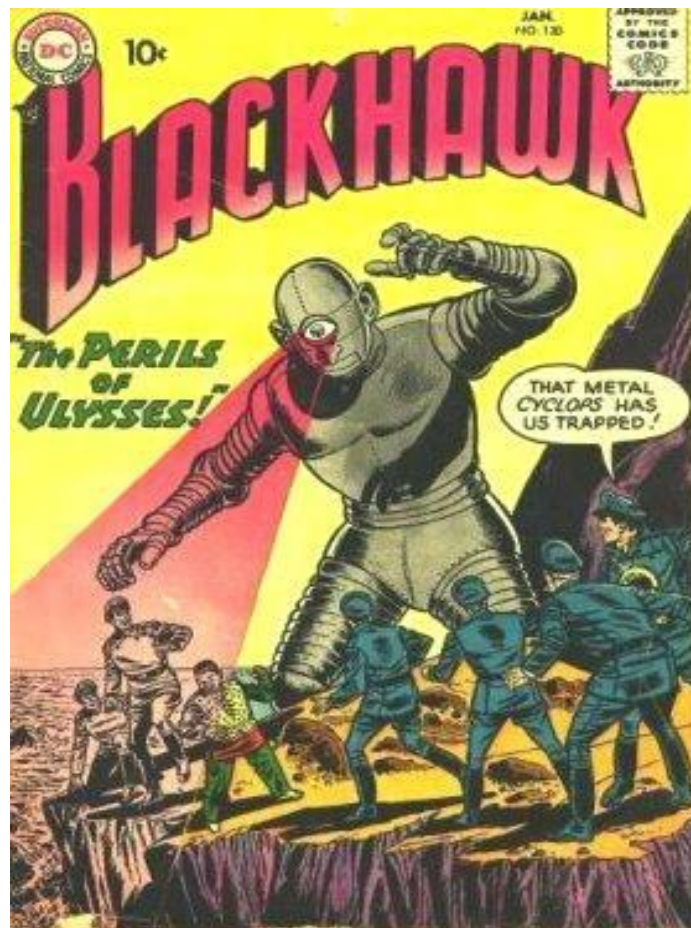
For more than twenty years, I had been in a 'time warp' of my own making. The characters I had created a generation ago hadn't aged a day. The Soviet Union was no more. Once Top Secret, satellite surveillance and electronic intelligence had become commonplace. My Milky Way Manuscript read like a head of Iceberg Lettuce.

'No matter how well-written and thoroughly researched,' said Kurt Vonnegut on my bulletin board. *'If it's not what your story is about, get rid of it!'*

Picturing Susan Sarandon, I recast my astronomer with a smaller role. My hero, James Peterson and NSA, and my antagonist, Alexander Kabakov and the KGB, were deleted. Write them off as a mercy killing.

Down to 180 pages, I went back to Word One.

'Gimme some blood 'n thunder'!



© 1956 DC Comics

*"I had a period where I thought I might
not be good enough to publish."*

Stephen King

At the dawn of the computer age of intelligence-gathering, not even Super Analyst could have foreseen the intelligence-*distributing* impact of the Internet. Through a beautifully designed *free* website, I could save my childhood hero!

Blackhawk comic books started before Pearl Harbor in 'real time'. Unlike other costumed heroes who never aged, Blackhawk and his team got old and retired in 1977.

Reimagined in a couple of unsuccessful 'tribute' series during the 80s and 90s, Blackhawk had all but disappeared. But never to me. Over the years, I had submitted stories to the comic book company and had always been rejected. This time around, when I was ready, there would be no printing, no paper, no copies, stamps and envelopes, everything via computer!

With the encouragement of the webmaster, I'd soon be bringing the Blackhawks back to life!

Through my agent I got work as a 'book doctor', helping authors with their novels. Usually a waste of money, as too often the 'doctors' will prop up aspiring writers to bleed them dry.

It wasn't about the writing, but *story*. Time and time again, because the authors were 'qualified'--doctors, lawyers and businessmen, they told tales starring the heroes they wished they had been.

'Fiction is fiction' said a female editor to a room full of aspiring women authors. 'Not autobiography in a party dress.'

An award-winning, rich TV producer recruited me to help him with his novel. A wonderful, intelligent, honorable, and honored writer, he *did* have a novel if only he could write himself out of it.

Over nearly a year, he paid me nearly \$2,500 and didn't listen to a word I said. His novel was never published.

I had gone through the 'autobio phase' and come out of it. Or so I thought. Writing about whom I wished I had been was hardly a stretch; *imagining* myself as big and beautiful, invulnerable and invincible, the mightiest being ever to walk the earth; *becoming* The Milky Way Man would be the ultimate 'acting out'.

I could write about being a 'giant' because I *knew*. I'm six feet, four inches tall. Among professional basketball players, a midget. But in Costa Rica...

In a restaurant with other Peace Corps Volunteers, only I was tall enough to see over the high booth - in other booths, the tops of few heads bobbing as they ate. Suddenly...*Madre Dios*, a beautiful young woman, her full face smiling at me! She had to be at least 6' 2". In Costa Rica? She must have felt like *The Fifty-Foot Woman*.

I smiled back. Not a 'come on' smile, but an exclusive one. It made for a telling moment. Only she and I understood.

She soon left with her boyfriend or husband who was a half-foot shorter. A quick glance back, that knowing smile; she had seen a man who knew how she felt.

Everyone thought I was a failed writer, but a lousy father?

As an artist, my son Thomas possessed what I never had: a *line*. Influenced by Jack Kirby, Burne Hogarth, and Todd McFarlane, one look at his work and I knew it was his alone.

I encouraged him early and often, bringing home art books from the library, and keeping him in art supplies and bunches of comic books. But it was the creation of the ***Inner Circular*** that ignited him.

"Dad, I want to make a 'graphic novel'," he said, almost as if declaring a quest, showing me the text of Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*.

"We can do it," I said. "But it's gonna take a lotta work. Double-sized on illustration boards, then shrink them down to standard cover size. You'll do all the drawing and inking.

"You up for it?"

"Yeah, sure, Dad!" he said, all excited. "But what will you do?"

"What good's technology if you don't take advantage of it?" I said. "I'll print the story off the internet. You block it in paragraph by paragraph for each panel, page by page.."

Tom went at it for nearly a month, his spirit aflame throughout the process. Finally we were ready for a trip to the printshop. It took us two days to shrink, cut and set everything right. Thirty-two pages long, we made 50 copies. The printshop owner was so impressed, that she wouldn't charge us.

"The whole county should be proud of you," she said.

I was even prouder; my son was a *real* comic book artist!

Driving home with his first edition, our creative spirits bonded. I wanted it to last forever.

Tom got in trouble in school. In the post-Columbine panic, he was suspended for a week.

Maybe it's my fatherly pride, but if I had been an art or English teacher and one of my 15-year old students had created a 'graphic novel' of an Edgar Allen Poe classic, I would have played it to the hilt.

The school ignored his *Masque of the Red Death*. Not the students. He sold out two runs. Tom's second book would be exclusively his. He wouldn't even let me type up and cut-and-paste the text.

It sold even better than *Masque*. At the start of his third book, he hit a wall. Some role model I was: couldn't keep a job and still couldn't get published. Peer pressure, drugs, girls, legal troubles. He dropped out of school and joined the 'under-culture' and traveled about.

He's living with his girlfriend out west and having a tough time. I still send him art books and supplies. We don't talk enough. When we do, I'm always trying to reignite his creative spirit, to get him back on a quest.

"You're either burning or you're out," I'd say, and he'd understand I was talking to both of us.

"Yeah, sure, Dad," he'd say.

SCIFI.com was my first stop on the net. Over the years, I'd write fifty+ plus letters that would be posted on *Science Fiction Weekly*. I once praised a story I read on SCIFICTION, syfy channel's fiction site, the only reader to do so. As for the rest, dated and derivative...

Or 'sour pages'? Over the years I submitted four short stories to SCIFICTION. All were rejected. After six years of failing response, the highest-paying science fiction market on the Internet shut down.

A sign of the times. Locked in its past, churning out cut-and-paste 'clothesline' stories, the future had left science fiction behind.

Where did that leave me?

When Unemployment Insurance ran out, times got tough. During the winter, our well pump blew and we were without water for three weeks. I kept filling the bathtub with snow so we could flush the toilet.

God bless my agent. He got me a 'real' writing job. And this could be the *big* one! It with a query from a self-made scientist/naturalist who saw himself as a cross between 'Crocodile Dundee', and 'Indiana Jones'.

I'd got the guy's initial query and it looked promising. Then came vignettes written by his secretary that 'needed work'. I rewrote them and the guy was impressed and invited me to his business lab to talk about me writing his autobiography.

I'd never considered writing anyone's life story, but this could be the break I was looking for.

"Don't talk about money," my agent warned me before I left. "That's my job."

I flew down, got picked up at the airport by a chauffeur, then was introduced as 'a writer from New York.'

More than anything else I wanted to write a story, and show my wife and son that I could be a 'professional'.

I stayed a week, taking all kinds of notes and he and his secretary liked me and felt his book would be in good hands. *But* (There's always a 'but' in this biz!) as many places as this guy had been and the stuff he had done, I saw the best of it as a 'fluff piece' series for a travel or science magazine. A book?

I kept at it. He'd been married twice, the second time to a young 'golddigger'. "I got took" he admitted. (Pity the poor 'Sugar Daddy!') He was currently pursuing a buxom blond he'd met at a dance club. Still in the 'platonic' stage, he'd taken her along on one his far flung expeditions. Is that what this was about? I write a glorious autobio so this guy can finally get laid?

There was no advance. My agent would work that out. I returned home to be told that my literary subject had been offered a screenplay for a lower price. Going Hollywood, he couldn't resist. He offered me some money for the work I had done, but I was insulted. Me and my damn pride. I should have taken it.

His life might have made for a colorful trailer, but hardly a film. The screenplay was never produced.

The lesson learned: *a/ways* get the money up front!

I taught English as a Second Language for the last time over the summer at a private religious academy. My students were young Venezuelan and South Korean boys.

Convinced of their 'proven program', too many schools fail to understand that if students are to conform to their needs, shouldn't the teacher conform to the special needs of the students?

After the Venezuelan boys left, I junked the program and wrote my own series of challenges. Language isn't a 'subject', but a living thing, a joy to master. With apologies to Gene Roddenberry and Mel Brooks...

'English...the final frontier. These are the adventures of a unique class, boldly going where no class has gone before...

'South Koreans in Space!'

You had to be there.

My first story for the **Blackhawk** website was up for all the world to see and I got some positive feedback, but I wasn't yet satisfied. The Blackhawks started fighting Nazis, then the Japanese. After WW II, they took on the Commies. Bought by Warner, 'Cold War' enemies were replaced by gimmicky costumed villains and space aliens. The heroic team soon went into a power dive, changing uniforms, becoming *superheroes* in an endless chase to catch up with the times and never did.

That put fans at odds. Some liked the early team, others, later incarnations. I looked at Blackhawk not as a hero, or leader of an elite team, but as a *story*. Not to 'bring Blackhawk back', but to push Blackhawk *forward*!

Rewriting *always* begins at Word One...

As I was making some money helping authors, I could consider myself a literary professional. As a 'book doctor' or 'ghostwriter,' I still was a teacher at heart. Got a 'pre-Internet business novel' from an author who knew it needed help.

Written in third person, as a sequence of events, his tale of greed and malfeasance had its own quirky charm, an heroic quest in the wacky wonderful wasteland of American Capitalism.

But the ending...(That '*about* cable' flowing through the story, make it *crack* like a whip!)...was limp and contrived. I gave him some suggestions. He'd rework the final chapter while I hit the rest of the book. Not change the story, but bring clarity to it, not good writing, good *reading*!

He liked my work and paid me in weekly \$250 increments. As we went along, I'd show him the method of my own madness, hoping he'd pick up on it, making for a fully-realized climax and finale. Most of all, I wanted his book to *be* his, not mine.

In two months, we got to the end and he sent me the final chapter. It was as if the story had fallen off the side of a cliff. Was he still relying on me to save his novel?

"C'mon, writer!" I urged him. "You've created your own unique vision of the world. Don't cop out on your story or yourself!"

Like I should talk? For nearly half my life I've been trying to find the meaning of an eight-foot gleaming automaton, and I was still light years away.

For all I know that author completed his quest alone. He still owes me \$250.

I had grown up a *Video Ranger*, under the televised command of *Captain Video* and his mechanical TOBOR (*Robot* spelled backwards), enthralled by their black-and- white outer space adventures.

One evening, sitting up close, I gripped a little blue plastic toy. With a jolly face, my 4-inch young spaceman carried a 'cosmic rifle', as eager to explore the unknown as I was.

On the screen, there was danger! One of the Captain's teenage *Video Rangers* had fallen out his ship and was tumbling through space. I squinted at the television.

Could it be? The helpless *Ranger* had a 'cosmic rifle' just like my toy.

A harder look--the TV *Ranger* was my toy!

"Pho-NEE!" I cried out.

I had begun questioning the relevancy of science fiction, the power of the literature. Hadn't my 'alien invasion' story already been told? Had I become trapped in the waning 'science fiction universe'? VHS thinking in a DVD world!

Since Wells' Martians attacked in 1898, from *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, maybe the worst film ever made, to *Avatar*, the highest grossing film in history, countless armadas of starships have traversed the cosmos to exploit bountiful worlds, which begs the question: How many 'sufficiently advanced space aliens' does it take to conquer a world?

The answer has to be *none*.

The further science fiction goes into the future, the more it portrays the past. Near the end of WW II in Europe, the US and Britain launched 'thousand-plane raids' to bomb Berlin. Barely a year later, one plane and one bomb destroyed a city and then another one.

Atomic bombs killed more than 150,000 defenseless civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and almost as many jobs building, flying and maintaining bomber aircraft.

Technology eliminates jobs. A civilization capable of interstellar travel has long since done away with transporting 'live soldiers' trillions of miles to fight a war.

Because there'll be no war. A small drone identifies the planet's dominant species, isolates and kills a chosen specimen, then divine its DNA to enhance and upsize. 'Intelligent design' in a Darwinian Universe, with the Milky Way Man's first step on US soil, humanity is doomed.

But there is one inadvertent hitch...

In 1999, 'Intelligent Design' made headlines. Which was exactly how The Milky Way Man was created.

'Man without sex?' remarked one of my White House characters with an Orwellian touch. 'Some *are* more "Intelligently designed" than others.'

Retitled 'Intelligent Design', my agent submitted hard copies to six different publishers.

"Do or die," he said. "We'll go out like rock stars."

All were rejected.

Maz and Tom got sick as The new Millennium approached. Instead of our annual New Year's Eve celebration, we were in bed by 8PM.

Back in Woodside more than half a century ago, I remembered wondering where I would be if I lived to see 2000. I had wanted to be in outer space. Another quest bites the dust.

I like to strike up conversation with local folks wherever I go: the dump, the library, and of course, the laundromat.

The cute, blond lady in charge had written her autobiography and was dealing with a high-pressure vanity publisher. I read her typed manuscript. It 'needed work.'

She didn't have a computer and couldn't afford one. As I was no longer using my word processor, I gave it to her and showed her how to use it while my clothes spun in her machines.

Years later, I saw her in High Falls. Her book had been published and she sold every last copy out of her laundromat.

"There's hope for us all," Mom would have said.

Was there?

I have no idea where my creative spirit came from. We all have one, don't we? Beyond intelligence and so-called 'talent', the desire, the obsession to make something new and beautiful that will get all kinds of attention because...?

Failing over and over again for more than a quarter of a century, when do I say I tried my hardest and did my best, but I just didn't have 'it'?

If writing is an addiction, then like the drunk and the druggie, the victim must 'hit bottom' before he can begin to turn things around. The daughter of the owner of America's largest sex shop, the 'Wall-Mart of Porn' sent me her 'family story' for 'shaping into a submittable manuscript'.

Porn is no different from 'respectable' prose; without heart, humor and humanity, it quickly blows its wad, rolls over and goes to sleep. Had the story been about how this 'family enterprise' got off the ground, and the inspiration of her dear father's vision, sprinkled with local barbs, she might have had a quirky tale. Instead she went straight for the groin, describing in minute detail, the perverse conduct of her peep show customers.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money," said the esteemed Samuel Johnson. After paying \$250 for a hard week's work, she cut me off, complaining about my 'style'.

Good thing I didn't have any yet.

I was home that fateful morning when Mom called and asked me if I was watching television.

"Yes," I said. The second airliner had hit the World Trade Center ten minutes before.

"We're living in a new era," said Mom.

I had created the man as a *power* metaphor. Islamic fanatics had struck against a symbol of US economic dominance, unleashing the full might of the American military machine--tanks, planes, ships, missiles -- 20th Century weapons in a 21st Century war, as much for God as for country.

'Oh, brave new world!'

Far from reality, on science fiction websites, I met John Snider who'd been the editor-in-chief of *scifidimensions.com* since the beginning of the Millennium. As much as we both loved the genre, he was more traditional and we disagreed constantly. Such is the breadth of science fiction.

I sent him The Milky Way Man.

Within a week, we had a deal. Snider would not go on to win a Hugo or a Nebula, science fiction's grand awards, but if it means anything at all in the genre, he gave me a chance. No money, of course, but the online announcement thrilled me.

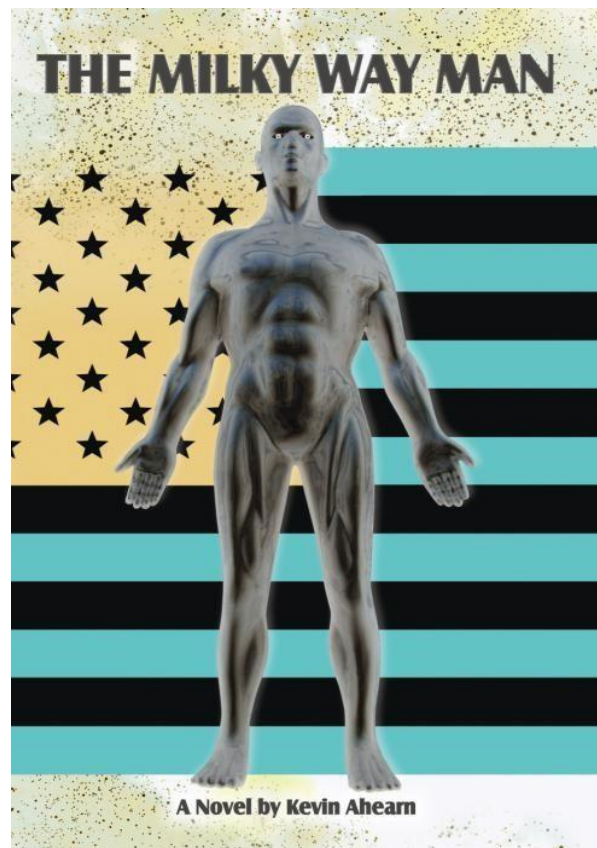
*'scifidimensions is proud to present our first novel - **The Milky Way Man** by Kevin Ahearn! We'll publish it in four parts, from August through November, 2002. Both Kevin and I hope you enjoy it, and we encourage you to send us feedback'.*

I was going to be read...by science fiction fans!

After nearly 26 years, was 'the AGONY' of my quest finally over?

What would be
revelation'?

'the *rapture* of the



"The wish is the father of the mistake."

Vladimir Lenin

In the cold, damp basement of our family home, a large cupboard holds the compiled record of my novel quest--more than sixty pounds of piled paper, manuscripts rejected over the years.

Unlike old photographs, I'm afraid to look at them. Not that the writing is 'bad', that's 'classroom thinking.' A writer has 'it' or he doesn't---his own personal THERE, that unique niche in the universe exclusively his. It's not that I didn't have 'it' and wasn't THERE for more than 30 years that scared me, but the very idea that I'd get 'it' or anywhere else writing this 'ker-rap'!

What kept me going? What made me believe that I could be a 'real' writer? Conceit, stubbornness, arrogance? Was I so far gone that I couldn't see that my obsession was nothing more than a selfish excuse. Wasn't being a 'real' husband and father quest enough?

John Snider, forever to be known as 'The Editor who Originally published **The Milky Way Man**', got more feedback on my novel than anything he'd ever run on

scifidimensions.com. Not that it went viral or was read and bought by a publisher; I got maybe two dozen letters from fans, but none from a professional in the science fiction 'community'.

Two of the original 'Milky Way Fans' are still with me.

After its four-month stint, I asked the editor to take it down, promising to write additional 'sci-fi' pieces and did so over the years until John discontinued the site in 2010.

I had stopped thinking of the Milky Way Man as a 'space alien' or 'super-robot' or 'ultimate weapon'. Brought up on *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and the *Wolf Man*, all were European. The *Mummy* came from Africa and the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* out of Latin America.

The biggest, baddest, most beautiful man in the history of the planet, The Milky Way Man had to be pure *American*, 'Where all men are created equal.'

His DNA comes from a young Lakota brave, an Oglala, the tribe of Crazy Horse. Unlike other groups who called themselves 'the family' or 'the people', the Oglalas were 'the Men.'

Science fiction is full of 'alien invasions' which conveniently allow humanity to fight back and triumph. With the introduction of the man, when will the handsome heartthrob appear with inner conflicts and a troubled lovelife to save the world? Or perhaps the beautiful, brilliant scientist who will discover the meaning of her life as she rallies all around her to defeat the man?

Sorry, but neither is coming. The Milky Way Man is the hero. And he's on a quest.

'Man, what're you doin' here?'

I got a seasonal job doing tax forms for Fleet Bank. ("How *FLEET* it is!) Boring beyond belief, I made a game of it. Fleet wanted 60 forms corrected and filed per hour. At the end of my second stint, I did a record-breaking 202 to win the only 'Super-Duper Grand Slam' certificate in company history.

In 2002, after 18 years, my team was in the Super Bowl! The Oakland *Raiders* got killed and would go on to endure the unthinkable: seven double-digit losing seasons in a row. (But I'm *never* giving up!)

I got a job as an RV salesman at a huge camper lot. I sold one in three weeks and was gone.

For Christmas season, I sold calendars in a booth at the mall. The guy running the nearby soda fountain was a diehard fanboy. I gave him THE MILKY WAY MAN to read and got free Cokes till Xmas.

Leading into my third year, Fleet promoted me to Group Leader. Maybe they got my sense of humor, but just before I was supposed to start, I got a job 'with benefits' with a small publisher. As a 'customer service rep' in charge of the books division, I was in on the 'ground floor'!

Unfortunately, the company was literally a madhouse; the records and inventory were in complete disarray, and nobody in charge ever read, but I was in the epicenter of the process, watching books being created from beginning to end, and most important, *after*. The warehouse was piled high with 'vanity' books published years before whose authors paid a storage fee. Worse than never being published, the writer's greatest fear is to be left lying alone on the page, forever unread.

At first, rebuilding the division kept me busy, but I still I wanted to do more. The company had a backlist of a dozen science fiction books that never sold so they wouldn't publish The Milky Way Man unless I paid them, and I was dead set against that.

Strumming through the files, we had one author under contract and a manuscript. A true sports tale, it 'needed work', but this guy had written books for a big company years before, and also wrote his own sports column. Maybe I could learn something from him.

I got permission from the boss to contact the author. The manuscript needed 'beefing up', to read like a story rather than a sequence of newspaper clippings. The writer was delighted to hear from 'his publisher' and promised to get to work.

Meanwhile I came up with the title, designed the cover and the graphics for the chapter headings. This was going to be a 'real' book!

What was The Milky Way Man's *quest*? No chickening out clichés. I aimed for the peak. Mr. Scrooge, Frankenstein's "monster", Mr. Spock and Darth Vader sought, beyond power, money, and knowledge, their own humanity. For my novel to work, its most human character had to be The Milky Way Man himself.

"No masterpiece was ever created by a lazy artist," said Salvador Dali and he must have been referring to my 'real sports writer'. Who did this guy think he was? Where was his

guts? A paragraph here and there with little research done and that was it? Like the whole world was waiting for *his* book to be published?

I wound up writing a third of the book and 90% of the stuff worth reading. Production promptly screwed up the cover and the graphics, even leaving out a word of the title on the spine. Finally, I took my name off it. After using the wrong file to publish the first run, the book is still gathering dust in the warehouse.

I'd begun writing short stories on my word processor, but none were worth typing over into the computer. I kept at it and in 2005 had my first short story posted online. As I got no money, I couldn't consider myself a 'real writer'. Over the next couple of years, I wrote close to a dozen short stories -- about technology and time travel and religion and race -- and editors liked them and posted them.

I felt proud, but as time wore on, I began to see these sites, not as a resource for readers, but for writers. Some of the stuff needed so much work that wasn't done that I no longer wanted to be alongside it, and asked for my stories and articles to be removed.

Or was I no better and afraid to own up? If I were a 'real' science fiction writer and not just another wannabe fanboy, why couldn't I get my novel finished and published?

Wicasa Ohitika was a young Lakota brave at odds with his spirit.

"A boy no more," he declares, mortally wounded. "I am the Milky Way Man!"

And then...

The novel was going to transform me. No longer the rejected wannabe, I would suddenly burst like a supernova at the core of the science fiction universe. No mere teller of tales, not me who'd struggled so hard and so long, no more that third-grader desperate for attention, I would become 'The Milky Way Writer'!

In 2006, a longtime science fiction publisher announced the first edition of a bi-monthly online sf magazine fans could subscribe to for only \$30 a year. The publisher poster its 'teaser', highlights of the stories in the premiere issue.

I jumped on it. Before my eyes I would see science fiction as written by 'professionals', a goal I aspired to. The 'Golden Age' of sf had been in the 1930s when the future giants of the genre broke ground and shaped the future. Using the new technology, would lightning strike again in the New Millennium?

Worse than 'bad' or mediocre, the magazine was *late*; sci-fi retreads from the last century. It was as if General Motors, desperate to reinvent itself, instead of an electric car, had unveiled a super-deluxe *stagecoach*.

Not just disappointed, I was angry and blasted the 'trailer'; 'The Gap between Us and Them' was posted on every 'fanfic' site I had written for. The magazine editors were pissed and contacted me, offering their complete issue for free. I declined, not wanting to read 'traditional science fiction' at any price.

Was I justified or had the 'professionals' once again irked my lifelong inferiority complex?

Unable to sell more than 2000 annual subscriptions worldwide, the magazine would shut down in its fourth year. '*The Shape of Things to Come*'; throughout science fiction publishing, more and more 'traditional' stories were attracting fewer and fewer paying readers.

After 22 years, my marriage came to an end. Maz and I had been monogamous from begging to end. We had done a variety of things well, but grew up to become two different people who no longer loved each other. Truth be told, my wife and son had given up on my 'Milky Way' quest and I couldn't blame them. Less than ten miles away, I moved in with the other woman in my life.

My stepfather Bernie had died in 1995. "One of the all-time greats," said brother Mike and how right he was. Just before the hurricanes and the housing market collapse, Mom sold her 'snowbird' house in Florida and moved back to High Falls.

"I see him failing," said Mom of Maz's Dad before he passed away.

Now it was Mom's turn. No longer able to drive and after suffering a fall, she was not doing well alone. Only the timing was right; after so many years, Mom and I needed each other badly enough to live together.

For *Book Expo America*, the annual convention, the publishing company printed up 250 copies of a first novel from a 'Traditional Publisher' (TP) out west. Then shipped to NYC, the novel, and its author, would have their 'coming out' at the big show.

Imagine me and The Milky Way Man. I took our file copy of the new novel home over the Memorial Day Weekend, wishing I had written it.

But as I started reading...

The novel was ridiculous, cut-and-paste 'ker-rap' rife with typos, misspellings and faulty research, yet got glowing reviews by important people. Whose book had they read?

'Blowback', they called it in the intel game. During the Cold War, CIA would 'leak' disinformation to fool and confuse KGB. The Russians would then rewrite the 'leak', send it back, and CIA would believe it!

TP actually believed they were releasing a breakthrough novel. I read it cover to cover and sent a detailed report to the author and TP.

The author quickly replied, demanding to know my 'expertise'. TP's president thanked me, saying there would be 'revisions', and offering me a free copy in hardcover.

I declined, then sent him *The Milky Way Man*; TP said it kept him reading till page 22.

Uh-oh! Back to Word One.

Within a week after its publication date, TP's novel rose to #25 on Amazon. Because it had struck a chord. TP's marketing team got the author an article in a business mag about his 'controversial method' for beating the Stock Market. Once read by 'real' readers the book vanished and reads today like a pathetic joke. TP and the author made a profit, but pity the poor investors who bought into it.

TP and I still exchange e-mails about publishing, but he's yet to take me seriously as a writer.

In the winter, I returned to doing tax forms, but Bank of America had bought Fleet and was running their own show.

"You're crazy for coming back," said one of my friends from the old days. "BOA's taken the fun out the job and they treat us like shit."

I got off on the wrong foot right away and within two weeks I was fired for "Inappropriate comments at the workplace."

BOA was absolutely correct. Racist, sexist, or demeaning words directed at a fellow employee or the company itself should be grounds for termination.

"What did I say?" I asked when I got the news.

"Oh, we can't tell you that," said BOA.

I haven't done banking there since.

I wrote four complete **Blackhawk** stories and even if they were the 'best' **Blackhawk** written over the last fifty years and 'better' than the other **Blackhawk** fan fiction on the website...

"So what?" says Publishing. 'Nobody cares!'"

Writing is not a contest. The work must stand on its own. 'Good'? Think 'gridiron', not 'classroom'. A story is not unlike a field goal attempt. Chip shot or record-breaker, whatever the wind and weather or under a dome...the story goes through the uprights or it doesn't.

My **Blackhawk** was 'well-written', 'thoroughly researched' with 'excellent action'...WIDE RIGHT.

Unable to break through, I had the work taken down. I'm still working on it.

The Milky Way Man needed a line, an Orwellian credo that would uniquely define him. Not as a robot or a space alien, but as a *metaphor*.

'He who demands the future, commands the future!' says the Milky Way Man. Not just bigger and stronger and more intelligent, *better* than us.

Early in their marriage, Mom and Bernie were at a teachers conference.

"You ought to try the buttered peas," said Bernie on the buffet line.

Mom turned and glared at him. "Are you trying to run my life?"

I was *driving* her life to doctors' appointments almost every day.

"You mean you haven't shot her yet?" one of my dear siblings called up, a *Law & Order* devotee. "She's impossible. We'll all testify. 'Justifiable homicide'. You'll walk."

Since I'd moved in, I'd been giving Maz half my paycheck, then after I got fired, half my Unemployment Insurance which was quickly running out.

I needed a push, some literary company to join me in my quest. My life story was halfway written when I saw a notice for *The Stone Ridge Memoir Writing Club*. A loyal patron since childhood, I was immediately interested and sent in a writing sample *'There's Always the Aqueduct'* to the club's president.

And just like that, I became a member. We'd meet only once a month and members would read excerpts of their memoirs. Then we'd discuss...

It wasn't until the third month that I would read from my own work in progress...

"One, two. The sale is over and you missed it!"

That evening, the President of the club called me at home and because I was "Too advanced" kicked me out of the club. Just like that! And the Director of the Stone Ridge Library backed him up.

I lacked the courage to tell my mother.

Mom had a 'cover story' as to why I wasn't 'whir-king.'

"If anybody asks," she said. "I'll tell them you're an editor 'whir-king' at home from the computer."

Not a lie, but I was down to my last manuscript, a favor to a friend. I interviewed for a job at a hardware store and didn't get it. Good thing. More and more, Mom needed me home 24/7. I began trolling the net and came on a 'literary agency' that specialized in helping writers get published. The company was looking for help. I sent in my resume and got back customer samples to critique. *Voila*, my 'cover story' was suddenly true.

My services cost each aspiring writer \$40 for which I'd get \$15. Hardly big bucks, but it gave me an incredible opportunity. I imagined going back in time to talk to myself in the very first stages of *The Milky Way Man*. Would I have listened to me?

"Experience is a collection of learned-from mistakes," I'd tell my customers. "And I've made more mistakes and written more 'pre-publishable writing' that I pray you ever will. So instead of learning from your own mistakes, why not learn from mine?"

The rub was that to initially attract customers, the company would laud their writing, and with just a little Agency help, they'd be on their way.

Not so fast. People are as sensitive about their writing as they are about their 'sexual performance'. With the right technique to hit the right spots, all will be wonderful. The question never asked: Do you truly want to *touch* the other person in the relationship? It's not about 'good writing', but good *reading*.

'I've written, therefore I'm a writer," too many had been led to believe. If that third paragraph on page 43 could be reworked, they'd be published. They sought not help, but confirmation.

"You gotta love every one of them," said my boss. Because my job was a push to sign up writers for three hours of my 'professional instruction' at \$65 per of which I'd get \$25.

"Writing is easy," paraphrasing the deathbed epiphany. "Storytelling is hard."

Concept + Characters + CONFLICT = Story with a beginning, a middle, and an end; an oatmeal recipe which makes for lumpy results.

My oldest client was 85. His autobiography centered on his relationship with Jesus. We spent some of my 'three hours' on the phone.

"Sir," I said. "I want you to imagine that twenty years have passed and you've gone to a much better place than I, but your book remains. It's what you've left behind.

"Now imagine one of your children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren reading it. How do you want them to feel about it? Your autobiography is not a chronicle of places and dates, but who you are, your *spirit* reaching out to touch the reader."

"Oh," he said. "That changes everything."

God bless him. He went back to Word One. He'd tell my boss that I'd helped him 'immensely', but still have to pay to have his book published.

My youngest was a 16-year old African-American girl who'd written a 'urban chick-lit' novel full of violence and sex and brutality aimed at her female characters, none of them with the slightest of hopes.

The company wanted me to sell her three hours of attention for \$195. That's not what this young wannabe needed. I had her call me.

"We can do this 'salesman to customer'," I said. "Or 'writer to writer', straight up." The girl wanted it straight and got it.

"A writer who is not a reader will never be either," I said.

We've been going back and forth ever since. She's gone through some tough times, but she's still hanging in there, still reading, still questing. She'll be a writer yet.

Not where my clients were, but *when* - a year, five years or ten or twenty years behind me. I had been where they were. What I wanted most was a writer *ahead* of me and got one.

A young Indian man kept me reading a 600-page first person historical novel on the tortured birth of Pakistan. I gave him a new title and 'smoothing suggestions' and he was grateful, wishing he had met me sooner.

I pushed the novel at my boss, but it was never published. The writer is currently working on a sequel.

For every customer who thanked me, many more were insulted, outraged that I could possibly find fault with their work. But I couldn't fake it, this was about the 'written word.'

"Half the customers love you," said my boss. "The other half hate you."

My boss counseled me about my honesty, but in the end, my 'expert services' were no longer good for business.

"I want you to concentrate on your own novel," he said. "Let's publish it."

For the very last time, I went back to Word One. I'd rewritten the first page more than 250 times. Finally...

Man has to be unique in the universe. Not because we began as single-celled life whose ever-changing offspring crawled out of the sea and then came down from the trees to dominate the earth. Not because we've survived wars and catastrophes or that we create art and tools or because we love and hope and pray.

What makes us human burns within us: an immortal spirit bestowed by the creator of the universe.

Or so we believe, some of us more than others.

"Mom's got better coverage than Dick Cheney," said brother Mike.

"Exactly what's wrong with the health care system," said one of my sisters. "We're spending more on people over eighty than children under eight."

Week after week, month after month seeing doctors and specialists, taking med after med after med.

"Whir-king fulltime to stay alive is not living," said Mom.

It's rarely good news when your estranged wife's lawyer calls, but Maz had met another man, and they wanted to get married. She'd get the house; I'd get the car and the credit card debt.

Just like that, my divorce was final. I was back at the beginning, me and The Milky Way Man. When the novel sold millions and the franchise rights cleared ten million, would the lawyer call back?

Or maybe Maz would write a book: **The Milky Way Wife** - *'20+ Years with a Failed Writer.'*

Thankfully, she's got much better things to do.

The 'galleys' of my novel appeared on my screen just like for a 'real' writer. I missed working over a paper manuscript, studded with cut-and paste 'scabs'. The transfer made things a bit jumbled, making me read it even more carefully. No typos or grammar gaffes in *my* novel!

I dedicated the book to Mom, who unfortunately, would never be able to read it.

Rather than a dated science fiction cover, I brought my Milky Way model to a local graphics shop. The two ladies, try after try, completed the exact jacket I wanted, an *inversion* of a 'Brave New America!'

I believe in the human spirit. That it's the most powerful force in the universe. A pure American versus the invincible, invulnerable Milky Way Man, what chance does humanity have?

Less than a week after I approved the final manuscript, the prototype book arrived. After being 'pregnant' for 32 years, I embraced my paperback child. I bought twenty-five copies and sent them out to the big boys - the *NY Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, sci-fi websites and of course, Mom's favorite, the *New Yorker*

At the School of Visual Arts, I was told that every individual artform is in some way, a self-portrait of the artist. The older we get, the more we remember being young. The son of war hero, I had been sent to occupy the homeland of a beaten foe. For the West End Bluehawks and the Jackson Heights Jocks, I was The Man. For nearly a year I had explored and discovered America on my own. In Costa Rica and Brazil, I was a stranger from an advanced technological civilization. Life *imagines* art; in a milky way, my first book was as autobiographic as my second.

A hundred years from now, when the history of the 21st century is presented in thousands of GCI montages, none running longer than fifteen minutes, 9/11 and the

economic upheaval, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and other unfortunates will be mere blips in the Century Picture.

The globalization of the new technology will dominate the show. Irrepressible, mobile, ubiquitous, and getting smaller and cheaper all the time.

The Milky Way Man is already here.

When the news broke, and the media clamored to meet me, on my very first TV talk show, I'd stand up tall, throw my fists in air and proclaim to all the world, "A wannabe no more, I am the Milky Way Writer!"

On March 19th, 2009, **The MILKY WAY MAN - A Novel by Kevin Ahearn** was published.

It sold 20 copies.

'Write that....and die!'

2009-Now





Dear Erica,

Thank you.

And I apologize.

I don't know your full name, where you live or what you're doing. Yet if I never see you again, you will always be magical to me.

The Sunday New York Times had long been a family tradition. The High Falls coffee shop was the closest, and lately there'd been quite a turnover. The week before a stunning blond was behind the counter. Her country smile and voluptuous body were still dancing in my mind seven days later as I drove in for this Sunday's edition.

The blond was gone and there you were, tall and slim with long brown hair. Pretty, but in a mannequin sort of way, as if life as I like to think I know it, was somehow missing.

"I'm having the Rondout time of my life and I'm sure you are too," I said when you asked and almost got a smile. As I walked to my car, I found myself trying to re-picture last week's waitress.

That didn't happen. On the short drive home, I got something else. Was it your long hair and lithe frame or the seeming lifelessness in your eyes that projected a completely unexpected image...from a 50-year old comic book!

BLACKHAWK, Issue #120 from January, 1958. I had the book in my collection. In the cover story, 'The Perils of Ulysses', my hero and his valiant team faced Homer's alluring sirens. But in this spin of the classic tale, they weren't real women in G-rated bathing suits, but androids.

A sci-fi siren? Whoa! What's going on here?

Work came first. My first novel was going to be published. Line by line I hit the galleys, after so long, this would be my 'coming out' as a science fiction writer.

Soon it was Sunday again and I couldn't help seeing your comic book image as I drove into town.

After I paid for my Times, I had to ask, "Where do you want to go from here?"

I've asked that question often--bank tellers, retail clerks, folks at the library, guys doing community service at the landfill. Too often, people didn't know where they wanted to go or had already gotten there, their lives at an end where they were.

"I'm going to be a Mental Health professional," you said and in an instant the android became a person, a woman on a quest with a fire in her eyes!

The energy you projected--I got this visual rush! Fresh from my art school days, the paint still wet, Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Though the artist's mythical ideal had a more Victorian shape, it was her flowing hair and the spirit in her eyes that blew me away.

From comic book siren to Renaissance goddess! Who is she?

A "mental health professional"—maybe I needed one myself.

I'd been alone since my marriage ended two years before. Lonely and horny...or was there something else happening? One image had led to another. "It is what it is," was not 'writer thinking'. Where is this going?

Home for a couple of minutes, I drove back to your store.

"Uh-oh," you said when you saw me again.

*"As a future mental health professional, you might find these interesting," I said, showing you back issues of **Inner Circular**. "It's about how clients feel."*

Your name was Erica and you had a degree in psychology. Looking back, If you had been 'Nancy with a business major', none of this would have happened.

On my computer, my novel was in its final draft. Once I awoke at four in the morning, and couldn't wait to get to work.

The next Sunday, I went for the Times with a plan.

*You had read the magazine and remarked "a lot of angry people." Your minor had been English Lit and you'd tried **Twilight** and were 'not impressed'.*

To paraphrase a Star Trek episode, 'Behold, a goddess who reads!'

"I'm a writer and full of BS," I said, and how true was that. "My first novel's about to be published, would you like to read it?"

"Okay," you said and I ran out to my car and gave you a hard copy.

Back to work. The cover and 'blurb' were done and I was closing in on the final corrections. With every finished page, I was getting closer and closer to the beginning of a new life.

I'd go to the library every day, bringing home books for Mom who was having trouble reading the way she used to. On the way, I'd stop in at the local drug store and pick up a few things.

I was waiting on line and suddenly, in front of the holiday decorations, in a full winter coat and a long scarf, there you were

"I started your novel and I'm hooked," you said.

I was stunned. Maybe it was the time of day. To limit the morning glare, the front windows were covered with wax paper. Could I believe my own eyes? An aura shimmered around you!

A new image flashed, that of a fashion model in a glossy New Yorker spread. Mom had been reading that magazine every week for more than half a century. Have I been imagining you all my life?

You were 'hooked' by my novel!

Halfway home my raging id jumped to the fore.

"God, I wanna fuck her!" I cried out.

*'To Die in Erica's Arms' - What a letdown heaven's gonna be!
Or if Hell, not nearly as hot.*

Then I caught myself. Was I going out of my mind?

Psychological studies have been done on the 'vulnerability of women' following ugly divorces or bad relationships, the effects of sudden low self-esteem. Throw in some booze or dope and the result is unpredictable, often hazardous behavior.

But 'real men'? Mom had decided she couldn't take winter at home and moved to a senior residence until spring. That left me alone with myself. Then I got the call. My son Tom had become addicted to heroin. He and his girlfriend were shooting up. She ODeD and died in his arms. He was 'under observation' at the local psych ward. I had been dreading something like this for quite a while. Full of parental guilt, I went to see him.

Had I been a better father, Tom wouldn't be on a 'suicide watch'. Reality was driving me crazy--my only child's crisis as an excuse for my own selfish fantasy? Sunday came again and I couldn't wait to see you, but you hadn't read much more.

"Don't rush me," you said.

Things went downhill from there.

"It's science fiction," you said.

What could I say?

We were outside on the shop porch. A chill was in the air. Couldn't you understand what my novel was about?

"Life is a quest," I said emphatically. "You are not an object or a trophy, but an individual unique in the universe!"

Whatta line! You must have thought I had completely lost it, and maybe I had.

My novel bored you. 'The Milky Way Writer' had been rejected yet again. The next Sunday you left my manuscript at work. I picked it up. The drive home was longer than I thought.

The last time I saw you was for Tuesday morning coffee. Right off, I knew something was amiss. You retreated to the rear of the shop and projected yet another image: that of a bird on an airport tarmac, anxious and frustrated, but unable to take flight. Pretty plumage, but in full flight, I bet you'd be breathtaking.

Your shop closed for the winter and opened in the spring under new management, but I couldn't stop thinking about you. Not as a woman or a person, but as a story.

'The End of an Erica' was the worst and most important short story I ever wrote. Worst because it was all about Me, Me, Me, 'The Milky Way Wannabe' who sees a coffee waitress as his unobtainable dreamgirl and realizes he's experienced 'coming of old age'.

Depressing as hell. That's me? That's whom I've become? I thought it was the greatest story, went back to your coffee shop, and asked your former boss to mail it to you.

As ill-conceived and poorly executed as it was, the story was my first attempt to break away from science fiction and fantasy.

That could have ended everything. With one phone call: "Tell your dirty old friend he's a loser who can't write!"

And you'd have been right. Thank you for not doing that.

Had I come to this - Dirty old Don Juan stalks coffee waitress in her twenties? Not about you, personally. I knew nothing about you and never asked. It was your affect: What the sight of you generated within me.

A "Sherlockian" mystery for a psychology grad or a mental health professional?

*Observation + Deductive reasoning...TOP SECRET Dinar! "This looks like a job for **Super Analyst!**"*

Did I still have my USAF Security Service 'cypher brains'?

I took a long, hard look back at my life, searching for 'Erica' moments. Teaching special education in Brazil...

'Two-Oh-Two-ing the situation' led to...

'The Erica Equation'

Indelibility becomes Metaphor = TRUTH
(What storytelling is about!)

"Define 'Indelibility,'" a fellow wannabe asked me.

"Erica," I said.

'Ainda!' said the story.

For me it was a breakthrough. Proudly I took it to your former boss and he mailed it. You did not reply.

Not that I blamed you. I rewrote the story about you as 'The Power of Erica'. But I was still unable to break free of 'The Milky Way Wannabe,' injecting sci-fi scenarios throughout. And at the end...Sleeping with you had to be anti-climactic. I'd open my eyes, and lying next to me is the most beautiful woman in the world wearing only a sweet smile, still fresh from the middle of the night

And when you awoke, I would feel love, glorious, blissful love. Or at least, lucky, right?

I felt neither. Instead the strongest emotion of all: fear.

I was afraid that you'd open your eyes and see...me! This pompous, pretentious jerk I had become and the frightened little boy I had been all my life.

You had become 'Every Woman' who's most telling power is to make a man examine himself.

I took it to you former boss. You did not reply.

My VISTA experience came with an 'Erica moment' and I opened with it. Not about me or the Civil Rights Movement or baseball, but a 'rite of passage' following the 'Greatest Generation'.

But...

"And if I haven't any talent for writing books or newspaper articles," wrote my Ideal Writer. "Well, then I can always write for myself."

She was writing for Anne Frank. Me, for a born-in-the-blood fanboy! How was that working out?

"God, I want her to read me!" raged The American Writer I was determined to be.

With each story, I started with a fresh 'indelibility'.

The RED GLOW was a burning childhood memory, and became a metaphor for too much of my life. Easy compared to the next story.

"The D in Dorothy stands for 'determination'," said Mom as she fought cancer. "I am determined!"

Another 'motherism': "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Mom died peacefully at home. Her firstborn was with her to the last. A poor husband, worse father and failed writer, it was the least I could do.

She left her five children equal shares of more than \$600,000 plus her house. Wow! Plus Social Security, enough to keep me storytelling for the rest of my life.

Cancer would have other plans. Twice.

High Falls had to be a story. Its 'indelibility' was The Aqueduct as seen by a nine-year old. I couldn't have written it while Mom was alive, but I think she would have liked it. Many of the locals did, but you, Dear Muse, had no reaction.

Local history intrigued me, but standard anecdotal texts were without 'transcendent indelibility.' I pushed the envelope and wrote stories about Stone Ridge, Rosendale and Kingston.

With every completed story, I'd put a hard copy in a stamped envelope and take it to your former boss's office.

"You ever get any feedback?" the secretary asked me.

"Are you kidding?" I said.

The secretary wrote your name and address on the envelope and pushed it at me.

"No," I said, turning it over. "That's not what this is about."

With a degree in Psychology (Hope you've gotten your Masters!), you probably believe I'm certifiably nuts. Always have been! If not for the insanity in my life, what would I have to write about?

My Air Force experience was a story I had to tell, but I couldn't find the definitive 'indelibility'. Again and again I'd go back to Word One. Finally I understood that there were multiple 'indelibilities' and it became a three-chapter story.

*Written in my 'high school voice', CATCH-202 would take a couple of months. I'd been mailing you a story every two or three weeks. Couldn't have you believing that I'd quit, so I put some of my old short stories through 'The Erica Equation' and mailed them one by one. I just might have an anthology: **'Stories for a Coffee Waitress'**.*

Back to my life: that 'tribe' of boys in Jackson Heights, then exploring America on a bike 'My Home, Sweet Home.'".

*Finally, my 'Baby Boomer memoir' was done - **'I was a TOP SECRET Superhero!'** and I had your former boss send it to you.*

But by that time, our connection had been permanently severed. And no literary agent or publisher wanted anything to do with it.

I kept going. And going back, revising constantly and feeling like Penelope, unraveling and then reweaving her tapestry. When's Odysseus finally coming home?

My four local stories needed a push from my fingertips. I'd started with computers in 1964, and still there was so many capabilities unexplored. I began injecting photos via cut-and-paste giving the work a 'scrapbook' flavor.

A year went by.

*I encountered an "Indelibility" in nearby Kerhonkson and created a 'scrapbook' novel which took a mythical point of view at state history: **The New York Gnome**.*

Another year passed.

I stuck to local history, finding a cute 'dog story' in nearby Napanoch. But Ellenville had been stumping me for years. I had to tell a tale that could take place only in Ellenville yet be a metaphor for the rest of the country.

*My **RONDOUT READER** was finally done and I really liked it because it gave the area what it needed most: heroes in exciting and enlightening stories rippling with history, magic and my twisted sense of humor.*

The local Cultural Powers blew me off. Every library, civic association, historical society and museum either ignored or rejected my RONDOUT 'scrapbook'. Not that I was trying to sell them anything; I just wanted to be read.

What was left? I'd gone from sci-fi to autobio and then came home to tell fanciful local stories only to fail again and again.

Not for a moment did I consider just quitting. The 'Official Quarterback' of the Jackson Height JOCKS, the coach of the Champion West End Bluehawks giving up?

'Ainda!'

Yet another year went by.

Maybe I should be relieved that you won't be getting any more of my stories. I never found out if you had read any of them or not. But that's the way it should be, really. Because I'm not THERE yet.

Worse that being rejected or ignored is being between stories, searching for the 'Erica moment' that scene or quote that lifted the story off the runway?

I'd look everywhere, and sometimes stumbled upon undiscovered treasures, but it's the stuff that has stayed with my most of my life...from 'King Kong' to Roswell to the

'Red Baron', from 'The Father of the Air Force' to 'Columbus of the Cosmos' that I wanted to give a fresh perspective.

Not as straight history, but telling their stories in first person in 'scrapbook' format. The process was wondrous, putting the reader THERE, in the heroes' hearts as their stories unfolded, pushing their impact into the 21st Century.

'The MACHO of HISTORY' ran 475 pages. Not a 'real' book, but the longest computer file I had ever compiled. Of course, no agent or publisher wanted to read it.

My son kicked heroin, met a new girl. Now she's pregnant. By October I'm going to be a grandfather!

I've come full circle. From my first 'Erica' story more than four years ago, to these very words.

*Once again I sent out queries to literary agents and publishers. This time had to be the charm. Could it be America is finally ready to believe in a **TOP SECRET Superhero?***

Every year, superheroes gross more than \$10 billion. Surely my true life experience had to be marketable.

Not so, of course.

'Rewriting always begins at Word One'. I've given this 'Baby Boomer memoir' a new title and tightened up the prose a bit.

Yet another round of queries to agents. No one interested.

*It's going on five years. My publisher E-mailed to cancel my contract. **The Milky Way Man**, the sole creation of half my life, will be forever unread.*

I'm off to challenge yet another 'windmill' - the vindication of my boyhood comic book hero!

*Six months and countless revisions later, my quest was complete. I was overjoyed. I sent **BLACKHAWK** to an agent and a publisher I had known for years. Not that they both rejected me; neither bothered to open the file.*

"Curiosity won't kill you," penned the poet Blake. "But lack of it will."

My sister has worked for years for the largest publisher in the country. Again and again I begged her to give someone, anyone in the company, her older brother's memoir.

"No," she said every time. "I don't like the writing."

That English as a Second Language school and the Mental Health facility that fired me both closed down and left town, the failing capital of the county.

'It is not about the AGONY of the quest.'

In 2022, New York State Department of Corrections finally made a "correction" - that "supermax" prison that had fired me was suddenly closed. "Soft-on-crime" politics, blared the media. No one even hinted that this "step above maximum security" facility had been poorly designed and incompetently staffed thirty years before.

After an initial failure, I rediscovered WordPress and posted four files:

- 1. RONDOUT READER**
- 2. MACHO OF HISTORY**
- 3. The Milky Way Man (A!. AMERICA)**
- 4. I was a TOP SECRET Superhero!**

*And I got read! Especially the **Reader**. I made it a monthly magazine and after fourteen issues more than 10,000 downloads. But my memoir continues to be a personal disappointment.*

Roger Wilco, I had been a "Superhero" for about 20+ pages. As for the rest of my life, an idealistic adventure for what? Sixty years of storytelling and never made a dime. I just might be the most rejected writer in all of literature!

As for the publisher who had fired me for refusing to follow his illegals orders: he was indicted in federal court for "willfully failing to turn over payroll taxes and corruptly endeavoring to obstruct and impede the Internal Revenue Service."

My quest goes on! From Word One, I've redone my soon-to-be "world famous" memoir. This has got to my time!

My 'Impossible dream': You and I, Erica, alone together...on the page. Before your eyes, my words take flight and you can hear my voice. I'm touching you as indelibly as you touched me.

Oh, 'the rapture of the revelation!'

Life is a quest, Dear Muse, for humanity, beginning with our own. You helped me find mine and I will not consider myself a Rondout writer until I hear the sound of your voice.

I want you to tell me that I made you imagine.

And if not, well, 'There's always the Aqueduct!'

Besides, it's not that I'll never see you again; I always will. In a full winter coat and a long scarf, by the holiday decorations....magical!

Maybe that's the best ending of all.

"Go on again with fresh courage,"
Kevin