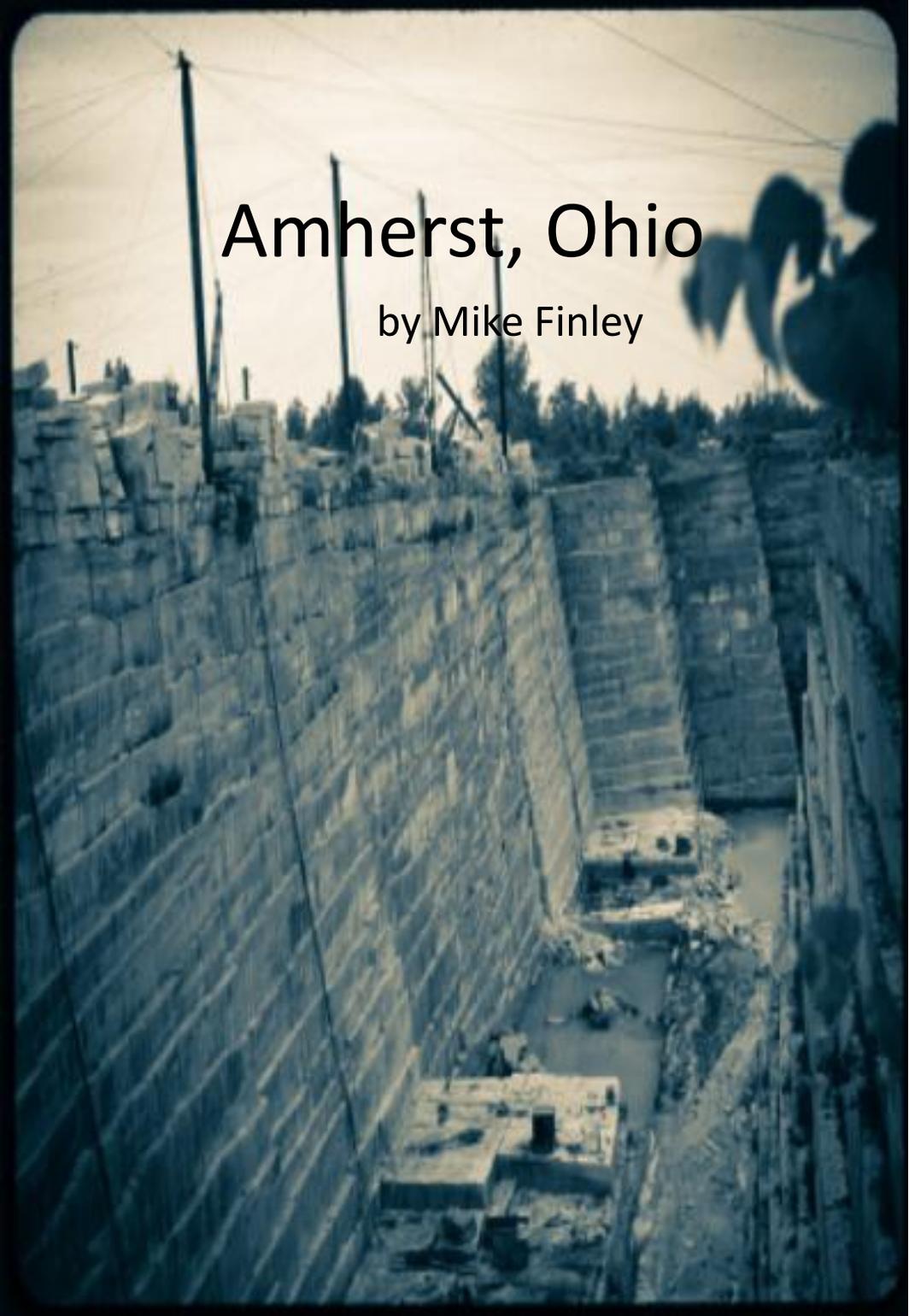


Amherst, Ohio

by Mike Finley



This book is a free gift for my friends who live in Amherst, or once lived in Amherst, and are a little in love with Amherst, as I am.

You can download it [here](#). Print it out. Or read it online.

Or you can order it bound from <http://peecho.com/> -- It'll cost \$20. I don't get a penny from this.

But you can read it right now for nothing. Download it or watch it "full frame," so you can read it!

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Hello

I wonder if more than a couple dozen people in Amherst, Ohio, remember me. Certainly Gerri Rice, and the friends she has introduced me to. And Liz Sniezek, Julie Miller's sister. And her mom Mary.

But here I am, writing a book just for the town I grew up in.

If you look in Wikipedia for "Amherst, Ohio," and you scroll down to the bottom of the entry, there I am among the town's notable people, as famous author.

This is probably because I put it there. I don't remember doing that but I probably did. That's how Wikipedia works.

The truth is, I am not a famous author. I did write one hit book in the 90s when I was a business writer. None of my other nonfiction books made much headway with the reading public.

But then, late in my career, I started self-publishing, partly out of spite, partly for the

fun of it. Little books, mostly digital, with funny or alarming stories inside.

Anyway, I am older now, and trying to live as long as I can despite metastatic cancer. A negative diagnosis makes you wonder what matters most in life. Family certainly. Friends, yes! But also the past generally, where you came from, what it all meant to you.

This is my book about that. I grew up in Amherst, and finished high school there, and then took off. Some of my time there was very hard. People died. Loved ones left. I was arrested, I attempted comical suicide, and toward the end I accumulated endless detentions, which I never had to serve. Cuz I was gone.

But enough people in town noticed me, and got who this goofy guy was, deep down. They saw something in me, and here I am today, a notable person and not a bum. Kidding -- I pretty much am a bum.

This book is my thank-you to those who cared about me. Many of them are no more. All of it happened in a place I still love -- Amherst, Ohio.



First, A Year Away from Town

My freshman year of high school wasn't even in Amherst. It was at a minor Catholic seminary in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The main music I heard there was plainsong. Us boys had to learn the medieval notation -- *punctum, clivis, climacus, punctum*.

It was a very earnest place, not hip like Amherst.

Here is how every day began, at 5:30 a.m.

The boys slide from their third-floor bunks and tiptoe to the porcelain trough to brush with Crest and spit.

Now dressed, we pound down two tall flights of stairs and exit into the still-dark morning.

Down at the pond the ducks are quacking, maybe because of the noise we were making. The footfalls of all us boys -- 71 enrolled in all, a record haul -- pound on the planks to the priests' residence.

We enter the rectory and pass through an underground corridor to climb three final steps to the chapel entrance.

From the darkness of the tunnel, everything is suddenly bright. A dozen tall, lit candles. The censer, swinging. Fragrant smoke rising to the ceiling. We are no longer in Pennsylvania time. We are long ago. Roman Catholic time.

We kneel on the hard bare boards. Our callused knees have gotten used to it.

Before us the crucified Christ is suspended, and below Him, in a mosaic plastered to the altar, the breast of the mother pelican, jetting blood to feed her babies.

We all believe that while we slept through the night, some of us jerking off in our bunks, Jesus was up on that cross, stiff as a bone, suffering nonstop for us.

We were there to learn how to join him up there.

I heard a very interesting song on our homemade radio in the basement, where we boys played

shuffleboard and ping-pong. It was November 1963. The song was "Please Please Me."

This happened within a few weeks of the Kennedy assassination.

I was playing table tennis with Bill Grooms, also from Amherst. Bill later went on to become a football coach, in Grafton or somewhere. In that moment I heard the sound of crazy harmonica and my head jerked away. Grooms scored point one because I wasn't looking.

I liked records, and my family had a stack of 45s back home in Ohio. Ray Charles' "I Can't Stop Loving You." Peggy Lee's "Fever." We also had Broadway musical LPs -- *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*.

My teenage sister Kathy had had a bunch of Elvis Presley records. She adored Elvis. She saw in him all kinds of good qualities that I couldn't entirely make out, being a boy. This is one Elvis bit that jumps to my mind:

*I don't want to be your tiger
Cause tigers play too rough
I don't want to be your lion
Cause lions ain't the kind you love enough*

Eh, Elvis.

But the song I was hearing on the old radio was different. It was really fast, faster and more excited than most Elvis song after his first record. Who played harmonica on a record, I asked no one, besides Johnny Puleo on Ed Sullivan? And then the guys sang, and you could tell it was an early take, not the 37th. The voices were reedy, reckless, happy. They were selling something, and it was priced to move. "Listen to this. What do you think?"

A few days later I caught another song by these people, "Love Me, Do." And the deejay, who was very excited, gave their name: Beatles. Joe Greble, who had some kind of intestinal problem, and enjoyed it, told me they were English. Pop stars from England? Why didn't they sound like Terry Thomas in the movies? Pip, pip, cheerio.

Where "Please Please Me" was fast, like they were driving a car into a bridge, "Love Me Too" had a sluggish, almost funereal rhythm. The sound was nothing like the polished pop records you heard in the jukebox. It was messy. It lacked slickness. Could they be playing their own instruments? That

was unusual, almost amateurish, not slick at all. And they had the same personality from song to song. They sang “I” even though they were a “we.” A single personality, one that was exploding with excitement.

Because I was at a seminary, I was not equipped to follow up much on this musical discovery. We only got to listen to the radio between 6 and 7 pm weeknights. On Saturdays we walked to an ice cream parlor near the highway, where we all wolfed down sundaes. The jukebox there featured surf records, which were cool. There was “In the Warm California Sun.” The Rooftop Singers sang “Walk Right In.” Everyone liked “Sugar Shack.” But there were no Beatles on the local machine.

Then I got a single-page letter from my brother Pat, whom I will tell you about later. He had written me maybe five letters in my entire life. The front page gave some news about what was happening in the family back in Amherst. The back page, however, had a pencil drawing of some kind of circular insect, plus the phrase “Ringo Starr.” I did not know what that meant.

Maybe I would learn more at Christmas back in Amherst.

I had one decent friend at the seminary -- one person that I felt knew who I was, and appreciated me. I should tell you that the rap on me from the 4th grade on -- that was when I skipped a grade and wound up with a bunch of older, more judgmental kids -- was that I was "immature." Even then I thought that was a dumb thing for 14-year-olds to call a 13-year-old. Like they were learned adults.

The friend's name was Bob, and he made no such judgment. Bob was an extremely skinny person, even for a 14-year-old. No shoulders whatsoever. No chin to speak of. He seemed held together by copious amounts of dandruff and a black clip-on tie. He was not Mickey Mantle. He spoke in an adenoidal voice. He was always pushing his glasses up. They always seemed to be greasy.

But Bob was big city -- Oak Park, Illinois -- and he was very intelligent, in a way I had never known. He knew grown-up things, like what the words

liberal and *conservative* meant. He had opinions about things. And he talked to me as if I also had thoughts and opinions, or could be taught how to have them.

He was kind. And he was the first friend in my life who saw something in me.

I'll tell you right now that that is the theme of this book -- people seeing I had pluses that outweighed my minuses, and then loving me.

My favorite memory was that Bob and I passed a notebook back and forth in study hall, taking turns writing scenes in a nasty little play satirizing the full-of-themselves priests and the gung-ho seniors. Our play was written in the backdrop of Rome at the time of the clampdown on Christians. Bob's writing was deeper than mine, but I thought my gags were better. Our play-in-a-spiral-notebook had a title: "Praxis For Prefect."

We kept the notebook secret, in Bob's locked desk drawer.

The seminary was a very routine place, every hour of the day mapped out for study, reflection, meals

and athletics. There were surprisingly few moments where you could just be friendly with a friend. But Bob and I found a way. There was a duck pond at the base of the seminary hill, perhaps 300 yards around. Its intended purpose was reflection. But we used it to blab. Priests circled the duck pond whispering from their breviaries, and pointing things out to the air. The ultra-pious kids did likewise, peeling off decade after decade on their rosaries. I never got that.

But Bob and I just gossiped and made jokes at other people's expense. That's when we plotted our play. And on Saturdays we climbed up the seminary farm hayloft ladder, swung the bale door open, and dangled our legs in the sun and exchanged play ideas and talked about our families. His family sounded super-smart but neurotic. My family was just a mess.

I once had the feeling, talking like this by ourselves, that it was somewhat intimate, like when boys kiss girls. But that was ridiculous, right?

Another time, we sat beside one another on an old couch in the record room, in a catacombs-like tunnel under the mansion where the priests lived.

Lesley Gore was on the turntable, singing “All Alone Am I.” Suddenly Bob stood on the sofa, threw on a kind of scarf or boa, and began dancing from one item of furniture item to another, like a fairy from a fairy tale. He was so skinny, he seemed oblivious to gravity.

I thought that was strange. But, he was my friend.

Late in the school year I was called up to the rector’s office. The rector was like the CEO of the seminary. He raised the bucks and laid down the law. He thought he was very urbane and smart, but he was really just cruel.

“I see you’re friends with Mr. Dubiel,” he said.

“Yes, good friends,” I responded.

He drilled deeper. “You know, it is important, especially at your age, to be wary of sins of the flesh.”

“What?” I was trying to picture flesh sinning. The only flesh I had experience with was the Crayola crayon.

“Aquinas called it concupiscence, and it applies to all temptations of lust.”

I knew what lust was -- raping and tongue-kissing and like that.

“What do you mean?” I asked, genuinely perplexed.

“I think it would be best if you and Mr. Dubiel didn’t see so much of one another. There should always be a third person,” he said.

“Why? What’s the problem?” I asked.

“I’m saying cool it with Mr. Dubiel. We know what you’re up to.” And he flung the play notebook through the air, and it skidded to my feet. They had unlocked Bob’s drawer!

“Yes,” he said. “We know all about your improprieties.”

Friends -- I eventually figured out what the rector was saying, and I felt a wave of deep shame come over me. For the remaining two months of the school year, I could not bring myself to look Bob in the eyes, or speak to him, much less write plays or walk around the pond.

I must tell you that we never did anything the least romantic. We were just friends.

They rector gave Bob the same talk. When we saw each other we looked away. We were in disgrace, and we both bought into it. I felt bad later that I did nothing to stand up to this railroading that I barely understood. I betrayed the friendship.

When I left the seminary, being 14 now, I was starting to get interested in fleshy things. Not with boys but with girls. I never went back to the seminary or, for that matter, to the church.

The incident haunted me. In my thirties, I thought I could piece together my seminary memories into a novel. The book I wrote contained what I could remember of our notebook play. I made fun of the same priests and the prudes and hypocrites.

But when I got to the story of Bob and me, the tone changed. It became a kind of shy, doomed love story. I knew by then what the rector had done was fucked up. I wrote the book to set matters straight. It was called *The Usable Book*, after our chapel hymnal/prayerbook, Liber Usualis.

I even had Alex Hailey's agent peddling the book for me. So I had hopes of it being the next *Confederacy of Dunces* or something. But literary fashion had moved past cute Roman Catholic memoirs like *Do Brown Shoes Reflect Up?* -- so I was screwed.

Book probably wasn't that great, anyway. I don't know, I can't read my own stuff.

Later I found a way -- something called the Internet -- to call Bob Dubiel. I was very nervous, but excited to talk to him again.

"Hello?"

"Robert, it's your old friend from the seminary -- Mike Finley."

Silence.

Then, we began catching up. Bob surprised me with his new calling, as a kind of faith healer using shamanic shiatsu processes to work through deep traumas, to heal people invoking the Holy Spirit. Still Catholic, but crazy Catholic. He went to Russia a lot and was a big deal there.

I thought about what he was doing. He was healing people magically. He was closer to Jesus than anything we were taught at the seminary.

“Bob,” I said, “I need to ask you a question. I was accused of being sexual with you. Is that what happened to you, too?”

“Yes. That was bullshit.”

“Then, I need to ask, Were you gay? Cuz I didn’t know what that even was at the time.”

Bob laughed. “Oh, heavens yes!”

He told me that half the school was blowing the other half, in the showers, in the dorms, in the priests’ residences. In the rector’s quarters. And the gayer you were, the farther you went in the Marist system. Bob made it all the way through Novitiate, but stopping just before Holy Orders.

I knew nothing of all this. I felt great relief hearing it now, but I had another matter to discuss. I told him about the book I had written, largely about us and our friendship.

“I was hoping I could send you a photocopy of the book, so you know how I interpreted those days.”

He agreed to read it and I mailed it off to him. But I never heard from Bob again, and it's been like 25 years.

I thought for a long time I had offended him, or he did not like my characterization of him. Over time, however, I have concluded that Robert did love me, just like the rector said. But he was tender and respectful with me. He did not want to cause me any harm. Besides, it was all new to him, too. He was just a fourteen-year-old boy, not some ordained predator.

Meantime, it was back to Amherst for me.

Pictured: My mom and brother Brian in Scotland



Home

I am going to describe one of the most awful moments of my life.

It is September, 1963, and I wake up in my Ohio home around 4 am to ride with the Groomes family to the seminary in Bucks County. I wait with my mother, in her housecoat, who fixes me scrambled eggs for the journey. She is knotting her hands in anxiety. We are silent.

The Groomes car pulls into the drive. I lug out my small trunk, whose ingredients -- sweaters, shoes, underpants, everything labeled -- have to last me till June.

I want desperately for the car to get into gear and start pulling away. I knew I was doing a sneaky, skunky thing, leaving my mom, who has already lost two family members -- a daughter to a tooth-pulling that went bad, and a husband, who scooted off to California, where he was not blacklisted. He had misappropriated some party funds, and GM put out the word on him.

The car began to roll forward, but then there is my mom, standing my the window. Her face is a torrent of tears. She is knocking on the glass, desperate to stop what is happening. Because I was her favorite after Kathy, and I was going away.

I wave gently with my fingers, and then turn my face toward the road. And finally we are gone.

I have not gone a week in my life since then that I have not thought of that boiling, awful moment. My mother, in an agony of pain. She was a strong person with a terrible weakness. She had no defense against her own feelings.

Looking at her anguish from the back window of that car, I am exiting her body once again.

I returned home to Amherst for holiday break, expecting my mom to still be wounded by my leaving, and the house to be clouded in sadness.

Instead, people seemed to have figured out how to live. Pat and Brian were busy with school, and my mom, I think, found that there was some status in our largely Catholic town to having a son in the seminary.

“And how is that son of yours doing?” the ladies would ask at the IGA.

“How I wish my two sons had done that!”

Not that my mom sought status, but that it brought some healing to the trauma of splitting. Likewise, my experience being away elevated me in my brothers’ eyes. I knew more about the world than them. I knew what it was like to live somewhere else.

In turn, I was impressed by what my younger brother was up to. I tried to be a good big brother to Brian over the years, but I was sometimes mean or dismissive with him. I rolled my eyes at whatever he thought was important or cool. “Oh, Brian, the things you don’t know could fill a book.”

But unbeknownst to me, Brian had been doing something monumental. Only 7 years old, he somehow found the money and the mobility to go to a record store and buy several records by the Beatles, the band I heard on the seminary radio.

He had two Beatles LPS (*Introducing* and *Second Album*), a Beatles comic book explaining their Liverpool origins, a deck of Beatles bubblegum

cards, and a b/w photo of the Beatles. You know the photo I mean of them in their collarless coats, clustered around Ringo on a chair, with McCartney holding a lit cigarette. All of them looking a little -- crazy. They looked like they belonged to themselves, not to a record company.

It's not an especially attractive picture. The weird haircuts. Collarless jackets. Forced publicity grins. The cigarette. And Ringo. Thanks to Brian I now knew who Ringo Starr was and what the riddle of my other brother Pat's letter in November meant.

The picture was included in a record album that Brian told me was not even available in the U.S., and yet he had one. Seven years old! The songs included "Love Me Do," that song I heard in the ping pong room, and which was still sloshing around in my head.

Brian put the record on the record player, on which we had placed a nickel over the cartridge, to keep the needle from skipping.

Something wild rose up in me. The songs were not all killers, but on balance the record was wonderful -- emotional, rocking, very, very fun.

When their voices harmonized, there was no sound anywhere like them. They were joyful, hungry, unapologetic, unphony, like they were springing off the vinyl and taking their fleshy place in the world. And laughing at the foolishness of it all.

I could distinguish individual voices. John really knew how to put a song across. He sang with greedy passion, like he was on the brink, like there was something seriously wrong with him. On "Twist and Shout" he sounded like he was going to divide in two and hop around on two separate legs. He was looking to shake the whole world up.

Paul tended to sound pretty and sincere, But "I Saw Her Standing There" was so great, so loud and leering ("She was just seventeen -- you know what I mean.") Of course, I was only 13, but I still got it.

George was interesting looking, but he could not sing too well. On "Do You Want to Know a Secret," he sounded like he was tied to a chair. I still liked it. And Ringo just had one song, "Boys," in which the un-starlike qualities of his voice -- like his face -- only contributed to the frothing character of the song. (Why was a man singing about boys?)

Because it was a girl-group song -- the Shirelles -- and he sang their version of it.)

I listened to these records over and over. I read the comic book, chronicling their rise from Liverpool to greatness, with interest. Ringo had half of his small intestine removed as a boy -- it's why he was so small. I hated the bubblegum card trivia, but I devoured them anyway.

Mostly the songs were about love and dancing. One song stuck out as different -- "There's A Place." Didn't have a girl in it. It was about the need to have shelter for themselves. There was something very interesting there, some keening search for truth.

It was all adorable.

I never had a conversion experience with my Catholic faith, like I was supposed to have at First Communion and Confirmation. But I felt like I was having a conversion experience now. With this music.

Mid-1964, I started to have a Beatles dream. Someone stood under my window and threw

candy at the pane. I dropped down into the barberry bushes and we climbed into the limo. I sat in the back, on the hump between George and Ringo. I saw in the rearview that I had the bushy haircut, too. I was one of them.

We drove to Cleveland, making jokes at one another's expenses. I liked that they pretended to have American accents, for my benefit. I sat mostly quietly, grateful just to be with them.

They clearly cared about me and called me mate. I didn't stop to analyze why. In a strange way, it made perfect sense that I would be with them.

Onstage I was useless, banging on a tambourine, doing la-las in the background. It scarcely mattered. No one could hear me anyway, for the screaming. No one could hear anything.

Girls chased me down the boulevard along with the guys, snatching at my hair and clothing.

And then they drove me back home, the dawn just beginning to glint.

"Be a good lad now," John said as I got out of the car.

“Be kind to your mum,” said Paul.

“Don’t let your knickers down,” Ringo said dryly.

George just gave a wink under the yellow dome light.

And they drove off. Back to Liverpool, I guess.

I stood under my window, unable to jump high enough to reach the sill.

And then I woke up. I was in my own bed. My hair was its usual Vitalis-y self in the mirror. I was overcome with sadness. I was *there*, and then I was not.

I had this Beatle dream, with variations, over a score of times over the next couple of years. I suspect I sometimes still have it, 50-plus years later.

Because it was a dream of supreme happiness.

My brother Brian has been in my heart ever since that day he taught me. He lives in San Francisco today, on North beach, the Greenwich Village-like, very hip neighborhood. He’s a fine guitarist, a lover of the old songs.

He has had a weird life. At one time he was married to an actual millionaire, the granddaughter of E.W. Scripps, the founder of the newspaper/TV/radio network. But the granddaughter died, and he was on his own again, scraping by.

But what strikes me is that, all these decades later, he is still in the music business, locating out-of-print LPs for music-addicted customers around the world, all hung up with the sounds that enter the head and take up residence there.

Brian's and my best moment was probably when he visited me in Minneapolis, for the fourth or fifth time. It was about 1988. We went to a bar in the Seven Corners neighborhood, called Sgt. Preston's. We had a drink, and talked about how we had missed one another over the years, and how alike we were, but how we knew life was going to keep us from being close ever again.

And Brian began to cry, and I began to cry, and we held one another in the back of Sgt. Preston's.



My sister Kathy

My Blue Plume

Around age seven I started to have nightmares. I had fewer than ten of them altogether. They were worse than scary, they were sickening. I was just a little kid, and they took me all the way down.

I know people hate accounts of dreams, but bear with me one time. This dream one contained a key to the life I was to live.

OK. I would wake up somewhere in the house, in the bathroom or out in the yard, and I would be crying and trying to get my breath.

Usually it was my mom who found me. She would stroke me and ask me what was wrong. And I would look up to with tears beading off me like a wet windshield.

“It’s going to happen,” I said.

“What’s going to happen, Michael?”

“It’s going to happen!” I cried.

“You had a bad dream.”

“It’s going to happen,” I shouted.

Here's how I remember one episode of this bad dream.

It was a landscape dream. I stood outside. The sky high above us seemed made of glass, or porcelain, something breakable. The sky is not supposed to break, but in this dream it did.

A crack began to form, and sharp bits of sky began to fall. I knew in the dream what it was and it was my job to repair the crack, to keep the sky from falling.

Because where are we without the sky up top of us?

So I climbed a special ladder that lifted me all the way to the edge of the sky.

But I had nothing to fix the sky with. No glue, just my hands. Another crack would form, and a knife-like chunk would fall down on the world.

I looked below. There was the whole vulnerable world, which was about to die.

I felt such grief sweep over me, and guilt that the task I was responsible for was too much for me. I was failing, cosmically. The people below were my

family. I saw Kathy struck by pieces of glass. The whole world was bombarded with pieces of glass. The whole world was dying because I let them down.

Seven years old, and I had to deal with all this.

“What’s going to happen, Michael?”

“It’s going to happen!” I cried, Mom wiping my face with a washcloth.

When I was 11, on May 15th, 1961, my sister Kathy died. She went to the dentist, she came home, and the ambulance came.

When they took her to the hospital, she had me run upstairs to fetch her scapular, on her bedtable. I grabbed it and ran down the stairs, but the ambulance was already pulling out of the drive, red lights spinning. They stopped and let me hand them the scapular.

I never saw Kathy alive again.

Afterwards, people talked about the body. I didn’t understand why they would call Kathy a body. Somehow I took that to mean she no longer had a

head -- just a body. Like a chicken at the super market.

Then my dad said he had been to the funeral home. "They did great work on her. She looks beautiful. Like an angel."

Why would it be hard to make her beautiful? She was always beautiful to me.

But I liked the part about her looking like an angel. She loved Jesus and Mary, in addition to Elvis. Now she looked like an angel. I imagined her being lowered from the ceiling of the funeral chapel on nylon line, all dressed in slow-flowing lace, suspended in the room, and backlit like a holy card. Amherst had never seen anything like this apparition. And the bluebaby complexion was gone now. She was beatified for everyone to see.

But then my dad ruined it. "Right now they have her in the refrigerator."

Didn't he see me there, listening to every word he said?

I was a mess. Family arrived from Wisconsin and they had stopped at a rest plaza on the turnpike near Norwalk. They bought peanut brittle and

crossword puzzle books, plus lacquered straw hats with red plumes streaming out of the hatbands. Dyed turkey feathers, I guess. When it was time to go to the service and everyone piled into the cars under the apple trees, I insisted on wearing mine, the one with the turquoise feather. My mom gave me a look that sawed me in half.

The service was in a basketball gym, because the parish was still raising money for a proper church. Joining the procession, I looked up at the balcony where all my friends from school were standing. I didn't know what look to give them, but I must have smiled a bit, out of self-consciousness. That smile would cost me two years of bullying from Jim Frisina, a mixed-up kid who took it upon himself to be Kathy's defender -- against the little brother who adored her.

It was the first time I thought this thought: I don't want to be in this place any more.

And that's how I got to the seminary. As bad as this moment felt, at the time, I think of it differently now, I focused on my shyness with

classmates. I should have focused on the fact that more than 400 people filled the church in May to grieve with our family. No one knows what to say at such a moment. But they knew how to show up, and share their tears with us.



My mom, my dad, my baby sister Kathy, in LaCrosse.

Sailor Dad

It's 2006. I'm in L.A., driving with my brother Pat out to the high desert to clean out our dad's house after he died. Pat and I loved each other and wished each other the best, without quite enjoying one another's company. He saw me as flashy, the writer. I saw him as a chess-playing recluse. But I adored him -- he was my big brother.

Then he said it: "You know, Dad didn't like you much."

I looked over at him in silence, the only sound the roar of the freeway outside.

"I wasn't always crazy about him," I replied. A bit flip, right. Concealing the fact that Pat had just stuck a knife in my heart.

My dad abandoned us kids in 1962 when I was 12, and Pat 14. It was one year after Kathy died. As I understood it, he and my mom had promised they would not break up while Kathy was alive. So, when she died ...

Us three surviving brothers didn't see him after that until we were much older. We told ourselves -- and we told others, too, who were strangely curious, and seemed to know more than we did, which was weird -- that Dad was working so hard he had to sleep in the office. We never knew him to be so hard-working before. We just hoped things would get back to normal.

Then one day our mom said, "Pack your bags boys, we're going to Niagara Falls!"

Well, that sounded like just the thing to get our bloodied family back in the game. We drove, just Mom and us three boys, through Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York till we got to the falls, which were amazing. Did you know that the waterfall generates so much mist that only professional postcard photographers can ever actually see the falls? That's a fact.

We stayed overnight in Niagara Falls, Canada -- yes, there are two of them -- in a storefront restaurant and motel that served both American and Chinese food.

The next day we drove back, and our mom still hadn't said what the point of the trip was, but back in our bedroom we noticed Dad's drawers were empty. Pat and I confronted our mom and gave the bad news, that burglars had made off with Dad's underwear. Still no explanation from mom.

People in those days had great trouble being direct about things. We're not much better now.

Pat, being older, eventually figured out Dad was gone, and us boys wouldn't be seeing much of him in future.

It was worse news for Pat than it was for me and Brian. Paul Finley loved his oldest son, and took him to ball games, chess tournaments, and bridge competitions. They both found deep meaning in any kind of game, which Brian and I didn't. For Pat that love, the love of his life, was going away.

I guessed I would miss our dad, because you have to love your dad. He always seemed really smart to me, and nobody's fool, and he knew how to let off steam, with drinks and loud jokes, which we

took to be a good thing. The last thing we wanted was for steam to build up.

People didn't like Dad much. He wasn't much of a joiner or giver. He bore a certain resemblance to George Wallace. Dark hair, round face, rough beard, a pushed-up piggish nose from a childhood sledding accident, and an assertive way of taking. He came across as combative because he always thought he was the smartest person around -- even while coaching Little League, where he got into a fistfight with another drunk coach, which made the Chronicle-Telegram. He had a good, breathy baritone voice, and he loved to sing in the car. He loved making the car vibrate while singing Sinatra.

I remember kissing him once before toddling off to bed and being grossed out by his shadow whiskers -- so stiff and unpleasant, like kissing a lemon grater. I also smelled the booze rising out of his lungs like a ghost. I felt sorry for our mom, having to be cheek to cheek with that every day. Maybe it was just the end of the day, when the whiskers were most stubborn. I knew evening was when moms and dads got romantic.

I didn't hate my dad, but I felt he was from a different planet. A planet where drunken cold-hearted dads made automobiles. Apart from us kids. He was so different, it made sense that he went away.

There were problems in my earliest memories. When I was three, on the very cusp of awareness, our family went for a car trip from Amherst to Daytona Beach, in my dad's latest Cadillac, yellow in color. The 50s were all about color and cars. We tried to be the happy family taking a trip. But there was the feeling that Dad would like to give us the slip and duck into some shady spot along the way.

My dad worked at Cadillac Tank Plant in Brook Park as a design engineer, and always bought the latest model. It was a sign of his commitment to the company. And he loved that Cadillac car.

In Daytona Beach a local paper photographed Pat and me playing in the sand, and did a full-page photo feature of us. It is practically my first memory -- of having our picture taken! Why they chose us, of all the thousands kids on the beach, I

don't know. (Answer: It was because we were both of us *extremely* cute.)

I remember the brightness of the sun, and the heat that continued in my skin, as we drove back north, past the Cape Hatteras lighthouse, striped like a candy cane.

Two days later we drove up Fifth Avenue, and Pat and me craning out heads up to see the Empire State Building. Dad cursed the bumper to bumper traffic of Manhattan. It sure wasn't like that back in Amherst.

I thought at the time we stood on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, but I now believe it was Rockefeller Center. Because I could see the other building several blocks away.

To me, I was seeing the most important thing in the world. The great achievement of a great city. Then my dad picked me up and help me by my ankles over the rail, as a joke. My mother screamed. My brother and sister recoiled. I was wriggling in his grasp like a worm on a hook. He thought he was teaching me something important,

or maybe he was making fun of my country-boy
awe.

I remember dangling upside down over 80 stories,
and clawing for my dad's wrists to hold onto.

This is the same dad who tried to teach me to
swim by throwing me off the side of a fishing boat.
I didn't learn to swim then. I can barely swim now.

My mom rebuked him. You could see even then
she was getting tired of his clownish cruelty.

We drove home through the tunnels on the
Pennsylvania Turnpike. We kids shouted through
the tunnels until we ran out of breath. I held
Kathy's hand in the back seat. I always felt safe
with her.

Back home, our parents fought. I did not
understand the dynamics at the time, but it had to
do with our dad yearning to party, and my mom
wanting him to stay home, husband our money
and be nice to the rest of us.

They came to hate each other like there was no
higher calling in the world.

When I was six I found a cigar box in a closet and the idea occurred to me to paint it black and put a lock made of masking tape on it.

The idea was to keep secret stuff in the box. I didn't have any secrets yet, but I thought I soon would, and in the interim it would be cool to have a lock-box for them. Because you never know.

The problem was, my vocabulary was still developing, and instead of writing PRIVATE on the top in white crayon, I wrote the word PROPERTY.

All it said was PROPERTY. To me that sounded plenty ominous. I didn't know what property was. So I would stick notes in the box saying TOP SECRET or NO TELLING, and carry it around the house, sort of showing it and sort of not.

My dad was drinking a Black Label and listening to Jimmy Dudley on the radio.

He saw the box behind my back, took it from me, and said, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I remember us three children sitting on a braid rug in the dining room on Park Avenue. For some reason our Danish dining room table was missing. Repossessed? It was late for us, dark. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Some drama was taking shape and I did not want to miss it.

We four crouched together on the rug, which had a circular pattern, like a bullseye. My brother and sister understood what was at stake better than me. Sister Kathy glared bravely at our dad. Brother Pat twisted about wildly.

Our mom knelt behind us, hiding, either to block our dad's blows, or perhaps just to shame him, to expose him to us. See what your father is like. See.

Paul Finley seemed like he might bust loose any moment, break a glass or take a swing at a dangling lightbulb. He made gestures as if to strike us, then laughed because we cowered. He never quite hit us, but we were plenty scared.

I believe, looking back today, that he was acting out his own despair at our situation. Sick child, stuck in an apple orchard in Amherst, wife not getting him, career not advancing as might like,

and this crazy impulse he always had to be elsewhere, anywhere, glugging down drinks and impressing people at the bar.

When I was grown up, he told me a great truth: “The greatest happiness I can have is making a woman laugh.”

I got that completely.

Our mom was in despair, too. She wanted to get away from the farm life she grew up on, and now she was back on a farm, an apple orchard anyway. Pinned her hopes on this bright young auto engineer. It was not in her to run away. Moms nearly always stick it out. But they don't ever like it.

In my opinion, I thought they were crazy. Unable to enjoy the things kids naturally loved -- running in the grass, hugging Cleo the cat, jumping off the porch, jumping off the porch again. Life was riddled with little delights, but you would never know that from grown-ups. Their idea of fun involved foulness -- cigarettes, whiskey, bad language, jokes that made no sense but had

everyone gasping for air, dads grabbing feels from other moms.

Our parents were loaded with passion but devoid of actual happiness. They each seemed to have a knack -- each in their own way -- to make the worst of a bad situation. Our father was good at storming out of the house, slamming the car door, and ripping the gravel as he drove his Cadillac off to the Dewey Road Tavern. Our mother was good at being victimized, then tearing him apart after he left.

Us little kids stood our ground, not knowing what was at stake, or even what was going on. What do kids know.

My dad and I have lunch in Ventura. It's 1968. Halfway home, he realizes he is missing his wallet. "Sons of bitches," he says, pounding on the wheel. "Robbing sons of bitches."

At home in Inglewood, a phone call. "Mister Finley?" a kid says. "I found your wallet in a parking lot. I called the number inside."

“Any money in it?”

“Yes, forty dollars.”

“A Mastercard?”

“Yes. My dad is driving me to a game at the Forum at seven. We can bring it right to you.”

“Ha-ho,” my dad says, hanging up. “Am I one lucky SOB!”

An hour later, a knock on the door. Kid hands over the wallet.

“That’s great, kid,” my dad says, and shuts the door in his face. “It’s all there,” he says, waving the wallet at us.

Another knock. My dad opens the door. The kid’s dad is standing there.

“You ever hear of rewards?” the man asks, and punches my dad in the nose. “That’s yours.”

My fiancée Rachel was driving through Southern California in 1978, and stopped by my father's place in Hesperia to introduce herself. He invited

her in, and fed her, and was reasonably hospitable.

But at one point my dad looked at her and said, "You remind me of that movie star ... what's the name though ... the one with the red hair?"

Feeling complimented, Rachel ran through her list of ravishing Hollywood redheads.

"Lucille Ball?" ... so funny!

"Rita Hayworth?" ... not too shabby ...

"Katherine Hepburn?" Why, that would be ecstasy ...

But no to any one of those.

"I've got it." My dad said. "Woody Allen."

And what woman, meeting her future father-in-law, whom she will have to deal with for the next thirty years, doesn't want to be compared physically to Woody Allen?

Decades later I reversed the pattern. Instead of him bullying me, I decided to bully him. Not physically, mentally. Meeting him at LAX I would

slap him on his round stomach and laugh. I was 35 years old, towering over him and his hair had turned white. I was the stud now, the guy who knew how the world worked, not him. I was not so outright hostile that he could call me on it, but believe me, I felt hostile. I acted way more insensitive than I actually am, just to see how he liked it.

Pat was right. All I had to do to tear him down was to whisper into his ear the word Amherst.

Burned into memory was a phone call I had with him in 1998. I told him his only granddaughter, my Daniele, was in trouble, that she was having suicidal thoughts and hung out all day long with her punk friends. Drugs, stealing, mocking the straight world. I told Dad she needed intensive psychological evaluation and that it cost money.

“Gee, money is kind of tied up here right now,” he said.

This was the guy who called my daughter chubby as a child, called her that to her face. Who left her

all day to babysit an autistic kid who lived on the block, a kid with aggressive tendencies.

He could shit on Daniele as a child, finding thing after thing to criticize, but not be available when she needed help staying alive -- who would in fact go on to take her life at age 25.

How was I supposed to forgive that? Where was I going to find compassion in my heart?

So I'm driving with Pat toward Dad's house in Hesperia. He's just died, and we have to fix his place up for sale. Pat is telling me why our dad never cared much for me.

"The life that mattered to him was his life here in the desert. He cleaned up here. He got sober. He managed a successful business selling conveyor belts to factories. He stopped writing bad checks. He earned the respect of local people. He owned five houses and rented them out to Hispanic families trying to make a go of it here doing construction work in the desert boom town.

"Whereas," Pat said, "you always tried to drag him back to the past, to remind him of the bad old days. How he left us. Stuff he wanted to forget."

I glared at Pat. I understood that our dad's second act was meant to overwrite the first, and now I was supposed to admire his talent for making a sale, and the California living that meant he never had to wear a tie, and he had built his house on the edge of a golf course, with a showcase of trophies for the tournaments he won, and maybe an old picture of Kathy, and Patrick and me on the mantle. Maybe a school snapshot of my daughter Daniele.

I tried to rip up all the old griefs, tried to see Paul Finley in a more sympathetic, more compassionate light.

He was not the first Paul Finley. A brother with the same name was born two years before him, in 1917. He died of pleurisy as a baby. And his parents, in their own grief and confusion, slapped the same name on our dad when he came along. They raised him like he had another, more perfect self to live up to.

Just like me, he felt he needed to escape -- from the family farm on Sunset Ridge overlooking Prairie du Chien. How he met our mom as an

engineering student at General Motors Institute in Flint.

The story is that he invited her on their first date to a wedding, and he got so drunk he tapped the water glass with a spoon and announced that he and Mary were engaged to be married, too. Big surprise to my mom. After considerable thought, she agreed, and when he graduated they married and moved to Ohio so he could work at the Cadillac Tank Plant, and later at Brown-Light-Chapin in Elyria, and make our home in an apple orchard in Amherst, Ohio. And have a sick first child, whose sickness quashed his dreams of being a big shot at GM.

And in his fear and disappointment, he drank more and more every year.

Until he's standing in the grass in front of our house on Park Avenue, hands in his pockets, telling me, age 12, that he's got to be moving on, to California, but maybe I can come visit him sometime.

And when I was 15 and finished 17th on that Ohio English literature test, and carried the certificate

home in a clean manila envelope, and started to cry on the sidewalk, tears splattering the perfect envelope -- cuz I didn't have a dad at home to be proud of me.

I do feel sympathy for him. He was 21 when the war started, 35 when he lit out for the west. I'm much older than that now, and I can see how life got to be too much for him.

I know now that my dad felt shame abandoning the family.

He stole, and got caught, and had to leave Ohio.

I know now he felt he was a good guy who never got credit for meaning well.

It wasn't his fault his daughter was born sick and died young.

He wasn't the reason his wife was the way she was, despising everything he did.

Later in life he undertook to make amends helping tenants along I-15 in sorry straits, especially the young mothers, whose gratitude and approval he sought.

He even went to court and gave depositions against bad fathers who did exactly what he did, abandoning their families when their luck turned sour.

He lent out money to these families to pay for heat and forgave the rent, month after month.

He came to be considered a man to turn to, a godfather of the Mojave, once his second wife had bled the evil out.

For her, he gave up drinking and smoking and rare sirloin.

He teed off from the hard fairways each morning before the dew burned off.

Eventually he stopped chasing the waitresses who had tempted him all of his life, with their snug rayon uniforms, their lipstick, and the arousing way they slipped him the check.

So when a tumor sprouted around his lungs the size of a pie-plate, he felt gypped again and cursed his luck, and in his wretchedness ratted out everyone he ever thought he loved, including me, for remembering everything he ever said and did.

He was like so many of the greatest generation. They could win that terrible war, but when they came home they didn't know dick about who they were or how to act. They were all broke up and stupid inside. Behind the brass doorplates on all those golf properties, men in plaid pants were confused and grieving for what they had seen, and unable to tell the truth about what they had become.

Also, I must point out he gave me life, and I am half him in some way. Consciousness is the greatest gift we get. I am grateful for the protein kickstart.

But -- I remember this one image, and it helps me forgive him. It's the fourth of July in Elyria, Ohio, 1960. The fireworks are over, and everyone picks up their blankets and heads for their cars.

My sister Kathy had fallen asleep on the grass at Cascade Park.

Though the walk to the car was half a mile, much of it uphill, my father held her close, his first-born daughter, the heart of his life, and carried her gently through the shuffling crowd.

And yet ...



My brother Patrick Garin Finley

My Brother Pat

When my brother Pat was 11, and I was 9, our job was mowing the grass, which was a pretty big job, because we had about 60 apple trees on our property. It was an old orchard, gone to seed, but it still dropped millions of apples, which we had to mow over.

We tried this with our regular mower from our last house, but it was no match for this job. The mower wobbled over the apples and spit about half out the side, splattering the grass. One time, it flipped over from the agitation. You never want a mower to flip over. There were still several apples riding the spinning blade. One of them hit me right in my young groin.

Our dad was an engineer, and he located a refurbished industrial-strength mower from the classifieds. The machine was taller than either of us, and looked like it had been part of military ordnance in Korea. Pat and I named it The Shark.

It was a self-propelling mower, which meant we spent half the time chasing it and it advanced

upon the grass and weeds. The thing was unstoppable. I swear to God, it just wanted to kill. It gobbled up tall grass, sunflower stems and raspberry bushes, even our mom's zucchini plants.

When it got away from us and collided with an apple tree, The Shark lifted its mouth off the ground and began ripping at the bark. It circled the trunk, looking for a way to bring it down. Even when we caught up to it, The Shark was too much for our spindly kid muscles.

Animals on foot and slithering through the grass fled at the Shark's approach. It was so powerful it could chew up the tall grass right after a rain, or when the dew still hung on the weed patch. Pat and I were terrified of it. We would talk about it in low tones, how afraid we were of losing our feet to it. At least we would not have to keep mowing the lawn. Maybe.

One time the Shark ran over a whole community of yellowjackets, who were feasting on the rotting apples, and those that were not shot out the side exit descended on me, furiously stinging me about nineteen times.

Thanks to the Shark, I am allergic to yellowjacket stings to this day. Seriously. If I am stung tossing an ice cream stick into a trash barrel at the State Fair, that could be it for me. As a sensible precaution I avoid the State Fair entirely.

We were so afraid of The Shark that we tended to wait too long to crank it up, by which time the grass had grown to thick, thistle-y levels. It was no challenge to the Shark, which would like nothing better than to be let loose in a cornfield in July. But it made it harder for us boys to see what was underfoot.

One day, halfway through the summer of 1961, Pat and I are dealing with a nasty lawnful. Our practice was to make mowing a relay event. I would do one circle, he would do the next. We cranked up The Shark, and Pat was the first one to let it drag him across the grass. After Pat's turn being dragged, I grabbed the Shark, still moving, and plowed into a thick hedge of weeds. Halfway into it, I tripped on a tree root, and could not hold onto the handle.

I stopped right there, but the Shark charged forward, laying the field to waste. When I looked

up, it was racing crazily across the field, cutting a diagonal swath. We hoped a tree would stop it. But it veered away from the trees entirely, it crossed Park Avenue and drove into the swamp across from where we lived. Smoke billowed from its engine as it pitched forward into the cattails and reeds, stewing and blubbling in the mulch.

That engine didn't stop for another half-minute.

We ran and woke our dad on the couch, and told him of the catastrophe. It was too much for him. He called on a drinking buddy, Frank, who owned a pair of hip waders to untangle the machine and drag it back onto dry land.

Pat stared at the shark in its difficulty. I saw malice in his eyes, even for a big brother.

Our dad and Frank tipped over the silent beast and pulled fistfuls of cattail reeds that had wrapped themselves around the blade.

They changed the gas. They emory-boarded the sparkplug gap. They cranked the motor. Not once but thirty times.

But the Shark would not start.

Finally the two men repaired to the living room to watch the Indians lose and drink beers.

But Pat and I, standing over the dead machine, looked at each other and we nodded. We knew we had broken the Shark with our minds.

I had a brother. Still have him. His name is Pat. He lives in L.A. We grew up 25 months apart in Amherst, Ohio, him being the older. Pictures show two cute little round-headed Irish boys. He seems pleased, I usually seem kind of dazed. We got along, for the most part.

Because our sister was sick and took so much of their time, our parents each focused on one of us. My dad picked Pat, who looked like him, and shared his passion for games. They played chess and cards and went to Browns and Indians games.

Likewise, I looked more like our mom, and she and I both liked to cook. She chose me, and took me shopping and to flower and garden shows. Later, as our parents grew apart, dad started taking us both to games together. So I was not left out. But

by that time, a fierce bond between those two had set in.

Pat was a tussler. He had a football helmet, but it was not regulation. Still he charged at the brick foundation of our house, time and time again, until the helmet cracked in two, and Pat needed stitches. He was a tough little cuss.

He liked wrestling, and on Saturday mornings we watched it on our black and white set. Our favorite was Argentina Rocca, an authentic global star who wrestled barefoot. Pat admired his academic approach to the game. I thought it was cool he played barefoot. What if the bad guys just stepped on them?

Beyond that my interest in the matches was largely looks -- who wore what, who had a big belly and a hairy chest and was therefore the villain. Pat memorized the holds and throws -- half nelson, flying mare, the sleeper hold. And he was always trying to practice them on me, which I hated. Being five years to his seven, I couldn't match him in any way, so he just seemed like a pest. I just wanted to get away from his (camel) clutches.

Now, here's the kind of intimate inside detail that really sells books like this: One time Pat was all over me, choking me and twisting my spine till I thought it might snap, and I thought of something: I stuck my finger up the corduroy seat of his pants. Not up his butt, just pressing up against the fabric. It caused him considerable alarm.

Pat jumped up like a spring had been sprung. "Why'd you do that? That's not wrestling! You can't do that! That's illegal!"

"That's because you're the good guy," I told him. "I get away with stuff."

I remember wondering why that was such a big deal to him.

By the way, I could be making all these details up, and I think Pat thinks I am, because he has only vague memories of stuff I could write *Remembrance of Things Past* from. In fact, however, I am telling the truth at all times. Believe me, this is true.

As a small boy Pat was fascinated by football and baseball cards. He would play actual games on the

living room floor, teams of his own choosing, many decades before fantasy football. His cards were precious -- Y.A. Tittle, Willie Mays, Lou Groza, Mickey Mantle, Jim Brown. Had he tucked them away someplace safe, he might be a millionaire today. But he reduced them to tatters by playing floor games with them. Hundreds and hundreds of floor games.

I think Pat really lived in those games. The strategy, the statistics, the surrounding literature, the violence. It suited him.

Our dad taught Pat to play chess, and within a couple of years, from ages 7 to 9, he showed a frightening alacrity for the complexities of the game.

Every night the two of them would set up the board and have a go at it. I paid zero attention, but I do remember one small fact. One night Pat Finley beat Paul Finley, and Paul never played with Pat again. That was the high standard of sportsmanship in our little house. You can't let your little son beat you. Ever.

As a boy Pat was a sound athlete. He played catcher for Harry Robinson, a sad-faced man who coached Houston in the Little League by the Western Automatic building. Without having long arms like the pitchers he caught, Pat could manage them behind the plate, using a touch of his strategic mentality to keep the batters guessing.

Catching is not for everyone. You have to be willing to suffer. Pat was. Every year, he was dying to be named MVP for the season. Instead, he always got Best Sport. He knew it was a shit award. He never put it on the mantle. Always, the floor in his bedroom closet.

Pat played using his brain. If there was a right way to catch, stand, throw to second, he followed those rules and got pretty good outcomes. He caught, played third and pitched.

I was more of a confused showboat. I remember taking a grounder at second, leaping forward unnecessarily, and throwing to first in mid-air. It would have been great if I had thrown with any accuracy, or if the first baseman in any way

expected the slow-motion flip. I wound up looking like a supreme ass, at nine years of age.

In school, Pat was an academic star. He skipped the second half of the first grade, and was installed in the second half of the second grade. The move met the sisters' needs, giving Genius Boy a push down the Catholic school runway. By sixth grade they felt another push was necessary, and switched him to the 8th grade.

By that time not only was his intelligence established; so was his height. He was 5 foot 5 going into high school. Genes may have played a role, but I think it was more the pressure of having to be two years more mature than he actually was. Pat was a fighter before anything else, though, so I'm guessing he found a way to be accepted by older kids a head taller than him. An attitude of so what else is new. He had a gravity and a distance about him that I never had. People took Pat seriously.

I do not believe he had a date through high school at Marion L. Steele, back in a time when that was surely deducted from one's reputation.

Well, he had one date, a prom date with Noriko, the Japanese exchange student. (Who was very nice.) In a way they were both low-altitude exchange students. Neither of them belonged where they were. Only Noriko could fly back to Japan. Pat could retreat to his books and machinations, but it wasn't the same. And unlike me, he didn't have a big brother smoothing the way for him. He did it all by himself.

Think about his predicament. He has a sister, whom he knows will die while still a child. He grows up with that ticking time clock in the house. Then she dies, and he realizes that any kid can die. In fact, going just by birth order, it looked like his turn might be next.

And then his dad -- his pal, his guide through the dangerous world -- picks up and takes off. And his mom, unglued by all the disasters, begins to come apart.

She got so frustrated. I remember her sending us, several times, to the end of the orchard to find sticks for her to whip us with. Why? Because we were playing backyard baseball a hundred yards away, and lost track of time. We ran home, all

dusty from running bases and sliding in the dirt, and had to select our own weapons of punishment. And as the oldest, Pat got it the worst.

I think of every one of those blows -- the losses as well as the whippings -- causing his body to shorten up. Less surface. Less pain.

Women need to be a little bit beautiful to go on living. Men need stature. Without it you're Toulouse-Lautrec. People don't take you serious. God did this to him. So the hell with Him.

Pat's one high school thespian outing was typecast -- Rumpelstiltskin the resentful dwarf, who entered stage left, through a tiny door.

He was a vulnerable boy. But he bore his pains and sorrows like a hero.

By the time I followed Pat to Marion L. Steele High School (subtracting my year at the seminary in Bucks County) he had graduated, but he had left a memory trail as a straight, don't-mess-with-him guy. So I was treated pretty well because I was his brother. That's how small towns like Amherst work. If a brother or sister precedes you into the quarry

of higher learning, you get a pass through the worst stuff. Kids didn't pick on me, cuz they knew Pat, as a recent graduate, embodied everything Amherst knew about honor. Since he had walked through the gauntlet before me, I didn't have to.

In my junior year I took tests to get into college -- Merit Scholarship, the ACT, the SAT, all of those -- and one test included a writing part. I knew there would be a writing part, so I had a topic that I would write about if no other topic were suggested -- Pat. That was the title of my essay -- "Pat."

Four years ago, clearing out my attic crawlspace, I came across the essay I hand-wrote in 1966. It's only 268 words. Here it is:

I have an older brother named Pat. He's not interested in the latest fashion, or what's on the TV. He's interested in history, in the universe, in game theory and great literature.

We have an entire bookcase at home devoted to civil war books. Many of them are huge, or are part of multi-volume sets. He has read them all.

He knows about every battle, and what the strategic significance of each one was.

He has read every play by Shakespeare, even the ones other people avoid, like Titus Andronicus. He knows when Shakespeare's histories are just as fictional as his comedies. He had thought it all out.

I've read Shakespeare. I can tell you, it's not easy.

Pat's done the same thing with Dickens, and other writers. His favorite play is Cyrano de Bergerac, by Edmund Rostand.

The play is about a person kind of like Pat himself -- tremendously talented as both a soldier and a poet. But his nose is gigantic, the sort of thing school kids love to put down, tearing at the person's spirit.

Cyrano was wounded so deeply that he invented an alternate world to live in, and an alternate personality to display in public.

The last line in the play, as Cyrano lay dying. Is "Mon panache!" referring to the feather on his hat. It is his soul, that he kept pure through his life. "My unsullied plume!"

*People tease Pat because he wears white socks.
But I admire him for than anyone else I know.*

*Despite all his challenges in life, he always has
been a caring brother to me. So, I guess I love him.*

Most brothers squabble. I don't recall Pat and me doing much of that. I think he resented me, for being more insulated from Kathy's death, for having fewer medical problems, including fewer anxieties, for growing a couple inches taller than him, just at the moment he felt his life starting to sink.

I remember us putting clean sheets on Kathy's bed. I was going on and on about something, and I, being 11 and thinking it was sophisticated, used the N word.

Pat stopped with the sheets. "Don't ever let me hear you say that word again," he said. I didn't.

Pat was a rigidly ethical boy. If he ever stole or told a terrible lie, I am not aware of it. He did not have the internal flexibility to do these things. His whole thing was that, for better or worse, he would be what he was.

Whereas I was, even then, something of a con man. I was good at fooling people, at sidestepping logic. I enjoyed ending arguments by saying nonsequiturs and walking away, as if I had won. It was like a joke to me. I let my imagination do the heavy lifting. I was egotistical. Pat played on a resolute, unchanging chess board. I sent the pieces flying.

The chessboard is a metaphor. I never actually flipped one over, except accidentally, because we were playing on the edge of the bed.

But -- did I mention he played me every afternoon for a couple of years, on his bed, and I never won once? Never won once. He denies this, but he is wrong. Trust me on this, despite everything I just said.

One of my lies was telling people that Pat had once played Bobby Fischer. And lost. My lies were pretty thoughtful -- I wanted them to be believed. I claimed he was named a Junior Grandmaster by the World Chess Federation at 14. That was untrue, too. Why would they have a junior level -- genius child chess players are famous for taking on their betters at early ages.

Another lie I told was about Pat appearing on GE College Bowl when he was in college, on behalf of his tiny little college on a hill, Hiram, against Texas blockbuster Rice University. Pat desperately did not want to appear on the show -- self-conscious, anxious about performance. He threw up multiple times on the flight to New York. Though the filming of the show was black and white, he nevertheless appeared lime green on our set.

He was terrified of not having the right answers.

In fact, he did great, but his teammates might as well have worn dunce caps. Rice creamed Hiram. My lie was that Pat scored the most points of any player in College Bowl history, and still got his ass whipped. I made that up, a lie of love.

In all my lies I was trying to communicate to people how formidable and brilliant my brother was, and how everyone should respect him, and gasp at his fierceness of thought. He wasn't just a kid who wore white socks to school. He was beyond being a nerd. He was my Super Brother. He was the best.

His very uncoolness -- his indifference to the stupid world and its stupid judgment -- was what made him so staggeringly cool.

One thing I bragged about Pat was not a lie. It was that, as a college student, he began writing a book tentatively titled *The Psychopathology of Chess*. It was part history book -- a collection of stories about the very weird and disturbing behavior of famous chess masters like Fischer and Paul Morphy and Wilhelm Steinitz (who claimed he could call any person in the world without using a telephone).

But Pat went further. He linked this craziness to the core truth of the game, the truth that drove players to madness. Sure, they were probably crazy to start, but playing the game for hours every day, always having to be five moves ahead of the guy across the board, led to endless self-doubt and paranoia.

But around page 100 Pat put his pen down -- people wrote with things called pens back then -- and he stopped writing the book. And he never went back to it. And he never said why.

Three possibilities:

One, he had better things to do with his time. He was a college student, after all. Classes to take, etc.

Two, he felt his own craziness overtaking him. Writing about it only made it worse.

Three, and worst of all, he saw through to the essence of the game. Checkmate, from the Persian *shah mat*. Kill the king. Kill the father. Kill *your* father.

At its heart, he discovered, chess is patricide. What an revelation this must have been to a boy abandoned by the father he adored -- the clever father who taught him chess, who charged him with his own competitiveness, but who couldn't stand to be beaten by his own son. The elusive father he would spend his lifetime chasing, out to California and into the Mojave desert, where he would do our dad's taxes every year.

In the end, Pat put up his dying father in his own home, with his beautiful wife Kathilien. Paul had become deranged by his brain mets, and began mistreating Kathy, who was black and who had

given Paul four terrific grandchildren -- which was more than any other of his other sons managed to get on the books.

That's when Pat sent his Dad packing. Nobody got to mess with the love of his life -- not even dear dying Dad. We'll visit you at the home, Dad.

Once, when I dropped out of college and ran away to live in a commune -- I was always running away, to college, into theatre, into writing, into being a hippie -- Pat set me down, again on his bed, and wrote a check for \$500 and mailed it to my college loan people.

He didn't have much money, just what he earned washing dishes for Dick -- but there he was, being super brother again. Living through all these things together. Not talking much about them. Never bragging. But doing the work. Taking the hits.

My dad and I might have kited a check or two. Our ethics were fluid. Pat, by contrast, always paid up. He always did it right.



Kathy and our Mom

Mary Mulligan

I talk about my mom to friends. Sometimes I am achingly appreciative. Sometimes I just ache.

She was a strong-willed, intense woman who did not suffer mistreatment well. It happened, a lot -- but she would always let you know it wasn't right. There was little liberation of women in her time, until the very end. She had to invent her own revolution, which centered on her version of events, and her stony will. There was what she told you, and what she kept to herself.

My mom taught me good manners. She was very clear about keeping family secrets secret. People were not to know certain things. She would not take delight in me writing this now.

As a boy, for the longest time, I was in love with her. I wanted us to always be together. I wanted to make Dad die somehow, perhaps carried off by tornado, and I would set up house with her.

Later I found reason to fear her. Her insistence on her version of things. Her willingness to inflict pain,

especially on those she loved. She was old-fashioned about dispensing guilt.

Other people adored her. My brothers and I had reason to fear her, while loving her.

It was not until I posted a picture of her on my Facebook page that I was able to show my friends who she was -- her penetrating gaze, her famous green eyes, the brutal determination behind her smile.

People said to me: "I understand you better now."

"God give me strength."

My mother had key phrases and utterances, that she seemed to be saying to herself, but were definitely aimed at you. She wanted to be overheard saying them, and for you to figure out what to do with them.

"That shitty father of yours, I hope God sends him straight to hell!" That's another phrase I remember.

She could be quite bitter and mean about our dad, who picked up and left for California. She would

sometimes lose it and start whaling on us, making us fetch sticks for our own beatings. There is a rule today that you don't badmouth your ex in front of your kids. That rule did not exist then.

"God give me strength" was one of them -- a prayer of despair. Something Jesus might have said, stumbling up Golgotha.

Translation: See me in my agony, see what I must put up with, and note how different it is from everything I wanted from life, and all because I wanted you, Michael, and look what I got instead.

She was not religious in any way. She saw church as a game rigged to make some people feel good and others to feel unworthy, with both sides kicking in cash.

She was not Catholic by any stretch. She was anticlerical, owing, as near as I can tell, to a bad experience as a girl in a revival tent. They were all con-men and charlatans, all the way up to the Pope. But we kids, obediently going to Catholic school (because they were stricter there) had to live with that contradiction.

In this case, I heard her say that terrible sentence when she got a call from the principal about me. "God give me strength." I realized, in the marrow of my bones, I was not making life easier for her.

Being a good boy, I hoped God would give her strength.

She, who had endured so much pain. Who loved me, bathed me, fed me, and instructed me in the right way to live.

I, who was now adding to that pain. Running off the the seminary, just like my dad, and later, to the hippie communes. Heading off to be holy, but not before first committing murder. Of my mom.

That's perhaps putting it too strongly, but I know I hurt her deeply.

My mom was Mary Josephine Mulligan Finley Konik. She was the oldest of six kids, raised poor on a Michigan farm in Otisville, Michigan, 20 miles outside Flint. Her dad bred beautiful quarterhorses, milked a score of cows, grew taters in the fields, raised a yardful chickens and roosters, and I remember -- in the 1950s, when I visited the

place, that still had no running water or indoor plumbing -- a quarrelsome goat.

I have pictures of her as a tough-looking child, 1925, as a determined young girl, 1930, and as an attractive young woman, 1939, on a double date with a young man and another couple.

She had a boyfriend that she liked, before she met my dad. But the boyfriend enlisted in the Army in 1939, and he never came back.

Mary had survived the Depression, and now wanted out of Otisville. "I was tired of yanking milkweeds out of the potato field," she told me numerous times.

She took a job at a diner in Flint, and one night in walked a young automotive engineer student, Paul Finley, my dad. They hit it off, awkwardly. My dad once told me me, while drinking, that he was interested in Mary because she closely resembled a woman he had just given up stalking. *Wooing* was the word he used. But he followed this woman on trains to Chicago -- that went beyond wooing. He was a reckless, bright, unempathic young man.

He asked her on a first date, to attend the wedding of another engineering student. He wanted to dance, and he got sloshed, and then he got jealous of the attention the wedded couple were receiving. He tapped his champagne glass with a spoon, and announced -- perhaps as a joke -- that he and Mary were going to be married soon, too. People applauded.

She knew nothing of this and was taken aback. She was a farm girl, 19 years old. My dad was as handsome as he would ever be. He drunkenly talked himself up -- "One day I intend to run General Motors myself." Still he seemed to have more going for him than other men in Genesee County.

So Mary married Paul, and Paul enlisted in the Navy, and fought for his country -- not really -- at the Great Lakes Naval Station at Sault Ste. Marie. While he was away, she gave birth to my sister Kathleen. Kathleen was born with a heart problem, which back then was called blue baby syndrome, and today is called tetralogy of Fallot.

While Kathy was a pretty baby, her skin was a bluish or purple tinge, a symptom known as

cyanosis. The color is the result of improperly oxygenated blood.

The baby takes on a bluish hue because of poorly oxygenated blood. Normally, blood is pumped from the heart to the lungs, where it receives oxygen. The blood is circulated back through the heart and then throughout the body. It's caused by a hole in the ventricle wall.

Doctors did not tell my mom this. She wondered what was wrong, but did not know the truth until she read an article in Life Magazine.

Mary undertook to learn more about it. Doctors were not encouraging, and told her to accept that the baby had a limited life span.

So she was married to a selfish sailor, and had a purple baby that was doomed to die.

My brother Pat was born three years later, in 1948. Two years later, I was born. We settled in a rented house in an apple orchard in Amherst, Ohio. Paul's work was in nearby Elyria.

She took nearly a year to pass an Ohio driver's test. I was five, so that was a long time to me because I went along each time, and had to console her when she sobbed afterwards in the parking lot.

Not giving her a license made sense. She was a bold driver. Splashing through the river fords in Cleveland's Metropolitan Gorge in Cleveland, and climbing a steep hill exiting the park, the old Plymouth's standard transmission stalled. Our mom directed us three kids, age four to nine, to stand behind the car to keep it from sliding off the road and tumbling to a fiery crash below. We kids gamely went back there, not eager to even touch the bumper, while she struggled with the clutch.

Fortunately, another driver -- a man -- stopped and helped before kids and car tumbled into the ravine.

Because Kathy's issues required a lot of attention, our parents decided to choose one boy to focus on. Our dad chose Pat, and Mary chose me.

It was my mom who taught me things. The teaching could be intense. Upset at Paul's

drunkenness and dalliances -- he allegedly gave her a venereal disease -- Mary gave me a scary lesson when I was 4. I stepped out of the bathtub and she rubbed me down with a terrycloth towel, , grabbed my little penis between thumb and forefinger, and she spoke this sentence to me, which took me years to decode:

“I want you to promise me you will keep this part of you clean, as long as you live.”

I said, Sure.

As I grew older, I never forgot this moment. It was not traumatic. More like, puzzling. She was telling me to be a good man, and not cause women pain with my unfaithfulness, my drunkenness, my dishonesty. If I lived as a good man, perhaps all my sins would be forgivable.

I have mostly kept that promise. Largely.

This conviction, that I had to be a good man, could have meant anything to me. I think it helped send me to the seminary. More than the nuns, more than Kathy's death, I think she was the reason.

I have tried, in the main, to be good, to not hurt people. I know that I have frequently failed.

My mom taught me how to clean and cook and behave. I observed the way she made scrambled eggs. “Trampled eggs,” was how I mispronounced them then. I am told. I know, hilarious.

Me today, I crack eggs without giving them much thought. Break the egg, dump the goop in a frying pan, fry.

She took a more cautious approach. She cracked the egg purposefully, then scooped the inside of the shell at each end with the tip of her index finger, unwilling to waste a molecule of protein.

That was the Depression showing through. That egg came from her coop. She was administering a painful, thorough justice.

She taught me to read, sitting in her lap. *On Beyond Zebra*, by Dr. Suess, was my first book. I tore into it once I cracked the code. Letters led to phonics, which led to words.

Until I was six at least, I was deeply in love with her. I wanted us to always be together. I wept and pounded on the locked screen door when she went away to work a shift. She was the beauty of

my life. She was everything to me, as all mothers are to small boys.

When we married, I promised her a brand new red and white BelAire, like the one she already drove. Assumed in this was that my dad, her husband, would go away.

Later I found reason to be afraid of her. On occasion she beat Pat and me and tore at our hair. She was a brave mom, but she was extremely emotional. This life was not the one she hoped for, back when she met our shining father.

She was a divorcé before that was common or acceptable in a town like Amherst. She strove to be respectable, but she was often excluded from the inner circle.

She was devoted to the young girls, typically high school seniors or college age kids, who worked at Dick's restaurant, replacements for her own daughter. Mary was a role model, mentor, and second mother to them.

In 1965 she remarried, to her boss, Dick Konik. Financially, things got much better. But with Kathy

dead, Mary continued to struggle inside. She became even more sensitive and high-strung, while remaining very social, holding the biggest and best backyard parties in the county.

She would laugh heartily at a joke at these events, but she could never tell one. She did not care to be a clown. Above all else she wanted respect. Some friends called her the “Duchess” behind her back -- with affection, but also out of deference to her will.

When Dick died, his excavation businesses promptly failed. The creek beside the house rose and washed away Mary’s genealogical and historic paperwork, all very precious to her. Somebody – she darkly suspected a relative – broke into the house and made off with cash, jewelry and other valuables. Accused relatives assured me Mary was off her bean.

She got sicker, to the point she could no longer live in her house. She had a heart monitor installed. Her feet and legs were black from diabetes. She was showing major signs of dementia. I traveled down from Minnesota and brought her home to live with my family. Several times she hid money in

our house – hundreds of dollars -- and then could not find it.

She turned against my son Jon, 13, in a restaurant and snapped “Why do you hate me so?”

The answer, which he was smart not to give, is that she terrified him.

I understood her misery. Everything had been taken from her, her things, her Ohio court of admirers, the Mormon church she joined in order to get the young elders to mow her lawn, all her friends, and now she was freezing in Minnesota, and competing for my attention with my brilliant wife and our weird kids.

During our year together, there was little she still enjoyed in life. But one day I caught her in the kitchen. She had dropped a wadded-up tissue on the floor and was struggling to bend over and pick it up. Finally she scooted a chair beside it, stooped, and nabbed the bit of fluff.

This whole operation took her about three minutes.

Nothing worked for her any more, but she was damned if she would leave a wadded up Kleenex,

with whatever was on it, where everyone could see it.

Mary died visiting relatives in Kentucky on her favorite day, the feast of Saint Patrick, in 2003. That afternoon she suffered her fourth heart attack. Her kidneys began to fail. The ER doctors, mismanaging her medical records, ignored the DNR note: DO NOT RESUSCITATE. For an hour they shocked her in and out of consciousness.

“They’re doing everything they can,” her stepdaughter said to her, clasping her hand behind the ER drape. “Everything they can” was way too much.

Mary didn’t care. She was sick of everything, and wanted to be with Kathleen again. Death was her prayer by then.

“What can they do to me,” she said to the ceiling, eyes widening in the fluorescent light, “that they have not already done?”

I was asked to give my mother’s eulogy. My goal was to write an honest description of her, but a sweet one, the sort a loving son would write. I

wrote notes for myself on index cards, then put them in the best order. It was a thick stack. I wanted to tell hard truths while professing my deep gratitude to her.

During the talk, things went right for a while. I talked about her love of her friends and family members – her love was fierce, and sometimes painful, but it was no joke. I talked about her place in history – an immigrant’s daughter, grown up on a farm in Michigan with no water or electricity or phone as late as 1960. The Twenties, the Depression, World War II, marrying, having children, divorcing, working three jobs for years to keep us boys fed and shod.

Then I dropped the index cards on the floor, and in my nervousness, was not able to put them back in the right order. I should have numbered them. Instead, I began reading, still early in the talk, about the horrors my mom had seen. I broke down after a few minutes of the distressing parts, and had to stop. I never got to the sweet stuff, how grateful all my life I was for her love. So the cut-in-half eulogy came across as pretty dire.

I read a few cards about Kathy.

One sign of Kathy's weak heart was the fact that she still had her baby teeth at 15. My mother, knowing the value of looking good, arranged for her to have her teeth pulled. The dentist made her sign a waiver, because of the dangers involved. Kathy went into a coma after the procedure and never woke up. My mom had to live with the truth that she had made the decision that cost Kathy her life.

People, hearing this in my funeral oration -- "She was responsible for her own daughter's death!" -- gasped.

In 1964, Mary Mulligan did an odd thing. The family had come apart, with Kathy dying after a trip to the dentist to have her baby teeth pulled, and our dad splitting for California to start over without us.

We were broke. Mary was waiting tables for Dick, and trying to sell Mutual of Omaha to people in Amherst and Oberlin and Elyria. Many nights, even school nights, I would sit in the car in Elyria, hearing the trucks rumble by while she tried

unsuccessfully to scare people about their future, and get them to sign. The leads were never any good.

We needed a hundred dollars a month to make rent, and some months she was a month late. Meanwhile we boys ate, and ate, and split our pants.

Mom would come home from the restaurants after midnight, dump her tips in the repurposed fishbowl, smelling like a french fry, and comb the cigarette smoke from her long, brown hair.

And yet, it was this humiliating moment that she chose to hire a painter to paint her portrait in oil. It was pretty good, kind of a great lady portrait, her standing against a farm field with her hands clasped before her.

It hung in our living room and made us boys uncomfortable.

My mom was beautiful, because she just was. But there was a problem. The painter had made her breasts a titch too big, and being self-conscious, she worried that every eye would go to her bosom.

Portrait painters don't like to be asked for a re-do, but this painter did his best to fix it. The problem was having to undo a part of the body, and replace it with the same background – sky mainly -- without calling attention to it.

If you walked up to the picture, you could see how he painted over her body. So there was an element of shame even in her proud pose.

My friends said it was the kind of picture whose eyes followed you across the room. I could not look at it myself because I would drown in her beauty, and simultaneously drown in the pain she suffered.

And so Kathy went to the dentist, and went into shock, and then into a coma, and then died.

My mother, after all the care she had lavished on her sick daughter, made the decision that caused her to die.

My wife Rachel, who knows about illness, suggested that my mom's diabetes could be connected in part to the grief and horror she felt about her decision.

Interesting to speculate that my mom, who had such disdain for churches, brought this illness upon herself, as her penance.



The Byrds

Concert Tickets

My brother Pat liked playing cards. Though not a social king at school, he was part of a tight-knit group of smart high school boys who played cards and drank some beer and a touch of whiskey. They often did this in my presence. College-bound, all of them.

There was Larry Schulz, son of my English teacher; Jim Davidson, probably the valedictorian, who I think spent a year abroad, in France or someplace; Bill Kish, an irritable but witty young man; and Dave Gilbert, a kind-hearted son of a grocer who one year later would escape to Canada to avoid the draft.

I often have wondered what became of Dave Gilbert.

The boys often brought over folk and rock records that were unfamiliar to me. In particular, they brought over Bob Dylan's very first album, the one with "Gospel Plow" on it. I didn't like it. Dylan sounded like an old man in a front porch rocker. He was singing about old folky things and Woody

Guthrie, none of which I had any connection to. But the next time they came over, I had bought the first album by the Byrds -- "Mr. Tambourine Man," etc. It remains, 50 years later, an absolute killer of a joyous, jangly record. I played the record, and one of the guys, Bill Kish, was thunderstruck. I think he made a mental note: "Finley's brother not as dumb as he seems."

This will sound improbable, but that very month, the Byrds, who the pop world was hailing as the New Beatles, were scheduled to appear at the Cedar Point Ballroom, 50 miles away. The improbable part is that Bill Kish, having no idea how much this would mess me up, bought four tickets, including one for me.

So, on the night of the concert, I found myself sitting in the backseat of Bill's car with his little sister, Kristeen Kish, whom I didn't know.

I recall her as being cute and sweet and smart and shy, sensible but wary of weirdness -- the exact opposite of Julie Miller, with whom I was enmeshed in a frightening love struggle. I smiled nicely at Kristeen, and she smiled prettily back at

me. I asked her if she knew who the Byrds were. She did. This was excellent news.

We stood side by side in the old amusement park ballroom while the Byrds rattled the walls with with their mighty speakers and wrangling guitars. Jim McGuinn, David Crosby, Gene Clark, Chris Hillman, Mike Clark. They looked and played fantastic. I was in the presence of the most Beatle-like rock band America has produced, offering folk rock at precisely the moment (“Help!”) that the Beatles were doing the same exact thing!

It was way, way, way too much. The concert inspired me to think I should always be going to concerts. Every night if possible. Why not: Dick was going to give me his big Buick Special, so I had a car, so all I needed was a girl.

I couldn't imagine taking Julie to see the Byrds. She was bigger than the Byrds, in her own way. She might clap, but then she would talk about how they resembled medieval minnesingers, pitching woo and singing songs about love and social upheaval just like they did below ladies' balconies in the 14th century.

I balked at that prospect. But here's this girl Kristeen. Bill's sister. I didn't know her from school. But now she's standing right beside me. The music naturally makes us tap our shoes and sway, and our fingertips practically touch.

Technically, I told myself, we were on a date. And dancing. A special date where you can't admit you are on a date. A date where you don't even talk to the other person. It was a secret date.

We drove home that night, aware of one another sitting just eight inches apart. We could hear one another's breathing.

Julie found out about my apostasy. "Kristeen Kish?" she cried, looking out the window for some kind of explanation. "Kristeen Kish?"

At this point I got snooty. "What's wrong with Kristeen Kish? She's a nice person. She's cuter than a button! She's really very bright? Have you ever spent time and got to know her? You'd like her! And besides, it's a free world. I can do anything I like! It's in the Constitution!"

To this Julie lifted her bosoms, still clothed, and pointed them at me like persimmons. "Does she

have these?” she cried. She wasn’t taking any of this well.

“We’re in high school,” I reminded her. “People do this sort of thing.”

I left her on her knees, staring into the moonlight like Christ at Gethsemane.

A week later I saw in the paper that the Beatles were coming to Cleveland. All my deepest and weirdest fantasies converged in this single, mindblowing fact.

- I would invite Kristeen. Right away. Like she would turn down free Beatles tickets.
- I would obtain tickets. Four of them, for us plus Paul Plato and Kathy Druga.
- I would drive the mighty Buick Special, of course.
- We would attend the concert, along the first base line, which was how I imagined it.
- We would go the El Zona on Hwy 252 afterward, and order broiled steaks, medium rare, with those wooden signposts they

planted in the meat. Paul had a fake ID and would order us beers -- Champale, the best thing there was.

- We would go neck under the July moon, at the edge of the quarry, the light glinting off the dark waters.

That's how it would go. Only, it didn't.

I was too nervous to invite Kristeen. I figured, once I had the tickets, she couldn't say no.

Cleveland was 35 miles away. I didn't actually have the Buick Special yet. I failed my driving test for a third time.

I didn't have a credit card or checking account. I could hardly call and buy tickets that way.

The tickets disappeared in about 70 minutes anyway. Even if I took a bus into the city, what chance did I stand in an elbow war with fierce urbanites?

Even if I had got tickets, the seats would be in the blimp section of that cavernous public stadium -- 88,000 seats. Any chance of meeting up with the

boys afterwards and mentioning my weird dreams went up in smoke.

The reviews of the concert were bad. The sound didn't travel. People sat behind massive steel beams. The Beatles themselves looked like they would rather be anywhere else in the world than in the vast yawning confines of Cleveland's accursed stadium.

Two more weeks of crummy stadium concerts and the boys would bag live performing forever -- till that one last rooftop blowout.

Even the Byrds would go bankrupt within the year.

I never did call Kristeen. In truth, I did not carry a red-hot flame for her. I just liked her. We continued to say hello to one another whenever we met at school, the memory of our night of blissful folk rock fading in the rain.

Love is so complicated.

I finished the summer, scrubbing out garbage cans and driving Dick's smoking Graveley tractor over our acres and acres of thistles.

Such is a young man's life.

The DOG-FACED MAN.



Freak Show

In my junior year, the dean of men at Marion L. Steele High School, a Mr. Leonard Lyle, gave me and Perry over a hundred detentions for handing out wrapped sugar cubes at a sock hop.

Sugar cubes were the standard medium for LSD in those days. “May this gift give you vision,” we said as we passed the cubes out. The whole school freaked.

I don’t remember how Perry and I paired off. At some point, we must have noticed each other and saw a repeating pattern from his life to my life. We both liked the Stones. We both longed for girlfriends, but neither expected to obtain one any time soon. We both, for different reasons, harbored a deep hostility toward the system around us, and hoped to call attention to the falsity of it all.

Perry and I both had difficult home lives. You know my story by now. Perry’s dad ran off with a younger woman, leaving him alone with his mean, demented, multiple scherosised dystrophied

mother. She was a shrieking, heartbroken woman, and she took out all her miseries on Perry, striking him with her cane sometimes. I saw this happen myself.

Perry, a small, tense boy, withdrew into a world of his own, stocked to the rafters with revenge fantasies. We always headed to his room to play Stones and Yardbirds records. "Under My Thumb" was our favorite. No cheerful Beatles music in that dim room.

Perry and I were always plotting some revolutionary act. One plan was to secede from the U.S. and start our own nation, which we called Pigo. We would charge a toll to people driving by Perry's house. Print money, with a pig on it. Contemplate war, but then demand tribute. None of this was original. I stole it from Leonard Wibberly's *The Mouse that Roared*. But I told Perry it didn't have to be original to be taken seriously.

Word spread that Perry and I were heavy into drugs. We weren't, except, well, one day we bought a pound of Heavenly Blue morning glory seeds at the local grain elevator, boiled them to

wash the blue poison off, mashed the seeds flat with a rolling pin and then gobbled them down with Tang. Then we bused to Lorain under the influence of Poor Man's Psilocybin to see a matinee of *Psycho*.

Nothing happened, apart from our puking up the morning glory mash in a lobby ashtray. I hate to think what seeing *Psycho* on actual LSD would do to a person.

One time, when we were 16, Dick and Mary commanded Perry and me to go with them and the stepkids to the Ohio State Fair in Columbus.

We drove down to Columbus in the van. When we got there, Perry and I, too cool to wander through all the corny parts of the fair, abandoned the family and found our way to the carneys. We thought it would be cool to see a freak show.

We paid our seventy-five cents and tiptoed into a tent, climbed a platform and walked by the two girls, connected at the forehead, lying on a bed in their jammies. They were putting in their shift as the Siamese Twins, passing time by flipping through the same issue of *Little Lulu*. The larger

one pulled out a stick of Jucy Fruit and put in in her mouth.

Shaken, Perry and I tumbled down the out ramp and rapidly walked away. We were sarcastic, obnoxious boys, but we did not speak again for twenty-five minutes.

We became criminals. Mainly we stole comic books and 45s, English Leather, Spiderman comics. And we stole them from mom and pop stores right in our little town of Amherst, Ohio, stores that must have been struggling to make ends meet. Our folks probably knew the owners.

I never felt "guilty" about harming the merchants -- in my mind I already lived in a post-capitalist economy, where theft was natural, and an insistence on "property" was the true crime.

We were anarchists.

I don't know why we did it. I think we were saying something to each other, like Fuck the world. Or, somebody stop us. Or just, howdy, Perry. That's right, we did it to send a signal to one another. To say Hi, Perry. Hi, Mike.

Perry and I were in the Dimensions record shop at Park and Church avenues. The shop was run by a nice couple who by Amherst standards were doing a cool thing, selling rock and roll records along with stereos.

I treated them with such disrespect. I would reach up into the Top 50 display, take out a few records, maybe buy one, but slip a second into a coat pocket. I did this maybe four times in all.

The record I tried to steal was, "She's Coming Home," by the Zombies, a British Invasion band. Kind of a Phil Spector production, it reached #58 on Billboard's Hot 100. Not really worth stealing. The Zombies had so many better songs.

As I was leaving the store with Perry, the owner, Ken, followed us across Church Street. "Boys, can I walk with you?"

We went from smug and cool in a moment to paralyzed.

Ken took us back, had a few words for us. I remember, "You know, we're having a hard time making it." And "Didn't I always treat you guys well? And then you do this?"

He handed the 45 over to the Town of Amherst Police patrolman as evidence. Then the cop drove us to police HQ in the basement of the town hall. And watched on as he called our homes and informed our moms that we had been picked up for petty theft.

The cop was not mean to us, but he let us know, in subtle ways, that we were in the system now, and he had to be dispassionate, even though we were white and college-bound. He put a lot of kids in juvie and he would put us there, too, probably. Perry and I were not placed in a cell. We sat in folding chairs, realizing our lives had changed for the worse.

Our moms pulled up in separate cars.

I don't know what happened in Perry's house, but my mom was operatic in her unhappiness. "What am I going to do with you?" "How can I show my face in this town now?" And "Do you want me to take you to see a psychiatrist?"

I saw the same look on her face I saw when I headed off to the seminary. So strained, on the edge.

I loved my mother, but I hated living under the same roof with her. She had lost so much, Kathy plus my dad. My mom was held together by grief and bandaids.

I think she feared me seeing a psychologist -- not a psychiatrist -- because she was afraid of what was happening in her own head.

And I was in the seminary just eight months earlier. What was the deal?

I spent the next week in an agony of shame. I didn't understand my own self. I waited on tables lethargically. I was dying to tell someone the truth. But I was too ashamed to tell it. I was a bad, really bad person.

This memoir is about these years of confusion and shame. I now, a lifetime later, understand that I was being battered by factors in my life that were severe enough to make the usual responses -- praying harder, promising to do better, sucking it in -- inadequate. The devil energy had to go somewhere.

I didn't really believe in the devil -- ever. Still, something demonic was going on. Kids were becoming criminals.

I am so sorry to the record shop I stole from, which indeed went under a year later. They deserved better for their hard work, risk-taking, and hospitality. I contributed to the loss for our dull little town of a neat resource.

Also, I was struck by how firm the police were to me, but in a respectful way. It must have been a major part of their job description, dealing with teenagers stealing, fighting, raping, racing, vandalizing and taking their lives when things became too much.

Where did all this craziness come from? It didn't use to happen.



Julie Miller

Brain Sexy

I remember the first time I saw her. I was almost 15. I was still rocking from the crimes I had committed and been caught doing. Self-esteem, minimal. Never got that psychological help my mom was terrified I might need.

It was in the Platos' living room. A handful of high school Thespians, a few from the neighborhood breaking set after the last production, which I didn't see. Joyce Plato, who had acted in plays with my sister Kathy, invited me to hang around. And suddenly, Julie Miller was sitting at the upright piano, banging out the chords of "Bringing in the Sheaves."

She made fun of the hymn while doing it every rapturous ounce of justice.

She was such a trip. Her grin was full of joy and power -- and braces, though she gave no sign of caring. She certainly didn't hide 'em. Tossing her head of honey-brown hair, like a benign witch going wild in a movie, tearing at her breasts, a

librarian in full climax, a woman on horseback clearing the hedge.

Julie Miller was brain sexy.

I took her to be the play director, a visiting college girl, someone older than us anyway, hipper, modern, a Zelda drunk without liquor. I thought wow, was I in cool company. In Amherst.

In the fall I started my sophomore year -- having burned my freshman year at the seminary. I was amazed to find her in my classes. It seemed impossible, but she was in my class!

And almost, from the first day, she saw me, remembered me, and decided I was one to watch.

She laughed with teachers as if they were close friends. I found out later that, as granddaughter of the town founder and civic servant, Fred Powers, everyone around saw her as part of the pioneer family. Not fancy royal -- quite the opposite, revered for their solidness.

But it wasn't me who paid attention to her. It was her paying attention to me. To me! To lowly criminal me. As an incoming student, kids were forming long lines to ignore me. But she looked up

whenever I entered the room, and flashed me her gleaming, shameless, crocodilian smile. If there was a joke, she was as likely to direct it to me as anyone.

At first I thought she was being hospitable, or perhaps Joyce asked her to look in on me. Terrible things happen in high schools, even in sweet little Amherst. I was so vulnerable!

But it was more than that. She saw something in me. She favored me above others. It could have been my innate genius, but I suppose it was that she was a teenager and so was I. Our brains were pumping hotly.

Only, my brain was pumping for other people.

Julie, while wonderful, bowled me over with her style and brilliance. When she entered the room she swung her hips and pursed her lips as if she knew everything about everyone in the room.

I loved her attention. Almost every afternoon, after school, I would stop off at her place on Park Avenue on the way to my house on Park Avenue, across Highway 58.

We gossiped about teachers and other students. She knew who was doing what to who and in what position. We drank tea, we listened to the Fugs.

For a year we were school friends. We both lived on Park Avenue, so I would stop off with her and talk about books we'd read -- or not read, in my case -- and people we knew. She loved to gossip, and I learned that I did, too.

English teacher Evelyn Smith invited us to take the Ohio High School Scholarship tests. She scored #2 in the state, because she knew every book that had ever been written. All I really knew was fun writers like Twain and Verne and Dickens. But it was enough for me to score #17.

(Thank you, Mrs. Smith! And Mrs. Schulz as well!)

After that Julie and I were the language and literature celebrities, #2 and #17. To those who paid attention to these things, at least. It wasn't much. But it meant a lot to me. I felt like a big bad butterfly stepping out of a limo. Cool.

Julie did this for me. She made me somebody.

It was a real turnaround for me. I hardly had time to be angry and confused. Because I was acting, I no longer needed to act out.

But I didn't think of her as my girlfriend, even after she made outrageous appeals to me to make a movie. "I have been told I have a heart-shaped ass." Bending over. "What do you think?"

Wide-eyed, I still didn't make a move. I was a pillar of salt. Fifteen years old. My mother told me as a child, "Don't be a bad man." I was not equipped for Julie Miller.

She was so grand, like someone summoned from some other era, like Sarah Bernhardt. When she laughed she put one hand on her breast. Like an Elizabethan lady. You could not look away.

But -- being a shallow youth, I just wanted a regular girlfriend. My sophisticated tastes at that point of my life ran to for cute girls in snug pants. Pleasers, like Gidget or Veronica's friend Betty. Someone I could impress other guys with.

Julie scared me. I could imagine her whipping horses out of a burning barn, then cracking her

whip at the moon. I didn't know what to do with her.

Amid all this glory there had to be losers. It was high school. I looked around at all the other kids. They had their reasons to be afraid, shy, complete unknowns. I was discovered, and they were not. Some had to be having as painful a time as me.

Case in point, Perry, the boy I committed crimes with, and listened to the Yardbirds with. The kid who had to live with his sick crazy mom because his dad took off to St. Louis. No one was discovering him. In fact, his best friend -- me -- just deserted him for another woman.

Years later I found he had become a poker partner with my brother Pat. His mom was dead, and he lived in a railroad shack outside town. I dropped in on him once, and his place was a mess. Beer bottles rolling on the warped floor. Mustard down his T-shirt front. He acted like he didn't know me. Sorry, Perry.

What follows happened just a few years ago, at my desk at Thompson Reuters in Minnesota. I had to pick up the phone when it rang. I didn't want to. I was scared, scared, scared of the call thing. But her family made me do it.

"It would mean so much to her."

"It would free her up to die."

And so I sat in my cubicle at work, with fellow workers on both sides of me, waiting for the family to patch the call to me.

Around 12:15 the call from Amherst came.

The younger sister, Elizabeth Miller, spoke. "I'm putting the phone to her ear, Mike. Just start talking."

This was a surprise. Julie couldn't talk. It wasn't to be a conversation. I had to make everything up. I had to do all this on my own.

I could hear erratic breathing on the other end.

"Hello, Julie," I started. "Liz has been after me for weeks to give you a call, so here I am ..."

I rolled my eyes. What else did I have to say?

“I told Liz,” I went on, “I haven’t even seen you since 1968. That’s almost 50 years. That’s a long time to not see another person. To be honest, I wasn’t sure what I would say.”

Then I heard the breathing quickening on the other end. I knew that sucking in of air. It was her. It was a signal of excitement. It was her.

Julie was breathing quickly though her nose now. It had a rhythm to my ear that I heard as laughing. My co-worker in the next cube, hearing I was on a personal call, grabbed her stuff and left. We were alone now.

“Our brains were pumping hotly.”

That was how I described the heat building between Julie and me on my visits to her house after school. It took months because I was determined not to be ensnared by her. She was so powerful, she so knew what she wanted, and I was just a dumb boy, trying to figure things out.

One night, at her house, she dared me to kiss her, and I did – out on the lawn, under the tall pine in front. Encouraged by darkness, I advanced, took her in my arms and our lips met. It was a good fit. In a minute I went from boy to trouble.

After we kissed I broke from her and ran home like a rabbit under the stars, up the Park Avenue hill and then down again.

What happened next was a complete transformation from what I had been -- the depressed thief member of a family that lost a daughter and a father.

I'm talking to Julie on the phone, in 2014.

"I turned 16, moved one town away, and Dick gave me that car, the Buick Special. Remember that? I would pick you up and we would make out on an overlook by Route 2.

"We would jump out of the car, naked as birds, chase each other in the dark, bouncing up and down, and then maul each other over the trunk."

Then we went away to different colleges. I once hitchhiked a hundred miles to see you in Ashtabula, remember? And your roommates all cleared out so we could go to town. You were a woman now, and I was something like a man.

Then in the morning I hitched away, like Heathcliff with his thumb out, and I never saw you again. That was 1969.

I heard you married, and divorced. I heard you were in Boston. I learned you became a psych nurse, taking care of people without money. I learned you could reach them when no one else could. Because you yourself were bipolar.

I learned you had switched sides and married a woman you loved, and you had a daughter together, who is a doctor now.

You know the rest. We talked on the phone one time, before you got sick. When my daughter died, you called to help me through. I told her I had nothing left. You told me I had lots.

And then you got sick, and here we are, and here I am doing all the talking.”

There was a long pause, during which we both breathed and choked.

“I just want to tell you one thing, Julie Miller,” I said. “You were such a friend to my life. You showed me who I could be. You also showed me who you were. And that was beautiful.

“For that I will always love you, Julie, with thanks in my heart and tears in my eyes.”

I hung up the receiver. Four days later your brain tumor swept you away.

Julie lured me into acting. We had a powerhouse drama coach, a lively woman named Kaye Oblinger.

I don't remember her actually giving me instructions. She sat in back, letting Julie and me find our way. I still talk to her today on Facebook. I hope she knows how important she was to me.

I played Vincentio to her Katerina (*Taming of the Shrew*). Later, we would win some Northeast Ohio Drama Award for a Checkov one-act, *The Marriage Proposal*. David Cotton, the suitor in the play, held

onto the trophy for 50 years, then mailed it to me for the next 50. Thanks, Dave.

At Marion L. Steele, kids were raw and restless but still pretty square. My rebellion was more out there, done when no one was looking. I only grew my hair long in my senior year, to portray the Marlon Brando role of Sakini the Okinawan interpreter in *Teahouse of the August Moon*.

The dean of men, Leonard Lyle, wanted to know why long hair was necessary for a play set in post-World War II Japan. I told him we were using the Okinawan setting to explore contemporary youth attitudes. Sneak up on it, you know? Thus the hair.

He gave me so many detentions I could not complete them until after I graduated. So I switched schools and left all my friends behind.

It was in detention hall that I began writing. Mostly it was dark, self-involved surrealistic stuff. I remember driving to Oberlin and buying a collection of Federico Garcia Lorca poems at the campus bookstore. Then, on a bus trip to

Cleveland, I saw a literary magazine -- my first -- on a bookstore counter on Chester Avenue.

It was red-orange day-glow 8x14 mag in Cleveland called *Weed*. The editor, a sophisticated young man living in Pepper Pike on Cleveland's east side named Peter Dragin, was the editor. People like Tuli Kupferberg were published in it. All this was very inspiring to me. I sent a bizarre, 5-page poem to him called "Love Poem to a Cuspidor." It was a very theatrical breast-beating thing, using lots of thees and thous. In the end I drink what's in the cuspidor.

Cuspidor is a fancy word for spittoon.

I learned then that, to get published in that rebel era, you couldn't hold back.

Weed was denied area arts funding when a poem in it described "old men masturbating with leaves." Didn't get me off, but the Plain Dealer called it prurient. Allen Ginsberg came to Oberlin, just a few miles south of me, and read the offending poem asked what the big deal was. "That's not bad, you know" he said. "It's not good, but it's not bad."

Because of Peter I learned about our local lowercase poet, d. a. levy. Levy was the city's poetic punching bag, constantly being arrested for obscenity or corrupting the young.

I remember a snippet of courtroom dialogue he was part of. The judge asks levy how much he made writing poetry, and levy answers, about eight cents. To which the judge replies, "You should charge more."

I even did get to visit Peter one day, at his folks' home in upscale Pepper Pike. It was country mouse and city mouse all over again. My tastes (Simon & Garfunkel and the Beatles) must have seemed quaint to him, whereas I marveled at everything he played for me -- a sonorous, swooping John Fahey guitar LP ("The Great San Bernardino Birthday Party"), an anthemic collection of songs by a fellow with a bottle cap over one eye, Tim Buckley ("Hello Goodbye") and the first Jefferson Airplane album ("Takes Off"), a raving set of folk blues with Signe Tolle Anderson declaring powerfully "It's No Secret" (how strong my love is for you.)

I immediately adored the Airplane, they were raw and smart and passionate, with a definition of *love* that went way beyond boy-girl-backseat. It was a code for a new way of living, and I wanted to live it.

Peter and I are Facebook friends.



Dick, center, surrounded by Mort and Fran Plato

Dick's Mix Tape

When I was six, my mom, who was a waitress, went to work for Dick Konieczkowski -- he just went by Dick Konik -- a man who ran a restaurant on Lake Erie called the Holiday Inn.

It wasn't the Holiday Inn you are thinking of. In those days trademarks were not a big thing, and any business could be called anything. The restaurant was built in 1952, and came with a motel in back, also called Holiday Inn.

Dick was returning from Korea, where he had been a medic, dragging injured soldiers to MASH units. Now he was cashing in on a well-heeled immigrant father, Frank Konieczkowski, who had been a bootlegger during Prohibition, bringing whiskey across Lake Erie from Canada, and selling it to taverns and serving it in his own speakeasy in Kamm's Corners, called the Black Horse Tavern. Black Horse was the English translation for the family name, Konieczkowski.

It was Frank's dream to set up his three Polish kids in a business on Cleveland's west side, which he

gambled was about to boom. It never did. But Dick's restaurant and his brother Bob and sister Elaine's motel did alright. Enough to pay my mom minimum wage to serve burgers and beer to line workers from the nearby Ford plant.

If you ever wondered why your right passenger wheel came off as you drove it off the dealer's lot, back in the day, blame it on our quarts of beer.

Dick tended bar in a white shirt, detachable tie, black vest and dress slacks you might see on an old man at church. He looked like a Polish restaurateur.

A boss-waitress relationship with my mom deepened over the years. Nothing salacious, but when Kathy died, Dick showed up with a trunkful of cold cuts and salads for the reception. That was Dick all over -- I have never known anyone who worked so hard to buy people's love, or people so pleased to grant it. People adored Dick Konik.

Two years later my mom and dad split, and we began seeing Dick on a more regular basis. To a family that had lost two family members, his

generosity and his otherness -- being outside the family, but somehow, always, inexplicably on our side.

Then things heated up. Dick took our mom out on dates. He took us all out of dates, taking us to Chinese restaurants in his old neighborhood. We got to know him. He hovered on the brink of obnoxious, calling waitresses "honey," talking in the loudest voice in the place, telling the managers jokes you should not tell in a crowded dining room, running up tabs, paying in cash, always leaving extravagant tips, which he would pull from a bulging bankroll.

Our little family was white-knuckled with money problems -- where was the \$100 past-due rent check coming from? For Dick, money was a joke.

I eventually learned he conducted much of his businesses on a cash basis. No receipts, minimal tax paperwork, lots of bribes and baksheesh. That was Northeast Ohio -- Chicago without the tall buildings. Most transactions -- he ran an excavating and trucking business as well as the restaurant -- were on a cash and handshake basis.

He was kind of a crook, but a beneficent one. To my knowledge, he never had anybody whacked.

Dick was an old-style immigrant don, hiring hundreds of new arrivals and feeding their Polish families until they learned a little English and got better jobs.

When he died and my mom tried to take his place, she learned that none of the customers, all men of that Mustache Pete generation in Cleveland, Lorain, Elyria and Amherst, wanted to shake her hand. She was a woman. She was no fun -- truly, she wasn't. His little empire folded in a matter of months. We never figured out where he stashed enormous gobs of his money. No insurance. No retirement fund. Our mom began seeing herself as a shopping cart lady, dragging her dogs by the highway. But that was later.

He always called me Michael, even when I was 11, and went to work weekends in his kitchen, scrubbing steak fat off dinner plates. He always treated me with respect, which astonished me. My real dad never did.

Dishwasher is by far the best job in a restaurant. The cooks are going crazy keeping up with orders. The waitresses are trying to remember who wanted French dressing, who wanted Italian. The bartender is mopping away the sweat from listening to stories and running up totals.

But standing amid steam and running water and the clank of pots and plates, the dishwasher warms his blood at the wrists. He has all the time in the world to clear the sink. Everyone is yelling, but he doesn't hear.

Dick's big windfall came in the 60s, when Holiday Inns of America bought his name to secure their trademark. That was in 1966, the year the Beatles came to Cleveland, the year Dick and our mom got married in his dad's black brick mansion living room on the Metropolitan Gorge, and we all moved to a house he had built for us out of second-hand wood in Vermilion, the next town over. I had a hand in building it, pounding a bucket of nails at irregular angles into the roof -- all

building materials acquired from teardowns, costing him dimes at the most.

Marrying into Dick's Polish family meant I suddenly had step-siblings, cousins, and a vast network of other Polish families, the kind that had priests bring communion to your extended dinner table at midnight on Christmas Eve.

Everyone treated me and my brothers great. The men played Sixty-Six, a card game that even my brother Pat (a serious card player) had never played

Pat's book of card games, which I found in a box, describes the game:

Sixty-Six is a fast 5- or 6-card point-trick game of the marriage type for 2–4 players, played with 24 cards. It is thus an Ace-Ten game. First recorded in 1718 under the name Mariagen-Spiel, it is popular in Germany, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia.

Now imagine having all that explained by drunken Polish uncles, licking their lips at the prospect of taking all your matchsticks from you.

Moving to Vermilion meant I had to change schools.

I got my driving license, despite having Dick sit alongside me during practice runs, losing his cool whenever I cut a corner too soon or sped through a changing light.

Dick had a strange brain. He was mildly dyslexic -- though we did not know that word then -- and he was emotionally highly eruptive. He was always losing his temper, and it was always personal: What are you doing? Are you crazy? Where do you think you are? He would literally throw his hands up in the air and shake his head as if the situation were hopeless.

And then, after 30 seconds passed, he would be tranquil and even-tempered again. The sun came out and birds began to cheep. Nobody took his rants seriously. If you did you would lose everything. Yelling was just his way.

When he married our mom, Dick gave me his car, an incredible 8-stroke 1956 Buick Special. It was more of a tank than a car. Everyone who has been

a teenager at some point knows how transformational this moment is. I went from nobody to somebody, from peasant to knight.

It was in this Buick that I challenged by workteam at Jungle Larry's to stop at the Sandusky McDonalds and hold a hamburger eating contest afterwards. I challenged classmate Ty Darrow, who went on to star as a linebacker at Ohio State, to the contest. He had 40 pounds on me. I stopped at 38 hamburgers, and someone noticed bits of sandwich beside my car seat, and Ty was ruled the winner. "There was a bone in that one," I protested, vainly. I was disgraced, and nauseous.

I used that Buick to get to school, to bug out early, to cruise Main Street, to transport alcohol to friends on the bluff overlooking Highway 2, then drove drunkenly the two miles to home. I asked girls out on dates, and got bolder with them and scarier to their parents. I was bad news. I had a car. Anything can happen in a car.

Julie and I would jump out of that car, down in some dark hollow somewhere, aggressively naked, in the dark, and maul each other. I remember her

smell. I loved her smell. I raved at the moon. I pounded her like sand.

Dick was a generous man. He had to be, because handing out cash was the only way he knew to tell people he loved them. It was how he showed what was in his heart. He spoiled everyone he loved rotten.

All my life he was there for me, usually silently, pressing a secret wad of twenties into my hand when shaking it. In the late early 80s, during the recession connecting the Carter and Reagan administrations, when I was struggling to get by in New Haven, he gave me a heavy duty pickup truck, for hauling broken cement. I had no broken cement to haul, but I sensed the intent behind his gift and quickly sold the truck for \$700.

When he asked how it was working out I told him, slightly abashed, that I had sold it. "How much did you get?" he wanted to know.

"Seven hundred," I said.

"That's twice what you could get in Lorain County," he said to me. "You did good, Michael. Real good."

Dick was a fabulous teller of jokes. I stole this one from him and have told it thirty times:

A man named Charlie is sitting on a stool. In comes his friend Harry, who notices he has this big, black shiner. He says "Charlie -- what happened?"

"Oh, says Charlie, I got it in church."

"You what?"

"Yeah, I was in church, and we was singing this hymn, and I looked in front of me, and the dress of this woman kind of crept up, you know, so it was kind of stuck up in there. So when I pulled it out, I got this."

"Oh Charlie," Harry says, "you gotta promise me you'll never do that again. So next week, in comes Harry, and Charlie's got two shiners. "Charlie, what happened?"

"Well," says Charlie, "I did just like what you said. I was in church, and the same woman was standing

in front of me during the hymn. And I looked at her dress, and it was hanging down straight and normal, and I knew she liked it tucked up in there, so ..."

When he sold the restaurant and focused on his trucking and excavating business, he became truly happy. Like a little boy, he loved the trucks and bulldozers and dirt, and he loved working with rough, inarticulate, grown men like himself instead of chatty teenaged waitresses.

That was when Dick blossomed. Polish immigrants clustered about his feet as he dispensed jobs and other favors. His men were phenomenally loyal to him. If you ever got into trouble -- an arrest, a divorce, a death in the family -- Dick was there for you, with cash in hand.

The things he was unable to put into words burned in his commitment to other people's happiness and fulfillment. He was like a godfather to over a hundred families, the beneficent lord, and he would do anything for them, and the feeling was mutual.

When I was 15 Dick gave me a tough assignment: "Spend the afternoon babysitting Bill Puzzola, why doncha. Make sure he doesn't drink."

Bill was an over-the-road trucker/contractor for Ford Motor, drove loaded car carriers from the auto plants to dealers in the Midwest and border states. Between trips he was a patron of our saloon, and a devoted friend to the family.

Buffalo Bill Puzzola was a fiery, tiny, comical guy. He held no uncertainty about any topic, and yet he seldom seemed right about much. There was something wrong with his voice, a stammer, like he had to coax every word out, emphasizing every seventh syllable. But he was quite loud.

Example:

"I told your mom I'm lookin' OUT for youse guys. And I'm not ABOUT to let her down. Because your mom is like a QUEEN to me."

I have never heard any speech pattern like it in any other human being. It might have been the result of drinking. I know he had been in and out of detox. Maybe he got punched in the throat, I don't

know. The defect, plus the drinking, made him seem a bit subhuman, like the dog that wants to go in, then out. People that knew him loved him, but others may have seen him as the dog. He got into a lot of fights with men twice his size.

He was an impossible alcoholic. I was only 15, so I had no idea what that was exactly. His friends and family all loved him to pieces. But they also hated him for his slavery to the bottle, which eventually ruined most relationships. My mom, who knew something about alcoholics, pitied his family.

So I had to drive Bill to a meeting, on my permit. He seemed very moved by the sharing -- I didn't go in -- but on the way home he said, "Hey, Michael -- pull over here. I GOT to get a magazine. I gotta get Field and STREAM!"

But -- it was a package store. I called after him to come back, but he didn't until he'd purchased three bottles of Richard's Wild Irish Rose.

It is hard for a kid to come across as stony, but I drove home with my jaw set in judgment.

"I'm really disappointed in you, Bill," I said. "You make me look bad to Dick. And now I can't ever trust you again."

Bill was surprised by the grief I was giving him, and said nothing. Later, I'm at our house and there's a knock on the storm door. It's Bill.

"Michael," he says, very agitated, his hands shaking. "I just wanna TELL you that you made me feel ASHAMED today."

He beckoned me to follow him. He led me across the truck bridge in our back lot to the mechanic's barn. He still had the paper bag that the wine came in, but the bag looked a hundred years old, like he had been twisting the brown paper in anguish all afternoon.

One after the other, he took out the three bottles of Wild Irish Rose and dashed them on a flagstone. The wine bubbled up and melted into the gravel.

"That's what you did to me, MICHAEL. And I'm quitting for good this TIME, thanks to you!"

Of course, he didn't. He couldn't. I went off to college and he went downhill, dying from alcohol poisoning before he turned 50.

I have wondered, were those even the same three bottles he'd bought earlier that day? Wouldn't be hard to drink them down, and make the switch. But even that was an act of love. He thought the world of me and my brothers, and our mom, and Dick. And he didn't want anything he did to set us back in any way.

He was one of a couple dozen saloon customers that were part of my life. They were quiet, harmless, mostly single men who stopped by every night and bought drinks and limped home in their cars at closing time. Dave, Smitty, Mister Stevens, Happy Newyear, Art Musgrave.

They smiled bashfully at my mom, who was not just a queen for Wild Bill Puzzola. She was all their queens.

By 1989, at 60, Dick was one of the best-known and best-liked men in the county. People who understood his popularity but didn't know the man talked about him running for Congress. He was youthful, vigorous, and powerful. But he

didn't feel right, and began talking in a way uncharacteristic of him, self-concerned and fretful.

When my mom would tell us on the phone that something was wrong, we reassured her that Dick was strong as a horse, and nothing could bring him down. But when we visited that summer, he seemed changed -- inward, and angry.

One day we arranged to drive 80 miles in two cars to see Shamu the killer whale at Sea World. But something went wrong and we were unable to meet up again at Sea World. Rachel and I and our two kids wandered through the area looking for them for a couple of hours, without success.

Bewildered, we drove back to the house. Late that night, Dick and my mom returned, and Dick was in a hideous mood, seething with rage. As he passed me in the kitchen he gave me a look that would kill small animals. He was a different person than the man we knew.

Several months later Dick and Mary called a family meeting, at a Holiday Inn in Beloit, Wisconsin. Every faction of the extended family showed up, for a discussion of the division of family wealth.

Dick had it in his mind that he was going to die, and wanted everyone to be clear on the flow of goods.

Again, we went into denial, pooh-poohing his concerns. But he did look tired and out of sorts. It was a time for the next generation to step up and show leadership, but none of us felt worthy. Dick was finally diagnosed as having a brain tumor.

His doctor -- Dick preferred going to his local doctor because he knew him, and he didn't know the specialists in Cleveland, so how good could they be? -- assured us that it was, in all likelihood, non-cancerous.

You have probably heard this story before.

Dick's doctor dithered for almost a year, relying on CT scans rather than the more sensitive MRI. By the time we got the MRI scan, the tumor was cancerous as hell, an astrocytoma invading his cranium like a killer starfish.

That starfish dragged Dick down through a miserable last couple of years, and finally to an awful death, crying out in bed, pounding with his fists, as the last great stroke swept him away.

But I will say this, that once he understood his diagnosis, his personality sweetened again. The reason it sweetened was the same reason it deteriorated in the first place -- because the tumor was pressing against his prefrontal lobe, where the emotions are housed. Because of the pressure, he lost his customary control of his emotions.

That was why, despite a lifetime of temper squalls that quickly passed, he bore a grudge over the Shamu affair. And it was why, as the tumor tightened its grip around his life, his unwillingness to confront people directly and tell them how he felt -- and to slide them twenty dollar bills instead -- melted away, revealing a man in love with almost everyone he knew.

Dick talked my mom into allowing him to die in the house he and I and forty other Polacks built, but it was wearing her out, and she needed a break every now and then.

Dick needed help walking, being fed, going to the bathroom. And it was a 24-hour watch. For several

days I took my mom's place, sleeping beside him, waking up a half dozen times every night. Other times he was comfortable and we had great talks about dying and dreams. He wanted me to be there when he died, and hoped it could be soon. Being chicken, I wanted to be on the other side of the earth.

As the attack on his brain deepened, Dick changed. A wall separating his lobes broke loose inside him. The feelings he could never admit to -- "That's the bullshit!" -- rose up in long, wild dreams that he would describe in detail later. They were often very beautiful.

His health and appearance deteriorated. Chemotherapy took his hair. Radiation took much more. To shrink the tumor, they overheated his head, and destroyed some of his salivary glands and tear ducts, and converted his raspy voice, and the laugh you could hear halfway across the county, to a whisper.

The tumor did a number on his coordination -- his long stride was replaced shuffling baby steps. It seemed he was forever sipping water, to irrigate the dry passages.

One day I witnessed something remarkable -- a barber giving a hairless man a haircut.

Dick didn't have a hair on his head after chemo, not one. But he liked talking to Dave, who also sold insurance and awnings.

Dave would pretend to snip hair for half an hour or more, chatting about the kids today, or an open lot on the outskirts of town where a supermarket might go. And Dick would nod, or grunt with half open eyes.

He had no words left in him, but he was pleased to be served, to be the man again, it made him feel that ghost hair was still coming out of him, unstoppable, wild.

When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess off, shook the cloth off on the porch, let nothing ride away on air.

It struck me that he and my mother, who had an on-again, off-again love in their marriage, became very close in their last year together. She, the

self-educated sophisticated lady, and he, the rough-and-tumble man's man, became best friends at the end.

My mom was always prudish about matters sexual or even physical. Yet at the end, she set aside all her airs, and when he was unable to get to the bathroom by himself, she took his penis and placed it in the urinal jar herself, while he let go.

It was the last thing I expected her to be comfortable doing, and she did it quietly and with grace.

I had some extraordinary talks with Dick in the last months of his life. He spent much of his days sitting in the quiet wearing dark glasses. The dimmest light seemed glaringly bright to him, and high-pitched noises, like my one-year old son Jon's wailing voice, could set off rapid, upsetting aural seizures.

He liked to sit by the picture window, watching the finches and warblers flit by the bird feeder. And he liked to discuss his dreams.

And he liked to discuss his dreams. A recurring one began with him waiting outside the house at

dusk on a summer evening. He was healthy in the dream, and whole. Soon a long black car would pull up by the Lake Road, and inside were George Raft, the actor who played gangsters, and Al Capone. They would gesture for him to climb in, and they would speed off down the two-lane backroads through the farmsteads of Brownhelm Junction, Henrietta, and the Firelands. Along the way Capone would do the talking.

"And you know," Dick said, "people don't understand Al Capone. Everyone makes out like he's this bad guy. But they're wrong. He's OK. He might of done some bad things a long time ago, but I know him. I talked to him. In his heart, he's OK." It didn't take a Jungian to see that Dick was coming to terms with his own failures in life, through Capone, and finding it in his heart to forgive himself.

We talked about death. It disturbed him that no one in the family was comfortable discussing it with him. But he knew he was dying, and he felt he was the only one of us working through the implications.

"What do you suppose happens when you die?" I asked him.

He looked at me levelly. "I'm going to be with Jesus, and my mother," he said, with a gulp. "And your sister Kathleen."

I wondered out loud if he needed anything from me -- help in ending his ordeal. "If you decide you can't go on any longer, and you need help, I can help."

Dick smiled. "No, I'll -- I'll land this thing myself. Thank you though. Thank you for offering."

He began to sob. "I never knew it could be like this between people."

My last visit to Ohio was for a huge farewell picnic in the 20 acre backyard. It was just like the picnics of old, when Dick would smoke a hundred pounds of kielbasa on green applewood, and enough Coho salmon to fill a tent.

The day before the picnic Dick was still getting about the house in his small two-inch steps. But when the people began to arrive, he felt his

strength return, his voice deepen, and late in the afternoon, as the accordionist played, he stood with my mother among the scrub pines and danced a stately Slavic waltz.

That weekend he counseled me. "You know, Michael, in this life you need to think with this head," he said, tapping his left temple, "not this one," he said, pointing below his waist.

"I think some of my problems are because I think too much with this head," I said, indicating the upper one.

"Yeah, that would be you, all right," he smiled. I nodded. "You know, Michael, I always loved you," he said, his voice catching, and his dried out eyes weeping tearlessly.

"Like you were my own son, that much. Never anything but proud of you."

I remember crying on the way home from high school, years earlier, because at that time I had no father to show my accomplishment to. But look at what Dick told me that day on his bed in Ohio.

When I said the Buick Special was the nicest gift I ever got, that wasn't quite true. What he told me that day on his bed in Ohio, that was the best.



Sr. Marian Coughlin

To Sister Marian in Chardon

In recent years I have struck up a snailmail correspondence with the nun who ran the elementary school i attended in the 1950s. Which I find just amazing. This morning I made a list of some of the teachers i remember from those years. I didn't write this to be on Facebook, but I got carried away with the the notion that the sisters gave us kids a great life gift -- and you can hear that in my words.

I came to St. Joseph midway through the second grade (1957), and got Sr Mary Richard. She was "old school" -- she thought I was a dirty boy and she sometimes washed my face with a cloth in front of the class. She pinched my ears, too. My reading was off the charts, so I felt like a graduate student. I remember teaching Michael Plato how to draw "kidney bean" figures.

The Platos were our neighbors, and like a second family to Pat and me. Michael was my best friend, and later, his big brother Paul. I am still in touch with Joyce, and Michelle, and Geralynn.

Third grade (1958) -- Miss Jacobi. She was very bright, and I think it was her idea to "skip" me to the fifth grade. Pat was being skipped the same year, so maybe they thought it would be good for me to skip, too, within the family. Someone put sugar in Miss Jacobi's gas tank and wrecked her car. I really liked her.

Fifth grade (1959) -- Miss Shuler -- I began to suspect I was ADD at this time (I didn't know the word, but I could tell there was something funny about my attention span. I was as smart as anyone, but I often forgot to do my work. I only wanted to do things that were fun. I didn't have a very analytical or mathematical mind, but I was very good at fanciful things.

Sixth grade (1960) -- gosh, I can't remember. Was there a Sister Leocadia at St. Joseph? There was someone by that name that I liked somewhere.

Seventh grade (1961)-- a very kind and able woman named (I think) Sr. Justine. She was one of my favorites -- I can see her but i can't remember her name.

Eighth grade (1962) -- you, Sr. St. Patrick, or as you are now called, Sr. Marian Coughlin. You were in charge of the school, and you kept a lid on everything. Your voice was a little low and that gave you authority. You never "flipped out," even though you were surrounded by rioting children. People did not want to annoy you. So no running in the halls, place your wet boots against the wall, and no roughhousing in the parking lot/playground. You were like an eagle, always scanning the landscape for things that were out of synch. What I remember most is that you treated me respectfully, as if I were a person.

Your respect felt nice, but also humbling, because I knew I was really just a kid.

I had no relationship whatsoever to the pastor, Fr. Leimbach, even though he heard my confession 50 times, even though I went off to seminary -- he didn't seem aware it was happening.

He wasn't mean. He was unsuited to the work he did. He had a pinched nasal voice that undercut him, and he had some eccentric ideas about food and digestion. ("Chew milk.") Maybe if I had been an altar boy, he would have known who I was. I

got the feeling he didn't want much to do with the school -- that that was the sisters' realm.

Fr. Turin, the assistant pastor, had better social skills, was smoother, maybe more "modern." But I didn't know him much.

Back then, parents didn't stop and consider just how formative a group of teachers would be with their child. Kids as they grow up forget many kindnesses, but sure as shooting they remember the bad stuff. One theme of mine is that every front door shuts off a family in pain. Some kids were just barely able to get to school every day. And for their suffering the rest of us made fun of them, or excluded them. Weird things were happening everywhere, and the only measure of normal came from this crazy center, the practices of the Church.

The sisters were doing it for God, and for the church, and a bit for Amherst, Ohio. They suffered on purpose to do a good thing.

My seventh grade teacher at St. Joe's was the principal of the school, Sr. St. Patrick. She was a

tall, beautiful, cool, kind nun. Her name there was Sister Patrick. Later on in life she took back her birth name -- Sister Marian Coughlin.

She was especially attentive to my sister Kathy before she died, and remarked to me that Kathy was very deep spiritually, that she had accepted that the meaning of her life, which would end at 15, was to suffer silently and be kind to others.

When I quit the seminary, and quit being Catholic, I never told Sister Patrick. Decades passed. One day in the early 2000s she found me on Facebook. She was as earnest and faithful as ever. I couldn't bring myself to tell her I had lapsed and believed Jesus should be brought up on charges of fraud. "Ask and you shall receive," my ass.

And I forgot, as I posted endless, often cynical notes to the world on Facebook, about politics, society and other gritty stuff, that she was sitting in the audience.

She also saw my creative work -- stories, poems, and the like. Suddenly she was there, commenting on a surrealistic poem. Her comment:

“Free verse is certainly a release for those who can express themselves so potently!”

Isn't that a funny thing to say! It was weird to think an 89-year-old nun was stalking me online, but she was very pleasant about it, despite her traditionalist avoidance of informal, unrhymed poetry -- the stuff I write.

So I wrote her this rhyming, unrhymed response:

I know you are trained to fend off thanks
Especially when the form is so wild.
But know that I kept all the prayers and letters
You have sent me since I was a child.

In the 50s teaching free verse was unthinkable –
So lazy, so deserving of shame.
That is not the way they teach you to teach
At the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

We kids in eighth grade admired you so
You taught us to live our lives as if
Jesus were always in the room with us

Hanging in back with St. Joseph.

At times you seemed like a mother
To us, although we called you Sister.
You cared, you corrected us when we were bad –
You always were our teacher.

I read that sisters live long lives
And are less susceptible to dementia.
The work, the purpose, the service to others
And all that that meant to you.

What if I had lived like that!
How it must sustain the body and mind
Those years not getting minimum wage
You were in heaven the whole time.



Our favorite family, the Platos. Z-wise from the back: Michael, Paul (blue line), Joyce, Eric (middle), Gerri, Mort (the dad) Shelley, martin and Frannie (the mom)

Sharp Dresser

Our neighborhood, growing up, was two old houses on adjacent hills, with a development of new houses hemming us in. The two old houses, feeling pressured by the new people in the development, became very close. We were the Finleys. They were the Platos, a wing of pioneer family in Lorain County. The name of the town, as early as the 1820s, was not Amherst, but Plato.

But us kids didn't know about this past glory. We just hung out. The kids in our house loved the kids in the other house, and we all had doubts about our fathers.

Their father, Mort Plato, was the sort of man who slept in his underpants on the living room couch. He held many positions over the years, from meter read to steelworker to shopkeeper. He could be hilarious, insisting on the actual nature of things. Sometimes he crossed a line and became mean.

Here is a story showing Mort's parenting approach. Gerri, 17, was on a date with her boyfriend. They

were driving down Amherst's Ridge Road, on the west end of town.

The boyfriend, showing off, took his hand off the wheel on a turn. The car spun out of control. Gerri flew through the windshield and kept flying -- ninety feet in all. It took police two days just to find her, far away in the corn. She was unconscious, in a coma, and had broken nearly every major bone in her skeleton. She could have fit in a jar.

Two months she hovered between life and death, first in a hospital bed and later at home. On the 66th day she sat upright and stared goggle-eyed at the casts encasing her.

"Oh my gosh," she cried, "what have I done?"

Her dad, reading a paper beside her in a chair, responded, without looking up: "You missed a lot of work."

That was the dad. But this is the story of his oldest son and my best friend growing up, Paul Plato.

Paul was two years older than me -- normally a disadvantage to boys being friends. As the elder boy, it was his right to accept or reject the younger

one. For some reason -- I became a kind of validating sidekick, like Pancho in the Cisco Kid or Alan-A-Dale -- he always let me tag along. And I was nearby.

Paul was a cool customer. Thin and dreamy, he had a job at Louis Cohn's, a clothier in nearby Lorain, so he knew how to dress sharp. Girls swooned for him, and I guess I did, too. I was proud that he let me hang out with him.

I helped him with his paper route, biking the Chronicle-Telegram up Park Avenue, Broadway, Taylor, Tenney, concluding in our downtown, at the Hobby Shop, where we sometimes ordered the tiny pizzas that were frozen, then toasted in a tabletop oven. To us that was rocket technology. We talked about model cars and tested the Marine Band harmonicas, which should have made them unsellable, but didn't.

Every month he had to collect, and that meant going to each door and asking for money. It was the worst part of the job. You could hear people fighting inside, or slipping out the back door, or they would open the door and see what a horror the house was. "Can I pay you next week?" The

answer was always “Sure.” No way a couple of kids could shake down the dimes that were owed. It was the Chronicle-Telegram’s problem. They wouldn’t crack down, as they needed the house for circulation numbers.

Paul went Divine Word Seminary in Girard, Pennsylvania in 1962. I have always wondered why he did this. Maybe he needed to get out town, as I would a year later. He was an altar boy and one of the regulars. My stint was at a different seminary, in the opposite corner of Pennsylvania, in Bucks County. He lasted two years. I lasted one. We never talked much about the “sem.” It seemed very uncool once we were sprung. We both attended the public high school, alongside Lutherans and Pentecostals and such. Nobody seemed to care about any of that. We were teenagers.

We never biked any more. Neither did we wear hats or gloves in the winter, even though the wind off Lake Erie was enough to strip your skin off. A hallmark of our style was that we seldom told the truth, to one another or to ourselves.

We walked the suburban lanes and circles through our neighborhood at night, sometimes stopping at Essig's bottle shop for Swisher Sweets, which, being underage, we were obliged to steal.

I remember one night we talked about sex. This is the only time the topic came up in our years together. We were walking languidly down Butternut Drive.

"Do you think you would do it?" I, being 15, asked.

"I would definitely try it once," Paul told me, "just to see what it's like."

I thought, what a judicious, almost scientific response that was. Of course, we were lying again. Neither of us had had any sex, but it was on the docket. Paul, being a lord right out of an El Greco painting, would go on to be one of the legendary lovers of our town. He loved girls, and later, women, and they loved being with him.

Just once, indeed.

Paul owned an acoustic white steel-string guitar, with a plug-in. He was not an especially good player, but he was 1,000 times better than me. The hits that year were stupendous -- "Mister

Tambourine Man,” “Hanky-Panky,” “Paint It, Black.” We practiced a few tunes, like “It’s All Over Now” and “You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling” in his dad’s den. I borrowed his guitar a few times and tried to make sounds at home like I heard on records. I could not.

We talked about starting a band, even though, as with the Beatles, I showed zero natural musical ability. I could sing, a bit. I styled myself before the hall mirror as an R&B singer like Jagger or Eric Burden or the Righteous Brothers. You know how it is: until you record your voice, you have no idea how dinky you really sound like. I was a simple tenor convinced I could sing way down low like Bill Medley.

We finally got an opportunity, at a school hootenanny. Folk, not amplified. We worked up a duet of “Hangman, Hangman, Hangman” to perform in the high school gym. But humiliation struck. Midway through the song I forgot the next stanza, and we came to an abrupt stop.

Astonishingly, we changed the act in no time, going into a Smothers brothers spoken routine about whose fault it was. We just played ourselves,

arguing with one another in a friendly way. People thought we did it on purpose, and therefore, “outside the frame,” ironic. After that, Paul and I were inseparable, until I went off to college, and my family moved to the next town over. I didn’t see Paul for a year and a half.

In 1968, when I was living in a hippie commune in LA, he left a message for me at my dad’s place. He wanted me to drive him to the ship in San Pedro that would take him to Vietnam.

I felt like I was saying goodbye to him forever. The 60s had plucked us apart.

After his stint in Vietnam, Paul went to work as a truck driver for my stepdad Dick, so I had the chance to see him from time to time, when I would come to visit. We always found a place to drink beer and get high. It pleased me no end that I was still somebody to him. We still had adventures, such as the time he and I stole Dick’s truck back from the impound lot, and a Highway Patrolman came knocking on my folks’ door the next morning.

In his 40s he pulled up his shirt to show me something on his chest. I saw a round pattern over his heart that resembled a purple Mayan calendar, crablike, crenelated like turret in a castle. It was some kind of cancer. Radiating through his skin.

At first the theory was that it was mesothelioma from all those barrels of chemicals he trucked around for Dick in Lorain County. Northeast Ohio is a cancer hotspot, nearly everybody got it. When rivers routinely burst into flame, you know there are public health issues.

But that was a wrong theory. Paul's this cancer was caused by Agent Orange, which took so many boys like Paul that went off to Vietnam to save democracy and came back ruined. Sweet-sad Paul nodded and pulled his shirt back down.

Paul lived for the Rolling Rock, the fresh-stoked pipe of dope. "Living the dream," was what he called his failed life. "Having a ball, rolling to the bottom."

I hugged him that last time, and wept into my pillow that night.

My beautiful friend. I knew when we first played together as boys we were both going to go some day. But it killed me to see you go first.



A Summer of Lies

From 1961 to 1965 I worked as a dishwasher, busboy and cleanup guy for my stepdad Dick. In 1966 he financed a business for my brother Pat and me, selling fruits and vegetables from a garage on Lake Road, a stone's throw from his restaurant.

Most fruit stands are associated with a nearby farm, selling corn or peaches or whatever they grew outback.

I remember one farmer/fruit stand worker's followup when a customer asked how much a half-peck of tomatoes cost: "Whatever you think it's worth!" The response kind of boxed you into paying a high price, unless you wanted to insult the farmer.

Our fruit stand had a gimmick, too. We were only barely associated with Ohio agriculture. All our offerings were the same as you'd get in a nearby Kroger or Fisher-Fazio store, because our supplier was the same wholesaler who supplied Dick's restaurant with potatoes for french fries or lettuce

for salads. His name was Gelman, and he operated out of Lorain.

Thus our grapes were displayed in commercial crates, as were our black cherries, avocados, cantaloupes, etc. Costs were about the same as you'd pay in a grocery store, but nobody seemed to mind. We made enough money that we paid for my first year of college at Wooster that fall, as well as Pat's senior year at Hiram.

But never mind all that. In 1967, the summer of love, the summer of Sgt. Pepper, I left Dick's employ and went to work raking trails for Jungle Larry, of Jungle Larry's Safari Island, located at Cedar Point Amusement Park, 60 miles west along the lake.

The job was a windfall for me. I happened to know a kid at school who was friends with Jungle Larry, a local TV celebrity who ran a zoo and frequently appeared on kids' shows with animals. He recommended me, and so I got the job. The only problem was I was only 16 -- going on 17. I lied and said I was 18. They issued me an ID card that was good in any beer joint in the region.

It was the greatest job a 16-year-old boy could want, cuz I was surrounded night and day by wonderful 18-year old girls, working in concessions, food service, and hospitality. Boys got the best jobs, running the rides and games of chance. Jungle Larry hired both boys and girls, including the lovely Leilani Haupricht.

Cedar Point had a beach, so the girls were mostly tan and beautiful. Some spent so much time in the sun -- I specifically remember this -- the hairs on their arms turned blonde. I thought about those sun-lightened hairs at night in my bunk, in a dorm packed with those very luscious girls.

My challenge was to fool these girls into accepting that I could be 18 and in college. To do this I had to act ultra-sophisticated. I knew I could do it, I just didn't know how. Act sullen? No, that was no good. Talk about classes? No, I didn't know anything about that. I finally opted to act mysterious and faraway -- never crude -- and let my blue eyes do the heavy lifting. That, I could do.

It was a summer of lies. I calculate I did not tell the truth for 108 consecutive days.

I wore jungle khakis to work, and an Australian cowboy hat. Larry gave me a jungle nickname, Bwana Mike. I guided tours, swept trails, cleaned cages, fed the non-predacious animals -- monkeys, tapirs, African porcupines, flamingos, parrots -- and once I even appeared on on Captain Penny, the Cleveland kids' afterschool cartoon show, holding some macaws on a stick.

It was fame, of a sort. A bit like the Beatles. Only real.

Jungle Larry was an actual person, 6 foot 7, with a Texas accent, who regularly went to Africa and either caught animals on safari or acquired them through a zoo animal brokerage. I thought he was an asshole.

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He told lame jokes. "If I knew you were coming, I'd of baked a snake," he said 14 thousand and 12 times.

All day long, as they people pushed through the pathways, loudspeakers played the theme from the movie "Born Free" over and over morning to night. BORN FREE.

In my mind I always whispered “and now they’re in cages.”

The lovely Leilani disagreed with me. She had been with Jungle Larry much longer than me, and she swore they were generous and straightforward with her. It was my inclination to continue to see him as an asshole.

As we went along, I learned Larry was Christian Scientist, and did not like to call veterinarians in when animals got sick.

Something happened on Memorial Day weekend, when we opened the zoo to the public, that changed everything.

Just before the weekend, Larry bought a pair of wild olive baboons from Sudan to Safari Island -- a male named Mombasa and a female named Loma. And I was assigned caretaking duties.

Did you know: Olive baboons have longer canine fangs than lions, and a reputation for viciousness!

In the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1932, a busload of Italian soldiers was attacked by a tribe of baboons, who tore the truck to bits and killed or carried off scores of soldiers.

Baboons -- not to be trifled with.

The females also have vivid naked radiant rear ends during estrus that, like solar eclipses, you didn't want to stare directly into.

Both creatures were incredibly strong and alert-looking. Loma was in estrus. Early Saturday we got word that a group of Seventh Day Adventists was aghast because the two baboons were boning each other in front of their tour group.

We arrived in time to stake the two animals apart, so only their fingers could touch. This was at Jungle Larry's instruction. Then the terrible thing happened. Mombasa strained all the next night and day to reach Loma. Around 5 AM the next day he leaped up, and the chain yanked him so hard his neck broke, and he died in a heap of sawdust.

Everyone freaked. We shut down that part of the island. We placed Loma in a traveling cage and pulled blankets over the sides, like a widow's compartment. We tried to carry on, as if nothing had happened.

My job included raking out the enclosure she and Mombasa had been staked out in. Everyone said, Don't let the baboon get the drop on you. They can tear the eyes out of your head in two seconds.

On the third night, after the show shut down for the night, I was raking the pen, and I felt a tiny, strong hand grab my pants pocket.

It was Loma, reaching through the bars of the cage. I nearly let out urine. I put my hand on her hand, and she quickly grabbed it and pulled me down, till I was kneeling and facing her.

I could barely make out her golden eyes in the shadow of the cage. I pulled back the blanket to see her clearly. Intensely, she turned my hand over and over and examined my hand. I think she was looking for the perfect place to draw blood.

But I was wrong. She was studying the pores of the skin on the back of my hand, and then plucking -- picking microscopic particles from the back of my hand.

She was grooming me.

Grooming is a major social activity among primates. It is one way a tribe of creatures living

together can bond and reinforce social structures, family links and strengthen relationships. It brings peace to even violent groups of animals.

I looked at Loma and saw, for the first time, how very intelligent and beautiful she was. And she looked back at me just as fervently.

Why was she grooming me? Because she needed someone to groom. It was in her nature to do this, even with captors. I was all she had. In the days and weeks left to us, we communicated entirely by touch and by examination.

Summer wore on. Every day I worked, then chased girls when I got out. I even went out with the lovely Leilani, and we made out in my Buick alongside the chaussee road. No sex, just kissing and crawling around each other. That was all I was ready for. To me, that was enough!

At night, however, I snuck back onto Safari Island and spent fifteen minutes with Loma. One Saturday I drove to Hammond, Indiana to see a girl named Sue who quit Cedar Point because I had got too fresh. When I located her apartment and

knocked on the door, a linebacker from Purdue opened it. Get lost, he mouthed. I did.

I raced back to Ohio, to Sandusky. I knew Loma would be wondering where I had gone. When I got back, there was a commotion. One of the guys greeted me at the gate. "The baboon escaped," he said. "She climbed up a tree."

People gathered under a sycamore tree. I saw her in the top leafy branches staring out over Lake Erie. I could see from her expression she was only just now realizing how far she was from her home in Ethiopia. There was no easy escape route for her to take.

I called to her. Loma ... Loma ... She spotted me ... she hesitated a moment, then began scooting down from her high perch, like a polejacker for the phone company.

I was glad she was safe. I was glad even though the part she presented to my view was her vivid red radiant inflated asscheeks, which I had very ambivalent feelings about.

She backed down the lower branches of the sycamore and climbed into my arms, wrapping her arms around me.

In that summer of sweetest love, it was the only time I ever held her.

Four days later I was scheduled to leave the zoo to start college. I couldn't bring myself to say goodbye to Loma – I was only 16, remember, not a settled 18-year old. See, I even lied to the baboon.

So I slunk away, and drove across Ohio to my fall semester. And I put her out of my mind, and lived my life.

That was 1967. Twelve years pass. I was visiting Ohio with my wife Rachel. I wanted to show her the zoo where I worked. I was impressed that the animal areas were more natural now, less inhumane, more hospitable than in the olden days.

We came to the primates area. I could make Loma out behind see-through nylon cables now, not bars. There were eight baboons in with her – all babies and adult females.

Loma was white in the face now, but she sat like a queen on a log of green concrete, a darling great grandchild, or a great-great, clasped in her golden arms.

Loma did not blink, but she fixed her gaze on me. Life had moved on but I could not take my eyes off her. She had survived and done well. She had made a successful career for herself in the jungles of Northeast Ohio.

That's how I remember my girl. As queen of the jungle. That was my snapshot from our summer romance, and the beautiful creature who took me as her mate.



My Friend Gerri

I returned last summer to Amherst, Ohio. My little “town in the woods.” That’s what the name means.

The old heart of the town is much the same as it was. Many of the businesses have changed, along with the signage. But I could squint and see the old drug store (Lessiters), the old grocery (Schlutzkers), the old bank (now a tavern), the old Ford showroom (now Arabaica, a coffee shop). The Amherst downtown still defines sleepy.

Only on the outskirts of town are the new places -- and they get most of the business.

I’m guessing there are black people and Hispanics living there now. The Amherst police used to run out convoys of young blacks from Lorain. No one ever came right out and said it, but we were all terrified of black people. They were depicted to us as barbarians at the gate. As if we white small town folks were 5th Century Athens.

I drove my friend Klecko down to see the old abandoned quarries, from when we were "Sandstone Center of the World."

He stood patiently with me while I looked down into the giant hole. When I was young, the quarries had already stopped producing. I remember being surprised to see trees covering the floor, a hundred feet down.

Fifty years later, those trees are just dead stocks rising out of the darkness, drowned by seeping spring water.

I tell Gerri over coffee that I visited Kathy's grave, out at St. Joe's cemetery on Middle Ridge Road. It was nice, I said, but the grave is tipping over. None of the other graves were tilting -- just Kathy's.

It didn't mean anything, it was just another imperfect thing, the Second Law of Thermodynamics doing its magic, everything succumbing to entropy. I just didn't think it would happen in my lifetime. Her grave only sat on that shifting hillside ground, a few hundred yards from the quarries, for 54 years.

Gerri says, “I have some gravel in the garage, and a crowbar to lift the grave. I’ll go out there today.”

At the reading Klecko and I gave at Mahall’s in Cleveland, Mary Miller and her daughter Elizabeth sit right in front of me. They remind me of all the nights I spent in their parlor, wooing Liz’s sister Julie, the girl I loved, but not especially well.

The night Julie and I kissed under that spreading pine tree – which took me three months to get around to – I broke away from her and laughed, and dashed away, skipping violently home, like a kangaroo on No-Doz, up then down the Park Avenue hill.

The half hour I spent talking to Julie in 2014, when she could no longer speak, and the tumor had grabbed all her brain, was torture to me.

But I had to talk to her because I felt like she had called me to life, made me feel almost as goddamn special as she thought I was.

You gave me everything, I said to her. You made me like myself. You were the best friend of my youth.

Good night, my darling, I whispered to her that afternoon, as the call came to an end, calling from my cubicle.

I'll see you on and on.

At Mahall's I looked out at strangers and old friends and read about falling out of my mother's car as she rounded a turn in Olmstead Falls in 1955.

The centrifugal force of my mom's hard left turn caused the car door to open. And out I went. I missed the rear wheel entirely, and rolled down the tall grass of the shoulder.

In the poem, my mother races down the slope to pick me up, castigating herself for several seconds -- before obtaining a promise from us kids that our dad need never know about this.

I looked out at my aunts in the dark room – Elaine and Irene. I repeated my mother's name to them,

just them, the name they loved. Mary Mulligan Konik. Mary Mulligan Konik. I nodded at them when I said it. I looked every one of them in the eye.

I sit in the car at the curb out front of our old house. What happened to the Chinese elm, I wonder, the one that stood atop the terrace? The one my dad said goodbye to me under.

The house is still there. The closest apple tree would have been about here. This is where the cars and pickup pulled up, late at night, headlights left on, and us kids gathered by the upstairs window.

Two men threw a thick rope and pulley over a branch and began to yank. A body rose up off the truck bed. In the bright headlights the blood looked black.

It was a deer. It had jumped in front of our mom's Chevy hours earlier, and totaled the car. There was my mother, weeping into a bloodstained terrycloth towel. There was our landlord, Charley

Thomas – why was he up in the middle of the night, sharpening his superlong butcher’s knife on a cinderblock?

Charley Thomas went in with his hands, split the deer up the middle, stabbed around, planted his hands around something, then pulled.

The deer’s heart tumbled like a bag of groceries onto the black grass.

I drive Klecko through Lorain, which has been in steady decline for 50 years. The entire city is still. You don’t even see immigrants now. That’s how broke this city is.

First the Ford Plant closed down then US Steel -- 40,000 jobs, neutroned away.

“Ohio is amazing,” he says. “Amherst is amazing.”

He loves the broken streets and tape-scarred windows. The screaming bridges of downtown Cleveland and the rusting hulks of the deserted steelyards move him.

People in town remember Pat and me, and brother Brian, whom our mother, working three jobs during the 60s, fought to protect from Ohio. She raised us princes without portfolio, set aside for better purposes.

I never set foot in the Ford plant or the steel plant or the quarries, except to trespass.

Amherst lives in me. I know, for instance, even as I drive us back to Minnesota, that Gerri Plato made it out to the cemetery that day.

She dragged a bag of white stones with her.

This 100-pound woman used a crowbar to lift the 300-pound rose-colored stone, resting it on a sandstone slab.

She filled in the uneven soil with stones. Then she lowered the grave back into place. And tested the job with the level.

She would take a bit of grass from my mother's grave, out on Mason Road, 10 miles away, and replant it on Kathy's grave, in St. Joseph's

cemetery. So they would be together again, in the grass.

I saw the look on Gerri's face when she promised it would be done. I never doubted.



"James Wright, 1962"

Appendix 1: The Skin on a Young Girl's Wrist

By 1967, I was preparing to leave home, to leave Amherst and my other town, Vermilion, for good.

In many ways I had survived the heart of the 60s -- my sister dying, my dad taking off, my period of acting-out, which caused so much pain for myself and others.

Because of Julie, because of writing that essay about my brother Pat, discovering *Weed* magazine and its editor Peter Dragin, and through them the whole world of the underground poets, I had patched together a kind of identity that would keep me going for a while. I was a beat poet!

The baboon thing was improbable, but my final act here was even more improbable, to me. I got to meet the poet James Wright, and even more amazing, discover that I had a sort of family relationship with him.

James Wright was no beat poet. He wrote these incredible, often heartbreaking books of

unrhymed poems published by Wesleyan University Press. He won the Yale Prize, and eventually a Pulitzer.

I have in the past described him as “kind of my uncle.” He was not a blood uncle. But, we were something, connected by family.

You will remember, my mom married Dick Konik in 1966. Dick was a fantastic dyslexic bartender truckdriver stepdad, but he did not seem to be a likely connection to American letters.

And yet he was. Dick had a dad, the Cleveland onetime bootlegger Frank Konieczkowski, operator of the Black Horse speakeasy. When Dick’s mother died, Frank married again, to Elsie Esterly. Elsie was a schoolteacher, a cultured woman raised in Galipolis down on the Ohio River. Elsie had a sister named Elizabeth, also a school teacher.

Elizabeth -- my stepfather’s father’s second wife’s sister -- was my connection to Wright.

Elizabeth Esterly taught high school English in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio. At that point James was one of her students. He and Elizabeth became close,

and for a short period, when James was going through teenage upheavals like I was, Elizabeth was named his guardian -- like a family member but not a family member.

Before I tell you about James, let me tell you about Elizabeth first. I did not know her but I remembered her from conversations with Elise, my step-grandma. She had all of James' books, which I read every time I visited her. There was something about him that I could relate to -- his cries of pain, his courage in going forward, his rebellious attitude toward what a poem was. I thought he was marvelous.

In 1969 I took off on a gypsy trip in an International Travelall with my Athens, Ohio friends Dirk and Sarge and Brody and Greg and Pat. We were supposed to go to Alaska but we opted to head south instead, and on a whim I bailed out in the Bay Area south of Francisco. I saw the word Cupertino on a sign and made my decision.

I had Elizabeth Esterly's address and walked several miles to a dusty fruit orchard town, a bit like Amherst.

I knocked on Elizabeth Esterly's door and she let me in. She was about 70. Elizabeth's husband Joe, a former aerospace engineer who had been blacklisted during the McCarthy hearings, looked me over suspiciously. I had a ponytail and wore bellbottoms. Why they let me in is a mystery.

They made me a sandwich and we talked. I was very full of myself, and burned their ears off with tales of reckless living, communing with flakes and gurus, hitching around and filling notebooks with crummy poems.

My hosts frowned like they had seen this before.

Aunt Liz showed me around her ornamental crabs, her tea roses, and a single radiant pear tree by the pump house, loaded down with golden oblong fruit.

The yard was a moving carpet of ducks and drakes, geese and ganders, peacocks and peahens. She picked up one duck, named Daffy, and explained that Daffy was an actual hermaphrodite -- one day Daffy changed sexes female to male. Some ducks do that.

The farm's speciality was 1,000 year old eggs. They buried ducks' eggs in the ground for months, then dug them up for New Years and other celebrations.

Inside again, we talked a little about James. Very generally. But then things went bad. I was accustomed to educated grownups being impressed by me. Because look at me, I was equal parts Kerouac and Dylan.

I believe now that they saw me as a foolish young man, of a type they were all too familiar with.

I had an especially bad effect on Elizabeth. She went into her bedroom. Joe took me aside and suggested I should leave, and not spend the night. They had had enough of me.

But before I left, he made me call my father in L.A. I had not talked to my family in almost a year.

My dad informed me that I had been drafted two months earlier, missed my physical a month earlier, missed my actual induction just that week, and now I was officially AWOL.

Joe drove me to the airport. There ended my crash landing at Elizabeth Esterly's.

OK, now let's go back to my experience with James Wright. I was 16, ready to head off for college at Wooster.

I loved my grandmother Elsie, Elizabeth's younger sister. Her house, on a cliff overlooking the Metropolitan Gorge in Cleveland, was close to being a mansion. Beautiful wood, windows, almost black brick exterior, and a stupendous garden with lilies as high as my head. It was a house a bootlegger gave his bride.

But I was most taken by two of Wright's books, in a basket by her red couch, *Shall We Gather at the River* and *The Branch Will Not Break*.

Elsie loaned me the books, and they proved to be a portal for me to a world that was very real to me. They were about Wright's life, especially in the Martins Ferry of his boyhood, a life of poverty, emotional pain, and lots of booze. It was the place where Wright's father worked at Hazel-Atlas Glass plant, and came home depleted every night.

His description of the hobo weeds of the Ohio were like Huckleberry Finn, only unremittingly sad. I dug the sad.

Wright was a poet of heartbreak. His work, especially the early collections I read, was mostly naturalistic, except that images jumped out at you like spinning carbuncles. His poems had the power to suck you into a vortex of deep, unsettling feelings.

I was 15, so I was very susceptible to these tales. I was struggling with Kathy's death and the breakup of my family.

Wright's poems put me in touch with that pain. There was so much sorrow in them, and so much hunger for love and reconnection. His poems were a good transition from the mystical adolescent fiction I was reading at the time, Herman Hesse's *Demian*.

I began to see Amherst as my Martins Ferry. Working people mostly, in the quarries and steel plants, sitting silent at the supper table. Behind every door, an unspeakable sadness, people broken by the jobs they could not quit.

But see for yourself. Listen to the gentleness of Wright's voice in a 1963 poem, "A Blessing," about two Indian ponies he stopped to touch, "Just Off the Highway to Rochester, Minnesota." It's one of his best-known poems. If it does not send a sharp shaft of feeling through you, well, it probably isn't for you, it's for me.

*I would like to hold the slenderer one in my
arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her
long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.*

This is poetry that makes you want to weep at life's shortcomings and glory in its momentary favors.

James Wright's poems soothed the wound that was still in me. I strove to see my family's calamity as a way to look back on the beauty that was in us. The line about "the skin over a young girl's wrist" was always Kathy's blue skin to me.

Seeing my infatuation, Elsie said, "Why don't we drive down to New Concord Sunday and meet James and his mom and dad."

New Concord was where they lived now.

To me it was like going to visit Superman. I didn't have a lot of heroes, but he was one. What would I say? Would I ruin it somehow? I knew what was the worst possible thing I could do, bring a folder of my 16 year old's poems. Morbid, grandiose, verbose, confused. Pretty much like my mature poems today. Wright would not see his calm influence in the turbulent stuff I was typing out.

It occurred to me he might be an asshole. High on himself. Unable to connect. La di da.

We got there, and first I met his parents, who were elderly, in that special way old people get in Appalachia. They were friendly. And after a few minutes James and his wife Annie pulled up in their car.

I stood at the back of the throng, pretty much paralyzed. I didn't have to feel that way. He hugged Elsie and Elsie introduced me to him. He smiled and held out his hand.

We went inside, and for the better part of an hour they all talked about family matters at table, how's whatshername, and whatever happened to -- and then about the Montessori school Annie was putting together in New York City. Annie talked about all the fix-up needed there, painting, landscaping, etc. They talked about their boy Franz, 13, who stayed back home.

After we were all comfortable, James turned to me. "Can I show you around the place, Mike? Give us men a chance to talk."

He led me to his mother's vegetable garden out back. He had helped his mother put in cabbages and zucchini.

“What are you working on?” I finally summoned the nerve to say.

“I’m taking a break from writing my own poems. I’m translating poems from the German that have always affected me. Are you aware of the fiction of Theodor Storm?”

What a polite question, assuming I knew things. But I was still Julie’s boy. We had read so much together. “I read Thomas Mann’s story ‘Tonio Kroger,’ last summer” I said. “Storm is mentioned as a guy torn by the plight of the artist in the world. Whether he is part of it or a part from it.”

Wright looked at me with surprise. I knew things, even if they were just paper cutouts of real scholarship. I have to tell you, this was a peach of a moment for me.

He told me he was also translating Herman Hesse. Herman Hesse was like Storm and Mann, only he was huge with teenagers just then. Siddha, Steppenwolf. Damien. You carried those titles around, girls knew you would never make any money. Kidding. They knew you were very sensitive.

Then, he asked if I had seen the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He and Annie had just seen it. By coincidence, Elise and I had seen it just the night before. So we rapped about that weird, brilliant, interminable movie.

This was going so well! And then I realized something. Wright's voice reminded me of the voice of HAL, the computer, in the movie. It was the opposite of a robotic voice. It was a voice of soft alienation, doing the bidding of the spacemen but unable to relate to them.

"Your drawing is definitely improving, Dave."

Then, of course, he goes crazy and tries to kill everyone.

I kept all this to myself.

"In all the loneliness of space," Wright said to me, "HAL's is the only human voice. The only feeling one. Everyone else is just a suit. I found it very touching."

James Wright told me that the secret of cantaloupe is the sweet smell at the stem. "With watermelons, you go by sound, when you thump it. With muskmelon," he said, "it's all smell."

And that was my day with James Wright. I rode back to Cleveland with Elsie. For the first time in my life I felt a grown man. I had stood toe to toe with this gentle, brilliant, tormented artist -- and it was fun, a very sweet sort of fun.

And I never showed him my young poems. I was proud my restraint. Our meeting was not about that. It was for me. It was to encourage me. What a nice man he was, to agree to my grandmother Elsie's request for some kid he didn't know.

This didn't mean I went on to become a good person. I still went to Elsie's sister Elizabeth's duck farm in Cupertino, and scared her half to death. The magic James conferred on me didn't always work.

But I was out of Amherst, off to college and into the wide world. I would still have an Amherst, Ohio, in my heart, like a snow globe I could shake from time to time.

It wasn't exactly Amherst, which would grow and change over time. But it was the town that kept

me going, got me started. I will always love that little town.

Were its people all good and sweet? They were not. Everyone was struggling, I know now. People dying. Sand in their lungs from the quarries, dead-end jobs at US Steel and Ford Motor. Better than Appalachia, but not much.

Buy my mom raised me there, with great courage in her heart. Amherst didn't do much for her. But it was to be the launching pad for her bright sons, Pat and Mike and Brian.

She made sure we never stepped foot in those factories. She married Dick to make a life for us that was apart from the grunge jobs.

I don't know what she really wanted for me -- just not that. She knew I liked to write, but rolled her eyes at the crud I was stacking up.

I did go on to make a living writing. Never hit the big time. But I never had to wash my hands with Lava, either.

I thank her. I thank them all for saving me, and helping to make me as good as I am.



Appendix 2: The Dominic Savio Chapter

I didn't tell the whole story in my chapter about my seminary sex scandal. In it I come across as shinningly innocent about sex and the body. This is true, to a degree, but there are events when I was a boy that show I had some knowledge of what was going on.

One time, a neighbor boy named Barry and I were walking through the woods near where we lived, and suddenly he pulled his pants down. He didn't say anything, he just stood there grinning. I had no idea what he wanted, but I was very uncomfortable. I ran away -- and the next day tattled to my teacher, resulting in a visit to Sr. Mary Patrick, the principal.

I was 10, the other guy 9. I came off as principled but a bit of a snitch. I remember thinking about St. Dominic Savio, whom I had read a book about. In the book, he too got involved in a group of boys being nasty down by the river. He wouldn't join in, and thereby suffered extreme ostracism. Rather

than play boy games, he allowed himself to be socially martyred.

By the by, I find no mention of this in his Wikipedia entry. The Church had lots of stories in the 50s that went away later.

But I liked the story, because I felt I had a destiny to likewise be very, very good. I wasn't very popular, either.

What nobody knew, and what I am telling you now, for the first time ever, is that I had a prior experience, on Easter Sunday, 1960. This was before Kathy died, before my dad lit out for California.

My family knew another family, in Elyria, that we once shared a duplex with. My mom invited them over one Sunday.

Their youngest son was named LeRoy. He wasn't a scholar, but I remembered him having fun energy as a small boy. We drifted up to my bedroom, stripped off our clothes without saying a word, and then got under my covers, where we examined one another in the light that filtered through the sheets.

Woe to us if anyone opened that door.

There was no sex, no talking, no genital anything, just rolling about and studying one another's bodies. I didn't understand one another, but I knew it was hot. Later, as I learned more about newly canonized Dominic Savio and other saintly boys, I was ashamed of what we had done.

That was in my history when the incident with Barry occurred. I was so ashamed I ratted the poor kid out to the authorities.

One final adventure occurred. It happened just after Kathy died, while my mom was going through the divorce. She dropped me and my brothers off at Leroy's family's house in Elyria. Because, what possible harm could come to us there?

LeRoy and I bunked in an attic room. I learned immediately that had grown in his horniness. He wanted to pick up where he had left off. I was 11. I held up my fingers, like Christ always did, and told him I wanted no more of that, that it was sin, and we would only be fanning the flames of hell.

I got pretty religious after Kathy died. Looking for a language that could explain to me what happened.

“That’s stupid,” Leroy said and jumped on me, and began slapping my face with his hard little dick.

“Give it a kiss!” he said. “Kiss it!”

I had no idea what he was doing, and I was not at all interested in kissing his dick. I told him he was being ridiculous, but the next hour was a repeat of the same event, all involving me sucking his dick. Which I never did.

I thought he was just being wicked like those flying monkeys from Oz. He must have thought I was an idiot.

It did not occur to me until just now that this was sexual assault. By an 11-year-old. But I felt guilty for years because I had been open to it back on Easter Sunday.

So, in the years remaining before I went to seminary, I felt I had put that naughtiness behind me, that I had broken with Satan, and was in the clear as regards those episodes with LeRoy.

I never figured out it was homosexual, which is what the rector assumed about Dubiel and me. It was just the terrible, universal thing that has dogged our species since we lived in caves and hunted with atlatls -- boys being boys.

So when the rector at the seminary charged me with concupiscence, I had *some* point of reference.



Appendix 3: I'm Looking Through You

I have a friend, Pete. We are close and get along well but we don't agree about everything. Sometimes our differences flare up.

Sometimes he will make a cold assertion, and his eyes will flutter like a shark, like he is experiencing an orgasm of hard truth.

Among Pete's criticisms is this killer:

I need to be loved by everyone. I am always grasping for attention and hoping it will be positive. I am needy.

OK, I'll give Pete that one. My defense is to say that my neediness is really a virtue. "I don't mind being loved. I don't mind needing love. In fact, when did love get to be a bad thing?"

Does that line of thinking work for anyone? Anyone? Because it's why I'm here tonight at Coffee Bene with my friends, who I sure hope love me.

I even love Pete. He is funny, and intelligent, and well-read. And I know he loves me, because if I have a flat tire in the rain, and wolves have gathered, the guy I call is his crabby self.

It's a complex relationship.

OK, here is another killer. Whenever it's my turn to drive, he reaches over and switches off my CD

player. This past Saturday, the music was Rubber Soul. The song -- "I'm Looking Through You."

Anybody here not know Rubber Soul? Hands up. What's the matter with you?

"I hate that," Pete says.

"No problem, Pete," I say. "Not a big Beatles fan?"

"Well, they're not very good."

This is where my entire body turns inside out. All my organs are dangling on the outside of me. Heart pumping in full view. Lungs flapping. I was taken aback! Slowly, I re-acquire the gift of speech.

"They're ... not ... very ... good?" All I could do was repeat his words.

"Well, the only reason we listen is we heard that music when we were young, so we have nostalgia for them. Me, I never liked them in the first place, so abracadabra, no nostalgia."

Now, I knew where he was coming from. He was saying they weren't good in a respectable way. Like the way that Mahler, or Dante, or Rembrandt

were good. High church -approved GOOD.
Basically, S.N.O.B.

And what Pete was saying -- that the music we love places an emotional smiley-face around our youths. It's ... sentimental.

I took Pete to his dentist, waited in the waiting room, dropped him off, then drove him home in silence. All the while, my brain is shuddering from the insult -- like Jell-O with carrot shreds in it.

He wasn't just erasing the Beatles -- they have been the tiniest bit over-played, would you say. He was snuffing out so many things I loved. Chuck Berry, The Stones, the Temptations, Sly, the Airplane, Marvin Gaye, the Who, Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Santana, Captain Beefheart, the Kinks. The Velvet Underground. Fella name a Dylan.

Pete was committing this mental genocide of everyone I was devoted to ... so he could enjoy the lonely pose of being above it all.

Didn't he know how much these people suffered? Setting aside any hopes for the future. Trying this unpromising thing. Living on nickels and dimes.

There's a reason they're all skinny on their record jackets. They're starving!

The losers were left with a lifetime of failure. For every act that made it through to stardom, another hundred acts were broken like bundles of sticks.

The winners were left with little more. What they did involved enormous amounts of pain, risk, failure, bankruptcy, depression, creative lockup, self-hatred, and worse. They were cheated by everyone, driven mad by drugs and confusion. Then spit out to end their careers in oldies shows in Branson.

Everyone died, one way or the other, just to put a few sweet tunes in our heads.

Crashed in the corn fields.

Stabbed in their bedrooms.

Choking on their own vomit.

Shot dead by their own fathers.

Left to bleed out on the city pavement.

All this suffering to create a bit of beauty. And they did it for us. They rocked so that we could roll.

I was a teenager in Amherst, Ohio during the absolute height of this excitement. We danced to the Yardbirds, Dionne Warwick, the Supremes, James Brown, the Dave Clark 5, the Ventures, Martha, the Vandellas.

I have asked my family to play “Wild Thing” by the Troggs as the exit procession at my funeral. I realize it’s not a great song. But ... it is a great song.

I need to pause here and wipe the fleck off my lips.

I think of beautiful Little Anthony, who spoke to every breaking heart there was. Hear him singing:
I know you ... don't know what I'm going through,
Standing here ... looking at you.

Him and the Imperials never made a dime. But hear what they gave us.

“Tears on My Pillow” ... “Goin' Out of My Head” ... and OK, “Shimmy Shimmy Koko Bop.”

Tell me Little Anthony did not put everything out there, everything he had in him ... so we would not feel so alone.

His songs encircled us in lassos of love, they were given to us and us only. They were our treasure, they were the passports we carried through our generation. They laminated us against the losses and failures we experienced in love. They bound us to one another in perpetuity. They were our insurance against despair.

We do want love. We need it like we need to breathe. And we'll take it where we can get it.

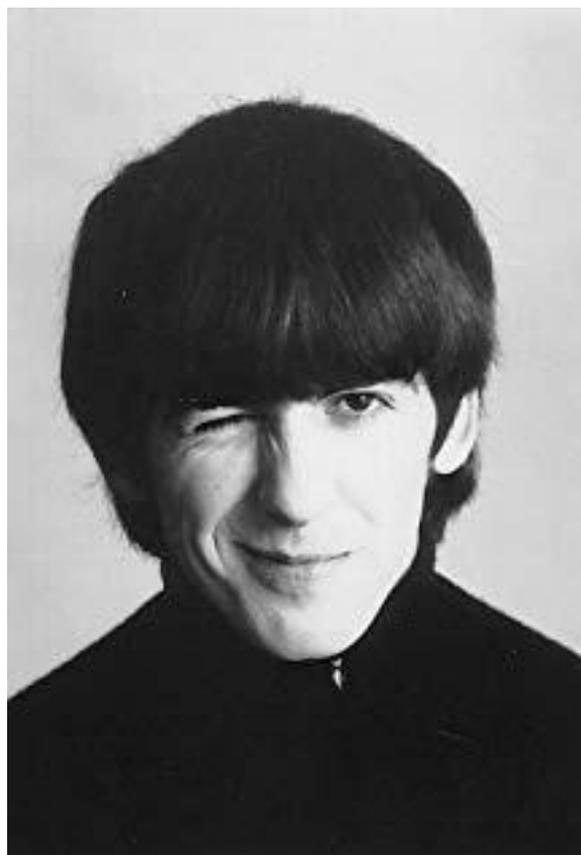
Oh, and were they good? They were VERY good.

Oh, Pete! I'm looking through you, man. Just like in the song. You were given a gift, and you flung it away. And now it's hard to call back. A high price to pay for being smart. Someone should write a song about that.

Oh wait, they did ...

*Boy, you gonna carry that weight ...
Carry that weight a long time*

This is a long and winding story. I will start with my disaster in the seminary.



Appendix 4: With George in L.A.

Over the years my dreams evolved. I no longer dreamed that I was young, and the band invited me to join them on tour and even though I played no instrument and sang only a little, and my hair wasn't quite right, they all loved me like a brother and went out of their way to let me belong.

Last night I dreamt I was in LA, and a mutual friend notified me George was anxious to see me.

We drove along the beach till we came to his wife's fashion salon, and I was led in.

A busy, happy woman with cropped curls gestured behind her and laughed. This was where all the money went, she said. I shook hands with the retinue.

Some of the members of the old band were still there, including the saxophonist with the scars on his nose, whose name I could never remember.

I met George's son, whom I had never met before, he was almost grown, and resembled his mother, handsome and quiet and composed. I was taken aback by him, and couldn't think of anything to say.

They wheeled out an exquisite cake that said "Welcome back, Mike," with a picture of us five lads, one without an instrument, with buttercream dahlias and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.

And when George arrived everyone crowded around him, but after touching his son's face he went straight to me and hugged me and we rocked happily for a moment, reunited, and I remembered the good times on tour, and how they always dropped me off again afterward at the gray house on the hill, and I would sneak inside to bed.

I could see the lines in George's eyes, and his hair had thinned but his grin was still stupendous, and he peppered me with questions about my family and my life and rebuked me for not bringing a photo with me.

During the meals, seeing the love they all had, I felt tears come to my eyes, and I burst out and told them I didn't deserve them as friends, they were all so genuine and kind, and I was sorry I had not stayed in touch, and I was so sorry about John, and I was sorry I had gotten old and fat and become a business writer and lost the music, and someone patted my back while I sobbed.

And in his thick scouse George quietly said none of that mattered, I had gotten away but we were together again, and we would always be mates, and this day was for us to remember and to share.

And they all lifted their glasses of soda water and lime.

When the alarm sounded I went to my daughter's room and kissed her several times on her smooth forehead.

She emerged from her sleeping bag like a rose in bloom and told me my hands were cold, and smiled her lovely smile.

We could hear the diesel idle of the garbage truck in the alley and the birds in the maple tree sang.

Though he lives in St. Paul with his wife Rachel and son Jon, Mike's thoughts often turn to his years growing up in Amherst. His family lived at 1243 Park Avenue. Mike attended St. Joseph's and Marion L. Steele. It was while he was a schoolboy that he started writing stories, nonfiction and poetry. He gave a keynote talk to his class of '67 in 2017. Mike is dealing with metastatic prostate cancer. This book is part of his therapy. See him in action at mikefinleywriter.com.

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