Variations on a Theme: Forty years of music, memories, and mistakes

Christopher John Stephens

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Variations on a Theme:
Forty years of music, memories, and mistakes

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Creative Non-Fiction

By

Christopher John Stephens
B.A., Salem State College, 1988
M.A., Salem State College, 1993

May 2009
DEDICATION

For my parents, Jay A. Stephens (July 6, 1928-June 20, 1997)
Ruth C. Stephens (January 31, 1936-October 29, 2005)

and for my sister Lauren (February 9, 1962-April 7, 1985)
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Thanks to my friends in Lynn, who took me in when the bottom fell out. Their kindnesses, and my Saturdays with D., have shown me what it means to be part of a family and the urge to write this book would not have existed without them.
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ABSTRACT

How did music play a consistent role through various memories? In this memoir, I look at the sweet, the traumatic and troubling. I use specific songs as connections to lost loved ones. I pin the power of music to the loss of three important people in my life: my sister, father, and mother. Who were their musical touchstones? Did I share them? Did music run through them as it has always run through me? The memoir is sandwiched by a brief extended metaphor that props up the conceit that we are entering a live concert performance. It is billed as a “letter to a lost loved one” because it is indeed meant to address that lost one, my sister, my guide. In the opening section I’ve lost my voice. I eventually reclaim it and vow that I will perhaps meet my sister at some point in the future.

Key words: personal memoir; music criticism; pop culture criticism; pop music; death; personal loss; nervous breakdown; teaching; writing
Variations on a single theme:

Forty years of music, memories, and mistakes

By Christopher John Stephens

Introduction-

Overture: Simple Gifts (an open letter to a lost loved one)

The lights flicker twice, and the crowd in the lobby excitedly spills in to take their seats. A small-framed man in loose-fitting formal wear comes on stage. He’s carrying a shiny steel National Guitar. A dozen more players follow, old men in similar wear, young women in flowing black and white dresses. They are all either carrying or wheeling along with them their instruments of choice: electric rhythm guitar, twelve-string acoustic, stand-up bass, saxophone, keyboards, tuba, trumpet, trombone and percussion. The drummer, a wild-haired man with intense bugged-out eyes, climbs the three steps to the stool behind his drum kit. As he sits, all eyes move towards him for some sort of signal, the smallest tilt of the chin that will signal the start of the performance.

The audience finds their seats before the performers on stage. The lights gradually go dim and a flurry of coughs sprinkle through the auditorium like chocolate flakes on vanilla ice cream. This night, this performance, this moment, is the big-ticket item for everybody. Look at the starry-eyed goofball dreamers in the audience, just like me when I was younger. They want some sort of holy absolution by evening’s end.
They feel as if music is the only way they'll be cleansed, but they know they’ll go home empty. There were rumors that this was going to be the musical statement of the season. This would be the starting point for every water cooler office discussion, the battle for the evening, the fight between something that embraces the heart and something that speaks to the mind.

These musicians were all people I knew: teachers, lunch room attendants and farmers, humble people with sometimes audacious dreams and understandable fears. Their willingness to roll with and sometimes improvise inside this sometimes foolish pop symphony of mine, to carefully color outside the lines, was amazing. I gave them the blueprint and they made it interesting. They took my story beyond the confines of a closed room and made it dance, made it sweat, made it sizzle. If it works in this test run, I told them, I’ll want to take it on the road.

I explained to my musicians that life got better when I learned to sing. I never meant singing in the traditional, conventional sense. I always had a husky, thin speaking voice. Sometimes it seemed like I was recovering from a tracheotomy. When I started singing, I became Sinatra or Bob Dylan or Louis Armstrong, anybody but myself. It was derivative and based solely on the styles that other people had started, but at least it was communication. At least I was getting across to people when everything else seemed to have failed. Everything was easier with music.

If you come, don’t feel like you’ll need to comfort me. I will be surprised, maybe scared, but I won’t need comfort and I won’t run away. If I see you in the audience tonight, in those three seats reserved front row center, I won’t be confused. I won’t be scared. Loss is only temporary. It’s only a small portion of what we become.
You died, the others followed, but I knew you would come back. It’s the real thing, and for you and the others if they show up tonight I want to compose something strong.

We sold so many tickets for this opening night, so many people heard about this performance; season ticket holders, the curious, the well-informed who will intelligently reflect about this experience on their music blogs, and the attention seekers who will go to the opening of an envelope. Everyone we knew together needed to understand that music was a real beast in my life that I still don’t know how to tame.

If you get here, I know you’ll be burdened with baggage from the journey. Don’t worry. Leave it all in the coat room. Nobody will ask where you’ve been and nobody will bother you about where you might be going.

This can be a very sad world where people sometimes make choices they regret and a series of events start that can’t be reversed. Maybe you knew this while you were here, but I don’t know. While you were here, we never really knew about chaos and hopelessness. We never knew that what we were trying to build as a family could suddenly stop without warning. There was the rebuilding process, but it wasn’t the same. That kind of drama, and that kind of irreparable loss, always happened to other people.

The certainty of tonight, and this concert, is all you’ll need to understand. If you appear, and if we have a chance to talk, I won’t get into any philosophical discussions. We’ll simply pick up again just like it was 1985; like the day you died. Just read this program and follow the series of musical cues. Any questions you have will be contained within the logic of what you’ll hear. Trust me.
Are you ready? I want you to use your voice and find the appropriate key for singing because this is going to test everything you've got. Maybe during intermission, if we run into each other, you can tell me about the cow who jumped over the moon, the old lady who swallowed a fly and Jack and Jill who rolled down the hill and never got that pail of water. These are strange songs, old rootless stories. It always seemed like mom pulled them from the sky, put her own twist on what every parent already knew. There will always be time for these stories, these first songs, these only songs. Look at the Mulberry Bush in the distance. Tell Liza there’s a hole in the bucket and it needs to be fixed. Ask anybody you see how Humpty Dumpty got on the wall. The song tells us he had been sitting up there and he had a great fall, but there’s only one thing I want to know: how did he get on the wall?

Sometimes we don’t want to hear music. I know that much. Sometimes it can be ponderous to hear a story that will start with hope and wander through disaster and wind up in a sort of secular purgatory, waiting for a cue that will mean passage to that next place. That cue always comes. We never fail to get answers to all these questions in great majestic scores, but sometimes we just want silence and mystery. Sometimes we just need to know where to sign.

I know that neither you nor our parents went to either of those “next places.” I’ve seen “the end,” dad’s body on a silver table, covered with a white blanket in a pristine white room. His head was huge, ashen grey, almost purple. Everything was starting to bloat at that point and he’d only been gone for probably ninety minutes. I stood there with the nurse who had brought me into the room to see dad’s body. She was probably expecting me to have a tearful farewell, but I was just too numb, too cold.
I talked with her about Dr. Sherwin Nuland’s *How We Die*, a book on dying I’d read exactly a year earlier. So much burned true then as it still does now:

“The experience of dying does not belong to the heart alone. It is a process in which every tissue of the body partakes, each by its own means and at its own pace. The operative word here is process, not act, moment, or any other term connoting a fly-speck of time when the spirit departs.”(Nuland, 42.)

*Trauma, and a tendency to intellectualize moments that should only be understood with the heart, will make reasonable people do ridiculous things. Instead of having a final moment with dad’s body where I could have said something wise, and the response I knew he would have given me didn’t need to be spoken, I stood still, rooted to my spot in the room several feet away. It was like a scene from those final enigmatic moments out of 2001: A Space Odyssey. An old man died and a child star is born.*

*This was my golden key, my Holy Grail. I was looking at the end happening and what I saw was that an ending did not mean that things stopped. Nuland’s words had been poetic and beautiful and evoked my insatiable inner literary critic when I read them a year earlier. I could have just been satisfied by my abstract understanding of them on the page, by the fact that he evoked such beautiful truth without a hint of sentimentality, but I needed to see what I was seeing. I needed to make the abstract concrete.*

*She left, and I was alone for a few minutes with dad’s body. I couldn’t say anything in that cold, silent room. There was no dramatic farewell speech. The music had stopped playing and there was no way to turn it on again.*

*If you can come and stay for a while, look at the supplies I have in my closet. I think the only instruments available now are the ukulele, drum, harmonica and kazoo.*
You can bang your spatulas on the Quaker Oats cereal tub. Blow into the white flutaphone that makes a sound only mom used to love. Sing those melodies that anybody can sing and listen to the playback of the symphony. There will be logical places where you can join in at that point, when we’re together, when everybody else has gone home. You can embellish the melody with that strange way You always had of being just a bit behind the beat.

Read the program notes for this performance and you’ll see careful thumbnail biographies of all the players, but you know their stories up to a point and you could have guessed what was going to happen in the decades that followed. I was able to sell advertising, to sustain some sort of financial viability to the evening (I guess this is what you call “break even,”) but money was never my point here. This is a production that stands on its own, sponsored by nobody, built only on the foundation of what was once good, what was once meaningful. If you come tonight, and if you listen, it will all eventually make sense.
Chapter One

First Movement- Technicolor landscapes and smiley, happy people

This is a tableau that was played out in countless suburban homes in the fall of 1969. If this had been set in New York City, I would have featured a family of jaded city folk. This is folk-art Americana, though, a patchwork tapestry of fiddles and mandolins and cows in the pasture. This is farmer’s markets and Homecoming football games and pep rallies and bonfires and skating parties, like the kids in “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” who danced with their heads bopping back and forth to the jazz piano styling of Vince Guraldi. This is everybody enjoying winter at the skating rink (whether or not we knew how to skate) and waiting for that perfectly brewed mug of hot chocolate. This is marshmallow coatings for Thanksgiving yams and the promise that none of us was any different or better than the other.

That’s me, ahead of the pack, a brown-eyed five year old boy home from my first day in Kindergarten. Put me in a place where I can’t get hurt, where my brother and sisters carry me from room to room, talk for me, coddle their new arrival. The only way to effectively capture the scene for anything more than just posterity is to look closely and try not to squint at all the brightness. The picture was probably taken with one of those Polaroid Instamatic cameras where you wait for the sheet to come out and then you need to shake it before the image appears. Don’t blame anybody for the coddling, the arrested development. Don’t think that the security of those times might be why it seemed to take me forever to grow up. Hindsight and intellectualism won’t help you here.
This is about going back to when we could willingly and shamelessly capture a time when there were no problems. This is TV dramedy heaven.

Three years after our opening scene, early summer 1972, a single photograph of nine year old Kim Phuc was splashed on the cover of every major newspaper and it changed the lives of most people from my generation. This girl, a year older than me, was naked, running down the streets of her village in Vietnam. She had been strafed with napalm, her arms stretched out to her sides. My mother taped the photo on the door of our refrigerator, right next to a picture of Archibald Cox, a Watergate guy. There had been a Saturday night massacre at the White House, there were bombings in Vietnam. From that summer on, I came to understand the dichotomy of life. Nobody and nothing was safe.

In 1969, Walter Cronkite regularly reported the Vietnam War Death tolls on The CBS Evening News. We watched the black and white glow from the TV perched on our piano as we ate dinner. The 5th Dimension and their pop hits “Let the Sunshine In” and “Up Up and Away” hung in the radio atmosphere like a soothing narcotic. The music was comforting, stable, a perfectly polished pill that went down without any need for a chaser. The side effects of joy were more often than not mind-numbing, but that seemed to be the price we paid for innocence, safe in suburbia while cities like Detroit, Newark, and Watts still dealt with the effects of riots from a few years earlier. We lived a peaceful life and had no reason to expect it might change.

One pop culture moment I can cite is the ABC-TV show The Wonder Years (1988-1993), a sit-com, without a laugh track, that dramatically and at times very effectively conveyed the era, the neighborhood, the sensibilities of white bread America from the late sixties/early seventies. This was really who we are. This was how we acted.
The garish set design and bright technicolors matched my cozy, hazy, comfortable memories from that era. They made great pop music the historical record, but they took their stories that much further away from reality.

The bad thing is that it quickly, unabashedly resorted to operating under the idea that by merely presenting the classic music of the era, you can effectively touch emotional trigger points and have no need to explain history through some sort of narrative context. The Daniel Stern narration in The Wonder Years was insidious and all pervasive. Everything was a lesson learned, a golden opportunity that should have been treasured. The soundtrack of Lovin’ Spoonful, Youngbloods, and so much more from that time was at first good, but it quickly became tiresome, like a junior version of the grating 1983 film The Big Chill where Motown music was commodified as yet another product to emotionally exploit. Squeeze all the emotion from the songs, but don’t try to understand them.

I will softly, carefully admit something here. At least for a while, mine was a good childhood, filled with support and excitement. I had a mother who fed my need to read, and I was always searching for something. Nobody knew things would go downhill within the next ten years. We didn’t start life with some sort of understanding that things were going to be progressively stable then just as quickly steer off-course.

In 1969 America, I was the boy king, smiling as I ran home, hugging my mom and going to my room to play with my trains and watch TV and maybe flip through some books. The trains were non-descript, wooden blocks. I used to peel off the pictures of the mighty steamrollers pasted on the sides, but Fisher Price deserved better than that. I think about the wooden teaching clock. The music played when I turned the red dial.
I turned it quickly at first, then slowly as I fell asleep. This was reliable, stable, and untouched by the corrupted forces of the world outside my neighborhood.

There were no Wii video games or online role-playing opportunities. The late sixties was not a time for instant childhood gratification and flashing lights and rewards. We (or at least I) didn’t need tracks for our wooden block trains. Other kids had full sets of Lionel trains, electric switches and steam and stop signs and bridges, but I didn’t need them. I rode the trains over every inch of our TV room, through imaginary tunnels and up steep hills, through long stretches of flatlands and back home again. The trains were the start of my urge to get somewhere. It would take more years than I care to admit before I finally, really moved forward, but even in those days I was sure this journey was not supposed to be measured in anything but sincere effort. I had to be at the conductor’s switch every step of the way.

Fred Rogers was a soft-spoken children’s TV host, and he was my first friend besides my own parents. I was there in his house every afternoon as he opened his door, entered his house, took off his cardigan sweater and carefully hung it up on a metal hangar. He walked down the three steps that separated his front closet from his main living room. He walked towards a bench and changed from his work shoes to his slippers. It was a carefully choreographed performance that began each episode of his classic PBS-TV program “Mister Roger’s Neighborhood.” He didn’t just walk in and change into comfortable clothes and feign surprise as he noticed we were there. The man was also a Presbyterian Minister, but the show was refreshingly free of proselytizing. There were so many calm, friendly characters in the cast. Delivery man Mr. McFeely promised “speedy delivery.” Handy Man Negri fixed anything that was broken.
When that toy train came across on the tracks running behind the sofa in his living room- en route to The Land of Make believe- I wanted to go with him. In that Land there were fun puppets that had style and subtlety: King Friday, Mr. Owl and Meow Meow Pussycat. Lady Aberlin was a maiden in waiting, a human who could walk freely with the stiff hand puppets. That was the key to the Land of Make believe and the real life Mister Rogers had in his neighborhood. His friends in real life were there with him in his imagination. It was unashamedly low-budget and cut rate. The puppet’s mouths just moved up and down. Occasionally they gestured with their hands. Fred Rogers was the relaxed late afternoon antidote to the crazed antics of some puppets on “Captain Kangaroo” or the vaudeville antics of Bozo the Clown and Kukla, Fran and Ollie.

What still resonates is that Fred Rogers never yelled or patronized me. He respected that I was a little boy who wasn’t afraid of quiet time, who never hesitated to imagine a better (or at least more interesting) life when the world around me got too hectic. I wanted a huge set of signal lights in our living room, just like Mister Rogers,’ something that could help the little train in my mind carefully pass through whenever I needed the escape. When that train came by on his show, I wanted to take the ride. I wanted to go anywhere so long as Mister Rogers was my guide. He was the only one adult I ever trusted would bring me back home to my parents.

Those were the visuals, and there was never a change. The opening credits were played out to a slow pan down to a neighborhood where everything was peaceful. Mister Rogers never used bells and whistles and fireworks bursting in air. The real world was exploding all around us, with political assassinations, riots in the streets and just an overall gloom.
It was hell out there for the most part, but there was an implicit promise of serenity in Fred Rogers’ neighborhood.

The opening lines from the final verse of the theme song that Mister Rogers softly sang to us over a bed of solo light piano jazz ala Bill Evans always got to me:

“So, let’s make the most of this beautiful day/since we’re together
We might as well say/would you be mine?/ could you be mine?
Won’t you be my neighbor?” [http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/televisiontvthemelyrics-kidsshows/mrrogersneighborhood.htm](http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/televisiontvthemelyrics-kidsshows/mrrogersneighborhood.htm)

He’s admitting both of us would probably rather be somewhere else, but we aren’t, so we need to adjust and make the best of the situations. The first question is simple:

“Would you be mine?” We can then answer either way based on our schedule. He then asks if we can potentially be his. This responsibility he gives us is daunting. I had friends at that age. Tim lived across the street. He would grow to be president of our senior class and a stable father of two, married to his high school sweetheart.

There weren’t many others, but that wasn’t the point. We had what there was of each other. We had the Stringfellows, that family with the Dickensian name who came up during my fifth birthday earlier that summer and watched TV as Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. We had the Landry family. They were my parent’s landlords at their first apartment in Marblehead, the Fred and Ethel to their Lucy and Ricky. There was the artist lady several houses down from us whose kid’s ears stuck out like an elephant’s. There was the family whose daughter died shortly into the new decade from some sort of encephalitis infection. Their older son hosted overnight stays with my under-aged and terribly fragile sister Lauren. He was eventually hospitalized after a botched suicide attempt. He was a fan of early Yes and Cat Stevens, a short-haired guy with glasses and stringy blonde hair in a cereal bowl cut.
Mary, twelve years old at the time, my oldest sister, was the bony-thin blonde oldest child of the family. She was out of the house and on her own within five years. She answered various calls of adventure readily accessible to teenaged girls of the era, including adventures with a much older guy who lived in a shack down our road across from the town beach. He was a curly-haired naturist/maple syrup collector with chiseled good looks and a possible violent (or at least dangerously brooding) side hidden beneath his hippie complacency. He had to shut off his Harley-Davidson’s engine as he walked up our long driveway on those late nights and early mornings he picked up and dropped off my sister.

Jack was my long-haired brother. He pitched baseball, caused trouble with my sisters, and otherwise stayed with his own crowd. He was a bully, the antithesis to the clumsy grace of our sisters. What I know about him now is formed mainly by what he was in those days. What I feel about him now is formed not from any sense of what he’s become but rather the cloud of fear he represented when I was a child.

Then, like now, Jack never saw a need to embellish his experiences with hard-luck tales of life riding the rails or years of squalor in some filthy drug den. I can only piece these stories together as the years pass. Maybe I want him to have had the heart and soul of a poet, but the fact is we never connected and I learned early on there was no point putting all my hopes on the possibilities that the smallest spark might grow into a relationship.

The truth about Jack was simple. He was always fighting, always angry, always searching for something through the latest kick. He was a child of his time, ready to fly, very susceptible to toxic. It really wasn’t much deeper, but that doesn’t make it any easier.
I wanted and needed a big brother, but he didn’t want that job. He went missing in action from the family the day of my 12th birthday in 1976, when he smashed my birthday cake on the kitchen floor and sprayed me with root beer, to sometime six summers later. When he did return, he was hollow, scared, quick to fits of scary rage. He seemed to have seen horrible things while he was gone. I’d grown, graduated from high school and found older brother figures who did for me what Jack might have been able and willing to do had he not been caught up in the demons that were infecting so many of his generation.

Here is some more truth. Jack played the role of constant troublemaker and nobody (especially Dad) seemed willing to control him. Trouble in school and at home (including one afternoon when Mom apparently saw no other options and took a broom handle to his head resulting in injuries that caused a half dozen stitches and would have landed her in jail had it happened today) made private school enrollment the only option. This opened up an entire word of fresh drugs and elitism for a scared little boy who would only get more frightened before escaping home in 1976 and living a life Kerouac, Burroughs, and Hubert Selby, Jr. could only have imagined.

Carrie, five years older than me, was the 4H enthusiast, the horse rider. Carrie and Lauren raised the chickens that the Landry’s gave us. Those two were inseparable for a while. They had the type of love/hate (but mainly love) relationship that I wish I could have had with my brother. They had basement parties. The high school kids drank, smoked pot, played Elton John records and looked up into our dense three acre back yard and swore they could see UFO’s circling over the house of Kay and Carlyle Thomas.

There was probably at least one eccentric couple like Kay and Carlyle Thomas on every street in our town. They were an elderly pair who lived two doors down from us.
We’d sometimes look in our back yard only to see this thin, Katherine Hepburn type old lady shuffling over to our back door. Sometimes she’d come inside the house and wander over to my father. She’d watch him tinker away at some handyman job in the living room. We knew enough to not startle her. We let the woman watch, listened to her talk about the weather, and then escorted her outside and down the hill and back to her house.

Kay was addled, but her husband Carlyle was officious. He was a town official who spent weekends scouring through the town dump in search of gems or infractions as to what could or couldn’t be thrown out. Kay’s dementia was gradual, dramatic by the end, evident in her milky grey eyes, frazzled hair, pained smile, the raggedy gowns she wore everywhere. On the fireplace mantle of their dusty dark house she had a collection of naked Barbie dolls, their hair pulled back by rubber bands. Carlyle called us one day to announce that our cat Lily was living in their kitchen cupboard. Kay had mistaken Lily for one of her Barbie Dolls, and wrapped a loose rubber band around her small neck. Lily was able to scratch it off, but it had gotten imbedded behind one of her ears.

Leah, two years old in 1969, was a blonde lump of smooth clay waiting to be formed, watching, and soaking in everything. She was the peacekeeper and mediator later on in life, always trying to prove herself. We were close only by accident of proximity. Our birthdays were close together, three days apart in the middle of July. We had joint celebrations.

The thing about Leah is that she always just seemed abrupt, frustrated with and embarrassed by me. She was always running towards something else, always running for the security of somebody else. We permanently drifted apart after the bottom fell out of our family and that was as much my doing as hers. I wanted to be separate, to be severed.
Leah survived a ten year horrible marriage, but not without some definite damages, and we remain distant in too many ways, connecting only for one or two painfully awkward phone calls a year. How are you? What are you doing? What’s up? Where are you? These questions always annoyed me. Mom said to the end “You’re all going to fight with each other over my grave,” and she was right.

My parents were a young couple in Marblehead, a seacoast community on the North Shore. Dad worked at the G.E. Plant in Lynn, several towns away. They had three kids within twenty-five months, and material possessions were slim. They started out sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Furniture would have to wait. Their second child, a son, followed. Then, there was another daughter. Gradually, like a time-lapsed film of a tree growing in the forest, they became a stable unit. They started having things, always humble and functional, but things nonetheless. They took a two and a half year break between their third and fourth, and another one between the fourth and me.

“By the mid-sixties, I told your father I didn’t want any more kids. Everybody we knew had at least half a dozen, but I wanted us to be reasonable” Mom said in her usual honest style. “His response: ‘Talk to the priest about it.’”

The larger my posse, the less chance I might get damaged. I played kick the can, my arm draped around the shoulders of another little kid from the neighborhood. I loitered by the bus stop down the street from our house. With sticks I drew circles in the dirt and watched the big kids carrying their school books. I carried encyclopedias and recited what I could from them, like a trained monkey. What secrets did the kids share? Maybe, by being this monkey for the big kids, dancing to music only I could hear, I might have a place in the world.
Chapter Two

Sunny days, sweeping the clouds away: every kid’s first address

My other show in those days, “Sesame Street,” overflowed with great music and a universal embrace of people I never saw in person: black, Hispanic, Asian, blind, handicapped, and deaf. They had different accents, alternate religious observations, everything that defined “other” but never separated it from me.

From the theme song about sunny days sweeping the clouds away, to “(It’s Not Easy) Bein’ Green,” everybody had a song. This was a sad ballad in the context of something deeper, sung by the lime green Kermit the Frog as he sat alone on a fence. It was about understanding, tolerance, and it ended with an acceptance:

“I’m green and it’ll do fine/It’s beautiful and I think it’s what I want to be.” (<http://www.events-in-music.com/its-not-easy-being-green.html>)

Music was everywhere in our house in those days, and it wasn’t always escapist. In 1969, my mother was still recuperating from emergency hysterectomy complications after giving birth to her sixth child two years earlier. The hysterectomy triggered her diabetes and over thirty years of gradually declining health. Those years are clear to me, but the younger ones still come back every once in a while.

Mom was thirty-three, petite, brunette the eldest child of an Italian dentist from the “good side” of St. Louis, Missouri. Her father had a thick accent that he retained to his death. Her mother sang old gospel hymns like “This Little Light of Mine” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” She was reportedly fond of a shameless dirty joke, unfiltered cigarettes, and a good stiff drink every once in a while. Her father was an enraged ex-prison guard who wrote poetry and abused his children but otherwise exists as a mystery.
My maternal grandmother died as she’d lived most of her final decade, in bed, at fifty-seven, and probably the only song that remained in her head was the steady beat of the machine keeping her viable, the rhythm interrupted once the plug was pulled.

Mom was “good” and “proper” in all the ways expected of a soon to be lapsed Catholic woman in that era: no smoking, cursing, always caring for her multitude of children through good morals. She saw early salvation through intellectual enlightenment, filling the giant, wall-sized bookcases Dad had made for her with volumes of great art, small copies of the complete Shakespeare plays and poetry. Mom was intent on giving us the positive, illuminating our lives with great thoughts and beautiful visions, but then there was seemed to be a glaring inconsistency.

With all this in her favor, why did she like “Is that all there is?” What was it about that strange half spoken/half sung performance that spoke to her? I understood why she liked Vicki Carr’s “Let it please be him,” but “Is that all there is?” was a mystery.

Some background: the song’s writers, Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, were one of the greatest songwriting teams in the history of pop music. They started in the fifties with great Elvis Presley tunes (“Jailhouse Rock”), and the canon of The Coasters (“Smokey Joe’s Café.”) These guys had the Midas touch when it came to the perfect hook, funny lyrics, and an overall jaded but funny outlook. “Is that all there is?” was a dark, somewhat disturbing cabaret style spoken word song popularized by the legendary torch singer Peggy Lee. In four verses, Lee tells some sad stories in her famous weary voice. The first is about her house catching on fire. The second describes a circus that she witnesses as a 12 year old. The third is all about falling in love. She is intoxicated by love.
In the final verse, the darkness reaches full bloom. The singer accepts what we must be thinking:

If that’s the way she feels about it why doesn’t she just end it all?

The temptation probably crossed her mind, but she realized that when the end came, her thoughts would be the chorus, a mixture of lazy passivity and bold acceptance of the inevitable:

“Is that all there is? /is that all there is? /If that’s all there is my friends/Then let’s Keep dancing/Let’s break out the booze and have a ball/if that’s all there is.”

<http://www.leoslyrics.com/listlyrics.php?id=9115>

Mom and Peggy both sang the word “boooozzzeee” like it was the key to the story. The hope that my mother instilled in my life wasn’t cancelled out by the darkness of this song. Rather, it was a fuller picture of gloom and real fate. Mom liked to blend her voice with all the great singers: Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Doris Day. She sang “Bushel and a Peck” from “Guys and Dolls” and Louis Prima’s“Hey Baba Reba,” songs whose lyrics were warm and inconsequential nonsense, but Peggy Lee’s rendition of “Is that all there is?” lingers longer. It was the dark sadness beneath the warmth and guidance my mother gave me through her life. Things are good, but you will always wonder if there is more to the picture.

Dad’s musical connections were less blatant. He was a Louis Armstrong fan long before he met Mom. Early in their marriage, before so many kids and other complications drove them through the roller coaster of their time together, Dad took Mom to a Louis Armstrong concert. They had bad seats, and the story (perhaps apocryphal) was that Armstrong invited those in the back to come fill up the front row.
When Armstrong’s trumpet-playing saliva spilled onto my parents, who were probably in the first few rows by that point, it was almost like a baptism. The gritty barroom haunts that were the bread and butter of Dixieland Jazz were probably all too familiar to my Dad who would be a faithful member of Alcoholics Anonymous from 1975 until his death in 1997. He abandoned the destructiveness, but the music stayed with him.

Trying to encapsulate Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong (1901-1971) is tantamount to tracing the Mona Lisa, writing a comprehensive blurb about The Bible. It’s impossible. Armstrong was a giant of the Jazz trumpet, probably the giant. Armstrong’s presence was that of a constantly smiling, sometimes eye-rolling African-American, constantly dabbing sweat from his shiny brow. This didn’t play well for some factions during the fifties and sixties, but politically correct revisionist criticism usually is damning to great artists. Armstrong is perhaps best known as the singer of the 1960’s hits “(What a) Wonderful World,” “Hello Dolly,” and “Cabaret.” Lesser known yet profound in more ways than perhaps initially understood by its audience was the subtle commentary on racism and plea for justice in his 1929 classic (recorded a handful of times over the next few decades) “Black and Blue.”

Listen to the legendary Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald duets (especially “Stars Fell on Alabama” and the score to “Porgy and Bess”) are probably among the sweetest sounds of the 20th century. Armstrong’s growl was the perfect compliment to Ella’s sweetness. We wouldn’t hear anything comparable until Ray Charles asked Betty Carter to “listen to that fireplace roar” in the 1961 classic “Baby, it’s Cold Outside.” Revolutionaries might have preferred their trumpet men to be scowling, alienating dark geniuses like Miles Davis, uncompromising and never willing to compromise for the man.
Louis might have been a buffoon compared to Miles, but again such foolishness always stands in the way of enlightenment. In a perfect world, there was always room for both.

I remember watching Armstrong’s televised stately funeral the summer I turned seven. Louis had died on my father’s birthday. A few days later, my father and I watched it on that dusty black and white TV in our kitchen. Dad and I didn’t speak. This was typical, but some moments didn’t need elaboration. The stereotype of his Irish heritage was supposed to have blessed him with the gift of gad. He might very well have been a charismatic monologist, but not with me. Armstrong’s funeral was a grand, dignified send-off for a Jazz giant, a horn player who had seen huge changes in his country. It showed me, even at that young age, the perfect celebratory way to slip this mortal coil.

There were other musical connections for my dad, and both show the polarities of his character. He had a huge head that looked as if it was carved from granite, deep-set grey eyes and thin eyebrows. His hair was receding but still viable until the end. He looked like a combination of the tired, resigned manhood of Paul Newman with the steely resolve of late period Clint Eastwood. Dad was a man’s man and sometimes I pictured him in barroom brawls, assuming a fisticuffs posture like an Irish boxer from the turn of the century. Put ‘em up. Put ‘em up.

So here is another dichotomy to ponder. How could this man’s man gravitate towards the soft at the edges Neil Diamond sensitivity? How could my father find a compadre in somebody this corny? I remember the puffy-haired, lace-shirted photographic portrait of Diamond from his 1972 album “Moods.” He was broody. He was introspective and meaningful. He was a baritone-voiced singer/songwriter whose look was meant to pierce through you even if the material was sometimes a little lame.
For Dad, it was “Song Sung Blue,” an innocuous pop number which nonetheless spoke truth beneath the banalities of the context:

“Me and you are subject to, the blues now and then/
But when you take the blues and make a song/you sing them out again…”
<http://www.neildiamondhomepage.com/lyricpag.htm#songsungblue>

In Willie Nelson, Dad found a grizzled compadre who sang about Whiskey Rivers and being crazy and the nightlife. Nelson’s production and songwriting approach was the antithesis of Diamond’s. He had a wobbly flat voice, a distinct finger-picking guitar style, but he also had affection for the classics. Diamond was primarily an originator, singing his own songs. In his final fifteen years, Dad spent evenings in the living room reading *The Boston Globe* and *How The Irish Saved Civilization*, shifting between CD shuffles of popular Broadway cast recordings of “Carousel” and “Showboat,” Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World,” and popular arias from Luciano Pavarotti.

Dad died before the ipod, but he took to CDs with great interest and energy. In those last years of his life, my parents found common ground in the schmaltzy “The Three Tenors” (Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras), swooning when Pavarotti soared with the crowd-pleasing “Un Nessun Dorma,” or when the three of them did their “West Side Story” medley. This really was pure and special romance. The sounds of that performance still echo in the house where we grew up, background during holiday cooking time and other nights when everything stood still and even the most unforgivable sins were temporarily forgiven.
Chapter Three

You’ll never walk alone

Dad’s funeral service was one of those unfortunately staid, perfunctory, dull affairs typical of Roman Catholicism. This is not a knock against that faith so much as a comment on rituals. I wish we had been willing to send him off with a New Orleans style line funeral, but that wasn’t us. We couldn’t justifiably pull that off. It was all atonal chants from the Priest, and smoke and blessings on the flag-draped coffin. I got too caught up in the musical and grammatical faux paux committed by a prim and proper, pale redhead singer who probably never knew my father.

“’Amazing Grace/How sweet the sound/that saved and rescued me.”
(http://www.anointedlinks.com)

I leaned over to my mother, seated to my left, and whispered in her ear.

“Did you hear what she said?”

Mom seemed numb, even smaller than usual, but a smile of recognition crept onto her face. She knew what I was about to say.

“Don’t start,” she said.

I couldn’t help it. She’d given me the key, so I had to walk through the door.

“Those aren’t the lyrics,” I said.

Mom stared straight ahead at the singer and the dark, antiseptic surroundings of this Church. This is the same one she’d regularly attended up until twenty years earlier, and I could feel a mixture of uncomfortability, regret, and anger from her as she sat still on the hard smooth pew. I was feeling the same thing. I glanced at the smooth tortured Jesus on the cross, looked at the colorful stained-glass windows that let no light inside.
There was a mothball smell that seemed to be wafting from the back room behind the altar, but that didn’t matter to me. I felt physically queasy and definitely out of my element, but this was beside the point. She had changed the lyrics to a great song, and I was pissed.

“She’s being redundant,” I said. “‘Saved and rescued’ means the same thing. It’s wretch,” I said. “It’s ‘saved a wretch like me.’”

Mom seemed to smile a bit, but probably not from anything I was saying. For that moment, we were of one mind. We were music critics, and this singer had failed. Dad was a member of several church committees and a late in life soldier in the Knights of Columbus. The priest couldn’t help his creepy dreariness. It was spelled out in the job description. But the woman, who was making a painfully obvious effort to be as stale as possible, should have known better.

Here’s what I wanted to know that morning during her seemingly endless performance of an unspeakably beautiful song. Did she think we would be offended if she had referred to our father as a wretch? As funeral songs go, “Amazing Grace” might not have the emotional punch of the sublime Negro Spiritual “His Eye Is On The Sparrow” (with that wonderful line of mourning “I sing because I’m happy/I sing because I’m free” <http://www.squidoo.com/his-eye-is-on-the-sparrow>) but the least this woman could have done was remain faithful to the original text.

There was neither time nor inclination to put together the ideal music mix for Dad’s wake. I knew the wake would be considerably freer than the Roman Catholic service, but I didn’t know what his friends would do. One by one, maybe half a dozen of his brothers in AA came up to the casket and placed sobriety chips on his clasped hands.
(My mother placed a pack of Reese’s Peanut butter cups inside his hands, a joke I’m sure he would have loved.) The chips Dad’s friends placed on his hands symbolized various landmarks in sobriety: 30 days, 60 days, and a year. They didn’t match his 22 years, but that wasn’t the point. The chips represented old melodies these men- mainly in their thirties and forties- were willing to surrender forever. They no longer needed to sing them, so they gave them away. My father had died, but before he left he’d helped them find a new song to sing.

Three days after Dad’s funeral, we delivered a flower bouquet to his Thursday night Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Mary, Carrie, Jack and I stood in the back of a crowded church basement. We listened as Dad was eulogized and it felt more hallowed than a church. There would be no tearful, gin-soaked reminiscence about close calls and blackouts in cheap motels on Route One. The attendees that night knew we were there. We were the quiet ones, nervous, out of our element. We were the numb, the mournful and bitter who were operating from a distance, watching ourselves move from the outside looking in. We were the children of an alcoholic who had died six days ago.

I never understood until that night why my father connected so closely with this organization for the final twenty-one years of his life. Groups and affiliations were not part of my life. He was an engineer, a mechanic, a father of six who did his best to raise a family through tough times and always come through things with his head held high. He saw his children through marriages, death, drug abuse, detachment, disenfranchisement, and reconciliation through grandchildren. My parents stayed tight through forty-one years of a roller coaster marriage that produced more drama than anybody would care to admit.
In spite of everything, especially themselves, they persevered and were better people for having known each other.

We know the melodies that linger like stardust on a summer’s night, but this is never a proper substitute for knowing the people. We cannot fully know our parents until later, and only through the clear eyes of others. I would not have wanted to know my father as a drunk, in the late sixties and early seventies. But it is more than just alcohol that can make people drunk, and my father was no different. He could be sullen, withdrawn, spend hours working under his car or painting the house, anything to get away from himself and what he may have done to his life. My father was the only one of his five brothers who stayed away long enough from his mid-west home to build a life of integrity from the cold childhood he’d been given. No matter what he did, in his quiet and humble way, he seemed to be still haunted by what could have been. In an alcoholic family, what went on at night was never discussed in the light of the next day.

The drunk that people say Dad could be at times before he quit is only understandable by relating it to my own alcohol abuse. Surrendering to a disease, to the weakness of an inherited condition and the mystery of a “higher power,” was always something to resist. That my father did it in 1976 is still a clear memory, those Ala-Non and Ala-Teen meetings where they drowned their regret in black coffee and the kids just listened. They were held in cigarette smoke-filled church basements with bulletin boards covered in postings for various bingo games. My parents were separated, working things out, and in family photographs Dad had dark sideburns, flared bellbottoms, wide collars and sunken, blackened eyes. None of us really smiled in those pictures, especially him.
For years I was bitter and regretful that this sickness had made him something else. Why had A.A. taken away my father?

Dad was a creature of comforting rituals and dangerous habits. He dispensed with the physically bad ones, cigarettes and alcohol, before his death, and replaced them with sweets and too much red meat. He became a resurrected Catholic, finding comfort in the traditions of Mass and The Knights of Columbus. Late Sunday mornings, after Mass, he made bacon sandwiches, bacon on the side, swimming in mayonnaise. He embraced secrets rather than sharing them. Why wasn’t he expressive? How he could go through life without writing or giving me regular bits of wisdom. What could I teach him about what I liked? To the end, like a sullen child never willing to appreciate what he had, I wanted my father to feed me.

He could build a barn for a horse and pony, erect a swing set or dollhouse, and never have to ask for directions, I was the writer and the English teacher who collected books, wrote incessantly, never got involved with sports. I was the Liberal, and he was the voice of Pro-Life. The many factors that make up who I am today are probably because I was sure he would have objected. At that Thursday night meeting, they said Dad was a great guy to get drunk with “but it was a lot more fun to get sober with him.” Others spoke of how he led them during their first, tenuous days in the program. In his last twenty years, my father helped scores of troubled people get better. He was an alcoholic mid-wife shepherding troubled people through the dark nights of their souls, where a thirty day chip means everything in the world as they clutch it in their trembling palms. That night, I learned that my father was a better teacher than I would ever be and he never had to tell people to let it be understood.
Chapter Four

The Sound Of Silence 1997-2001

How would it feel to take a vow of silence? Joining a convent wasn’t for me. A monk’s life would have cut down on wardrobe, but there was the annoying issue of a celibacy commitment. After Dad’s death, something happened. I was half an orphan, no longer able to know that he was there, one way or another. He might not have talked a lot in those last years, except to mom during their long walks, but he was there, a fixture of granite like something from Mount Rushmore. I just wanted to keep my mouth shut and walk through my days in quiet contemplation.

This is what happened. This is how things settled as I fell into more work. I got hired teaching Dyslexic students burdened with Attention Deficit Disorder and other issues of inferiority. I spoke with them when needed, but otherwise I stayed silent. I stayed alone. Human nature, lack of general self-esteem or confidence, and birth order in a large family sometimes dictates how much you choose to say in your regular life. I thought about the fact that I didn’t say a word until I was three, and I ended up regularly lecturing before countless classes of strangers. Outside of class, I was a quiet man, just like the title character in Dad’s favorite movie. What would people think if I went full time? How would I be perceived?

I thought about the power voices carried when they wanted to get something done. They were shrill, deep, twisted, gnarled, raspy, seductive, demanding and harsh.
Voices joined together in loud righteous indignation. Voices united to sing praise in a holy gospel choir. If they suddenly fell silent, if my cord was pulled, would anybody notice? The only advocate we have in this world, when everything else is stripped away, is our own inherent will to survive, and my energy level was running on empty. I looked in the mirror and the image I saw was shouting back at me. Any words that needed communicating would not have to be spoken.

So it was work during the day, and trying to be civil with co-workers and inspiring to my students, but otherwise it was a year of voluntary silence. Everything vocal from my old life was removed. In the late nineties I was still living at home, but this period of contemplation eventually became my curse. Be careful what you wish for because it will always come true. I ordered groceries through the Internet, and maybe even ventured outside my apartment every other day to go to the gym, but I did not talk. I did not say an unnecessary word to anybody. I maintained eye contact, proper hygiene, smiled at people, but otherwise I stayed silent. I balanced my days between healthy mind and body and thought about what happened to draw me towards the need for silence. I dusted off the books in my library and got acquainted with them. I listened to the great symphonies and concertos of the past five hundred years because I knew they’d be my only dependable friends for a while.

For years, I never stayed on one track in my train of thought while I spoke with people. My attention span remained that of a six year old, always eager to jump at the next interesting topic that came across my desk. Was it Adult Attention Deficit Disorder? No. It was just me, just my life. Worse than the constant rambling, though, was my thick-tongued stammering, stumbling over syllables in a nervous, frantic rush to that finish line.
Words never came out as clearly and flawlessly as they should have. I stumbled over the same ideas, rambled over the same tired phrases, and the assumption that every thought was so precious it needed repeating at least half a dozen times. My speech problems were never a medical problem. They came from excess pride.

As a teacher, I saw many of my students terrified to speak up in class. Had I been teaching online in those days after Dad’s death, I would not have turned back. I would have had no need to talk. That forum stripped us of any prejudices about appearances, body language, or quality of voice. I quickly learned how many of my distance education students seem to be more open to intellectual breakthroughs. They took the time to think before the dialogue bubble popped up above their heads. If only all of us could have that luxury in our real lives.

In a year of silence we could still electronically connect with the outside world. Think about the significance that comes from a look of love across a crowded, smoky room. Imagine the power of a perfectly timed, properly placed caress from a loved one. Listen to the wordless lyricism of Coltrane and Monk and understand that words are irrelevant filler, just too much with us these days. Call a moratorium on filibusters, a termination of small talk. I want to hear the silence between the grooves on a record, the white noise hiss on an old cassette tape, and I want to think it’s all too wonderful.
Chapter Five

Songs of Innocence

“Oh to live on Sugar Mountain/with the barkers and the colored balloons/You can’t be twenty on sugar mountain/though you’re thinkin’ that you’re leavin’ there too soon” (Neil Young- “Sugar Mountain”- 1969) (http://hyperrust.org/Music/)

The only truth I know now is that life is about movement, about going forward and never looking back. It is about train songs and long distance marathons and a cosmic dialectic where no worthwhile antithesis ever goes un-synthesized. It is about the constant push and pull, the struggle that never hurts. We can examine past mistakes and analyze grand achievements and live a settled existence, satisfied and eager that we’ve done our best, but from the moment we begin it’s always about moving forward.

Great pop music was the vehicle that brought me through everything. Beyond my membership in a monthly Parent’s Magazine Press Book Club, the faith my mother had that my slow intellectual development masked the makings of an intelligent man, there was the crystal smooth melody of her voice. Even in her angry tirades, understandable coming from any mother of six, she was almost operatic. Great music floated through the atmosphere during my childhood. Before the certainty of the train song (much more about that later), when I knew I could buy a ticket and jump aboard any sleeper car headed out of the dead end, there was the majesty of pop music. Here was The Beach Boys classic “God Only Knows,” the most fragile evocation of conditional love ever framed into three minutes:
“I may not always love you/but long as there are stars above you/
You’ll never need to doubt it/I’ll make you so sure about it/
God only knows what I’d be without you.” (http://lyricsfreak.com)

“God Only Knows” was co-written by Brian Wilson, one of pop’s first great tortured geniuses, and released during that cornerstone magical pop music year 1966. Great cover versions include Elvis Costello’s elegant early 1990’s live take with the Brodsky Quartet. The arrangement is at first unfamiliar, but when this adventurous contemporary string quartet eventually picks up the familiar melody and Costello’s vocals start with such earnest longing, the results are stunning. Paul McCartney has cited it as his all-time favorite song. This was heartbreaking fragile earnestness sung with more conviction than the singer probably had a right to express. In a way, it’s almost a spiritual. Nobody but God knows what will happen if the relationship ends. It might be read as threatening (look at what will happen if you go away), but the beauty overwhelms the danger.

By the mid-sixties, Brian Wilson fell into a deep mental breakdown, drug-fueled living death from which it would take at least twenty years to even start recovering. Stories are legendary of Wilson building a sandcastle in his room, spending weeks in bed, and ballooning up to 300 pounds, puffy and bearded and always in a terry cloth wardrobe. That he lived to re-configure “SMiLE,” his lost 1966 masterpiece, forty years later, is testament to the miracles a great pop sensibility can still pull off. He remains a fragile, frightened-looking performer, for some simply a miraculous embodiment of what good mood stabilizers can do for a damaged soul, but the voice is surprisingly strong after so many years and the spirit remains.
I was seven in 1971, in our 1967 Chevrolet Vista Cruiser, with Mom as we drove past the cemetery where the heart of my family would find their eternal rest. We had no stoplights, just abandoned railroad crossings, white Church Steeples, and unlocked doors. It was a town where barren couples adopted orphaned Vietnamese children. We sang Christmas Carols door-to-door, and we had no reason to think any of this would end within five years, after Watergate, after Nixon, after the death of hope. The car radio was tuned into Gordon Lightfoot’s “If You Could Read My Mind” that afternoon. Suddenly an image in one of the verses entered my consciousness and has never gone away:

“Just like an old time movie/bout a ghost from a wishing well/In a castle dark or a fortress strong/with chains upon my feet/but stories always end…”

(<http://www.lightfoot.ca/ifyoucld.htm>)

This was heartache, surviving a car wreck, reading minds, remembering unforgiving ghosts who lived in a hazy middle world. A year earlier, during a Maine family camping trip, The Carpenters song '(They Long to Be) Close To You' was the sonic equivalent of the warm down comforter sleeping bag that protected us from the rain. They were a sugary-sweet brother/sister pop combo from California that was huge in the seventies. The song was a lush, rich Burt Bacharach/Hal David classic, a ballad that paid tribute to a woman who made the birds appear every time she was near. You didn’t want to be taken by it, but like other hits from this duo, including “We’ve Only Just Begun,” the honest evocation of happiness and joy was hard to dismiss.

I never wanted to endear myself to anything so corny, but the years have been surprisingly kind to The Carpenters and their singles from this era nicely hold up in the light of today’s vocally altered mish-mashed tunes. There was a sense of purity to The Carpenters that was anything but post-modern and campy. They just seemed honest.
Listen to “Superstar,” written by Bonnie Bramlett and Leon Russell, for an armchair analysis of what might have been going on in the tragic tortured soul of Karen Carpenter. It’s a truly disturbing, frightening ballad. It was sung from the perspective of an obsessed fan who remind her favorite singer, on the chorus, of an empty declaration he once made:

“Don’t you remember you told me you loved me baby?”
(<http://www.richardandkarencarpenter.com/SN_Superstar.htm>)

The Carpenters may have been the embodiment of all that was harmless and vacuous in the 70s, the antithesis of the cerebral and confessional singer/songwriter, but Karen’s sudden 1983 cardiac arrest, as a result of her anorexia, gave lie to the notion that all was sunshine and lollipops in a land of eternal bliss and Pepsodent smiles.

Film director Todd Haynes’s 43 minute 1987 film Superstar: the Karen Carpenter Story is a bit morbid (he cast it entirely with Barbie dolls as the lead characters) but it ultimately proves strangely affecting and touching, thanks to the music. Richard Carpenter successfully petitioned to stop its distribution, but it can (and really should) be easily accessed online. Haynes takes the surface-level banality of the Carpenters music, mixes it with the perfection of the Barbie culture, and the viewer is rendered nearly helpless. The Carpenters were definitely the ultimate guilty pleasures in their day. No free-form, soul patch wearing hipster would have been caught dead with them on the play lists swirling in their minds during the seventies, when significance was synonymous with angst, but I always found something touching in their ballads.

For that week in campgrounds we shared with naked, pot-smoking hippies just down the mountain and through the woods within clear sight, nothing separated us. My parents were a conformist, mainstream couple, but in this instance they were able to flirt with danger, last through the non-stop drama of having six kids on a summer vacation.
Involuntarily, they enjoyed the best contact high money never had to buy. A summer 1972 family drive halfway across America, from Boston to St. Louis, was interrupted somewhere in Pennsylvania’s Pocono’s Mountains by a massive, overheated and underfed traffic jam. The eight of us were suddenly unwilling participants in a rock festival featuring Rod (“Maggie May”) Stewart and Alice Cooper.

Here was the scene: a hot summer haze drifted through the air and mixed with the sweetness of marijuana. Smelly, long-haired, shirtless men strolled through the long rows of overheated parked cars. Some of them sold dope and pills, others caressed pythons around their necks. Mom made peanut butter and cracker sandwiches for the concertgoers, and Dad spent the twelve hours stuck in traffic cursing any man named Alice and vowing that no record from any performer at this rock festival would ever enter his house.

Ghosts were all over songs from that period, in explicit or implicit form: James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain,” Cat Stevens’s “Wild World,” Carole King’s “So Far away.” I was an eight year old deep thinker when I learned about heartache from Don McLean’s “American Pie,” that eight and a half minute allegory about the death of innocence as seen through the loss of Buddy Holly in an Iowa corn field in February 1959. Nothing was explicitly spoken in the song. It was all allegory, all coy references, all implications, and I was hooked, especially with that mournful last verse, just vocal and piano:

“I went down to the sacred store/where I’d heard the music years before but the man there said the music wouldn’t play.”
(<http://www.don-mcclean.com/songsearch/viewsong.asp?id=89>)

That was easily understandable. Things were changing. The revolution was instead taking place every day in independent record stores with plastic-covered new releases with amazing cover art and gatefolds that opened up to a world of wonders.
Record stores were pristine, sacred places. They were the sanctuaries that made it possible for us to make great discoveries. Nobody judged what you brought to the counter. Sure, they might have laughed and smirked (as I did twelve years later when I worked in a store that eventually went under because all we seemed to sell was Culture Club records) but it was all part of a swirling, tough dialogue. We definitely were willing—like Elton John implored us in “Benny and The Jets”—to fight our parents out in the streets to see who was right and wrong—but in the record store we were kings. In the record store, we programmed mix tapes to play over the PA system, a mix that might not have always been welcoming to the crowd but it worked for us.

Earlier in the song, in a moment of weakness, the King looks down and his crown is taken by the jester, the heir apparent. “The courtroom was adjourned/no verdict was returned.” Nothing could be done because the guard was changing. Was this Elvis surrendering to the inevitability of The Beatles? Was that Bob Dylan brazenly strutting around with a crown of thorns, the crown he never wanted? The mind reeled, and I liked it that way. I wanted to know I could dance to my story song epics, sway around on the dance floor like a lopsided idiot, but I also wanted a guarantee that this music was going to exercise my mind. I wanted to think about everything, to question the principles an earlier generation had set out for me, to build another road for myself if the need surfaced. That’s the power this music gave me. McLean takes a dramatic detour later in that final verse and I never could fully come to terms with it, then or now:

“The three men I admired most/the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost/
They caught the last train for the coast/the day the music died.”
(<http://www.don-mcclean.com/songsearch/viewsong.asp?id=89>)
It should be hopelessly trite to me now. I don’t want to see the poetry in such
great lines of pop music, the same way I don’t know why I always remember the raining
fire in the sky, from John Denver’s masterful “Rocky Mountain High.” It’s too beautiful.
I want to drink the Kool-Aid of academia, read only the Norton Anthology, but I was
always going to be haunted by the material that first spoke to me.

Put the childhood rhymes in a back drawer. They will always be there when
everything else has failed. This image from “American Pie,” where the Trinity takes the
final one way train out of town, was not only about the end of innocence, but the loss of
faith. The idea of so closely aligning yourself with a prescribed sense of direction was
always foreign to me. I never took to rituals. I wondered if I’d ever bother with my
father’s Catholic faith, that same faith my mother left five years later to become a
Jehovah’s Witness, that faith of white suits and confirmation that meant so much to some
of my siblings and still resonates with some of them. I had been to church, seen the
smoke and mirrors, stuck my tongue out to receive the Host and drink the wine, but it
never really mattered.

Faith and longing came in the mysteries of Harry Chapin’s “Taxi,” a long,
cinematic first-person narrative about a jaded hero who drives a taxi for a living and finds
himself picking up an old lover one rainy San Francisco night. You could hear the sleep
in his eyes, the beard stubble on his cheeks. Nothing he’d ever planned had ever come
ture, and everybody from the old days was long gone. Of course, the selling point for
many was the refrain, where he noted that he “flies so high when I’m stoned.” But I was
more intrigued by the searing, soaring, ethereal falsetto voice in the song’s middle-eighth:
“Baby’s so high that she’s skying/Yes she’s flying, afraid to fall
I’ll tell you why baby’s crying/’Cause she’s dying/aren’t we all.”
(http://harrychapin.com/music/taxi.shtml)

Harry Chapin was one of the better alumni from the singer/songwriter school. He was a powerful folksinger and active anti-world hunger activist who would die in a car crash, at thirty-nine, nine years after he made it big with “Taxi.” (Croce, who wrote and performed the sad anthem” Time in A Bottle,” also died tragically, in a plane crash.) Chapin’s brother Tom hosted a great children’s TV show from that era called “Make a Wish.” Each week, he played guitar and imagined himself as an animal or something equally fun. We watched stock footage of the subject matter, and at the end of the show Tom was always sitting outside on a rock as he strummed the show’s theme song and literally ascended into the sky.

“Taxi,” like “American Pie” Procul Harum’s “Conquistador,” Todd Rundgren’s “Hello, It’s Me,” Carly Simon’s “You’re So Vain,” and Elton John’s “Your Song,” was one of those songs I always heard at night tuned to the legendary top 40 Boston station WRKO-AM as I slept with a transistor radio under my pillow. Those were the days when I felt like I had a horse in the race of Casey Kasem’s “American Top 40” weekly countdown radio show. Everything was a sweeping narrative, with grand cinematic flourishes and production values and adult metaphors for sex and drugs and hopelessness I could only hope to understand.

We examined lyrics and album designs for death symbolism and political upheaval. Elton John was Captain Fantastic and David Bowie was a Thin White Duke, Classic marathons and Memorial Day 500 best ever song countdowns that always ended with Led Zeppelin’s bombastic “Stairway to Heaven” and The Beatles’ “Hey Jude.”
Now, the best music is gone from commercial AM and FM radio and everywhere else. It’s been replaced by play lists and Mp3 downloads and ipod shuffle mixes and the luxury of satellite radio. The access is wonderful, but the magic has vanished.

So this was it. We were all moving forward, but now, a great song was telling me that there was a final destination at the end of the road. Where was I supposed to find (let alone keep) the faith when it seemed everything and everybody I ever knew eventually walked away when they’d had their fill of me? It was easy to see in my musical touchstones: Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, Beethoven, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and so many others. The main thing they shared was a definite unwillingness to ever compromise, but the other common thread was less clear. My heroes never stayed still. My heroes never settled for complacency. They never compromised or settled for anything less than following their muse.

It was difficult to have musical touchstones, or heroes, when you had no discernible faith. Still today, it seems those of us who don’t recognize a marketable “God” are treated as outcasts, asked to wait until everybody else is served before we can come to the family table for a fulfilling meal. Cultural heroes were never religious idols for me, but they were standards. They were role models. I had no intention of following these people as they jumped over the ledge, but their lives were compelling.

I thought about the books my father had, Little Stories of Big People, inspiring biographies meant to push him on during those years between the wars. Dad had those books and the glory of “The Greatest Generation. He lived by rugged individualism the frontier spirit, John Wayne and individual responsibility. I had “Wacky Packages,” “Dynamite” magazine “Soul Train,” Cheech and Chong and “Saturday Night Live.”
The jaded, cold, sad cynicism of a post-Watergate world told me we could not afford to trust anybody over thirty. I don’t know who had it better, but I knew indoctrination techniques when I saw them. I ran at the first sign of an agenda.

In the late thirties, my father and his brothers joined a “junior ‘G’ Men” law man’s club. They got junk mail letters of commendation from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. When I was ten, my walls were covered with photos I got from our 4th grade teacher’s subscriptions to *Time* and *Newsweek* of various Watergate conspirators: Haldeman, Ehrlichman, John Dean, the ski-nosed and sweaty widow’s-peaked jowly ringleader Richard Nixon. I was obsessed with duplicity, driven by tales of deceit and robbery, fascinated by people who thought they could get away with stealing an election.

My father and his brothers were adolescent “G” men out to capture communists and fellow travelers, but my friends and I played Watergate break-in for real. Dad’s life was very concrete and definitive. He was born a year before the Great Depression, and raised with a sensibility of saving, prioritizing, and- by the time he was thirteen- a nation that was fighting the Good War against Hitler and winning. I was born during Freedom Summer 1964 and raised with the hope that everything was possible and all people deserved justice. When Nixon tore at the fabric of the American Constitution, my generation had to put it back together. We crawled outside during recess, under the classroom windows, pretending the poor sap stuck inside because he hadn’t done his morning homework was George McGovern, alone in his Democratic Headquarters office, despondent over the fact that any chance at winning the election was unimaginable.
Chapter Six

Gotta Serve Somebody - belief and denial and no middle ground

I was fascinated with the ornery, idiosyncratic iconoclasts I would never have wanted to meet but I couldn’t imagine my life without them. My artistic obsessions weren’t as fully formed in those days as they are now, but the common theme was always the same. The only thing I knew about Jesus was what I saw in the movies, the sandy-haired surfer guy with the clean white gown and beatific glow. What I heard in gospel like “He’s got the whole world in his hands,” “This Little Light of Mine,” or the great gospel pop number from The Edwin Hawkins Singers “Oh Happy Day” was a sense of security in knowing where and when and how you would get your reward. Nobody was better than Sweet Honey in the Rock, The Staple Singers, or The Blind Boys of Alabama when it came to testifying and bringing me “the good news.”

Like sex and drugs, we learn faith from our parents, the streets, or some sort of structured environment. We take from all these influences the smallest element to call our own. My parents began their relationship as Catholics. Mom became a Jehovah’s Witness in 1977 and stayed with it until her death nearly thirty years later. I was envious of the conviction that gave her.

This is what I knew: faith was a slippery rock, a comfortably reliable narcotic, and when you were able to firmly grasp onto it, you had to hold on in spite of everything. Faith was the only guarantee, the only key to a promised kingdom at rainbow’s end.
Around the same time Mom found her faith, Dad found his focus in both Alcoholic’s Anonymous and a re-newed connection with Catholicism. They were revived, restored. They sometimes battled over whose faith Leah and I had to follow, and that left me more determined just to go my own way.

That was the simple truth, unvarnished and plain. Rather than take sides with either parent, like some of my siblings did, I let it go. I didn’t follow either, but I admired the connection both my parents found in their religion. I know. You want a better ending. Maybe the soundtrack will shift to a New Orleans funeral march something brassy and triumphant like “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” or “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Maybe there will be a slideshow of photos featuring my Mother in various stages of her life: the wide eyes and pouty mouth of Mom as a three year old, her wedding photo, when she could have doubled for a “National Velvet” era Elizabeth Taylor.

Look closely and you might even see the drained resignation in her eyes seen in nearly every photo of her in the seventies, that decade when things fell apart and came together again. The set décor is garish and tacky. Dad has sideburns and deep-set eyes. Mom has permed hair and colorful blouses. Diabetes and respiratory issues will take a toll on her weight and usual cheery attitude, but she won’t let it get to her.

Look at the pictures for what they are, sad and drained but real. Accept that that sheer sadness of mom and most of the family trying to simulate a sense of unity is just a lie of the mind, a trick, an illusion where too many Brady Bunch re-runs separate the line between illusion and reality. We tried through the years attempting to feel something real.
Unfortunately, it was never unified. Big families either grow tighter with each passing
year, or they end up like us, aimless satellites a long way from home with no need or
desire to re-connect. The only thing that satisfies me is knowing that mom’s faith
convinced her there was something better at the end of the road.

There could have been a better ending than the one mom really had that afternoon.
I want you to put this scene in your mind now and don’t turn away from it because I
certainly can’t: look out in the distance and notice that short, full-figured woman with a
large head. Her black hair is wiry, thick, sprinkled with the silvery grey of nearly seven
decades. Those thick eyebrows and that long sloping nose was just like her Italian father,
the nose of her sisters and brothers. Look at that warm smile and the brown eyes that only
she and I shared. Watch her in that supermarket parking lot as she grabs the handle of her
shopping carriage with one of her small, smooth sparrow hands and calls 911 with the
other. She probably tries to call other people in the time it takes for the ambulance to
arrive, but like anything in history that can only be speculation. Don’t go too close
because she needs space. She needs to breathe. She needs to collect her thoughts as
everything flashes before her eyes: regrets and triumphs and finalities.

Others are there now, watching, wondering, and hovering over her eventually
still and lifeless body as if their mere presence will somehow soothe the pain. This is
what people do. You know that. People rubber-neck at highway crashes. People swarm
around the sudden heart attacks, the epileptics, anybody who breaks the monotony of
their daily drone. People do that, but you don’t. Keep the picture in your mind as they put
Mom on the stretcher. Maybe, if it’s not asking too much, you can ask the crowd to
disperse, mind their own business. Get in the ambulance with Mom as they drive away.
If I had shot this scene I would have rolled my final credits, slowly panned away, and had Louis Armstrong singing “What a Wonderful World,” but you’ll just have to settle for an unfinished portrait.

Mom was a loveable, complicated, frustrating, hopeful, warm, normal person filled with the strength and support of her faith but always aware that something was going to happen. It had gotten hard for her to drive on the highway. Her asthma was proving debilitating, and the congestive heart failure of the previous summer might have been the result of trying to sell her house, or it was probably something else. Sudden death will always compel us to think about the options, what might have been, and in her last minutes before she walked out that supermarket door that last Saturday afternoon in October 2005 and headed to the parking lot, I want to think she was at peace and that the mistakes she might have made in her life didn’t need to be reversed.

Faith was strong, but it could never stop death. My father was already eight years gone by the time my mother went away. Sure the terminology is awkward: “gone” and “went away.” That’s what happened with both. My mother’s death was sudden, in the parking lot of a local supermarket, alone, cart full of groceries, probably halfway to her car at that point. My father’s scene was similar, but Mom and I were both there. We carried him from his easy chair, laid him out on the floor, and she began CPR. I stood in the background and watched. I’d called 911, and all I could do at that point was wait. No music was in my head that afternoon. I was living 90 minutes away from my mother the day she died, but I might as well have been a silent lifetime away.

This is about pivotal moments when your back is up against the wall and you have no available options. My parents had their strong separate truths during darker times.
Death had always hovered in the background of Mom’s life, one way or another. There were losses of newborn siblings. Her mother’s final exit was drawn out. In the end, she was 59 years old and connected to tubes in a Catholic hospital that wouldn’t think of pulling the plug. Barely a decade later, mom was down in St. Louis, cradling her father’s head in his lap as he finally surrendered to pancreatic cancer. They both found comfort in a spiritual dialogue about possibilities and resurrection and salvation on terms that seemed to at first scare him but eventually became a calming salve.

I didn’t know as much about my father’s connections, about the meaning he found in his faith. My father was a man of order, a man of routine, a company man at General Electric in Lynn, Massachusetts, the kind of engineer who diligently made the commute from our home in Boxford to the GE plant for thirty-nine years. He was gone at 7:30 every weekday morning and home at exactly 5PM. His was the last generation, it seemed, that was able to take a job and hold onto it for decades. He rarely philosophized at home, barely pontificated except to talk about hard work and responsibility and chores. The fact that these lessons were so rare made them all the more important. My father was a man of comforts who knew the satisfaction of late Sunday morning bacon and mayonnaise sandwiches, the brunch of kings after he came home from services at St. Mary’s Church.

Dad had his 12 Steps book, his daily affirmations to keep him on the straight and narrow. He had the big book of Bill W., a source for the mysteries of Alcoholics Anonymous. I still have those books, and the brown, slightly battered Sears briefcase he took everyday to work. The cover of the palm-sized 12 Steps daily affirmations book is taped to the spine. He read from it every morning after he straightened his tie and splashed on a few drops of “Old Spice” cologne. He liked mysteries, hard infallibilities.
He liked conclusive truths about definite paths that might help him hold off the demons from his past. My father depended on the stability of leaving the eternal struggle to uncover the truth to the priests, the moderators, the certified experts.

While his was a life of certainty, eventuality, and definitiveness, mine was a life infected by random facts. I understood that Woody Guthrie abandoned his first family during the Depression to ride a rail train out of town when the static ordinariness of this world proved impossible to take a moment longer, but I wasn’t there to be his friend.

It couldn’t have been simpler for me, but there were few people in my life that seemed to know how to listen. They had ears to ear, but listening was impossible. This is what I wanted to tell them: listen to Woody as he sings the farewell verse from “Deportee (Train Wreck at Los Gatos)” and tell me that these personality defects stand in the way of brilliant songwriting. He has said goodbye to Juan, to Rosalita, but then he reminds us:

“You won’t need a name/when you ride the big airplane/
All they will call you will be Deportee” (http://woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Deportee.htm)

It’s loss, anonymity, life as one of the nameless masses, the cogs in the heartless big wheel machine that devoured Charlie Chaplin in “Modern Times” and I knew he was singing for the lonely and forgotten. Woody was in the great tradition of folksingers in that he acquired tunes, patched together ideas, and got them on record. It wasn’t about polish and perfection but rather the obligation to absorb what was blowing in the wind. That’s what always took me to a better place and it’s why I wanted more.

I was messed up by minutiae. Quarterbacks played, and statisticians sat in the bleachers to record all the blaring fumbles that stood out on the page like bleeding cold sores. Life as a creative genius was tough, and I needed to accumulate authentic heroes, to put a wild-haired picture of Einstein on my wall and somehow reach his level of truth.
I didn’t expect or want my heroes to be my friends and I did not put my faith in the concept of grand intellect as the ultimate perfection. Accumulating these heroes was definitely just a temporary re-fueling stop in my trip to a deeper faith in a higher ground.
Chapter Seven

Golden Slumbers {December 6, 1975-December 8, 1980}

Here was the Holy Trinity of rock: The Who, The Rolling Stones, and The Beatles. Where you aligned yourself was less a matter of taste than an inherited position. You usually liked what your big sister or brother brought home. The first was a hard-thrashing gang of Mods who broke out with frilly shirts, bad attitude, and blistering rockers like “My Generation” and “Magic Bus.” Their masterpieces, “Tommy” and “Quadrophenia,” were rock opera orchestral masterpieces that sustained compelling narratives about characters lost, found, sometimes redeemed. Before writer Pete Townsend sold the band legacy for every car commercial and CBS-TV crime drama that made an offer, The Who was a band that kicked at the darkness and never looked back.

Favorites: “Behind Blue Eyes,” “Blue, Red and Grey,” the epic scope of “Baba O’Reilly,” and the classic grandeur of “Love Reign O’er Me.”

The Senior Frolics at our high school was an annual theatrical rite for high school seniors, inconsequential toga party songs celebrating beer and fart jokes. My sister Lauren performed a rocking version of the Who’s “Slip Kid” during her Senior Frolics performance. nemesis in high school was Mr. Soucy, the silver-haired Vice Principal, the Coyote to her Road Runner. When she sang the bridge to “Slip Kid,”

“Keep away old man/you and your history won’t rule me/You might have been a fighter but admit you failed,” (http://music.yahoo.com/who/tracks/slip-kid--881676)

she spat the words in Mr. Soucy’s face with a delinquency Courtney Love would have killed to assume as her own. For that moment, on that night, she owned everything.
Among the countless greatest hits of The Rolling Stones (“Satisfaction,” “Let’s Spend The Night Together,” and “19th Nervous Breakdown”) you could hear but a hint of what was to follow, unabashed celebrations of carnal conquests and vaguely Satanic flirtations always with the Chess Records Blues and R&B template always in the background. Their masterpieces are too many to mention, from the unwashed celebration of American blues and country that was “Exile On Main Street,” (1972), the beautiful anthems “Moonlight Mile,” (1972), “Winter,” and Memory Motel,” (1975) and the very fact that they have sustained (for better or for worse) to this day is testimony to the miracles of doing what you loved.

Todd was a heavy-browed, curly-haired trouble maker who lip-synced a version of The Rolling Stones’ “She’s So Cold” during our Senior Frolics. He was temporarily suspended after grabbing his crotch and suggestively gesturing during the “I’m a bleeding volcano” line. He was a bully with me through much of my first few years in high school, but gradually I was welcomed into his circle, the coolest one in school, by the start of our Senior year. He took the easy way out shortly before April vacation (carbon monoxide inhalation, car running, and sealed-off garage).

At the memorial service we had on the school’s front lawn, I was among a few people who said a few words to the crowd that assembled on the school’s front lawn. The PA system played “Wild Horses,” the early 70’s Stones classic about never going away, about always lingering somewhere. As an eighteen year old that April afternoon in 1982, I was immediately transported back to ten years earlier, a better time. I wondered if other people in the crowd that afternoon had the same feeling, if they connected with the lyrics.
In those days, I took for granted that great music with deep messages about an eternal promise would always be on the radio:

“Let’s do some living/after we die.” (<http://www.keno.org/stones_lyrics/wild_horses.htm>)

This was hardly the happiest, most life-affirming song to send off a high school student body in mourning over the suicide of their unofficial anti-hero leader, but that’s how our school operated. It was an assembly that risked romanticizing suicide, and it was something we desperately needed that afternoon.

I was a Beatle boy from the day I bought my first album, “Let It Be,” through the day John Lennon was killed. The death of Lennon didn’t end my Beatle connections so much as compel me to just move forward, get on that train and ride. Energy had to be aimed somewhere else, towards something else. Maybe I was supposed to bring my own voice to shout against the darkness, but at that point I didn’t know the difference between darkness and light. It was always easy to romanticize hardship, to elevate the smallest pimple into some sort of grand cosmetic conflagration. What was simply part of growing up suddenly became anguished drama, the deepest imaginable suffering. Dance too long with the devils of despair and you don’t ever want to switch partners.

In those early days, I always felt like I needed to catch up, to understand everything that had come before me, and The Beatles were it. We were the first generation of fans after their 1970 break-up who scoured the bookstores for anything Beatle. There was no music video, no immediate access to anything we might want from our cultural heroes. We took what was available and were grateful for the smallest morsels. Nothing was considered insignificant as we made every effort to fit things into the world. That made the amazing search for rare artifacts all the more essential for us.
The famous “Yesterday…and Today” discarded album cover featured the four smiling Beatles posed in blood-soaked butcher aprons, meaty severed baby doll parts artfully posed on their shoulders and laps was on sale at a Cambridge record store for $300. I wanted these relics, this iconography, and these tangible symbols of “other.”

Look at the attitude, the brutally tough darkness in their boy singer persona. They were shoving our faces in the packaged conformity that had been their careers for the first few years under the antiseptic management of Brian Epstein (who took his life in 1967.) The Beatles “Butcher cover” album never officially saw the light of day, and this first exposure to forbidden fruit only made me want more. John and Yoko, nude, hairy and unabashed on the cover of their album Two Virgins, those peculiar visual signs on the cover of Abbey Road telling us whether or not Paul was dead, the frightening audio collage nightmare that was “Revolution #9,” I took it all in and somehow came to understand how I factored into the creative process.

I took everything they gave me and I didn’t stop until long after I was satisfied. It was the epitome of a selfish relationship, all take and no give. This seemed to be what it meant not just to be a pre-teen Beatles fan in the mid-seventies, but a general music fan. We consumed. We devoured. We latched on to certain elements of our favorite band members.

Ringo Starr was the Beatle who sang Carl Perkins and Buck Owens songs with a flat-pitched, goofy and endearing voice. He wanted to open a chain of beauty shops, and he definitely seemed to understand that replacing original Beatle drummer Pete Best was the best break anybody could have ever gotten. Was Ringo a goofball? That’s too easy, too convenient. He was comic relief, a hard worker, and he could really keep the beat.
The others may have thrown him a bone with solo performances like “Act Naturally” and “Yellow Submarine,” but the group had a real affection for American country music and novelty tunes, and through the Beatles I got my first taste of those forms.

What about George Harrison? He was the fan of Eastern mysticism, the humble sitar student at the foot of master player Ravi Shankar. George had Bob Dylan at “The Concert for Bangladesh.” Hell, George could even make his guitar weep. More than the Indian music, the mysticism, and the transcendental meditation that could sometimes come off as corny, Harrison seemed to exude peace and serenity. He was nearly stabbed to death in the sanctity of his own home back in 1999 only to die from cancer in 2001.

Paul McCartney, still pounding the pavement as a touring, rocking, viable musician deep into the 21st century, was the perfect pop song craftsman. He knew Tin Pan Alley melodies (“Honey Pie,” “Your Mother Should Know,” “Michelle,”) and he wrote “Yesterday,” a stunning, undeniably real heartbreaking masterpiece of lost love. Think about this: Paul might have had the mentorship of producer George Martin to shape the string ensemble arrangement of “Yesterday” into an immediate pop classic, but this was still a song recorded by a twenty-three year old man. McCartney was a baby-faced matinee idol who somehow had it in him to convey the heartbreak of what can happen in the course of twenty-four hours.

This was what pop music proved for me, and every song made me feel like a paleontologist who suddenly comes upon the fossil of a long assumed extinct species. These songs, for me, were the watershed moments when innocence ends. I had no Biblical book of truth. I only had “The Book of Love,” “Ten Commandments of Love.” There was more truth and beauty singing in a street-corner doo-wop harmony group.
They gave perfect sub-three minute ode to teen romance and heartbreak. These songs were bridges of truth, a link from childhood to reality, and the only way I could ever grow up and get to that other side was to cross them.

It wasn’t long before I understood that the objective was not really reaching that other side so much as escaping the fire down below. That’s what Lennon’s death was to me. It marked the first and last time I ever cared about a hero, the first and only time I looked up to a cultural icon. I was probably like millions of other kids around the world. I wanted glasses like Lennon’s and a mysterious performance artist Japanese wife with a tangled jungle of thick, split-ends black hair that looked as if it could strangle me if I got in its radar. I wouldn’t have minded going out that way if it meant I’d be under the spell of a wild avant-garde performance artist who made strange sounds when she vocalized. Lennon was a visual artist, a former art school student. He marched in anti-war protests. He had peace-ins/bed-ins and bag-ins. I wanted to be a living, viable artistic installation. Make of me what you see fit, he seemed to be saying. I’m only responsible to my own muse. Was there anybody cooler?

Lauren came upstairs that night, probably 11:30. She opened my bedroom door and told me Lennon had been shot dead in New York City, home from a night in the recording studio. It seemed meant that she would be the one to tell me this news, that we would share this story. For our parents it was JFK’s murder, and for us it would be Lennon. He was a hero of the sixties, but his re-emergence approximately six weeks before his murder to promote his and Yoko’s album “Double Fantasy” after five years of life as a househusband made him somebody we could claim. He would be there for us. Howard Cosell told the nation during the end of ABC-TV’s “Monday Night Football.”
Immediate news was hard to come by in those days, if not impossible, no entertainment programs, no cable TV coverage. The newspaper pictures had Lennon’s widow Yoko, stunned, escorted from the hospital after having watched her husband shot point blank by a pudgy single while male, a loner, somebody whose name we were all too eventually learn, was trying to enact his own ending to the J.D. Salinger novel Catcher in the Rye.

Holden Caulfield, the cynical and disenchanted hero of Catcher in the Rye, never meant a thing to me then or now. The fact that Lennon’s chubby, bespectacled killer was found thumbing his thick fingers through his copy of the book solidified my distaste for it. The psychological rationalization was that Lennon’s killer, like Holden, went to New York City to expose the phoniness of his “brother,” of his hero. After exposing the phoniness, Holden would lead the children out of the wilderness and into paradise. Catcher in the Rye, at twenty-six chapters, was seen by many as a novel in flux. What really happens after it ends? Does Holden get what he wants? The thesis of the 2007 film Chapter 27 was that Lennon’s killer meant to write a new chapter to the novel. While interesting and daring, to most music fans it really proved to be a waste of time, just like the over-rated Salinger novel.

That December 1980, the radio played non-stop Lennon, especially that final single released in his lifetime, the hopeful “(Just Like) Starting Over.” The Beatles were memorialized, contextualized, eulogized for the reunion that would never be. I remembered my times as a fan boy, the Beatles collages I made and hung on my wall, how our 6th Grade teacher Mr. Nicolaisen played the medley at the end of “Abbey Road” (“Golden Slumbers/You never Give Me Your Money/The End”) and asked us to think about the ending line about how we could take only so much love as we give at life’s end.
You only get what’s equal to the amount you give in life, and nothing more. I thought of all those things, but I turned to other things for a while. For the first time in my life I just didn’t want to hear anymore pop songs.

What was it that made my train stop for a while after Lennon was killed? Maybe it was Ronald Reagan’s election a month earlier, and I had a feeling this would be a decade of bad times and artistic suppression. Lauren and I took a nearly silent forty minute ride commuter rail train from Beverly and went to Boston’s Lennon memorial the weekend after the man’s death. It was the first time I ever felt obligated to be anywhere. There were probably a thousand fans converged in the cold December Government Center Plaza, right by the Green Line MBTA station. There were speakers, testimonials, but I don’t really remember them. I remember watching the drained faces and singing rousing renditions of “All You Need Is Love” and “Give Peace a Chance.”

Lauren was two and a half years older than me and always the leader, always the barometer for what was meaningful and important and as we stood together that Sunday afternoon I thought about more than just being part of a city-wide vigil. I thought back to six months earlier, and her graduation.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

She was combing her long, frizzy hair and nervously dancing in front of the mirror. Mom had just ironed Lauren’s white Graduation gown and laid it out on her bed.

“I don’t know,” Lauren said “I’ll probably go to school in September. I’ll probably move out to Greenfield.” We both knew this was just a temporary fix, a means to an end. There had been no preparation, no college plans or clearly mapped-out visions for something better. Most of Lauren’s classmates had that more dependable foundation
Most of her classmates were already promised to Universities in-state and beyond, already well on their way to making their way in the world. We always seemed to be competing with the neighbors.

“Was it worth all the trouble?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” she said. She knew what I meant. She knew I meant the school suspensions. She knew I meant those times she took the train into Boston and spent the night with a straw-haired, much older pale-faced guy with drug issues who only three years earlier had tried to kill himself. She knew I meant the drugs, the bulimia, and the crazy fear. This was the truth, the demon that could never be swept under the rug. She knew I meant those nights she got hypnotized by the beat of something difficult coming from her stereo, something terrible, something that drowned out the fact that she

“Look,” she said. “I don’t want to talk about that stuff. It’s done.” She pinned her still frizzy hair up in a bun and adjusted the white mortarboard on her head. I gave her the Graduation Gown and she stepped into it.

“Just don’t stick around here too long,” she said. “See the world. Get involved with something bigger than this town.”

I knew what she meant here. Ours was a Northern Massachusetts suburban community that took pride in its tradition of Apple, Pumpkin and Strawberry seasonal festivals. Many of our classmates had boats they sailed off the coasts of our North Shore beaches, but nobody made waves. Summer was a verb, as in “I plan to ‘summer’ on the Cape this year.” Wardrobe was strictly docksider shoes, preppy pressed shirts and thin cotton ties, white or striped. We commuted into the city in our BMWs for our corporate or business jobs and we didn’t feel guilty. All this was our birthright, our entitlement.
Idealism and artistic freedom might have been ships that passed us in the night, but the eighties were ours for the taking. “What am I supposed to do at that school without you?” I said.

Lauren laughed and slipped a rose behind her right ear. “You’ve got to be kidding with this sentimental stuff,” she said. “What, are we in an after school special?” She turned down the Steely Dan tape playing on her stereo and grabbed her yearbook.

“Look,” she said. “This was fun while it lasted, but I’m tired of the past now. I can’t afford to live in it, and I hope you don’t either. There’s too much out there and I’m not going to wait for it to come to me.” She stopped and laughed at something I probably wouldn’t have understood. “You’ve got to know what I mean. You’re smart enough.”

She took the bouquet of roses from the dresser, hopped down the stairs two steps at a time, and we headed to the Graduation.

Lauren was supposed be with us forever. I knew that much. We’d had knock-out battles, one the summer of the previous year, in fact, where I threw her on the kitchen floor, pulled her hair and pounded her head into the floor before our father pulled us apart. That was the worst time, the culmination of all the rage I didn’t know how to handle. She was staying up all night, binging and purging and smoking unfiltered cigarettes and sometimes highly potent dope down in the basement.

The biggest issue was simple. Our parents were drifting like satellites by the end of the seventies. They’d recently reunited, but they couldn’t deal with Lauren. Dad always surrendered when it came to the toughest cases among us. He never seemed to want to be the bad guy. I ended up enraged bashing her head into the kitchen wall. I was sent to spend my fifteenth summer working for my Mom’s dad in St. Louis, Missouri.
There, he put me to work building walkways and let me stew in my own anger. He lectured me about the duties of parents and the obligations of children.

That Sunday in December 1980, though, we stood together with so many others, our arms raised in the air, fingers formed in a “peace” sign. We stood silent and nearly frozen as Lennon’s peace anthem “Imagine” played through loudspeakers at the stage and various places in the audience. Everything was different after that day.
Chapter Eight

Early 1981: Mr. Rudd and the angry young man

Friday’s were “free writing” days in Mr. Rudd’s English Composition workshops. He was the sole renegade testosterone blast in our otherwise kind and gentle high school faculty. Masconomet was the fuzzy white suburban dream school district where every teacher’s mission was to shape Ivy League candidates. Mrs. Walsh was a fawning, gushing teacher always there with an unearned compliment and ready to teach “Julius Caesar” as we sat in rows and blandly recited the Shakespeare magic. She was supportive, but she was probably responsible for killing the classical urge in more people during those years than anything on TV or radio. Ms. L was a petite, mini-skirt wearing sophomore English teacher who covered The Bell Jar in a perfunctory way, careful not to focus on the real life drama of Sylvia Plath.

What was it with Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar? These were the two key texts for high school juniors in my time. Neither has really seemed to age all that well, but perhaps that’s mainly the fact that I’ve grown beyond them. They eventually became irrelevant, like most causes. We put away everything that once felt so intense and essential. Boys had Holden Caulfield, and girls had Esther Greenwood.

Those of us inclined to do so would certainly have gravitated towards these books in our own time and on our own terms, but it seems strange now that these were mandated by the school department. We idealize the cynical. We gravitate towards the darkness. Why do we keep these dinosaurs now? There are certainly better options.
I will always be at the forefront of any protest against censorship, repression, and thought but I do think so many young people are too vulnerable and such texts (particularly Plath’s) tend to romanticize doom.

Mrs. D’s Senior Homeroom featured a giant wall-sized mural of Jimi Hendrix hovering over us in blissful Technicolor serenity. In her Rhetoric class, we all wrote confessional short stories about our teenage wasteland lives or experimented with short pieces she liked to call “Fabulous Realities.” Anything we saw in our daily lives that was contradictory, all things oxymoronic, a daisy in the barrel of a rifle or a tear staining the cheeks of the homecoming queen, it all got spotlighted. She used to work at Scribner’s in New York City, and she invited Lauren and me to dinner one night. We were part of a literary discussion club, if only for an evening, with Mrs. D and her husband. In her Literature classes we read Ethan Frome and The Grapes of Wrath. She filled the board with an exhaustive series of notes and connections.

But it was Mr. Rudd who stood apart. First, he didn’t seem to have any friends. There he was, in a Mike “Brady Bunch” perm at least five years out of style, wearing what the cool kids called a “man purse,” stuffed with his paperwork, his concise assessments of our stories carefully written in the margins. On Fridays he encouraged us to bring in albums from home. All I wanted to do was write, so I listened to Andrea’s Loggins and Messina album, or Jeff’s REO Speedwagon record. It was strictly middle-of-the-road, until Mr. Rudd brought in Bob Dylan’s “Blood on the Tracks.”

First track: “Tangled up in Blue.”

Mr. Rudd, stood by my desk, and challenged me with a quiz.

“Who is ‘the Italian Poet from the 15th century?’”
I was blank for a moment, but then I remembered the song. It had become a favorite of mine at home, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. “Tangled up in Blue” was the story of a solitary guy pushing on, always headed fearlessly for the next adventure. He goes into a topless bar and sees her, the unnamed her, the elusive woman he may or may not have known. He keeps looking at the side of her face because it’s illuminated by spotlight. The crowd leaves, and they go somewhere to talk, and maybe do something else. Eventually she gets the book of poems and hands it to the singer. He never tells us the writer, but the poems had an immediate resonance:

“Every one of them words rang true and glowed like burning coal
Pouring off of every page like it was written in my soul.” (Dylan, 332.)

I waited. I never wanted to show that I liked the attention Mr. Rudd gave my work, but he challenged me. He compelled me to do better, almost as if he knew that the “better” I might do was not going to surface for at least another twenty years.

“Dante,” I said. He smiled, and it was over.

Later that semester, after I’d submitted a thirty page, third person story about a 16 year old boy dealing with the death of John Lennon and the absence of hope, he pulled me out of class. I thought we were going to talk about music. I thought he was going to tell me about an article he’d seen in the latest Rolling Stone. I used to do that with Mr. D. during lunch, but he taught science and coached basketball and tried too hard to ingratiate with the minority kids. Mr. Rudd, on the other hand, had mentor possibilities.

“I like what you’re writing,” he said. “I really do. You have a great political passion. I see those Hunter Thompson books you carry around are paying off.”
Where was this going? What was his point? I thought everybody knew I carried those books around mainly for appearance, mainly because I figured it was expected of me. I thought people knew I was a scared little boy. How could I understand William Faulkner? Why would I want to dive into those brick heavy Charles Dickens paperbacks? He did have one thing right, though. I liked Thompson’s energy. I didn’t have the temperament for the drugs, but I liked the energy. The guy could write a sentence, build a paragraph. Much of it might have been fueled by hallucinogenics and alcohol, but I was impressed.

“Look,” he said. “I just need to give you some advice if you’re ever planning on going into this as a career, as a writer or teacher.” I looked him over and even then could sense the early stench of failure. He had probably wanted to work at a New England prep school and publish great novels for his generation like John Irving’s *The World According To Garp*. Aside from his home perm, Mr. R did have the matinee idol looks (piercing dark eyes and significant pout) of Irving’s dust cover photographs. Instead of the glory, he was stuck trying to light the spark of originality in petulant whiners like us. We were the generation set to graduate from high school early in the Reagan administration, in the dawn of MTV. Whatever the world had become at that point was about to be ours, but it had passed him by. I imagined his parallel life as a charter member of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, or tuning in and dropping out with Timothy Leary in the late sixties. In that life he was free, but he chose the path of quiet desperation, the road with the least bumps. The patches on his suit jacket and the long sideburns were his version of a freak flag, and I saw right through all of it.
“I need to be careful how I say this,” he said. “Sometimes the truth can hurt and the stronger the truth the deeper the pain and the more risk there is that everything gets misunderstood and lost in translation. Do you know what I’m saying?” He stopped, looked me in the eyes, and I said nothing. “It’s like this, Chris. It’s simple.” he said. “Writing is not a masturbatory act. It’s not about impressing, man. It’s about expressing. You need to stop using twenty dollar words when what you need to say can easily be expressed with a quarter. You need to turn it down a few notches or else you’re just going to turn into a joke”

I let this sink in for a few moments as he hovered over me and I searched the hallways for somebody I knew, for some sort of diversion. It brought me back to third grade, when Mr. Ritchie and Miss Smith took me out in the hallway and told me I was reading at an 11th grade level. I didn’t have any response to them, and I didn’t respond to Mr. Rudd.

Here was the truth. I’d only recently introduced myself to the pleasures of onanism, and I knew all too well the many variations that could take; Penthouse photo spreads with more detail than an obstetrician’s textbook, the hardcore penetration sex of Bob Guccione’s “Caligula,” shot through a hazy filter with hirsute fleshy actors and unconvincing moaning. Great sex, like meaningful writing, would come much later than that day in 1981, and I took Mr. Rudd’s advice to heart. It was like he’d saved his best, most meaningful advice and left it for me, his troubled little protégée. He was gone after that year, but his words have stayed with me, in one form or another.
Chapter Nine

2nd Movement: I’m a man/yes I am- The mid-70’s-mid 80’s

What- or who- was (and still is) the “fan boy”?

First of all, it really wasn’t a term commonly used thirty-five years ago. Today, the fan boy is a geek, nerd, obsessed expert on “Lord of the Rings,” “Star Wars,” or any of the countless “Marvel” comics regularly churned out by Hollywood. Today, the fan boy enjoys Graphic Novels and understands the oeuvres of Daniel Clowes (Ghost World), and Allen Moore and Dave Gibbons (The Watchmen.) He (and for the most part the fan boy is male) has long been embodied in the person of “Comic Book Guy” from the long-running Fox animated sitcom “The Simpsons,” and Harry Knowles, the obese, pasty-faced, ginger-haired proprietor/writer of the film website http://aintitcoolnews.com. Knowles and Comic book boy are big, opinionated. They wear loud Hawaiian shirts and cling passionately to certain truths about the good, the bad, and not much in between.

Today’s fan boys are arrested adolescents living in a world of role-playing games, delusions of conquest, and undeniable status as superheroes in an alternate world of the most pristine white, the darkest black, and nothing in between. (Women seem to have better sense and process their fandom through mere obsessive infatuation.) Cross the fan boy and risk your safety. The fan boy today still collects rare 45 records with non-English B sides. He scour flea markets for signed, laminated photos of his subject in a contemplative tone, perhaps a black and white Annie Leibovitz photographic study. He runs pop culture/music blogs and posts long, opinionated missives about certain trends.
He is snarky, cynical, a hipster romantic. He makes a point of being tragically hip, of dismissing anything that stinks of universally-embraced mainstream corporate success. In today’s boundary-free media world, where a newspaper dies everyday and there are no longer any universally accepted standards of editing or good and astute literary proprietary standards, any fan boy with a high-speed internet connection and unlimited time on his hands can become the next Roger Ebert, taste maker and deal breaker.

Today’s fan boy knows the affection he has for his subject at national conventions can and will be fleeting and fade as quickly as it grew, but it’s a love that he needs to play out to the end. It’s not erotic or visceral as much as total. The fan boy knows that his subject matter is flawed. He knows that his objects of obsession had drug busts and sexual indiscretions, that not every take of their classic hits was really worth collecting, but he can’t help it. The forbidden fruit of a bootleg recording in the pre-internet days could make a fan boy do questionable things, but I stayed straight.

The 70’s were a tough time to be a fan boy, to bond with our favorite guy singers and not have strange feelings. Did we admire their manhood, or did we harbor some sort of homo-erotic longings, feelings impossible to immediately understand, waiting to surface? We left Donny Osmond, David Cassidy and other bubblegum groups to the girls. They weren’t authentic fan boy material.

It’s easy to break down. The Fan boys were separated into two separate camps. In one corner (definitely not mine) were the fan boys wore jean jackets, mullet hairdos, and they always had a copy of Danny Sugarman’s Jim Morrison/Doors biography No One Gets out Here Alive in their back pocket. There, bouncing as they walked, was the shirtless vision of the Lizard King himself, breaking straight on through to the other side.
These Jim Morrison fan boys lived for bootleg live versions of “L.A. Woman” and that plus ten minute version of “The End” where their hero said “Father, I want to kill you,” paused for a few moments, and then “Mother, I want to AAAAAHHHH!!!” Well, did he want to fuck his mother? Was that it? Cool! The year “Apocalypse Now” came out, I was a high school freshman and I could not escape the Lizard King crowd as they tried to capture the faux poetic angst that was Jim Morrison and his admittedly talented band The Doors, the grizzled countenance, the heavy-lidded misanthropy. Nothing was everything and nobody was able to go so far on so little as Jim Morrison.

Some fan boys were brave enough to embrace the pansexual nature of David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, Lou Reed’s heavily-mascaraed eyes as he talk-sang his way through “Walk On The Wild Side,” and Freddie Mercury’s mustachioed prancing through Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” and “We Are the Champions.” We didn’t understand Elton John’s penchant for Liberace splendorific costumes, and it didn’t matter. This was about owning the stage, flirting, strutting with the rooster bleached blonde hair of Rod Stewart. “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy?” (Not really, but thanks for asking.) Thanks for showing me I had options. Those who couldn’t handle the campy theatrics of the ambiguously male crowd always embraced The Doors, but they had live options in Ted Nugent, Sammy Hagar, Black Oak Arkansas, Three Dog Night, Lynyrd Skynrd, and KISS. These were rockers, shit-kickers, ball-busters who never let you forget who was boss. They were exaggerated versions of what we could only hope to be in the prison-cell drabness of our rooms.

I can feel for the fan boys and girls of today, but it’s difficult to understand the attraction now. MTV was born in August 1981 just before my Senior Year of high school.
It started as a forum for music videos, and The Police and The Go Gos and so many other bands of the time were custom made for the medium. It came just in time for me to wean myself from the possibility of spending life as a fan boy. I had no interest in going to conventions and collecting pristine, unopened original vinyl pressings of the latest and greatest from the next big thing.

MTV and its sister station VH1 have long since devolved into a disgrace, barely a shell of their former selves. They feature smarmy, snarky pop culture shows that broadcasts clips of glories from the past. These networks, once important centers for what was happening and should be noticed in pop culture now just feed on the past rather than create anything of substance. Scripted reality and dating shows that don’t deserve a mention here have trivialized what it means to be a fan, to follow a leader. The products of these creations are famous for their vapidity, noted for their lack of talent. It can be argued that these stars are clever merchandisers of their own selves and thereby great artists for the 21st century, but it’s a lie. Lack of any discernible talent is not and will never be in and of itself a sign of genius. Fan culture still lives, but not like it was in my time. The great thing about being a fan in the 70’s was the shock of the new and thrill of discovery. Now, nothing is shocking and until somebody proves brave enough to be mainstream and risky and have universal appeal, the thrill of discovery will always have an impossibly short shelf life.
By 1987, life as an undergraduate college English student meant commuting to my school (Salem State College) and existing on the outskirts of what seemed to be an interesting social life- just for everybody else. I had started at a community college for the first two years, taken time off, and come back to something else.

“I hope you don’t think I’m going to keep paying for this,” my father said that Labor Day, when the tuition check came in. The problem there is that I did expect it. I did think that the free ride was going to last forever. I looked at my education as a boring waltz through standard texts and random fiction writing workshops where I figured something might happen. I had been a writer in high school. People told me I had skills. Wasn’t college supposed to be the place where the talents were nurtured?

My social life in high school had been crammed into the last two years, and at that it was hardly positive, barely social if consciousness and clarity was required to build long-lasting relationships with friends. I became a binge drinker I dabbled in highly potent, bong-smoked marijuana. Senior year, Fall 1981. I convened with my classmates to record background sound for a Senior Frolics skit. We were supposed to be laughing. I was properly lubricated with perhaps 64 ounces of straight vodka within an hour. The class president, Tim, my friend from back when I was five, drove me back to school and placed me in the lower men’s bathroom. It was not the safest or smartest move that day.
There, I vomited in one of the sinks, my long stringy hair spilling into the porcelain bowl. I was suspended, immortalized, a cause celebre for the Frolics show. I was welcomed back the second night of the performances only because my classmates noticed me standing under the exit sign.

The next summer, shortly after graduation, the binge drinking continued. My friends dropped me off at home and Mom caught me pissing a heavy, steamy stream of hot urine onto a wall in the garage. The next morning, Dad brought me out to the porch and started to talk.

“I am an alcoholic,” he said. “There’s a history in our family. I want you to watch yourself.” This is the first and last time we ever speak of it. Drinking still haunts me.

Most of the time, if I choose to start, I know I will need help before the night is over.

What was meant to build a bridge between me and a life that brought me phone calls at night and went to formal dances and passionately devoured the cracked country lips of a full-figured girlfriend only became a crutch. That kissing, that passionate complete devouring finally did see consummation the summer after graduation, not without the aid of some cheap whiskey and non-stop coercing. Romance had nothing to do with it. After that night I never saw my first again. She never found a place in my pantheon of carnal desires and I had nobody to blame but myself. My chances for a long-lasting relationship dried up for a long time.

But this isn’t about sex. I wish it was. I wish I could recount every detail of every encounter, all the sweat and bra strap fumbling and slippery, sweaty, back-scratching bedroom wrestling moves, but those didn’t factor into my life by the mid-eighties. I was an unapologetic romantic, a nerd who rarely got his chance with a good real woman.
Instead, I became involuntarily celibate, sublimating the energy I might have spent in random sex towards something else. I made mix tapes. I read every book I could find about outsiders and misfits. I went alone to the most tedious movies, anything black and white and subtitled. Everything I did was to avoid a commitment that might last beyond satisfying yet painfully empty one-night stands.

Here’s what I knew: college could have been the place where I joined fraternities and made connections and settled into a life of something stable. It might have been, had I proven receptive to options. Instead, I fell back into life as a hermit, life as a hoarder of books and music and grand ideas. My father had always said I was Boo Radley from To Kill a Mockingbird, and by my sophomore year in high school he eventually stopped asking what I was doing to develop my social life. Halfway through my undergraduate years seemed as good a time as any for me to fall back into the security of deep thinkers and grand ideas.

What was the point of this search? Why couldn’t college give me the enlightenment I needed? It was a simple conclusion to a deceptively complex equation. College meant deep sophistication, ponderous musings about philosophy and theory. In those days before gourmet coffee shops became the international meeting ground for fake Socratic dialogues and deep debates about nothing in particular, grand notions and brilliant artistic masterpieces were everywhere, and usually not in school. I had to be some sort of artist. I had to rebel. My father was an engineer shill for General Electric, I had to strike out on my own. My talent with visual art never really went beyond caricatures and the abstract. I gravitated towards music fandom, and eventually place for me. College gave me jazz, but I really had inherited that music from my parents.
I heard Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. From those artists it was an easy ride to Frank Sinatra’s darker periods, to Mel Torme and Sammy Davis, Jr.

The vocalists were always cool, always on target, always on the beat even if they strayed. Frank Sinatra was world-weary and tragic in “Angel Eyes,” arrogant and boastful in “My Way” and “That’s Life,” and hopelessly romantic in “All The Way.” Pianists like Thelonius Monk had long thin fingers that seemed to randomly hit just the right chords. He seemed sloppy but perfect. Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five” was smooth early sixties college jazz.

On his 1981 solo album *The Nightfly*, Steely Dan lead singer Donald Fagen referenced Brubeck. The song, “The New Frontier,” was all about the promises of the Kennedy administration era, the bomb shelters and beautiful people and cool jazz. The song is really about a guy on the make, a dude trying to get somewhere with a beautiful woman, and he uses Brubeck as the key to her heart. This doesn’t necessarily mean he knows anything about Brubeck, but he doesn’t need to:

> “Have you got a steady boyfriend? /’Cause honey I been watching you
I hear you’re mad about Brubeck/I like your eyes I like him too
He’s an artist; a pioneer/we’ve got to have some music in the new frontier.”

(https://www.absolutelyrics.com/lyrics/view/donald_fagen/new_frontier/)

In the song’s bridge, this pretentious, pseudo-intellectual suburbanite ruminates on the glory days, probably in the future, times we can only assume he knows will never come, when he’ll move to the city and take up design and study overseas. You could imagine the smooth early sixties piano-based jazz as a soundtrack to the era when people thought anything was possible, before all hell broke loose, before the world exploded.
That was always the connection, always the truth. Music was informed by its time. Music helped us escape from it. Music was the only reliable historical document.

I collected jazz on tapes and played them during long car rides when nothing else made sense, when I didn’t need to be burdened by lyrics. John Coltrane was the man, pure and simple. From the purity of *Blue Train*, to his gentle take on standards like “What’s New?” and “Nancy (with the laughing face)” from *The Gentle Side of John Coltrane*, this was played on romantic evenings, your woman’s face illuminated by candles, all night talking about plans for the future. The sex was good; tender and thoughtful and rough and sometimes reckless in a closely timed and choreographed over the sheets sweaty wrestling match, but that wasn’t the point. Coltrane did have his atonal experiments that might fit well with one night stands, but I wanted the gentle side. I wanted to be in the clubs from those old days and watch the perfect quartet come together in miraculous ways.

Miles Davis’s *Sketches of Spain* and *Porgy and Bess*, two of the major pieces he did with Gil Evans, were so elegiac and beautiful. They touched the deepest parts of my heart, just like *Kind Of Blue* was able to make me cry in my weaker moments when resistance was down. He was still recording and performing in those days, and the combination of the *Birth of the Cool* and MTV was at least interesting. I liked what he had done with Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature” and Cyndi Lauper’s “Time After Time.”

*Kind Of Blue* was probably the most accessible and understandable Miles Davis album, the starting point. It was suitable for sale to the “Starbucks” crowd, but I have to admit there’s nothing wrong with that when the results are this good, this undeniably pure.
It was the 1959 benchmark jazz album from which so many others are really still judged. Why? How? Maybe it was simply the slow luxury of the music, the beauty of such tracks as “Flamenco Sketches” (which is as delicate as the title suggests) and the long stroll that was “All Blues.” Davis’s trumpet had never been as crystal clear. John Coltrane’s soprano saxophone adds the best accents and soft shades in all the right places. Kind Of Blue showed me how artists could brilliantly improvise with each other, dance around as if they were alone but always being part of a team. Bill Evans’s piano work is the perfect stable balance between the leads of Davis and Coltrane and the rhythm section of Paul Chambers (bass) and Jimmy Cobb (drums).

In his beautiful and moody 2001 song “Genius,” the late great Warren Zevon gave one of the best musical references to the coolness that was Kind Of Blue. The singer has been eavesdropping on his ex-lover. He watches her, “in that skimpy little halter top,” coming out of the barbershop, her face probably flustered as she takes that walk of shame back home. In the second stanza, he lays it down very clearly:

“Did you light the candles? / Did you put on ‘Kind Of Blue’? Did you use that Ivy League voodoo on him too?”
(http://www.lyricsdownload.com/warren-zevon-genius-lyrics.html)

Zevon, with co-writer Larry Klein, bathes these sentiments with a string quartet, rhythm section, and electric guitar solos. In his final live TV performance on CBS-TV’s Late Show with David Letterman, a withered and terminally ill Zevon gave this all he got, the string quartet following his every move. It remains one of the most unforgettable moments on la We feel the loss of possibilities his character had with this woman, see her fool another poor sap, and hear Kind Of Blue in the background as she makes her move. She might have been a manipulator, but she definitely had impeccable taste in music.
I first heard Chet Baker’s tortured romantic trumpet playing on the 1983 Elvis Costello song “Shipbuilding.” Later, I heard his wispy thin high voice crooning standards like “My Funny Valentine.” In 1986, Van Morrison recorded a tender live version of “Send in the Clowns.” He sang, and Baker played trumpet. Baker ended his life as a wreck, an old gaunt man with missing teeth, a sunken face, and death in his eyes. He had started his career in the early sixties with matinee idol good looks, and ended as a junkie, but he made consistently beautiful music.
Chapter Eleven

You always hurt the one you love

One of the most heartbreaking, beautiful songs of loneliness and despair was “You always hurt the one you love.” Fewer songs were as definitive, as gloomy but true. Mom taught me the Mills Brothers and Ink Spots versions. In the aching beauty there is also sadness, and trouble, and that’s what makes it so special. Sure, the sentiments are agreeable. Relationships are tough, and sometimes you don’t mean to hurt but you do. By the time the singer ends, he tells us “If I broke your heart last night/It’s because I love you most of all.” Any advice columnist worth their title would tell the subject of this lyric to get professional help and find another love because otherwise the hurting will never stop. The good thing about pop music, though, is that the heroes don’t have to get help and they give us license to escape in their disfunctionalism.

My search for something beyond myself didn’t stop with jazz. The quest didn’t end with non-stop trips to the library for every available obscure record on the Blue Note label. TV proved meaningful, specifically Dennis Potter’s BBC masterpiece The Singing Detective. This immediately proved itself as one of the landmarks of TV and cinematic drama. Take this premise: a pulp fiction novelist with the same surname (save for the final “e”) as Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe (played with great anger and bitterness by Michael Gambon) is suffering from a horrendous case of psoriasis. There in his hospital bed, recuperating from his condition and trying to piece his life together, Marlow looks like an enraged, boiled lobster, red welts on every visible space of skin.
We see him in his present, tortured real life and the world of his fellow sick patients and staff. This alternates with his imaginary existence as the private eye Philip Marlow, on the trail of a case that doesn’t really matter. Still, what is real and what is imaginary? It’s all about noir, darkness, and anything willing to plunge into sadness was good enough for me.

The TV mini-series was over six hours long, with moments of graphic nudity, and an almost overwhelming sense of gloom. Will this man recover from his condition? The gorgeous nurse (Joan Whalley) massages his damaged body with Petroleum Jelly in order to calm the growth of his welts. She gets to his genitals, and Marlow (in voice over) panics. He starts ruminating about other things, random ideas, anything as long as it’s not sexual. The infirmed Marlow and his doppelganger, the suave trenchcoat-wearing detective, rarely meet until the end, when there’s a shoot out in the hospital ward. Have their worlds collided? Is this meeting real or imagined? It doesn’t matter. The results are audacious, exhilarating, more alive than they had a right to be. We follow Marlow through his recovery process, through his rage about his condition, his anger at his wife, everything. When he leaves the hospital the story of both creator and created is over, but his journey of real recovery is just beginning.

The other twist in this story was the music and how director Jon Amiel used it. Potter’s trademark style was to use great songs from Depression era America. His 1978 mini-series *Pennies from Heaven* (starring Bob Hoskins, American film version starring Steve Martin) was a flawless adaptation of his novel about a poor sap music sheet salesman who believes everything he hears in the false promises of the songs he’s selling. Either he’s been so indoctrinated by the myths, or he’s simply a pusher of toxic myths.
The title track of that show, and songs like “Let’s face the music and dance,” proved that the fantasy wish fulfillment world of pop music had roots that reached way back. Everything was blue skies and paradise promised if you washed your hands, obeyed your parents, and said your prayers every night. It was all shockingly sincere, true, and sweet. These were my parent’s songs, especially The Mills Brothers and “Paper Doll” and “You always hurt the one you love.” The escapism was perfect, but there was always something tragic about such unconditional happiness during such hard times.

In “The Singing Detective,” I saw the possibilities of fiction, the urgency of pushing a narrative as far as it can go the brilliance of how two parallel stories can seamlessly intersect with each other, how there were really no rules so long as the writer proved willing to step out on a ledge and take risks. I saw the wonder of a group of doctors in a hospital scene suddenly breaking into a lip synched version of “Dry Bones.”

The singers were well known: Bing Crosby with the Andrews Brothers, the gospel pop of The Ink Spots. It’s just that the context was so wonderfully strange. A horrifying scarecrow suddenly breaks into Al Jolson’s “After You’ve Gone.” This was one of the many flashbacks used to bring the story forward in unimaginable ways. A belligerent scarecrow flaps his boneless arms at the terrified child Marlow. After the horrors of surviving London bombings, we see the characters burst out into a rendition of Vera Lynn’s “We’ll meet again.” This was the brutal certainty of Potter’s writing, the haunting images of a movie that paid loving tribute to American noir film styles of the forties but was never anything less than original. The music turned this secular text into something holy and untouchable. Like any pilgrimage, the humble supplicant just needed to know when to leave when he’d had his fill.
Chapter Twelve

How a little bit of disaffection can take you far

“How we are now/entertain us” - Nirvana, “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” 1992
<http://www.elyrics.net/read/n/nirvana-lyrics/smells-like-teen-spirit-lyrics.html>

The 1994 Neil Young and Crazy Horse album Sleeps with Angels contained the typical elements: long solo fuzzy grunge guitar workouts in the tradition of “Cortez the Killer” (“Change Your Mind”) and message-free head bashers (“Piece of Crap.”) There was also a sublime, beautiful opening number, “My Heart,” that sounded as if it could have been written two hundred years ago and- had the technology existed at that time- recorded in some Revolutionary War era cavernous barn. It was achingly tender, with Young plunking away on an upright tack piano and singing about dreams that might last, a dream that was ending even as the singer and his loved one drifted into an unknown void:

“When dreams come crashing down like trees/I don’t know what love can do
When life is hanging in the breeze/I don’t know what love can do.”
(http://hyperrust.org/Music/)

I was living in a second floor Maplewood, New Jersey rented room that year. I shared one dirty bathroom with a Nigerian dishwasher across the hall, a toothless recovering heroin addict down the hall, and one of the landlords who lived in the cramped attic apartment. The train was a ten minute walk away from my street. The neighborhood was quaint and mainly all white, compared with neighboring South Orange. The movie theater ran 2nd run feature films like “Tommy Boy” and “The Shawshank Redemption.” The independent bookstore was cozy and comfortable, a good escape.
At $450 a month, this room was the only affordable place on my subsistence wage salary as an AmeriCorps/VISTA academic tutor in a nearby Newark middle school. It was adventurous, bare-bones and fundamental.

Each night I came home to a squalid bathroom, the stench of something the Nigerian was cooking on the bacteria-laden stove ("I only get free-range chickens, and only if they have been properly drained.") He worked nights at the restaurant and never came home before midnight. Once home, he washed his clothes in the bathroom tub, separated from my room’s bed board only by a thin wall.

“Do you really expect me to use the Laundromat?” he asked the first night I confronted him about the noise. “I am not a low-class man. I was raised to be better than that.”

I, too, was not low class, but I walked a cart full of my dirty clothes down to the nearby South Orange Laundromat every Saturday morning, accompanied only by songs on my Walkman and dreams in my head about what I’d do when my year of service was over, where I’d go. I made no plans, failed to take advantage of hazy connections, but I had dreams maybe of staying in Maplewood and trying to start a life, trying to develop something from nothing.

The recovering heroin addict regularly asked if he could borrow a few bucks, just until payday. I was usually able to avoid contact. When we did meet, it was always awkward, always tentative. Halfway through my year in Maplewood, he moved downstairs from me, but that was not the end of my troubles.

“Why are you always walking back and forth?” he asked once. “You never stand still. Can’t you get out sometimes?” I watched his beady eyes as he stared deep into me.
He scratched at something on his bare stomach, and I noticed a purple scar near his collarbone.

The landlords were a pair of contractors who ran an addict recovery center in Pennsylvania. One of them was a potato-faced bully with a loud mouth and intrusive manner. (“Why do you have all these books? Have you read all these books?”) Every Monday, he’d come home from the weekend at the recovery center with one of the addicts. These were a revolving-door series of desperate and grizzled cadaver-looking characters I’d meet in passing while slipping out of my room and into the bathroom.

I was stuck in limbo in the middle of that decade, with a freshly minted Master’s in English but no motivation and no sense of what I wanted. The year of service in Newark served a few purposes. It got me out of the house. It gave me some tangible work experience. It provided the means by which I could meet people in the field of education and it opened up the possibility of re-locating. I was six weeks away from my 30th birthday the summer I moved to Maplewood, testing out wings that should have had at least a decade of travel behind them, but I was still lost. The Newark work gave me direction and focus. It proved I could be an educator, that this was really the only marketable skill I liked doing, but I was still hopelessly lost and at risk of enjoying this familiar state of despondency.

My old crowd, such as it was, had long ago moved away with families of their own. It was a painful, realistic reminder that I had simply lost too many good options. I seemed welcomed at this new job, the only white man in a predominantly African-American after-school enrichment program. They welcomed me into their homes when we visited to talk about their children. They didn’t question me about my motivations.
Each morning I got off at the Lackawanna Broad Street train station and walked to the Washington street offices of Cities in Schools. I passed the butcher shops and saw all the workers mopping the blood and feces from the floors. This was where my uncles probably had their shops, on these same streets back in the 1940’s through to the 1967 riots, when Newark went up in racial flames and the dynamics changed for everybody. I felt the history so rich and thick in Newark, but it wasn’t there when I got back to Maplewood. I spent my nights alone, seeing an occasional movie or hanging out at the library. My weekends seemed free weren’t. The landlords and recovering drug addicts were gone, but I was in flux. I was hopeless, numb. I wandered the town looking for any place I could escape from the solitude that was so dangerously convenient and seductive.

The only music that really brought me any sense of perspective that year was Sleeps with Angels, and the main theme of that album was death, loss, transcending into an uncertain unknown. I had never really felt connected with the grunge marketing of the era. I liked the desperation of Pearl Jam’s “Jeremy.” Front man Eddie Vedder seemed like a sincere, passionate character. The video of “Jeremy” remains one of the most brutal but brilliantly rendered films from the golden era of that form. “Jeremy’s spoken.” That’s the recurring motif in the chorus. What has he said? The misunderstood and teased kid goes home, gets a gun, and comes back to shoot up his classmates and turn the gun on himself.

We don’t see the actual gunplay. The after-effects are stylized and dramatic, kids frozen in agony, stuck in their chairs, splattered in red paint, a shirtless Jeremy before the classroom. It was a highlight from the golden era of this visual music medium, the irony resting in the fact that this band hated making videos. Of course, it’s not a happy song.
I’ve always believed that dark stories like this one need to be told. They’re expressed, and by living them for a few minutes we can rise above these horrors.

I wasn’t about to pretend to have any connection with the flannel shirt wearing and coffee drinking Seattle grunge crowd, the “Reality Bites” commodification of a blank generation, but I felt like I understood the alienation. When Vedder and Pearl Jam hooked up with Neil Young later that decade, I saw that they had staying power and would live to transform themselves into something else once the era faded away. They were anti-pop, anti-publicity, and their material had integrity.

Kurt Cobain, the lead singer and writer for Nirvana, was reportedly the inspiration behind most of *Sleeps with Angels*, especially the title cut. The group never really meant anything to me. I was out of their core demographic. The only thing I heard was that grating, whiny voice. The only thing I saw was the stringy, unwashed blonde hair, the moth-eaten argyle sweater he wore at the *MTV Unplugged* performance, his left-handed guitar strumming. He seemed to have an eternal hernia, or some sort of medical issue. I looked at his milky grey eyes, and I heard that rage-filled Song of Songs “Smells like Teen Spirit.”

That was the iconography of Kurt Cobain, the brains behind Nirvana. That was the image, a hopeless angry man with a junkie bleach blonde wife named Courtney and a little baby and an image of smooth nihilism to maintain. The only good thing I credited to Cobain’s Seattle-based grunge movement is that it put an end to the despicable Hair Metal bands (Poison, Warrant, Skid Row and more) of the eighties. The other two guys in Nirvana, Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic, seemed like also-rans to me, really along for the ride, thrashing away at drum and guitar respectively without any sense of subtlety.
This was the calculated marketing of tragedy, and MTV was as complicit in it as Cobain and his record company. Nirvana was a long, drawn-out train wreck waiting only for the Transportation Safety Commission to come examine the scene of the crime.

Of course, I was wrong. I was pompous, close-minded. It was easy for me, twenty-six when the decade started, a stuffy academic in training, a loser still living at home with mom and dad until at least the middle of the decade, unwilling to completely cut the cord, covetous of my heroes Dylan and Springsteen and The Beatles and others from the singer/songwriter school. It was the simplest thing for me to summarily dismiss the packaging of Nirvana to a generation of disaffected youth with a bloated sense of entitlement. Did they not believe in personal hygiene? Why did they look so pitiful? Maybe I yearned to be among them, a flannel-shirted, coffee-drinking whiner who believed only in sharing with the world our firm belief in the absence of everything.

“Sleeps with Angels” was a quick rock song. Young was apparently inspired to build the song (and much of the entire album) around the said rise and fall of Cobain and his wife Courtney Love. Like most great songs that don’t feel the obligation to be ripped from that day’s headlines (and therefore risking a very short shelf life) it’s purposefully vague, about a girl with “trips of her own” and a guy who wasn’t worried because at least that meant they would live it out together. Of course, he does not live. He sleeps with angels and she wanders around with some sort of purpose, unclear. There were other lines about being too late; too soon, about him always being on someone’s mind. The song was like a trigger point to my soul in the middle of a decade where nothing else was happening and I wasn’t building my future. I heard it, and other songs from that album, and I thought about loss. I thought about movement, about walking away.
There was nothing in Cobain’s anguish that immediately spoke to me. Instead, I saw it through Neil Young’s work. I heard Young moved by the hopeless tragedy of it all. I saw the relevance of this pitiful burned out singer songwriter Kurt Cobain through the power of Neil Young. This was the dialogism of great pop music. The greatest songwriters knew that their work entailed more than just producing a hit record. They needed to speak to other artists through their work, whether by musical references or implied themes. They always had to understand that the creative life was about building on foundations that were laid down long before they arrived and would last long after they were gone.

This is why Nirvana, and specifically Kurt Cobain, bothered me so much. They threw away their brilliance. They squandered their rage, let it out without any context save for the thrill of the fight. That single, “Smells like Teen Spirit,” was brilliant, a dirty and angry tirade that really did seem to speak for a generation that saw nothing happening in their lives. “Here we are now/entertain us.” This was hardly poetry, but it was brutal and it was real and maybe I was jealous. Maybe I wished I could have formed a band and screamed something like that to the mass adulation of a crowd that was willing to follow my every word, to dance that last step with me. Cobain took the same route out as my friend Brad, from high school, nearly twelve years to the day later. The worship and memorializing that followed in his death might have also made me feel envious in the most perverse way. There he was, the poster child for disaffected 90s youth, and he knew the key to selling records was that you pushed more units if you checked out in a blaze of glory.
I left Maplewood in the summer of 1995 and came directly back home to my parents. I had no options, no possibilities to build on anything. I went back home with no plans but to rest and assume that something— as it always did— would come up for me. The foundation I could have built through connections, limitless energy, hopefulness, and a good reputation was squandered by pure laziness and an arrogant sense of entitlement. My father, who died in front of me almost two years after I came home, was right. I thought the world owed me a living.

I spent those two years before Dad’s death working back at special education jobs I’d had the two years before I’d left for New Jersey. I worked as an on-call substitute teacher, the phone right next to my bed for that 6 A.M. call. One day I might have gotten the call to work with severely intellectually impaired youngsters, dangerous juvenile delinquents, or an endless series of regular high school classes. The pay was regular and steady, but the only thing it gave me was more bitterness, more desperation. I was the academic Tom Joad, the mercenary educator, rootless and hopelessly running out of steam. No seductive melody was going to pull me out of this funk.

In the nineties, when it came to music. I respected the architecture, but I felt no need to decorate the houses. The grunge, hip-hop, alternative rock and everything in between, all just seemed fleeting. Neil Young remained relevant. Bruce Springsteen was compelling with such tracks as “Streets of Philadelphia.” R.E.M. and U2 could make me cry with anthems like “Everybody Hurts,” and “One.” The decade might have made me more conservative and selective, but that was probably the point about growing up and moving on. When we all spilled into the 21st century, my father had been dead for three years, my obsession with mix tapes was finished, and I was ready to grow up.
Chapter Thirteen

Think too much: My life as an adjunct college English teacher since 1998

What are your options when you’ve lost ambition, you need money, and nobody else will have you? In September 1998, I took a job teaching Remedial Reading at Northern Essex Community College, the same school where I’d started as an unadventurous undergraduate. I had no idea what I was doing. I worked with the man who’d written the textbook, a mousy Dr. W. with a permanently pursed mouth who was convinced he knew the formula. He knew how to mathematically break down the elements of reading standard essays and somehow replicating that formula when asked. He had written the texts and I needed to just slavishly follow his lesson plans.

The problem was that I had no idea how to be his representative in the classroom. The afternoon following my first class, a majority of the students stormed Dr. W’s office and complained.

“Chris, they don’t know what you’re saying. They don’t understand why you’re straying from the textbook. Do you need me to be there for tomorrow’s class?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll just stay with your syllabus. The textbook is fairly basic, so I shouldn’t have any problem.”

“I’m sure you won’t,” he said. “Oh, and please keep in mind that it would be fairly impossible for me to find a new teacher now, but I will if I need to.”

What did that mean, “fairly impossible”? He always said that. I told him I didn’t have any problems, but I should have said that I just wanted to teach Creative Writing. I wanted to have something stable that might cultivate my abilities, but I just stayed silent.
My other job that semester was at a satellite campus for a college whose student body was primarily comprised of active Police officers and ex-military personnel. Classes were held at area high schools late afternoons, early evenings, or Saturday mornings. At this school, I taught Creative Writing, Literature, Expository Writing, and I learned how to care about what I did. It might have taken me a while to find my style and develop a meaningful pedagogy, but it wouldn’t start unless and until I started to care.

Here is some of what will always remain with me from those classes: He was a thirty-year veteran sergeant on the Boston Police Bomb Squad, and a student in my first of many "Creative Writing" classes; he was hefty, bald, with a twinkling smile. I gave assignments like "Write Yourself as an Inanimate Object," where they created first-person narratives in the voice of a rock, the ocean, an ancient Redwood tree in California. They wrote one scene from the perspective of several different characters. I wanted them to understand that great writing was "found" just as much as it was deliberately composed. There was poetry in subway graffiti. Scribbles and anything that immediately seems trivial should never be completely washed away.

I was prepared for complete resistance from everybody in that creative writing class. One of them wrote of coming upon a man who had jumped in front of a train. Another wrote about drug dealers and low riders and the tendency for certain groups to drive certain cars, "which is why we have to pull them over and we can't apologize for it." I played a cut from the "New Yorker Out Loud" CD, actor Viggo Mortenson reading journal excerpts from Jack Kerouac. Roll, baby. Roll. Let's blow this joint. My class of police officers listened for fifteen minutes, and responded negatively to the hipsterism.
They didn’t connect with the cool jazz hip stylings of Kerouac’s spontaneous words. I knew what was coming as they took him to task, and I really couldn’t blame them.

“What did he give to the world except a headache for the cops?”

Logic (or perhaps stereotypical profiling?) told me they might gravitate towards the cool detachment of James Ellroy’s *L.A. Confidential* and James M. Cain's *The Postman Only Rings Twice*, as did I. To adjust a curriculum specifically for the interests of a target audience was patronizing and demeaning, but I felt drawn to the literature of right and wrong, of crime and punishment. There was something strangely seductive and romantic about the life of a detective, a private eye, two cops who vowed to cover each other's back, no matter what. It meant Gary Cooper in "High Noon," the conscience of his town, standing up for what mattered. It was Humphrey Bogart in "The Maltese Falcon," searching for "the stuff that dreams are made of." These policemen and women had seen everything, and I wanted to hear it all.

The connection that these officers had with heroic police and detective characters was the same as everything I felt about musicians. To them life was about good and bad people, white and black hats. Everybody had guns. The only difference came with how they were used. To me, the way Johnny Cash defiantly wore his guitar on his back was no different than any western movie hero. It was hardly by coincidence that Cash, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson and a slew of other country musicians from back in the day worked in movies and sang songs about God, love, and murder. Theirs was a monochromatic music that at times burst through with vivid, colorized characters. Think about the moment the hurricane drops Dorothy’s house into the Land of Oz and she carefully opens the door for the first time and her world (and ours) is drastically changed.
What was once a sepia-toned black and white life was now stunning color. That’s what I felt when I connected with country ballads like “I walk the line,” “Help me make it through the night,” and “Delia’s gone.” Those songs captured an entire world into what was usually less than three minutes, and I wanted to teach my students how to write that economically.

At times, we went on tangents. My bomb squad guy wrote three detailed accounts of a murder scene from the perspective of the teenaged Loverboy, the washed-up wife, and the spurned husband, who came home to kill the teen. Loverboy's narrative was even written from beyond the grave. We discussed racial profiling and the politics of small town squad rooms. We talked about justice, fairness, why nobody really gets a break. I imagined long boredom stretches interrupted by calls to domestic violence, or visits to an unsuspecting suburban family of five o'clock in the morning to tell them that their daughter had been killed in a car crash. They spoke of all this quietly and respectfully, in hushed tones. These were not bold men easily telling me long-winded scary war stories. They were just tired public servants who had come to understand that evil exists and justice is worth defending.

Their assignments were perfectly presented, from first to final typed draft. Each evening, somebody read from their journal while we spent the bulk of our time analyzing a particular classmate's story. They had read it over the week and provided written commentary. We discussed character development, motivation, symbolism, multiple plot lines. I knew the real work came with each successive draft, each time they saw that things could be seen in a different light, from an alternate angle, and still have the ring of truth. I just was never sure how to tell them that perfection would need to take time.
The cops took my classes in order to get their Criminal Justice Bachelor’s Degrees and a subsequent pay raise. Their respective cities paid for their educations. Many in the media saw the school as a joke, a diploma mill, but this was the first time I ever took my job seriously. I enjoyed going to work each day. I often think about my police officers from that and several other classes. I can still see my Bomb Squad Guy, eyes twinkling in a smile as he came to understand that his writing had a touch of beauty, a strain of world-weary and honestly earned melancholy. These students told me I helped them understand that there were many ways to see a single situation, endless variations on one strong theme. I couldn't tell them then, but I can tell them now, that they made me feel like I knew something and that I was somebody. They made me feel like my indecisiveness, low self-esteem, and tendency to ramble covered up the makings of a good teacher and a respectable man. This is a debt I'll never be able to repay.
Chapter Fourteen

Lost in Translation: figuring out what the words mean

My first time in what has ended up a long, varied side career teaching English as a Second Language seemed like a simple enough assignment. For two days, 9AM-3PM, The Oxford Intensive School of English wanted me to teach conversational English. The irony was not lost on me or anybody in my life. What did I know about conversational English? I was supposed to make them feel comfortable with my language, and it meant assuming the life of something I had never been; a social butterfly, a man at ease with myself, a man able and willing to spontaneously connect with strangers, to maintain a satellite of friends. It meant being normal and comfortable and at ease in my own skin. It meant being a raconteur, man about town, a warm conversationalist more eager to learn about the life of somebody else than reveal anything about myself.

English conversation was about performance, assuming an artificial personality, so there was no fear about this job. I just had to learn how to perform. I had to learn how to fake it. That’s what I did in my regular classes. I had a syllabus, a tentative script, and I riffed off it with the flow of a jazz musician. Lecturing to a large class seemed to come too easily for me. Suddenly I became Spalding Gray, dramatically presenting a monologue about swimming to Cambodia or impossible vacations connecting it with the subject at hand (a short story, a song, Biff Loman whistling in the elevator.) It was a totally different story on a one-to-one basis, but the principle was the same. Write the script before class, use it as an outline, but then go off towards any imaginable path. Just don’t drive into a ditch or spin your wheels.
My student, Haruki, was a Japanese Heart surgeon who had been in Boston for forty-eight hours and was soon to start work at a major teaching hospital. Boston was and remains a first-class cosmopolitan city, overflowing with some of the nation’s greatest colleges, and we welcome international students from all over the world. I always feel like I see the world through them, each semester in my adjunct college English teacher jobs. I want to show them the best of my country, to demonstrate how our lives in Massachusetts are but a small piece of the huge patchwork blanket that makes up the strange tapestry that is the United States of America. It would be futile to try and understand Americans let alone the idiosyncrasies of the English language in my classes, repeating verb forms and tense construction. These students were mine for a brief moment, and then they were gone. In that time I had to do my best.

Haruki’s exposure to English was minimal. There had been intensive English immersion for an entire week prior to his move here, but he admitted the language was the least of his concerns. The hospital had arranged preliminary housing for his first six months, and after that he would be on his own. There had been two years of English during high school, but twenty years passed between graduation, pre-med, residency, and his first job at a Tokyo hospital. English was heard, in the background of his life at parties, or in Beatles songs, but it was never used. He had no need for that until this job surfaced, but then there was the excitement of actually coming straight to New York then here to Boston.

“I could not wait to see America,” he said. “I wanted to touch the Statue of Liberty, to see where it all begins.” His dark eyes sparkled as he carefully, almost breathlessly told me this, avoiding eye contact, nervously staring at the door behind me.
This became a habit during our time together, one he would need to break if he expected to function as a hospital doctor. His thick head of black hair was slightly sprinkled with grey and cut in true Beatle style. It was as if the idea of excitement and making such a radical change in his life made him feel guilty, like he was hardly worthy of shifting gears in the grand design plan that had been set out for him by his parents, his culture.

There were obvious obstacles between him and a full understanding of the meaning beneath the words we all spoke with ease every day. These were easy to conquer. My own insecurities about public speaking and how I came across to strangers were irrelevant, but I was still a self-centered teacher. ESL Instructors were not supposed to let their students see them sweat. Don’t break down or stammer or fall into some sort of nervous speech pattern. My nervousness immediately turned me into Guy Smiley, the exaggerated game show host muppet from “Sesame Street,” all flailing arms, perfect white teeth and helmet hair. I would have to pull out all my tricks, all my theatrical flair, if I expected to be successful with Haruki.

I started teaching English and writing because I wanted to hide behind the artifice and pomposity of the grand literary statement. My goal was to convince students through my earnestness that there was only one way to see a story, essay, poem, or play: my way. In that respect, I was no different than many other college English Instructors. We were effective and conscientious, but we still had to fight the impression that our classes were sacred ground and we were the only valid conduits through which the commandments could truly be understood.
I had never been formally trained in or taught ESL. Before my first day with Haruki, I drew from common sense, instinct, and logical focus to determine my goals. I took into account body language, inflection, particular cultural tendencies, and mix them with the thick sludge that is a Boston accent. These were the patients my student would encounter, and this was the “English” he needed to understand. Cut a clear path through the woods and map out the route. Some other teacher would have to build the road.

We had three ninety-minute sessions, with a half hour coffee break, and a one hour lunch. I had developed a lesson plan the night before that included readings from William Carlos Williams, the great writer/doctor of Patterson, NJ, and Sherwin Nuland, author of How We Die. I wanted him to see the poetry and grace many doctors have used in writing about their profession. Express to me the awesome beauty of holding a beating heart in your hand, and you will go far.

High-concept lesson plans, and strict adherence to prescribed standards, automatically crumble under the weight of their own pomposity. That’s what happened with my ideas for that day. We didn’t need great literature to learn conversational English. We didn’t need to stand in the shadow of other people’s ideas, read aloud their graceful language, to absorb the grace of English. That was too easy and- in many ways- the lazy man’s escape plan.

On our second day I ditched the literature plans and instead learned this man’s story. Prior to moving here, he had studied English for five hours a week over the past year. Most Japanese students, he told me, were taught English as children. The problem was that their teachers had thick Japanese accents and the words were hard to understand.
As a surgeon in Japan he was used to certain cultural standards and expectations that were probably not available here. How could he properly and effectively communicate with colleagues and patients here in a new country? Would they misinterpret his intentions even if his English proved flawless?

I looked at his strong hands, the long fingers, the hard knuckles and smooth skin. I wanted to know how it felt to pull a beating heart from a patient’s chest cavity and watch as it pulsed. I thought I had control over grand ideas and themes in my daily grind teaching literature and inspiring written themes, but Haruki had the world in his clear palms. These were not the gnarled and beaten hands of a lumberjack or cotton picker. These were the wrinkle-free ivory palms of a concert pianist, a sculptor, a watercolor artist, and the hands of a man who could massage life back into a dormant organ. I wanted to know how it felt to have that power, but there wasn’t enough time for my needs and for the first time as a teacher I had to admit it was not all about me.

Our second day was six hours of improvisations and role playing. I transformed myself into a belligerent, morbidly obese 60 year old smoker. Tell me I need a heart transplant and don’t apologize. Maintain eye contact, and stay away from excessively long medical terms.

“Here is your heart,” I told him, presenting my right clenched fist. “This is how you can explain it to your patients. Each finger is an artery, a pump. They will understand this better than actual photos.”

I suggested that he study “The Big Dig,” Boston’s never-ending legendary traffic construction project. Radio traffic reports about the clogged central artery would make his patients understand their condition much better than charts meant only for a doctor.
This is what I learned after my first two days as an ESL teacher: composure, an animated presentation, and a relaxed, focused demeanor will get you everywhere. I wished Haruki good luck and assured him that he was going to succeed.

“Just keep your sense of humor,” I said as we parted ways at the end of our second and final day. “Your patients may be dying, or they may just need a lecture about changing their ways, but you can do it.”

We ended with a strong, firm handshake and I could swear I felt the magic transmitted from his hand to mine. Our worlds were different, but this was about the power of language and the almost impossible subtle shades of difference in tone, inflection, word choice and motivation. He remains in my mind, and I hope he’s still in Boston, still dealing with impossible patients, still having to make heartbreaking decisions. If he’s got the confidence that can come with mastering the English language, anything is possible.
Chapter Fifteen

A brief philosophical interlude

Why did I teach writing? I really had no choice. I couldn’t build houses or perform heart bypasses or do income tax returns. I taught because it was all I knew. The flame of writing can sometimes bloom out of control. Where did I want to steer it? How did I want my students to see themselves in words strung together to become sentences, paragraphs, and finally essays? I couldn’t let them know the most successful among them were alchemists who distilled the best mixture of sweat, inspiration, fear and desire into a chemical property that becomes their grand statement. They needed to learn that on their own. I was just the facilitator.

In an ideal world, I would have a great full-time gig at some paradise college with golf course green hills and a view overlooking the ocean. My writing students would sit outside under palm trees, discuss the classics, and start their own efforts based on these perfect models. They would draw from an expansive, complete definition of the idea “classic” and use their hearts and common sense to weed out the good from the bad. The class would become a supportive atmosphere during which the only thing I would require of them was to fiercely (yet fairly) critique the work of their classmates based on prescribed standards. This was the only way to grow as writers and human beings for one major reason: the willingness to maintain their integrity and dignity while showing they weren’t afraid to be vulnerable.
The gimmicks and effective tools I used were usually interesting. Tell a multi-character story from many perspectives. Become an inanimate object and speak in that voice. Dig up old love letters and mold them into fiction. Everything was subject to impulsive whims. Creative Writing was the last thing most of my Police officer students wanted to do, and the least easy idea for them to understand. They dealt in facts and a clearly delineated exposition of the events in question. I reminded them that this type of creative writing was like a body on the side of the road waiting for CPR. The person knows you’re there to give them a chance at life, so do your job. Just make them breathe and have faith that they will carry on the rest of the way on their own. My other students were fresh out of high school and rarely inspiring, but they were equally important.

The next masterpiece could be found or heard anywhere. Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan belonged with Walt Whitman and William Blake. Writing was most alive when seen through different eyes, when taken out for a walk in a freshly pressed suit. The best writing teachers were those who saw and cultivated the one beautiful flower in a garden of weeds. They tried to keep it alive, but if the weeds were at risk of dying, they didn’t run for life support. Some weeds just weren’t meant to stay viable. I don’t think that’s irresponsible. It’s just reality.

I always started each semester by telling students that writing can potentially save their lives. It’s not that a working knowledge of CPR or a cholesterol-free diet won’t go far in adding years to your life. Writing does not have to be a masterful, brilliant act of faith. Allow it to be tedious, to be foolish. A passionate love note can mean more in a single moment than any Declaration of Independence, and that moment is worth saving.
More truth: keep all your cards, memos, thoughts of the day, tear-stained letters ending relationships or long missives trying to start love affairs. Reading those years later will bring back feelings of great joy, regret, longing, cringing embarrassment, life itself. Be judicious and selective when it comes to e-mails you write and save. While a brilliant letter can give your life great meaning, sometimes impulsive thoughts committed to paper are better off secured in a safe deposit box at your local bank. I tell them that the writing they have already done is a testament to survival, betrayal, complicity in the grand design of the human race keeping their collective head above water.
Chapter Sixteen

Still thinking too much

Through all the classes, my annoying life of the mind, the ten college teaching gigs in as many years, the only thing I really understood was that I thought too much. I pondered, brooded, ruminated, and stewed over minutiae until everything was meaningless. On his 1983 album *Hearts and Bones*, Paul Simon had two songs that said as much. Again, music was saving and haunting me at the same time. “Think too much (a)” was a jaunty little ditty with a somewhat unfortunate eighties-style synthesizer arrangement, but it was the lyrics that spoke strongest to me:

“I had a childhood that was mercifully brief/I grew up in a state of disbelief.” ([http://paulsimon.com/node/176](http://paulsimon.com/node/176))

It was the other think too much, (appropriately enough titled “Think Too Much [b]”) that haunted me then as it does now. (Were these titles descriptions of a condition or a call to action?) To a soft marimbas and Vibraphone backing, he sings this tale of loneliness and a life of last resorts:

“The smartest people in the world/ had gathered in Los Angeles/to analyze our love affair/and possibly unscramble us” ([http://paulsimon.com/node/177](http://paulsimon.com/node/177))

Okay, this was understandable enough for a man of the world like Paul Simon. When I first heard this at nineteen I barely had enough experiences to warrant any love affairs. I barely knew the difference between love and sex. It was the music that lingered. The soft percussion was an atmospheric layer, and there was another sound that had to be the bleating of a lamb. What did that mean?
In the second verse of this strange little song, the scene has shifted. The chorus was simple enough in both songs of this title. The right side of the brain dominates the left, and the result is that the left side becomes overworked and (logically) neglected. In the second verse of “Think too much (b),” it is night time and the singer is visited by his father. Something has happened. Something is terribly wrong:

“And in the night my father came to me/and held me to my chest/he said ‘There’s not much more that you can do. Go home and get some rest’”

I always liked mysteries in my songs, hardships that needed no explanation. Both “think too much” songs were brief, sub-three minute jewels. Paul Simon was a consummate pop song craftsman who came from the school that always understood less was more. I’m a huge fan of the ten minute epics, but it just seemed more difficult to compress and distill complex thoughts into a miniature context, like a Faberge egg, like Dr. Seuss’s curious elephant Horton, who (like William Blake before him) saw a world in a flake of dust. It showed a willingness to trust your best instincts, to know how and where to judiciously chop away at your babies until you reached their core beauty.

All I knew is that life had to be about deep thinking. I wasn’t ashamed of having a brain and using it. I just knew all too well that I was thinking too much, cluttering my brain with useless information and one of these days it was going to kill me. I thought about how life was “active anguish in the context of flush.” This is just one of those damned frustrating random quotes that I can type into a google search engine right now. It was once important. It meant something, years ago, but now there’s no proof it ever existed. Just think about it: we spend our time navigating mazes of beauty and true regret.
We feel longing and satisfaction, happiness and sorrow. We maintain a righteous existence because we know we’ll be rewarded in the end. Have kids so you can carry on a legacy and hope they’ll inherit your good looks and high standards. Happiness is there, but active anguish is always the only remaining alternative. Without it, happiness is meaningless.

The thing about “active anguish” is that it’s suffering that’s moving on, building up speed. Live through it now, just for a while, and you won’t have to suffer again. Does this mean we’ll all get our beautiful reward at the end of the rainbow? I don’t know, and even if I did I wouldn’t tell anybody. Life is a highway of bumps, potholes, orange construction cones and freshly-paved roads. Get in your car, drive on, and deal with it.

I’ve always felt that the most humble and spiritual among us are those who do not have to advertise our greatness, those who do not lead worldwide organizations out of touch with their flock. There is just nobody worse than a person who professes to speak for God while in the darkness hiding horrible secrets.

The second half, “in the context of flush,” is equally interesting and positive. Think about it: to flush is to redden, but it’s also to glow and thrive, like E.T.’s finger. Was there active anguish in that little monster’s quest to phone home? Sure. It glowed every time he connected with a human heart. He stayed on earth, but his time was short. He understood that, and as a result he mad every connection was that much more intense. Understand your anguish. Don’t embrace it. Accept the fact that your anguish exists. That’s the only way to get happy.
But I knew happiness was a lie. I knew the idea of getting happy and staying there was only something that was ours at the end of the road. Were geniuses ever really happy? Most of us were never going to have to deal with that issue. We lived our lives rolling along at a comfortable, manageable speed through a safe landscape of intellectual development. Our ears recognize sweet voices, our eyes lock on to the unconditional loving looks of our parents, and our hearts never overtake the wisdom of our minds.

Common sense works in tandem with instinct. We enter our adult lives in a gentle compromise between the staggering intimidation of true genius and knowing just enough to live comfortably on our own terms.

The life of a child prodigy is an entirely different condition that seems impossible to fully understand. Are they geniuses, or just pint-sized adults doing stupid human tricks? They pop up on late night talk shows, these bespectacled little tots who can recite all state capitals at the age of 4 or name the world continents and oceans. They can give us any statistic we need, but the processing of information seems to stop there. What will they do with this information? Can they interpret as well as memorize?

As these things usually prove to be, the spring 2005 suicide of a 14 year old Southwest Nebraskan musical prodigy named Brandenn E. Bremmer was apparently impossible to forecast. Why did it happen? He left no note, and was recalled by one of his Colorado State University professors as an unpretentious young man with an easy smile. He planned to be an anesthesiologist and student at the University of Nebraska. Somehow, an available handgun mixed with unfathomable depression resulted in the only conclusion this teenager thought was available to him.
In the midst of following this story, I was most touched by comments from Brandenn’s mother Patricia. She was convinced her son was an Empath, that he could hear the needs and desires and cries of strangers. She felt that something touched him that day and he needed to leave. How could a mother maintain herself after she buries her child? I had no idea. We don’t know what the word would have gotten from a child prodigy like Brandenn Bremmer: concert pianist, swimmer, *Harry Potter* fan. The boy could have grown to become a bitter man who claimed his childhood had been stolen, but he didn’t seem to have a manipulative stage mother. The worst thing we do to our children is drain them of their spirit, dignity, hope and purpose. Brandenn E. Bremmer lives today, in blogs that specialize in gruesome deaths and in my mind, yet another guy who thought too much and paid the price.

I knew life was too short, but I never listened. I was always the angry, sullen bookworm who lived just to hide away and read. Life was about collecting and collating information written by people better than me, books about places I’d never seen and adventures I’d never have. So long as I could think and put the abstract into a concrete context, my world would not fall apart.
Chapter Seventeen

September 2001: everybody rides for free today

Here was the song that chose to haunt me that morning, the song that ran on an endless loop trying to tell me everything was okay: Paul Simon’s “Was a Sunny Day,” the tale of a Navy man called Speedo (Christian name Mister Earl) and his high school Queen Lorelei. It was simple enough. I had known it for nearly thirty years, ever since it was released on the classic 1973 album “There Goes Rhymin’ Simon.” It was an easy, very crisp and slick production, a melody that went over like a warm glove as played by the ace Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section.

Pop music has always been at its best when it deals in Dialogism, when it’s informed enough to coyly reference classics from a golden era. Here, Simon is quoting the great Cadillacs song from 1955, “Speedo.” It was one of the legendary doo-wop recordings in an earlier era of rock where (like the great Billy Ward penned Dominoes song “60 Minute Man”) bragging was the coin of the realm. Speedo was a lady’s man, and he wasn’t about to stop “’til they call off making pretty girls.” Paul Simon’s Speedo was more humble, perhaps even shy about his double life, but the musical reference proved there was something mischievous up his sleeve. The clarity of the production in that whole album was typical of pop music from the early seventies. This song, and style, always seemed to be the calm before the storm, the serenity before the chaos.

The chorus to “Was a sunny day,” heard three times throughout the song, was all about paradise, happiness. The sky was cloudless. There was no negativity, just like we felt in Boston that morning. The birds were safe, majestic, soaring, and beautifully free.
Our favorite melodies were spilling over the clear blue sky, like we knew they would. Life was good, and the sunny day was going to last forever.

As it was happening, we sat with our students in history teacher Mr. Z’s 9th grade Dorchester high classroom, huddled around a black and white TV with very poor reception. I had been the academic coordinator at this after-school enrichment program for twelve months, commuting from my two bedroom apartment in Medford to the Red Line train from Davis Square in Somerville to Ashmont station in Dorchester, an approximately 45 minute trip. The reception might have been hazy on that black and white box that morning, but within minutes it all became too clear and not even the surefire killer hook of a great pop song could save my students. Those songs swam through my head that morning, especially a Paul Simon single from nearly three decades earlier, but I was sure my students had reached radio silence.

Was I the Great White Hope who would concretely contextualize this act of domestic terrorism for these inner-city African-American children? I couldn’t do anything for them because all I heard that day was the music, the massage-like melody of Paul Simon’s tale of eternal love and happiness in a sunny day that was never going to end. Why did I think the harmless pop songs were going to save me from the madness?

The only other song that surfaced late that morning, as we all went on the inbound Red Line train back to Boston, back to the heart of the city where two of the planes had taken off was a line from James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain.” The line drilled into me like I had no choice. It was about “sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground.” (http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/j/james_taylor/fire_and_rain.html) That was my only dependable reference point, the only thing I could understand that horrible morning.
As everybody around me was squeezing the life out of their cell phones, furiously trying to reach loved ones, whispering that they knew people on those flights, avoiding eye contact for fear of completely breaking down, I was running this baby boomer playlist through my mind. The songs vanished for the rest of that month as I watched the non-stop news coverage, the recovery efforts, the questioning about what happened, who did it, what we will do in retaliation.

September stubbornly spilled over into October, still no music back in my life. People were concerned. They asked why I was sweating so much. I said it was probably hypoglycemia, or a pre-disposition to diabetes. They noticed grey hair at my temples dark circles under my eyes. Did they think they were being my friend? Were they under the impression that this was going to help me? The kids always pointed things out (that's what kids do) but they took me on surface value. I was intense. I talked too much and too quickly and risked boring them just to get my point across. I stayed on their case and sometimes trailed them in the halls to ensure they got to their next class.

Kids approached me in the halls; Hey, Mistah. What's my next class?" I followed kids when they angrily stormed out of class, and I talked them out of revenge. The kids made assumptions about some sort of life I did or didn't have, and I always left things to their imagination. Gotta girlfriend? Gotta wife? Got kids? You figure it out. No, the kids wouldn't wonder what was happening. If I suddenly disappeared one day, they would ask questions but then they would quickly move on. People in their lives had a tendency to slip away, and I would just be another guy they used to know.

There was probably never any doubt a break down might happen, especially when the music stopped and the adventure of even the most mundane train ride proved tortuous.
I didn’t want to be escorted from a grocery store, a bank, a shopping mall in the last days before Christmas, trembling and nervously sweating in the dead of early winter. I just wanted people to kindly tell me that I needed to put a halt to things. Tell them I had to take care of a family emergency. Afterwards, I’d go away to “dry out” or “get my act together.” Then, shortly after Christmas vacation, re-energized and with a sharper focus, I would prioritize something other than my troubles. Get rid of the glassy-eyed look and un-trimmed beard. Replace it with the conviction that if I stared straight ahead and focused on my next class, or a kid in the hall I hadn't seen for a few days, I could avoid having to face what I was doing to myself.

The music that had left me by September 13th came back in small pieces, but not by choice. Like everybody, I spent those early weeks just watching non-stop TV coverage of recovery efforts at Ground Zero. I watched Bruce Springsteen on TV, less than two weeks after it happened, perform his song “My City Of Ruins” at a pledge drive called “America: a tribute to Heroes.” The song was not written in response to this incident, this event, but it perfectly fit the occasion. It was a slow hymn to perseverance, to rising up, to taking your hands and praying for something better.

Springsteen had always been an artistic touchstone for me. His populist anthems of working class heroes and New Jersey life were huge since I was eleven, but I wasn’t aware at that point. My main concern at that age was The Beatles, but I knew the majesty of a Bruce Springsteen song. I knew the wall of sound and anthem of explosive guitar power chords that seemed to be a celebration of something bigger than just quick thrills. I was a fan during those days when “Born In The USA” was interpreted as a jingoistic anthem, but I stayed away from getting too close. The power was way too dangerous.
I wasn’t fully receptive to what he could offer; fully aware of the connection he had with Bob Dylan and the heroics of folk music, until Christmas 1982, when he came back into my radar with the album *Nebraska*.

I watched Springsteen that night, post 9/11, and suddenly I was back in Christmas 1982. Dad bought me Springsteen’s acoustic *Nebraska* album. Lauren and I spent the night upstairs in the barn loft, listening to the stories of lost souls and serial murderers, haunting harmonica, crystal-clear guitar, and the high lonesome type of vocals not heard since Hank Williams. We split a bottle of wine, and together we sat back and got lost in Springsteen’s tales of desperate losers waiting for that last jackpot (“Atlantic City”), dreams of patrimonial reconciliation (“My Father’s House”), and spiritual redemption (“Reason to Believe.”)

The gruff growl of his voice then, with murder ballads, and nearly twenty years later, as I watched him singing about praying for the hope and strength to rebuild, the steady composure of the small chorus backing him up, it was all so perfect. This was what it meant to be an artist, to be a singer/songwriter. Take your guitar to the streets or in front of a TV camera, strap it around your neck, and testify, no frills. It was one of the only times that year I cried, and not just for what had happened. The song and the artist had put context to everything, but still it was the only sound coming over my wavelength that fall. Aside from the victorious “Concert for New York City” that October, my jukebox was empty.

I started therapy in late September 2001. Surprisingly, there was no shame or public embarrassment. It was a simple business arrangement with a mental health professional, nothing more or less, and fifty minutes were always rounded up to an hour.
Weeks passed by with long-winded narratives about this person, that event, and the disastrous 8.5 Richter scale earthquake reality that was life with sisters and brothers. Every week, I coquettishly flirted with the biggest issues. I danced like Brando in "Last Tango in Paris," unencumbered by societal restraints, every bit the libertine. There was no shame in the process, but there was always fear in going too deep.

“How do you feel right now?” my therapist asked that first day. “Why are you here?” He seemed swallowed up by his armchair, a little man surrounded by comfort. The lighting was mild, cactus plants in the corners, a quiet breeze through the window. His bookcases were filled with pristine copies of Jung and Freud textbooks. Outside his window I saw the dusk of a busy downtown Medford and for some reason I started to feel like I belonged in his office, at least for now.

“I feel like that point in ‘A Day In The Life’ when the full orchestra breaks out into a frantic rush to the middle, after Lennon’s opening third and before McCartney sings about waking up and getting out of bed. Do you know that section?”

He nodded. I was terrified and repulsed at myself because I’d once again fallen into the trap of auditioning, of trying to impress with my pop culture references. Would he be on my wavelength? Would he see right through me? The problem is that this was the only way I knew how to describe this feeling on the brink.

“But there’s a problem,” I continued. God help me, but I had opened up this steamy can of bullshit so there was no reason not to wallow in it, no reason to pretend it wasn’t there. “Lennon has his final verse, the orchestra goes crazy again. They reach this ultimate climax and they have no choice but to release, but this wasn’t about fucking, you know? Or maybe it was.” I laughed, looked away, and quickly wiped away my flop sweat.
If I’d been him then I would have shot me where I sat and felt no remorse. “So can I assume you know that final chord, the forty-five second chord played by everything?”

He nodded again.

“I just don’t feel like I’m going to make it to that final chord,” I said. “I feel like this is it. I feel like this is the end.” God, that was so sappy! Why did I talk like I was in some sort of independent film I could see on the Sundance Channel? I figured that since I was there, I might as well go all the way. I checked if I had gotten a reaction out of him. I hadn’t. It really wasn’t supposed to be the point to get an immediate rise out of him. Maybe, in a small way, that’s what I wanted. Maybe this was my last chance. For a brief second I thought I might be the singular nutcase that would break this guy’s steely professional resolve. I thought about the drained pale ghosts out in the waiting room, flipping aimlessly through issues of *People* and *Time*.

I started twice weekly sessions with this therapist that lasted for nearly a year and a half. In those early weeks and months, he had me on a small dosage of Depakote. I got this from a colleague of his in Brookline, a psychologist who would be the final arbiter of what I needed. I gave her the same story, and she looked at me with concern. She might have told me that afternoon about the side effects of Depakote, but I was too confused. I just wanted to start. Whatever (if any effect) the medication had on me was going to be secondary to the process of recovery.

The main reason I started the process was because I had good, dependable health coverage. I started because I knew it had to be all about cognitive therapy, not pharmacological. It was about shedding the layers of the onion, humility, bravery, and not feeling like I had an exclusive right to pain. I had seen death instantly grab my family.
I had been abused and neglected. I marginalized and isolated and I had a right to start grieving, finally, after all these years. I was a red lobster scar of pain, but I still had an obligation to heal.

There was a dilemma here. I had spent a lifetime denying the professional analytical process. Give me a great novel, a revolutionary poem in chaotic free verse. I will nail down the meaning and I will make convincing arguments tying my own life to its themes, but only within the context of the art. Don't make me personally connect because then I'll have to come to some conclusions. The only analysis that meant anything had to be initiated by me. I was a reader and thinker, an Academic brooder. Don’t put me under the magnifying glass if you don’t expect to see a bloody, twisted, painful mess, and don’t look at that unless you’re prepared to fix it.

My mother, a Psychology undergraduate student at the age of forty, used to bring me and Leah to some of her classes when babysitters weren’t available. Mom liked Jungian archetypes and Rollo May’s Love and Will, anything about symbols and dream analysis. All these books and so many ideas took root in our house during those times, when dad bust their locked bedroom door down and Mom got a restraining order on him and he moved out for a while to live in a one bedroom apartment in working class Amesbury, when Mom moved to Salem, they came back together by the end of the seventies and stayed tight until the end, connected by their separate faiths and a determination to always have the last word.

In spite of the occasional trash talking each of them undertook about the other during those years, typical of married parents in turmoil eager to pull their children apart just to prove a point, those times were still at least interesting, still incendiary and brutal.
I pored though Mom’s Abnormal Psychology textbooks and imagined myself with
delusions of grandeur, audio hallucinations, and visions of the Virgin Mary on a potato
chip. These scenarios- and the bickering of George and Martha from “Who’s Afraid of
Virginia Woolf?”- were regular supplements to my tedious junior high curriculum. I
never mumbled, never drooled, but I wanted to be part of that party. It was more romantic
than anything else I had ever seen. Adult relationships were supposed to be bitter and
spiteful. We were supposed to spit words at each other in a shower of passive aggressive
rain.

In those classes, Mom put Leah and me on a chores reward system. We were
given Lima beans for every finished job. It was a simple and easy to understand system.
A clean room each morning was the equivalent of three beans. (one bean was worth a
dollar.) By week’s end, we cashed in our beans. I bought ice cream and books. We
quickly found the Lima bean supply and inflated our earnings and the experiment failed
but it was definitely good while it lasted. Mom took to psychology, and therapy, probably
as something more than a middle-aged crisis. That’s too trite, too insulting. For her,
therapy was more likely a logical way station on her search for purpose. She found it with
faith in that hectic final quarter century of her life, but she probably would never have
gotten here had it not been for therapy.

Those early stages of my therapy were infected by my insistence that every action
I had taken needed to be analyzed and dissected. I had gone to group therapy in the
summer of 1997, after my father’s death, but only because it was free. It didn’t work,
though. I liked telling my story. It was helpful, cleansing, but eventually I started
competing with other patients. Do you think that’s painful? I’ll show you pain!
It was all just a simple challenge, and I was more than willing to take it. Show me where that vein of pure hopelessness and desperation started and I will trace its every twist and turn, from origin to conclusion. None of this will be vague. None of this will be hazy. There was certainly a physiological or genetic reasoning to this temporary short circuit of emotional logic, but a lot of this was probably about performance. Who do we trust? Why do we trust? Why can't this just be worked out through writing and a hardened sense of humor? After all, real men didn't need to talk. Give me medication and I'll fly out of this danger zone.

Sisters and cousins and aunts and others drifting through hyper-space, living within or near my emotional area code, had probably been under some psychological care. I always saw prescription drugs and Elvis 1977, battling obesity and legends of the fall. I saw old black and white kinescopes of Judy Garland on "The Jack Paar Show" in the early sixties, telling one drunken story after another about the munchkins. Too many maps and pictures were blowing up in my mind. Zoloft, an affluent suburb of Prozac Nation, is a crowded metropolis, always foggy and cold in a mid-December limbo, teeming with hopeless neurotics mumbling as they stumble off the subway, and they are always threatening to declare independence from the motherland. Right?
Chapter Eighteen

*Walk Away*

“There is a winner in every place/There is a heart that’s beating in every page/the beginning of it starts at the end/When it’s time to walk away and start over again.”  
(<http://www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>)


This was the song I had running through my head that day I walked through the playground, back to the subway station, after getting fired from the most boring, soul-burning job of my life. It was late January 2002, and as I cut through the field behind the high school where I’d been working for the previous sixteen months, I knew I was going to walk away and start over again. Waits had a perfect grizzled desperation in his voice, and I liked how the guitar and bass played off each other. The song was inspired by the Tim Robbins film “Dead Man Walking,” about a heartless killer on death row (Sean Penn) who finds a connection with Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon.) The song was not used in the film, but I could still hear it. I wasn’t the dead man walking as I walked away, carrying a cardboard box filled with random stuff I didn’t have much time to collect, but I was finally free.

I read the memoirs *Darkness Visible, An Unquiet Mind, Prozac Nation, Ingmar Bergman* films about women sharing personas in an island house and Death playing a chess match with a stubborn knight were what got me through my first two years as an undergraduate. This is what I had to be: a brooding, moping, self-absorbed smelly mess.
I had to scrawl unintelligible musings on steno pads and read them at coffee houses. I was born to preach to the converted. Why did people shy away from depressing things? Wasn't there a cathartic release in things that were sad? Listen to Tom Waits, Leonard Cohen, Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks*, and Beethoven’s *7th Symphony 2nd Movement*. Let it take you down that path and as you're walking, carefully balance that crown of thorns on your head. Take off your shoes and let the hot coals burn your naked feet.

Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides* haunted me. A young boy in a bucolic, suburban bedroom community of upper middle-class America in the 1970's tells this heartbreaking story of the Lisbon girls, all five of them, how they took their lives one year and it affected this boy and his friends into adulthood. They wanted to save these girls, to reach out across time and grief and hopelessness and find a way to heal their wounds. It's a brave and romantic book hidden beneath the burden of its title, a dream narrative voice of such stark beauty that it could only be told by a boy in love with these girls. I had known this feeling, known these girls in my own way. Maybe I had even been them when I was a teenager. This was the book that stuck with me that season of loss, the text I wanted to understand again.

I remembered the heartbreaking scene in the movie when the boys communicated with the girls through pop music. They put the needle down on the record, Todd Rundgren’s “Hello, It’s me,” and they shared the heartbreak of not being able to connect. What a simple, pure, innocent pop record. The Lisbon girls were stuck in exile in their house. Maybe, if we read the book enough or saw the movie, pop music might save them.
They might take that ride towards freedom and daylight with the boys and live simply by the hollow promises of music on the radio.

There's never anything pretty about a public breakdown. I had seen it happen with too many good high school educators. Many of them stayed precariously in their positions, day after day, glaring out at the world and seething with bitterness at an out of control situation, waiting for the chance to bring their gambling chips to the cashier’s window at the end of their tenure and cash in everything for a modicum of acknowledgement and respect. They rationalized their every move under the guise that they had no choice. The kids would never succeed. All they needed was to keep these brats around long enough to collect documentation and then shove them over to somebody else. I had seen that in others and I hated it. My issues, my problems, were personal, and I was not going to make anything public unless I could have complete editorial control.

There were nights I couldn’t sleep during this transition time, after I was fired late that following January, when the unemployment checks came in and I filled much of my allegedly conscious time at the public library with all the other wanderers and dirty, smelly, hopeless souls. I felt like I was home again, like I was back in Maplewood. There were nights that slipped into days and found me shuffling through my apartment in dirty drawers and mysteriously stained white v-neck t-shirts, listening to NPR and the upstairs continuous sounds of my neurotic landlady vacuuming up all microscopic evidence of dirt. This was the fate, the bottom line, the script I was given that I had to play out. I saw myself sitting scared, alone, and afraid by the open windows of Somerville coffee shops.
It was about filling the time between beginning and my end of days, going through the motions of making like the grand plan I’d been scribbling was ever going to amount to anything.

There was no separation in those five months when the music was shut down and before I went back to teaching college. There were no days. Every night, I went through my files and threw out an amazing amount of papers from the past ten years. Then, there were times I had the kind of serene sleep I never dreamed I could ever have in my old life. It was uninterrupted, calm, regulated not by the prescribed pharmaceuticals so much as the thrill of finally having a break, finally knowing I had no obligations. My dreams in those days were hopeful, filled with possibilities, but they still lacked melody. Where once there was a score, an undercurrent, musical cues telling me how I could feel, there was now nothing. Without the music, I was never going to get anywhere.
Chapter Nineteen

Laying the tracks towards the Promised Land: How trains take us everywhere

“*There’s a long distance train/pulling through the rain/tears on the letter I write.*”- Bob Dylan-“(Where are you tonight? [Journey through Dark Heat]) (Dylan, 395.)

This is what you need to know about a train song: it will never fail to move you. The greatest train songs are all about movement and departure, one way or another, real or imagined the chugging, choogling, choo-choo Charlie whistle-stop swift and swoon movement we all make from one place to another. Train songs will not let you down. They will not stop before they get to their place. They are fixed on their tracks, nose down, windows up, conductor in the driver’s seat, looking out for daredevils dancing perilously like the head of a penny on the silver rails. A train song is about love, betrayal, faith and hope, justice and mercy, redemption for all God’s sinners, everyday workers down on their luck getting the job done and understanding that the day is long but the work is never over.

Train songs are inherited and passed down through generation, performed by toothless men around campfires or the most erudite tuxedoed musicians in respectable concert halls. They’re boundary-free. We rent them for a while, add individual flairs and special accents, and then they’re off to somebody else. Sometimes they’re slow acoustic ballads. (“The L + N Don’t Stop Here Anymore.”) Other times they’re glorious anthems.
They’re about a steel-driven monolith forging its way to the Promised Land (“John Henry.”) No two versions of a train song are the same. The common thread is justice and that driving beat, that chunk-a-chunk-a rhythm of the rails. The romance that flavors a train song is like a subtle sweetener for your favorite cappuccino, not too much, just enough to spread through your spirit when everything else you’ve ever counted on suddenly comes up missing in action.

Working on the railroad does not make you more special than anybody else. Gladys Knight will take that midnight train to Georgia with her pips because she’d rather live in a world with him than without him. You know that feeling. You have been on that train with her, and more than a few times you were also on that last train to Clarksville knowing your loved one was standing at the station waiting to share those “coffee-flavored kisses” with you. Romance and travel and moving forward are everything in a train song. You bought tickets on “The Marrakesh Express,” the” Peace Train.” You ran through all sixteen empty coaches of the “Mystery Train.” “The Love Train” might pick you up, even though nothing had stopped there for years.

Sometimes, a dark speeding midnight train is just another lonely cry at the crescent moon glanced through naked branches on a Mississippi night. Not everybody gets to ride with Woody Guthrie. Not everybody understands Bob Dylan when he warns about the slow train comin,’ but they all originated from the same place. Our only job is to stand on that lonely platform with Gladys, Johnny Cash, Woody, Bob, and so many others who knew there was comfort in moving on a train.
Chapter Twenty

Searching for that Lost Chord

“It goes like this, the fourth the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift/the baffled King composing Hallelujah.” -Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah.” (1984)

Most beginner acoustic guitar instruction books will teach the same thing. Along with suggestions on how to hold your instrument, where to place your fingers and how hard to press down on the strings, the books all have a supportive, encouraging tone. You’ll be pickin’ and grinnin’ in no time! Strum on the downbeat and keep time by tapping your foot! Standard texts in these books are easily understandable chord progressions for “El Condor Pasa,” “Leaving On a Jet Plane,” or “La Bamba.” Slowly, with the precise methodology of a parent who knows the tougher phases are just around the corner, the early chapters of these books focus on the happy major chords of C, G, D, F, E and A.

There is no immediate attention paid to rhythm or beat at this point. That sort of instinct will need to be discovered on your own terms, in your own time. The only way to understand rhythm is to let go and follow the standard logical progression of the pop song. The opening third of most successful starter guitar textbooks puts proper priority on seamlessly shifting finger placement from one chord progression to another. It will at first sound choppy and clumsy, but the opening phase of any relationship with a musical instrument is never about smooth style and grace. Be suspicious if it comes to you in an instant, if somehow your natural love of great pop songs immediately translates to beautiful sounds coming from your guitar. Beauty takes time to grow. Be patient. Let it happen in its own time, on its own terms.
What these books won’t tell you is that the minor chords will make you cry. This is what every text I covered told me, just not in those exact words. The minor chords, always more comfortable in dark areas, trigger an automatically sad impulse in your heart when strummed at a certain moment, slipped into the context of a pop song as a reminder that everything is really not all sunshine and lollipops. Strum them either all at once, loud but carefully and close to the fret board, or go minor with a dramatically slow arpeggio flourish and wait for the final string to stop resonating before moving on. These minor chords are the lonely foster children in a pop song, allowed temporary shelter at various points between the eternally happy major chords of any given chorus.

Listen to the slow diminished minor chords of Gershwin’s “Someone to Watch over Me,” that lonely song about a poor soul who wants only for the chance to have a companion. This was late night music illuminated by candles, melodies made to induce tears and trigger a longing for something better. It wasn’t the cry in your beer music. It was the sophisticated torch song under the streetlight melodies, and I wanted to know how they worked. I wanted to take the logical structure of a pop song, put it on the table, and take apart the elements so as to see how they functioned. Something that so profoundly touched my heart since I could remember—great music with melodies and a chorus and a refrain that fade into the final groove of the record—had to have an understandable structure.

Listen to how the great Hoagy Carmichael opens “Stardust” (lyrics by Mitchell Parrish) with a tease. The minor chords perfectly match the sensibilities of the words. Twilight comes bathed in purple dusk, and it’s the only aural context that’s suitable for the musings of this sad singer. This is why he was born, to sing a sad and quiet lyric.
He spends a lonely night dreaming of a song, haunted by a reverie, and he is brought back to when the love he shared (with someone we can only assume is now long lost) was new, when anything was possible. Just the idea of stardust makes the singer wistful for lost days. The song opens with a tease, gradually builds, but there is no obvious reward. There is no falsely earned prize for the hero, just the “memory of love’s refrain” and the fairy tale paradise the nightingale sings can only be understood if our heart is open. It’s beautiful because it’s sad because it’s beautiful because it’s sad, a bedrock of American pop music brave enough to expose its humanity. It’s not a daunting, impossible song to interpret, like “Skylark,” another Carmichael classic, but it demands respect. Don’t stray too far from your source material. Don’t embellish. Some masterpieces are good enough as is.

Listen to the structure of The Beatles soft and fragile song “And I Love Her.” It’s basically A minor, D Minor, G, G7, F, C and E minor. It’s soft and fragile. The singer could be anybody, man or woman. It’s hopeful and optimistic without being sickeningly cheerful. In the bridge, the singer proclaims that their love could never die. It isn’t until the end that we see how the strength of this love is really only seen at night. The stars are bright and the sky is dark. It’s a quiet, tender, powerful little ballad that creeps up on the listener and the music is compatible with the lyrics. There is a connection between singer and subject, but it does not seem to be one that could survive in the crisp clarity of daylight.

Leonard Cohen’s 1984 song “Hallelujah” has a basic waltz-like pattern that folds into itself like a dream or a chanted hymn. Where is that secret chord? Is something that’s secret really lost? Isn’t it just waiting to be found? Cohen’s voice had always been deep.
By 1984, it was a gravelly fohhorn call from the ancient days, and his studio version of “Hallelujah” can be ponderous. The song has seen a stronger, more accessible life through an early 90’s version by Jeff Buckley, and a more recent one by Rufus Wainwright, two sons of folksinger royalty. Buckley and Wainwright take it into soaring, operatic heights without being grandiose and bombastic. These versions have been overused in numerous films. Is it at risk of being killed? Can a standard wear out its welcome?

The original version stays longer with many listeners, and Cohen’s dark-shaded delivery is perfect for his own material. He was born old, a wizened Canadian poet, a singer who left the business for a while, became a Tibetan Monk, and he eventually found his earnings drained dry by a disreputable manager. Now, in his seventies, Cohen has taken to the road. We see an impeccably dressed older man, a doppelganger for Dustin Hoffman, and we wonder: what happens in the heart of an old Troubadour like Leonard Cohen? There he is, dressed like a dignified Italian consigliore, taking to the road to re-claim his livelihood and re-contextualize his music for the 21st Century. The lone fedora-hat wearing prophet of doom surfaces in the most unusual ways, but only if we want him, only if we have ears to hear him, only when it can be completely on his own terms.

“Hallelujah” was always a favorite of mine, and it has staked out its territory in my repertoire as a guitarist. But the problem is that a song like “Hallelujah” is so naked, so bare. Whose version do I sing? Can I be grim, deep, sad and foreboding like Cohen? Could I pull off Wainwright’s dramatic high flourishes? Performing it is thrilling.
Some songs are better kept in the privacy of my room, though, where I’m forever a teenager plucking out new ideas.

Here’s the other problem: I could think all I wanted about which versions of songs I liked, and which were more suitable to my peculiar vocal range, but public performances scared the hell out of me. They always did: musicals, public readings or school elections where for some reason I got the idea I could be a leader among men. As a five year old, my sisters and I used to perform selections from “Fiddler on the Roof” I don’t know if I wore Tevye’s beard, but by the time I got through with “If I were a rich man,” my mother would break out into effusive cheers and applause and I was reduced to tears. I can see me now, that awkward five year old with the wide brown eyes and flat feet, running for cover after my song was over, convinced that for some reason the flurry of applause from my mother and whoever else was roped into watching us meant the world was coming to an end.

I’ve spent too many years looking for that lost chord, convinced it was in my writing, or anything else I was supposed to be (brother, son, lover, teacher.) It might have been in the predictability of faith, or the escapism of movies and shallow romantic relationships, but all of that eventually turns to dust. I know that much. The only thing that’s ever proven dependable is the variations I can get on any particular theme, the countless way’s I can say or do or play or think the same basic ideas. When the sweetness of the life I was expected to lead went way past its expiration date, I returned to music, the old friend that never let me down.

The simplicity of Roy Orbison’s beautiful 1960 pop operatic masterpiece “Only the Lonely” has always intruded in my life like a distant, embarrassing, scarred relative.
I want to disown it but I can’t. It’s economical, focused, clear testimony from the field. 
Loneliness is certainly a narcotic, an easy way out of complete assimilation with the rest 
of the world, but it can only be understood by those who have been there. Orbison’s work 
always seemed to be risking something greater than just a small pop song. Forget the 
image: Ray-ban shades, black pompadour, and a huge four-octave range to his voice. 
Listen to the sentiments. This is desperation, sadness, but it’s the closest to truth anybody 
has ever gotten to the addictive lure of days where the only measured accountability is to 
your own sad, wretched, miserable self. 

Those of us who have lived alone for too long run the risk of enjoying the silence. 
We spend days without speaking, and the raspy voice that eventually comes out proves 
both scary and seductive. We can teach classes online, take classes online, become 
engrossed for days with solitary projects like reading and writing, but eventually 
it has to break. 

“How do I know I can trust you?” 

It was one of her earlier messages. This was before the days of Twitter, before the 
days when with just 140 characters we could instantly text our status, profound or 
mundane, to countless followers. On that day she typed if she could trust me, my life was 
about teaching online and instant messaging with women I met on match.com. 

“Life is sometimes about taking chances,’” I typed back. 

“But that’s not the way I operate,” she responded. “My friends at work- they’re 
the ones who motivated me. I didn’t really want to do this.” 

I pictured her, alone and afraid, quickly typing her thoughts into this message 
format. This is how our “relationship” started that winter. She had quickly contacted me.
She responded to my personals posting. In those days, match.com was free and I was too willing to be verbose, too willing to create a false and unrealistic identity just with my words.

“Where are you from?” I typed one night. We had been communicating ninety minutes a night for three nights. Our topic was usually light: asking about favorite movies, music, books, academic background, but we didn’t mention origins.

“I’ll give you some clues,” she responded. Quickly, I pinpointed a region. She was a native Ethiopian, terrified of meeting me. She had seen my picture, and was comfortable online discussing every imaginable philosophical topic, but she didn’t want to meet. I didn’t mind. In fact, it became an interesting mystery. I told her about my sisters, about my brother, about my background. We talked about hopes and dreams and visions.

“How do you feel about interracial dating?” she typed.

“Race is more about how others define us,” I typed. This was something I wouldn’t have felt comfortable saying face to face, but I liked how online communication allowed and maybe even encouraged pomposity. I liked how it gave me the freedom to exist purely with my written words. Where life usually made me stammer and mumble, online chats were limited only by how quickly I could tap my words onto a blank screen. Eventually it became almost a competition between us as to who could type the most compelling statement on the screen and click “enter.”

When we finally did meet, two weeks into our online chatting relationship, we circled each other inside our agreed upon date location: the Harvard Coop bookstore. She had not posted a picture, but I saw her: small-frame, dark skin, a nervous shaky body.
Her black hair was pulled back into a bun. She peered through small oval eyeglasses at the wall-sized row of books. Suddenly, neither of us could talk. After fourteen days of online chatting about everything, we were both tapped out. This uncomfortable prelude spilled over into an unbearable lunch date at a nearby restaurant. She cancelled a date that we’d scheduled for the next day. A month later, obviously with a mixture of guilt and loneliness, she instant-messaged me again and asked if we could be friends. I declined.

Here was the truth at that point: the addictive quality of instant messaging, of a cerebral, commitment-free communication all foreplay and no pay-off, was better than what she or any other woman could offer. This was pitiful and selfish but true. Years later, in my professional life, this flashed on my computer’s screen:

“Sexxyyyyycattt has sent you a message. Click to accept or decline.”

Of course, I accepted. It could have been anything; entrapment, simple spam pornography, but I felt like I had nothing to lose.

“A friend of mine is taking your English class,” she typed. Later, she admitted that she was in fact the “friend.”

“This needs to stop,” I typed. “If you need help, please contact me in class or during my office hours.”

It didn’t stop. It just got darker, colder, sadder. I eagerly took her bait. I answered her Instant Messages for the next three weeks, every few days, usually innocent and inconsequential questions about subject matter from that day’s class. The class I was teaching that included this student was in a program for women at a local community college called “Challenges, Choices, and Change.” They had difficult stories; recovering drug addicts, single mothers, abuse survivors, in their late twenties and early thirties.
They were back in school trying to make something of their lives, and we were spending the last third of our “English Composition II” class studying and performing “Death of a Salesman.”

Our communication was equal parts pitiful and strangely compelling, even seductive. I only had eight students in that class, and I felt like I was able to narrow down sexxxyycatt’s identity, but I still wasn’t completely sure. I’d spoken with my supervisor’s about what was happening, but they couldn’t do anything.

“Just keep a record of the communication,” I was told.

Most of these stories end as this one did, with a phone call at 1 o’clock on a Saturday morning.

“Chris,” the woman said. “It’s me, Sharon.” The voice was tired, sad. I heard party noise in the background. “Look,” she said. “I’m at a bar with my sister.”

“Have her drive you home,” I said. “I’m going back to sleep.”

Sharon loudly interrupted me. “Chris, did you know I was sexxyyyycattt? Did you know it was me all along?”

“I’m going to ask you again to hang up the phone and have your sister drive you home. You’ve got three kids at home,” I said. “Why are you doing this? Is your sister even there?” Her voice was thin, quiet. I listened to the dull mumblings of the crowd behind her and prepared for what I’d do if she started crying.

“No,” Sharon said. “Chris, you just don’t understand. It’s just something you did to me. I couldn’t help myself.”

I asked again that she hang up and get herself home. We kept talking for perhaps ten more minutes. She rambled on about how lonely she’d been, and I quietly listened.
She was so lonely, so afraid, and lower than most any woman I’d ever known. In my younger days I would have been attracted to somebody this desperate, I might have even tried to take advantage of her vulnerability, but I was professional and she was just so damned pitiful. Sharon cleaned herself up and entered outpatient detox shortly after that conversation, and I stopped making myself available for AOL Instant Messenger.

This is what I needed to know, what I had to understand. The shelf life of available romance in Travis Bickle’s “God’s Lonely Man” was very brief indeed. Eventually, even with that classic Bernard Herrmann Taxi Driver sad saxophone film score running through my brain, even I have to admit that the romance of it all eventually becomes tedious. No matter the strength and romance of the “Solitary Man” that Singer/songwriter Neil Diamond created from thin air, there comes a time when every lone wolf needs to join a pack.
Chapter Twenty-one

I was watching you- wrapping up and going home, Spring Break 2006

By March 2006, mom had been dead for five months, and I was still trying to listen to anything but the ghost thoughts in my brain, the melodies trying to take shape. Rosanne Cash’s January release Black Cadillac was a brilliant, schmaltz-free testament to survival. In less than two years, Cash had lost her stepmother June Carter Cash, her father Johnny, and her mother Vivian. Black Cadillac was testament to the power of the loss and the strength of bonds that would never break. From the travel motif of the title cut, the car that had taken her father on tour and then off to his final reward, to the final track, a silent 71 seconds (to mark her father’s age) this was what it meant to lose everything and live to tell.

All I understood at that point was property, the accumulation of things and the need to quickly unload it all. This was what had happened in the immediate weeks and months after Mom’s death. We were a materialistic family, and death just made it stronger. For Cash, with titles like “God Is in the Roses” and “House on the Lake,” the grief process involved retrieving just the smallest thing by recalling every last element. There is a precise dignity to her stories, and it’s not just a result of the strong musicianship and clear images:

The strength in her work is that she tempered her anger and bitterness about these losses with an understanding of the frailty and humanity of the all too human loved ones who once stood strong but were now gone forever.

I didn’t have time for that type of understanding, and I didn’t want to let go of the anger when it really proved to be my only friend. Five months after mom’s death, we were all in the midst of some petty squabbling about inheritance and what may or may not have been intended by Mom’s Will.

I wish I could effectively paint this scene because it was one of the uglier scenes immediately following Mom’s death. The four of us sat at her table for the customary reading of the will and learned that our brother had been disowned.

“I want that wooden spoon she used to crack my skull open,” he said, before anybody else talked, and he let out a little cackle.

Why was he disinherited? Was he a cold-hearted bastard? I think so. I always had, but what went on between he and Mom was their business. The fact that my older sisters chose to undermine what Mom decreed and give Jack a cut of the inheritance, “for the sake of his kids,” was unforgivable, but such are the bullshit decisions made in the wake of the grieving process.

In the late eighties, our parents purchased a Lot at a Sarasota/Bradenton Florida Retirement community and enjoyed winter time down there for about nine years before Dad’s death. It was in a poor community whose main business was an orange grove. A haze of late afternoon citrus fume settled thickly in the air. Mom kept going for several years after that, but eventually the trip became too risky, too hard on her health. She needed to shut it down. Mom sold the family home a little over a year before her death.
She spent her final months in a comfortable retirement community set high off the road overlooking the Merrimack River in Northern Massachusetts.

“You need to come and see the snow on the trees,” she’d say. “It’s like a painting. I think I can even see deer in the woods.” I visited once. She was the youngest person there, and the trek to her unit was a far one from where she parked.

“My address is #1313,” she said with a deep laugh, “Nobody else wanted it, but I didn’t mind.” She was still in the midst of decorating before she died, still examining the years that were supposed to follow. She was far from a vain woman when it came to decorating, just way too busy to immediately concern herself with what others might have felt were priorities. Sliced sides of cardboard boxes covered the huge bay windows in her living room and bedroom. There was always going to be time to get these new things.

In the course of eighteen months, then, there were three residencies to close out: the homestead, the new condo, and the Florida trailer. I went to Florida in 2004. Leah had been there much more, and seemed to feel a deeper connection. I think it was just easier for me to detach because that was the only thing I knew how to do.

The people in this Florida retirement community were leather-skinned, prone to gossip, promiscuity, and they shamelessly coveted their neighbor’s things. It was a different world down there, one of quick power walks, high stakes shuffleboard games, and incessant greetings as people walked, glided, slowly drove their golf carts back and forth, past each other, as if the entire state was one big neighborhood watch. Mom’s place was not a trailer she could take with her so much as a miniature one bedroom house. It had a sturdy, welcoming, comfortable porch that was built adjacent to a living room.
This was connected to the kitchen, a small hallway, one full bath and the master bedroom. Our job was to pack up everything, find a buyer, and walk away.

It was supposed to be easy. These things usually are easy, and I was glad to take a back seat to Leah as she talked with interested buyers. Most of the appliances and furniture would stay, and all we had to do was deal with the personal items: jewelry, clothes, and papers, we welcomed what seemed to be a non-stop series of well-intentioned visitors while we cleaned the place and packed our things. It was less a sad procession than it was a celebration of life. They knew our parents. They had played cards and dominoes there in the porch. They had played shuffleboard down at the recreational center.

"Your father was the life of every party," we heard. "He was so warm and your mother was such a sweetheart." Most of the time the thoughts offered were like that, just random comments, incomplete sentences that were left hanging on a ledge. Part of me wanted these people to elaborate, but the smarter part of me was just grateful to hear anything. In another time and place I would have dismissed these sentiments in other instances, but I appreciated the visits. This is what people did, a day after a death, six months, whenever. They paid their respects. You were supposed to visit the house of grief, wherever it was. The old folks in this Florida retirement village were too familiar with death, but they weren’t scared of it. They didn’t romanticize loss. Their stories of remembrance seemed to all blend into each other, and after a while it got exhausting, but the least we could do was listen.

As usual when you’re closing an estate, there was limited time for enjoyment. We got a hotel room rather than stay in the trailer, where we risked sensing too many ghosts.
The room overlooked spring breakers in floors below and at the hotel across the way. This Huntington Beach resort community had been hit hard by Hurricane Katrina. Everything looked like it was either in a state of ruins, or in the process of being re-built. It was hard to tell the difference, hard to tell if many people in the state weren’t just on the run from something. It was even more difficult to know if this wasn’t the standard view for this part of Florida and many of its people; a constant, reliable mandala circle of dying and living. The air conditioner smelled of urine and vomit, and we were kept up late by party-goers in our hotel and across the way, but it was better than nights at the trailer park. At night, at least for me, the ghosts never hesitated to materialize.

We did a lot of driving one afternoon, to see a lawyer and just get away, but we didn’t do much talking. We weren’t talkers, at least not with each other, at least not with words. As the Executrix of Mom’s estate, Leah was busy with her responsibilities, how she would be perceived by others, and I was busy trying to get my act together, trying to deal with dead-end work and inheritances and just seeing so many things down in the Florida trailer that I never knew. This was their life, these were their friends, and now it was all gone. At least we were there to deal with it. Other community residents who passed had their things put up for auction, displayed for everybody else to see, and I didn’t want that to happen to us.

But we were robbed. We were violated. Mom and Dad had come down to Bradenton because their friends, The Claussens, told them it was a good deal. Ed and Marge were a suffocating, stifling couple who took more than they ever gave. My parents eventually seemed that, and had drifted away from the couple after a while. Dad was first, and mom eventually followed, but Ed (a full-time resident) still maintained the property.
He still had a key. This was helpful in times of Hurricanes and other natural catastrophes, but still risky.

“Have you noticed we haven’t heard from the Claussens?” I asked Leah during our final day in Florida.

“I don’t need them,” she said. “You don’t either.” The Claussens didn’t seem to believe in visiting the home of the bereaved, in paying respect to people who were suppose to be their best friends, and we weren’t interested in going to their condo,

And then, we headed back from the hotel to make our last run-through of the trailer. Leah was eager to pack Mom’s two closets worth of clothes and bring it home. She headed to the closet and came out, her face ashen white,

“It’s gone,” she said. “Somebody cleaned us out.” We knew what had happened. Leah made some calls, people called us. Ed Claussen had been lurking in and around the trailer while we were at the hotel. He never bothered to visit us while we were cleaning up and packing things to be shipped home, but now all Mom’s clothes were gone.

“I knew it was going to happen,” Leah said. “I knew it, and I should have just taken these things with us yesterday. That lady across the street told me the other day that Marge was saying how much she liked Ruth’s clothes. Now, they’re gone.”

I said nothing, but mainly because I couldn’t really connect. Mom’s clothes didn’t mean anything personal to me. It wasn’t until Leah and I drove out of the trailer park for the last time and we called the Claussens to confront them about this that my anger came out.

“Deeyahh,” Marge said in her thick, annoying Boston accent, too loud, too practiced. “We have some pickchas of you and yowah motha and fatha that I think you might like.” I could feel her achingly fake smile burning directly at me through the phone.
She was probably clutching it with her gnarled fingers and she was probably convinced I’d feel sorry for her and give in.

I wasn’t having it. “I need to ask you a question,” I said. “I need to know why two closets full of my mother’s clothes are suddenly gone, and your husband and my sister were the only people who had the keys.”

She was silent, and then- “Deeyah, youwah motha- she wanted me to have the clothes. She was very generous that way. She…”

“I don’t want to hear it,” I said, and then Ed came on the line. “We’d still like to see you two before you leave,” he said in that way he’d always had of addressing me as if I were a nine year old petulant child.

“I’m done,” I said. “I’m done and we’re gone.” At that, I hung up. Leah and I couldn’t believe what had happened, and for a while we were bonded by our mutual hatred of the Claussens. We ran through all sorts of how could they? variations, and eventually we retreated back to our own thoughts.

The long drive from Huntington to Bradenton, with Leah behind the wheel, was dialogue-free. She flipped the radio dial through various Spanish music stations and kept her eyes on the road. This was the most comfortable, familiar condition, being along and smothered by my own thoughts. What might have been terrifying to others was like a comfortable old shoe to me. I don’t know what Leah was thinking as we drove out of Bradenton and to the airport that would take us back to Boston. I listened to the title cut of Rosanne Cash’s *Black Cadillac*, “It’s a lonely world/I guess it always was/minus you/minus blood/my blood.” In “I was watching you,” she sings “long before life/there was love.” “Burn down This Town” was the most appropriate track as we drove away.
We left Bradenton and we never went back and I had my headphones on listening to Cash sing away the heartache with a swaggering defiance so typical of her father’s life before June, of Johnny’s life before he found the woman of his dreams and a direction through faith:

“The sky is falling with ash and mud/we gotta make this promise, yeah blood to blood/so shut the door then slowly turn around/now you know you can’t make a sound/burn down this town.”</http://www.metrolyrics.com/burn-down-this-town-lyrics-cash-roseanne.html>

Everything was over. If I turned back, I was sure the whole place would go down in flames. I hated the past and the Claussens for their selfishness, for the times they had with my parents in Florida that I never had the privilege to share. I had this music playing on my CD headphones as we drove that main highway out of Bradenton, back to the airport where we would take a flight back to Boston. I watched the seemingly endless series of strip malls, the porn shops, the family restaurants, and I listened to music that broke my heart and healed it at the same time.
Chapter Twenty-two

Music in a black and white world: summer vacation time 2006

“They’ve got catfish on the table/they’ve got gospel in the air
And Reverend Green be glad to see you/When you haven’t got a prayer
But boy you got a prayer in Memphis.”


The old Hoagy Carmichael tune, “Memphis in June,” was a beautiful evocation of something different, something better. In the lyrics, he reminisces wistfully about his cousin Miranda making a blueberry pie. (The off-beat rhyme of “Miranda” and Veranda” is just one of the elements that make this song special.) The clock outside is ticking and tocking, Grandma is across the street still rocking (in her chair, of course) and everything is peaceful. This is a Memphis Tennessee where the sweet oleander was the most welcome perfume, where the paradise of your surroundings was too precious to be taken for granted, and this sense of serenity was sure to last forever.

I knew this song through Nina Simone’s 1961 recording, a highlight of the Forbidden Fruit album. In those days, and in that time, I imagined a musical Memphis free from divisiveness, an American South where racial color lines were clearly defined, Jim Crow laws strictly enforced, but in music there was freedom. Memphis was the city of Sun Studio, Stax Records, Beale Street. It was the city that mixed the rockabilly of Carl Perkins with the blues of Sonny Boy Williams and the soul of Isaac Hayes. This is all that really mattered. Separate the historical bloodshed and divisiveness from the music.
Understand that music will reflect and inform its times, but it will always stand alone.

The idyllic beauty of Hoagy Carmichael’s Memphis might not have survived through the turbulent sixties, but it would be forever immortalized in Nina Simone’s version. It would be forever imprinted in my mind as the promise and romance of the south, even when color lines meant there were two separate worlds: black, white, and nothing in between.

Like Hoagy, I had cousins in Memphis. Unlike Hoagy, whose vision of the city was one of happiness and peace; my cousins had major issues with race and identity.

Blame it on what my tour guide cousin probably saw as the eternal struggle between his world, his people, and my Massachusetts world of the Kennedy’s, John Kerry, Michael Dukakis, and gay marriage. For this cousin, it was that simple. I came down to Memphis carrying that baggage. He seemed to see our mutual white skin as the ticket to one of many monologues about the race issue, about “us” and “them” in Memphis, 2006:

“You need to understand this, Chris,” he said. “The situation for us down here is what they claimed it was for them thirty years ago.”

And so it started, the stories about profiling, about angry black people, about road rage and drug addicts and general tension. This cousin’s brother was a Memphis cop, but he didn’t talk with me that much about race issues. None of the rest of the family spoke about race.

He was a veteran of Gulf War I, from the early nineties. He was a cousin I had encountered only a handful of times over the past thirty years, a nice enough guy with something always bubbling beneath the surface. None of these times had ever been unpleasant, but they seemed to have been measured by the expectations we each had for and of each other. Who were we to each other? I had fifteen cousins from my mom’s side.
They lived in Missouri, Tennessee, Virginia, and other places that I probably didn’t know. I had nine cousins from my father’s side spread out all over. I had no contact with any of them, but I didn’t feel deprived. I needed to make this trip for obvious reasons. Maybe it was to re-connect, to deal with mom’s still fresh death about eight months earlier. I was weighed down by my usual tendency to examine and analyze rather than proactively respond to racism, and I had no idea about what was to follow.

“I can’t believe she married one of them,” he said. The “she” was one of my sisters, who had married a Ugandan native nearly twenty years earlier.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “What is ‘one of them’?”

I knew, of course. I knew what he meant, and I wish I had called him out on it, but that was the only defense I chose to wage on behalf of my brother-in-law. I wasn’t used to confrontation. I did not want to debate race issues or ask him to explain the roots of this anger. In fact, part of me was fascinated by it. I wanted to explore the rage, try to tap into the particular nerve that might have compelled him to so brazenly expose his hatred, but that was risky.

Vacations are always tough. I never made for a comfortable or guiltless guest, always at the mercy of my hosts, family or not. Every time I went somewhere, I wanted to be somewhere else. Vacations always seemed to be an excuse to act like an entitled idiot, and I never wanted to give into that weakest of impulses.

Mom had only been dead for perhaps eight months by the time I made it down to Memphis. I wanted to see my aunt, her younger sister (by 18 months.) It was a bit jarring and uncomfortable because everything about my aunt; her round face, her warm smile, her deep smooth voice, her pear-shaped body, her blood, it all reminded me of my mother.
I watched this woman. I listened as she gave me financial advice and asked about the family, such as it was. Everything about this woman made me think about my mother: that soft round face, those thick black brows, that voice and her long sloping Italian nose. It felt like my mother was down there in Memphis with me, and sometimes I had to remind myself that this could not be

The joy of great music is the blood that runs through the veins of Memphis, but this is a city that cannot escape the legacy of death. My cousin and my aunt took me to the National Civil Rights Museum one day. This was the former Lorraine Motel, the site of the 1968 murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. From outside a visitor walked right under the balcony and the mind immediately flashes to that iconic photograph of the murder scene moments after shots were fired. Those men, King’s confidantes, stand by his body, pointing to where they saw the shots fired. On the floor, partially hidden from view, is King, slumped over, dying. Instead of being shut down, in 1986 this hotel was transformed into the National Civil Rights Museum. Across from the museum, an African-American woman named Jacqueline Smith held vigil at her post, a one woman contrarian about the museum’s motivations and mission.

“You know, Chris,” my cousin said as we pulled into the parking lot. “Down here we call this ‘James Earl Ray Appreciation Day.’” His mother cringed and told him to hush up.

“I don’t want to hear that shit before we go into this museum,” I said. “Why do you think I’d think that was funny?”

The exhibits at the museum were interesting. There were replicas of buses burned during Freedom Summer 1964. I saw reproductions of the Woolworth lunch counters.
This was where the college students, (black and white) bravely sat at in direct defiance of laws against integration. Everything led to the museum’s second floor. The exhibits led right up to outside the closed balcony where King was killed. I stood still, frozen, and saw some of the view King must have seen. I stood in the aisle between the rooms, 306 and 307, where King and his entourage were staying. The rooms were maintained to look as they probably did back then; unmade bed, newspapers on the pillows, and cigarette butts in the ashtrays. Everything was completely frozen.

My cousin looked like he was loitering in the background, and seemed to stay mainly in the main floor. My aunt followed the exhibit, but nobody talked. We liked Sun Studios, with its interesting mix of history and its unseen but understood balance slightly tilted towards the white artists of Memphis. We stood in the same spots, in the very studio, where Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, and Elvis Presley, “The Million Dollar Quartet,” recorded their classics. Admittedly, this was an exciting moment. That studio is probably still haunted by the benevolent vapors of ghosts from fifty0five years ago. Others seemed to be trembling with religious fervor as they stood in the same spot as their heroes, but I stayed cool. The music was all that mattered, nothing else.

Our last stop that day was Stax Records, home of Isaac Hayes, Sam and Dave, The Staple Singers, Otis Redding, Booker T and the MGs. There were tacky but interesting exhibits of Isaac Hayes’s big cars and mink coats. Stax was formed in 1957 and devastated by the one-two punch of Otis Redding’s death in 1967, King’s death in 1968. It faded away in 1975 and only now is experiencing resurgence. This was the perfect complement to the Sun Records experience, and I wish I could have spent more time there.
Chapter Twenty-three

Flashback 1977: Elvis Presley and his bloody crown of thorns

This Memphis trip, and Elvis, made me think back to nearly thirty years earlier, June 1977. I was in my Junior High orchestra. We were on a field trip concert tour somewhere in Maine. I was nearing the end of my tenure as a violinist. The passion to learn and practice and perform just wasn’t there, but I was too lazy to walk away. There was really nothing exciting about being a cog in the wheel of an orchestra machine that mainly performed at Holiday concerts. We seemed to spend most of the year practicing “Jingle Bells” or “Joy to the World,” never straying away from the template as written on the sheet music, never daring to improvise, but I’m sure that’s an exaggeration.

I knew only one thing at that point: get me out of the orchestra. I had no reason taking a seat somebody else might have desperately wanted. I was not a team player, artistically or athletically, and the conductor on this train wasn’t willing to let me cut away on a solo. I would love to have had the skill to play the killer violin solo like Dave Arbus on the Who’s “Baba O’Riley.” I wanted to play fiddle like Papa John Creach on those Jefferson Starship songs. That was my idea of cool, not a tour of coastal Maine Junior High auditoriums.

We stopped at an ice cream place and I heard radio commercial for an upcoming Elvis Presley at a local civic auditorium. I quickly pointed it out to my fellow players.
This was the man. This was the guy. I knew his work. I knew he meant something, but I didn’t understand then the extent of his influence.

“Who?”

“You know, Elvis Presley, the guy who sang ‘Hound Dog’ and ‘Jailhouse Rock.’”

Those clues were lost on my classmates, and that was understandable. Elvis certainly had left the building by June 1977, at least on the radar screens of my crowd, me and my fellow teenaged east coast hipster intellectuals. This was the year of The Clash, The Sex Pistols, and the eventual other Elvis, Elvis Costello. It was the year of The Eagles’ “Hotel California,” Rod Stewart’s “Tonight’s The Night,” and more moaning disco from Donna Summer. It was the year of Leo Sayer, Bill Conti’s “Gonna Fly Now (Theme from ‘Rocky’)” and the insidious, pervasive, yet undeniably catchy “You Light up My Life,” as sung by Debby Boone. Of course it was a dry time on pop radio, an era bereft of danger and risk, but obviously we didn’t know it. We grasped whatever was available, whatever spoke to us, and the message of that time was blockbuster and gloss. That summer, “Star Wars” broke box office records by drawing mainly on old western and B level serial movie archetypes

The tide was going to change. There was no choice. There would be more releases from The Clash, the arrival of The Police and everything that re-defined the late seventies/early eighties. Our world of 1977 had no place for a bloated, sweaty, “King of Rock and Roll” known to my generation just for his white jumpsuits, scarves, thick mane of dark, greasy hair, and always the droopy, glazed look in his eyes. In 1977, there was no place for has-beens on a civic auditorium tour desperate to capture what was not theirs.
I didn’t feel then as I understand now how devastating it would be to no longer have a place in the world.

“Haven’t you heard that song ‘Suspicious Minds’?” I asked, sure they hadn’t. I sat in the back of our school bus and started singing it in the low mumbly tone Elvis used: 

“We’re caught in a trap/I can’t turn back…” (<www.elvis-presley-biography.com>)

There were very few (if any) Elvis impersonators during that time. I wasn’t great, but I got my idea across. Everybody laughed. That wasn’t the result I wanted, but they laughed and finally they had the reference they needed.

“Maybe we can go see him,” I said. “Maybe we can stay overnight somewhere and slip into the concert.”

Nobody wanted to take that risk with me, and nobody really seemed to see the inherent tragedy of this situation. We were one of many painfully tone-deaf orchestras in our early teens passing time before reality set in. At least we seemed to keep a steady beat when we sawed away at the strings of our instruments. Most likely none of us were going to make a career of it, but we were touring sister schools in small coastal Maine towns.

There was Elvis, forty-two years old (at that time ancient to us) almost doing the same circuit. There was a guy who had become a bloated caricature of something that was once so risky, once so different. The excess of Elvis memorabilia and images was probably barely imaginable in June 1977, so the brief film footage we saw in those days was at least interesting. Here was a guy just a year older than my mother, and he used to rock. He used to be dangerous. What happened? When did the magic turn into parody? Nobody could offer a realistic answer.
Elvis never really mattered to me after that, especially when the flood of worship started shortly after his death two months later. I never felt as if I’d lost a friend or a hero. Instead, the cult of Elvis just proved fascinating, especially the long parade of sightings people claimed to have had of their King at fast food restaurants in Tempe, Arizona, or working at a car wash in his beloved Las Vegas. The black velvet paintings, commemorative dishes, shampoo and sunglasses, these were all the iconographic artifacts of a faith I wasn’t about to slam. It didn’t matter. If people wanted to worship a fat, hopeless old rock legend who died of cardiac arrest one morning while on the toilet, who the hell was I to stand in their way?

I had to put this in context. I couldn’t let it just impulsively touch me. This was a story about choices, about exits taken and destinations reached. I wondered what might have happened had Elvis not slipped away in August 1977. He would probably have stayed on the Supper Club circuit, built a performance stage in Branson, Missouri and sold his jumpsuits on eBay or craigslist. This rabid cult of fan worship might not have surfaced had Presley stayed on the road, doing one night stands at state fairs and convention centers. There would have been no solemn candlelight processionals by his family gravesite. Punk and New Wave might never have happened, and the world of pop music might have simply been about risk-free interpretations of the American songbook.

Here, the facts are simple. Diet, drugs, and a cycle of loneliness probably not duplicated again until Michael Jackson rendered Elvis Presley irrelevant by the summer of “Star Wars.” In his great 1991 book *Dead Elvis*, a coffee-table sized volume that takes a serious look at the posthumous worship of this dead idol, writer Greil Marcus notes that he never visited Graceland, just the grounds. I could see him, lurking, waiting to get in.
It’s an interesting choice. The book examines not only just the state of hero worship and iconographic variations, but also the literature of grief, the question of what we do with our heroes once they outlive their purpose. Did we do this to Elvis? Was he fated to end this way? Here is what he wrote about the Graceland Enterprises, Inc. sanctioned 1983 photographs of the mansion taken by William Eggleston:

“The silence is overwhelming. There are no echoes of the assiduously contrived amusements or the long hours of boredom that took place here. It is impossible to believe that anyone ever lived in this place.” (Marcus 68-69.)

I drove myself to Graceland one afternoon, and Marcus’s sentiments were more than appropriate. Certainly there were the tacky, “white trash” elements: garish bright color schemes, wide collars and huge belts and orange and beige and dark brown paneling. The main house was relatively small as mansions went, everything maintained as it looked in Elvis’s time. The living room was bright, probably frozen in a 1962 ambience of brown, orange, beige and burnt sienna. The basement Jungle room was suitably rocking and the barometer there seems to be split between 1965 and 1974, the most vulnerable immediate post-divorce Elvis. I walked into the nearby Lisa Marie airplane. I saw the large exhibit of admittedly impressive gold records in what seemed to be the handball court room. The grounds contained the cemetery with three gravestones: Elvis, mother Gladys and father Vernon.

This was not hallowed ground for me like it was for so many others (including the handful of Elvis impersonators who had come over on the shuttle bus with my group from the sales center to the mansion) but I saw once again how Memphis and Boston were worlds apart. Would anybody but the man himself have erected such a shrine?
Would any place but the southern United States of America feature such a tacky but sincere and heartfelt tribute to self?

The hardest part of the tour was trying to maintain humility. I was surrounded by Japanese and East European tourists in striped shirts, sunglasses and flip-flops. This is what it must have been to make a pilgrimage to Lourdes, to crawl on glass for a few miles because the final destination was always going to make sense. In the end, after all the bleeding and suffering, there would be blessings.

Here was the problem: at Graceland, like so many other tourists attractions, I was too busy intellectualizing and contextualizing and I risked missing the specifics. There we were, probably two dozen people, shuffling through a path clearly marked off my velvet ropes. What I saw was nothing different than the set design in my old family movies. The living room: big sofas, pillows covered in frilly white doilies, oil painting portraits (or in our case shopping mall studio photos) of the loved ones, a stand-up piano, and plush white wall-to-wall carpeting.

This was the living room, the first place once a tourist entered Graceland, but it wasn’t where my eyes gravitated. I looked to my left and tried to peer upstairs. Nobody was allowed up there. I looked at the light tan carpeted straight stairway and remembered my own childhood, the home where I grew up, sliding down the stairs on my stomach. It didn’t seem like any of that happened here, just loneliness. I thought about late nights, a tired, bloated superstar standing at the top of those stairs, illuminated from the back by the moonlight through the window. Graceland had to be nothing about possessions and the tacky interior design so typical of the seventies. It was about loneliness.
The other tourists, hushed and reverent, listened to the audio descriptions as we went downstairs into the famous Jungle room: dark, low ceilings, big-tubed TVs tuned to black and white cop shows, leopard-print carpeting on the floor and hung on the wall. It was just like my grandfather’s house in St. Louis: stained wood-paneling and coffee coasters and dartboards. I wondered about the TVs Elvis was supposed to have shot full of holes. I wondered about debauchery, amphetamines and spontaneous jam sessions with his back-up singers The Jordanaires. This was the man’s refuge, but it still seemed so frozen and lonely.

I wish I could have been more humble, more excited, but it was all so sad. The other tourists were more animated. They pointed, smiled, and bowed their heads in seeming reverence to lost youth. I just saw Elvis in 1977, a forty-two year old bloated ex-Rock God on another round of comebacks, another round of desperately grabbing those last vestiges of fans who remembered him when he was pretty.

There is no definite way to conclude now if Elvis really was just a humble mother’s boy truck driver from Tupelo Mississippi who went into the Sun Studios in Memphis one afternoon in 1956 to record for Sam Phillips’ secretary and somehow just fall into history. She told her boss he should hear this boy, and the steam train of race music becoming rock and roll was set into motion. The legend is that Phillips wanted to find a white boy who could sing black music and sell it to the masses, to the little white girls. Did Phillips use the “n” word? Did Elvis? He embraced black music, which was one of the main reasons he was so controversial in the early days.

The issue is angry, emotional, and damaged. It can be more effectively argued that the clean white Pat Boone was more an opportunistic cultural appropriator than Elvis.
Boone charted with his milquetoast version of Little Richard’s hits “Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally.” This is easy to argue, mainly, but harder to maintain because Boone was barely a blip on the radar after that time in the early sixties when Elvis was in the Army and risk free white teen idols were all the rage. From 1957, and persisting in some quarters to this day, it has been understood that the source of Elvis as a racist came when he allegedly claimed, in terms most likely more blunt, that the only thing a black person could can do for him was buy his records and shine his shoes.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and one way or another, self-appointed or not, Elvis was burdened with all manner of issues. In a 2007 op-ed article that addressed this issue (“How Did Elvis Get Turned into a Racist?”) the noted Presley biographer Peter Guralnick commented on what should have been obvious:

“…he was merely doing his best to find a place in a musical continuum that included breathtaking talents like Ray Charles, Roy Hamilton, The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, and Howlin’ Wolf on the one hand, Hank Williams, Bill Monroe and the Statesmen Quartet on the other.”


That was the point, and I remembered those facts while touring Graceland and driving through Memphis. I drove past the pawnshop my aunt had owned for a while, the store about a mile away from Graceland. She had it for probably ten years, was held up at gunpoint more than a few times. In a later drive, with my cousin and aunt, the gunshots on the outside wall were pointed out to me. I expected more commentary, perhaps about who did it and why and how it’s a pattern on the lives of “those people,” but they were silent. I wasn’t expecting to come to Memphis and have everything challenged, to represent everything my cousin despised.
The only reference point I had ever had about a pawnshop was that great 1964 Rod Steiger movie “The Pawnbroker.” Steiger was the title character, a Holocaust survivor, angry and hopeless and enraged at all the sad people who came into his shop. They gave up their possessions for a temporary fix, a few dollars to hold over these spiritually crippled losers until they got on their feet again. He connects with one person, and his silent scream at the film’s climax is unforgettable.

If pawnshops were the final stop on Desolation Row, the repository for all our dreams that cannot be maintained, it seemed Memphis was filled with them and I needed to come to terms with that. My aunt told stories about old Beale Street jazz men who came in to pawn their prized trumpets for a temporary fix. This was a city of great promise and rich history, no different than any other, where the promise of a great career in music can slip away by the rules of chaos. My aunt asked these tired old jazz heroes no questions and they provided no answers.

I kept thinking of Bob Dylan’s masterpiece “Desolation Row” as I drove down Elvis Presley Boulevard. “Desolation Row” was the story of an assortment of characters on a road was definitely perilous, and it reached a crescendo in 1965’s “Desolation Row.” Everything was confusing. Nothing was working out as it should. The institutions of law, intellectualism, and religion were nowhere to be found except in the restricted confines of this road. Cinderella, Ophelia, Einstein and Dr. Filth all wandered through the perimeters of this road, probably just in the ditches. There might not be a yellow line paved down the middle of this road, but there certainly are enough cowards, certainly enough travelers waiting out their final days.
The Dialectic hovered over “Desolation Row” like a non-lethal fume. The desperate characters were unable to think too much, and probably not willing. Who else was writing such complex, difficult lyrics in those days? The achievement is still amazing. The listener might question the level of anguish if the only options on Desolation Row were “…making love/or else expecting rain,” but even the options of ecstasy and ennui meant great pain. It was not even a matter of preventing escapes from but rather exiles to this zone where nothing happened and nobody worried too much. The twisted synthesis of these character’s lives was hard to take. The thesis had collided with the antithesis in some grand hope of creating something substantial, but this was it.

By the end of this epic, the final track of 1965’s *Highway 61 Revisited*, the singer sounded weary. He had received our letter, but he couldn’t read too well. What happened? Was his eyesight fading? The option of sending more letters is eliminated unless we mail them from Desolation Row. If that was the case then we would have already been there with him and there would have been no reason to write a letter, but such particulars were irrelevant. This was the end of the road, but it had to mark the start of something else.

Beale Street simmered with great jazz and blues spilling from the bars. The most interesting part about this place was that it seemed to have come to terms with the scars of the past. They were impossible to conceal and I wasn’t sure if that was the goal. These scars were from more than just the riots of the sixties, and MLK’s murder. There were scars, evidence of pain that’s never healed, but that’s never been the point. Pain gets absorbed, assimilated. I thought about the cars Elvis accumulated (and quickly gave away) from the dealerships up and down what is now called Elvis Presley Boulevard, the long lonely street that hosts Graceland. The guy was really no bigger than the city he loved.
It was nice to feel the ghosts of great stars that came before and after the guy and to understand that Elvis was really just a link in the chain of Southern music.

Listen to Elvis’s 1960 version of the spiritual “Crying in the Chapel.” It was a 1953 hit for the vocal group The Orioles, in those early transitional days for pop music. That was when race and rhythm and blues would eventually cross-pollinate with country and rockabilly and create a new expression. The original was an ode to lost love, but Elvis brought the Church back into it. This is humility and grace in the presence of something so much bigger than humanity. Listen to Elvis’s 1961 version of the 1934 Rodgers and Hart classic “Blue Moon,” again about love lost and a lonely soul trying to find solace in a cruel world. It had been a doo-wop number (The Marcels, 1961), would become a modern FM radio alternative hit (The Cowboy Junkies, 1988), but Elvis’s haunting vocals and spare production made it swoon. He convinced us there was an eerie ghost in the studio that day, and nothing but a quiet, subdued delivery would get rid if it.

Today, Jagger and Richards and Dylan are in their mid-sixties. They have managed to survive on the fumes of past glories but they still (especially Dylan) can perform miracles. They will never go gently into that good night. Every day is another challenge, every night another city, a variation on a similar theme and you have to be in awe of their willingness to keep on keeping on for reasons other than just steady income. Rock stars burn out, but they can heal. They can regenerate. Elvis chose the easy way out, not an immediate death by his own hands but rather a slow and definitive evaporation of his promise. Paul Simon might have had it right in his 1986 hit. “I’ve a reason to believe we both will be received in Graceland.” (http://paulsimon.com/node/71)
Graceland shuttles visitors to and from the large adjacent parking lot. They provide headphones for us to hear the tour soundtrack, the solemn, humor-free narration meant to enhance the viewing experience. It is all carefully packaged and definitively arranged so as not to offend the sensibilities of a legion of followers who have surfaced in the wake of Presley’s unexpected 1977 death. It’s just really more standard for Holy sites. The years have only served to enhance the iconographic status of this mortal who—above and beyond all the indiscretions for many—simply loved his mother.

What Graceland doesn’t offer, in the end, is honest humanity. There is a patented sense of humility. The boy loved his momma. The city loved their boy. There just isn’t a moment in the tour where the visitor is able to see simplicity, honesty, anything not glossed over by Elvis Presley Enterprises. The visitor needs to fill in those missing pieces on their own terms.

When the shuttle dropped me off and I headed back to my Aunt, I heard more music in my mind. This time it was Bruce Springsteen’s “Johnny Bye Bye,” released first as the B side to his 1984 single “I’m on Fire” and later on the 1998 compilation boxed set “Tracks.” With a melody from the old Chuck Berry classic “Bye Bye Johnny,” Springsteen offers a tender take on the loss of a simple man who made it big with the help of a lot of people:

“We drove down into Memphis/the sky was hard and black
Up over the ridge came a black Cadillac/...They found him slumped
up against the drain/with a whole lot of trouble running through his veins
Bye bye Johnny...You didn’t have to die.” (http://metrolyrics.com)

I needed to understand Elvis through an everyman context about bad trouble and tough breaks. I knew enough not to openly mock Graceland during my stay in Memphis because the house Elvis built was really no laughing matter.
Chapter Twenty-four

Finding my voice again

“Now if he says that he’s afraid/take him at his word/
   And for the price that the poor boy had paid/he gets to sing just like a bit
The Band- “Stagefright” (1970)
<http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/band/stage%20fright_20012318.html>

It was summer 2008 in San Miguel, Mexico. The cold, hard rain during those four weeks I stayed there, the final summer of my MFA studies, could have ruined the experience if I’d let it. I’d brought my guitar down with me that summer, certain there might be people who would want to play, but I didn’t want to come off looking desperate. I was proficient as a teacher, and I still wasn’t clear what I was doing thinking I could professionally publish something. For five years I had been a regular op/ed columnist for The Boston Metro. The columns, with my picture right next to my words, brought me fame but no fortune, and the quality of the work suffered.

Playing guitar made me happy. It was that simple, but the first thing I had to do was come to terms with feeling happy. Amateur guitarists had always seemed like smarmy attention seekers. I was envious of their ability to grab a crowd and not feel embarrassed, not feel like crawling under a rock to die if they suddenly plucked the wrong string or sang a flat note. I hadn’t brought it with me the previous summer, when we were in Madrid, but I wanted Mexico to be different. San Miguel was brimming with wonderfully natural guitarists. I certainly wasn’t one of them, but the atmosphere made me feel less insecure.
During our last open reading night at a restaurant/bar in the heart of San Miguel, I played (with somebody else singing) a passable version of “City Of New Orleans.” Written by Steve Goodman and popularized by Arlo Guthrie in 1972. This American standard about a lonesome yet victorious train that plowed through the mid-west and south featured that unforgettable refrain:

“Good mornin’ America/How are you? I say don’t you know me. I’m your native son.” <http://www.folkblues.com/goodman/cono.htm>

By the time we got to the third verse, when the City Of New Orleans changed cars in Memphis, Tennessee, I was eight years old again, visiting my cousins in Germantown, Tennessee. I was standing in the think summer woods with all the gawky, gangly teenagers thinking the frantic movements we were making might flag down the City Of New Orleans as it headed the home stretch into Memphis. We couldn’t see through the windows of the club car, but we knew adults were in there playing card games and thinking big thoughts.

The song made me think about how something as merciless as a Hurricane can completely devastate the spirit of a people and the core of a community. Roots ran deep in that part of the country, but they never did for me. I had no parents, no homeland, no palpable sense that any territory was mine save for the plot of land where my loved ones were buried. My people had never staked a claim to one place for so many generations, and we certainly never had to fight for what was rightfully ours. “The City Of New Orleans” was like all other train songs. It only stayed at our station long enough for us to come in and take a nap in the warmest car during a bitter cold spell. After a break for refueling, it’s off again to the next station so somebody else can have their way with it.
A week earlier, at a fellow classmate’s party, I wandered among the appetizers, tried to enter the small talk, and I wasn’t feeling comfortable with either. The party was at a house about a half hour walk away from the main Plaza in San Miguel. It was uphill and the sidewalk was thin. This afternoon was a rare break from the rain that summer, when the cobblestone streets were flooded with mud.

The house was in a small neighborhood spotted with bodegas and fruit stands and child care centers. My friends were renting it for summer, and in the main bathroom off the kitchen the owner had covered the walls with plaques, framed portraits, and a variety of photographs, all of the Virgin Mary. I was early that might, as usual, and immediately felt out of place. It was like high school. Wherever I ended up, I usually wanted to be somewhere else.

As the evening progressed, a battered old guitar surfaced. A pony-tailed young man with dark skin and a trim figure came carrying a battered violin case. With him were a young boy and a stunningly beautiful woman with the deepest, largest brown eyes I’d ever seen.

“Do you want to play?” I asked.

His English was minimal, but he smiled and nodded. I felt like a kid on the playground looking for a quick pick-up basketball game. I picked up the guitar and strummed a few chords. The man pulled out a cherry red violin, and I started playing guitar. It felt like we were starting a car, turning the key and listening for all the engine cylinders to connect.

How did I sound? That didn’t really matter. I listened. I followed. I walked in this other guy’s footprints. That’s how I looked at collaborating with others to make magic.
His sweet, mournful violin notes laced through my simple A minor/E minor progression with a gentle grace, like a bluebird circling a feeder. Our other song was a gutsy blues, me on harmonica, somebody else on guitar, and those same graceful violin notes now transformed into a roadhouse stomp. These were performances that came somewhere from the ether, blew up like a glorious firecracker, and faded into the air around that summer night. Something tells me the magic of that memory would be ruined if it had been officially captured on video. Let the legend grow.

These experiences brought me back to my first flirtations as a performing musician. I played violin for a few years in that precarious time between boyhood and teenaged wasteland. Miss Glover was my first solo teacher, in my last year at Spofford Pond Elementary school. I had private lessons with her during recess time in the opened supply room off the side of the cafetorium, my bow scraping painfully across the bridge of my replica rented Stradivarius violin as I tried desperately to make the sound flow. In the orchestra, I could at least hide behind the stronger talents of Anne Marie Kelley or Melanie Duncan. Now, I was exposed for the fraud I was becoming. Now, only the three of us: me, Mrs. Glover, and custodian Mr. Hebb, knew I was never really going to make it. To her credit, Mrs. Glover was at least nurturing. She was one of those suburban housewife teachers who meant well but had no idea how to light the spark in a damp puddle like me.

Another music instructor was a former member of The Boston Pops under the guidance of Maestro Arthur Fiedler. If we dared to forget the clip-on ties our Mom’s bought for evening recitals, we had to wear paper towels shaped like the stiffest imaginable thin cloth ties so fashionable in the late seventies. Mr. Anderson was a grunt.
He was suffering in what must certainly have been the purgatorial limbo of junior high music classes, shepherding us through endless holiday concerts where every runny nose kid who could move their fingers and scrape a resin-filled horse-tailed bow across the bridge of their violins had a shot at the big time.

Pops Orchestras around the country usually get a bad reputation, and the music purist snob in me will claim that they detractors have a good argument, but there was just something undeniably charming about the white-haired, mustachioed Fiedler, who always looked more like a white-suited circus impresario than a serious classical musician. The Boston Pops released a flurry of albums under Fiedler’s baton, covers of hits from “Hair,” “Jesus Christ Superstar,” The Beatles back catalog and “West Side Story” among them. My father treasured Pops moments, especially going into Boston to see them perform at the annual 4th of July concert at the Hatch Shell on the Esplanade overlooking the Charles River. The highlight of each year’s concert was the carefully choreographed (complete with fireworks and a 21 cannon salute) of Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture.” Dad was always drawn to the grand theatrics, the stirring string passages and the build-up to the firings of the cannons. Fiedler was a stodgy character. There’s a footbridge near Storrow Drive named in his honor, and it overlooks parts of the beautiful pearl necklace park system in Boston. Film composer John Williams took over the Pops for a while after Fiedler’s death, and the repertoire got more modern, all “Star Wars” and “Schindler’s List.” The Pops still perform “The 1812 Overture” at the end of every July 4th concert, and if I ever come upon it the magic returns as if it had never gone away.

Another teacher was a frizzy-haired, mousy, pale-faced woman with granny glasses who wore long black peasant dresses and shiny Octagon-shaped gaudy necklaces.
Her hair was always tied back from her alabaster face with a fierce bun. (If she’d had blood running through her veins, I’m sure this would have stopped it.) She saw the violin as a tool with the soul of a Craftsman Power Saw. Learn the basic fundamentals. Read the musical notes in between the lines. Know when to rest, when to come in, and everything else will be fine.

I might have fulfilled mom’s unspoken but painfully obvious dreams that I’d become the next Yehudi Menuhin. Instead, I took refuge in the harmonica I’d bought when I was eleven and still play to this day. I hid it in my resin case and during off times I tried to make the notes bend, cry, bark like Paul Butterfield or Sonny Terry.

Here is the scene: a kid (me) in his mid-teens, sitting beneath the stairwell behind the auditorium, puckering up to my “C” Marine Band harp. The sound is crystal clear. The acoustics under that stairwell were the same as the boy’s bathroom. Sound bounced between the walls, got soaked into the floorboards. This is how it had to be: solitary and diligent and focused as I listened to the sounds in the head and tried to make them come out of my mouth.

The independent, live fast and die hard life of a blues harp master was filled with all the pain and destructiveness I could ever have wanted. The only other artistic life choice seemed to be that of becoming a mindless drone in a community orchestra, the type of faithful servant who was never going to advance beyond third violin. At fourteen, I waved goodbye to formal music teachers with all the glee of a convicted murder found innocent twenty years after the fact through DNA evidence. The freedom was indescribable, but the journey to learn about music had just begun.
Chapter Twenty-five

Requiem for a lost opportunity

It is one thing to be a fan boy. Age ensures we usually grow out of that condition. It is another thing to be saddled with all the other afflictions that come with being music obsessive. We are geeks, mix tape experts who spend all our free time making cassettes based around themes, tapes to show off our encyclopedic knowledge and post-modern sarcasm. My mix tape obsession started in my mid twenties and lasted ten years. I called the vocals series “The Master Tapes” and their counterpart was (logically) “Master tapes II: The Instrumentals.” Where most others who did this had people in mind, mine was a purely selfish pursuit. Give me the history of recorded American pop/country, blues, folk, jazz and rock. Give me the canon of great classical and film soundtrack music.

It was obviously a stalling technique, a sublimation activity. I wanted to control the playlist. I wanted every note of Miles Davis’s legendary 1965 multi-night residency at The Plugged Nickel. I wanted the best of Charles Mingus, or Ennio Morricone’s heartbreaking scores from “The Mission” and “Cinema Paradiso.”

This was the problem: where most people my age were starting families and building their 401K funds, I was living at home, going to one dead end job after another, scraping enough together for gas and Maxell-90 cassette tapes. I scoured every library in the area for great jazz, folk, blues, deep cuts from obscure artists. These albums were obscure, or on every music snob’s “must have” list, and I took from them what I wanted.
I threw them out by the turn of the century in favor of custom-made mix CDs. The urge to collect seems to have been tempered if only due to lack of disposable income.

What else do we do? We make collages of our favorite rock stars. We take pictures from “Creem,” “Circus,” and “Rolling Stone.” We hang these pictures in our high school locker and posters in our bedroom. The music fan is the true geek, the record store snob who stands guard as the last proprietor of Vintage Vinyl or Rocket Records, buried in the basement of a building in any major college town in the city, those musty buildings slowly but surely being phased out in favor of infinite MP3 downloads at the click of a mouse. We are sound architects; interested primarily in how this instrument contrasts with the other, how the logic of a pop song has a counterpart in the mathematical structure of a symphonic movement.

Beyond the tangible and easily identifiable roles, I was always just looking for my voice, embracing the sentiments, listening to the stories sung late at night when I should have been asleep. The talk shows were interesting, but the music was everything. Anything that came over the airwaves was okay with me because somebody else was sharing their idea of what was good, their notion of quality. I wanted a guide, somebody jaded to teach me about the world. Those were static, mysterious sounds as I twirled the dial. I picked up stations in Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York, and Cleveland. Anything was possible in these voices from different lands. This was the heart of the United States. They were drawing me out, these cities and different accents down the entire eastern seaboard on a clear summer night. They were telling me everything was possible.

The point here is that everything I found and all the music I heard really just represented lost opportunities, cities I’d never be able to visit, people I’d never meet.
Maybe I was made to just listen. Maybe all I needed was Sinatra’s dead certain vulnerability singing in the wee small hours of the morning, Roy Orbison singing for the lonely, blues that broke my heart as a child when I had no reason to feel sadness. Great songs laid the foundation for the heartache to come, cushioned the blow when all the sage counsel from the experts had done its work.

In his book *Musicophilia*, Dr. Oliver Sacks wrote about the way music can bear deep into our neurons. Wires get crossed, and variations of brain disease can make us endure the same melody, never being allowed to shut it off. That same curse can also be a blessing, though, especially in times of grief. When nothing else makes sense, (more often that not in those days and years when it all falls apart) the abstract combination of just the right chords do in fact pluck at our heartstrings and make us see that there’s something on the other side of all this madness. Just don’t try explaining the magic.

“As music seems to resist or survive the distortion of dreams or of Parkinsonism, or the losses of amnesia or Alzheimer’s, so it may resist the distortions of psychosis and be able to penetrate the deepest states of melancholia or madness, sometimes when nothing else can.” (Sacks, 332.)

Music kids were usually joiners. They might not have wanted to admit it, but they were eager for the spotlight. I knew kids who took the stage in a KISS tribute band. Others tried being mopey acoustic guitarists and whiney singers. Husky boys without a place in either world became lead percussionists in our school marching bands. Music kids knew this was their only way to stake claim in high school, but I craved solitude. Like the hero in Simon and Garfunkel’s “I am a Rock,” I felt no pain and I never cried.
Nobody could say anything that was going to get through my granite exterior until I got back to the safety that could only be found in my room.

In the late seventies, Lauren played orchestral flute and was in her high school Rock Ensemble. She was in the chorus in a local production of “South Pacific,” mortified that the required costume (a glittery two-piece bikini top and hula skirt) exposed her pale, acne-scarred back. She sat entranced, singing before our Hi-Fi set, ears covered by huge headphones, an unfiltered cigarette burning between her right hand’s first and second fingers, Fleetwood Mac songs spilling into her brain that never came out the way they came in. Unable to hear herself, she was a tone deaf natural, passionate about the mystic twirlings of Fleetwood Mac lead singer Stevie Nicks, but desperately out of tune. Before the magic of a studio that could make Paris Hilton sound like a Berklee College of Music graduate, Lauren was the tragic girl singer destined to not go the distance. She was my guide through music after I gave up the violin and entered the rest of the world.

Lauren sang through many of her problems. She scribbled Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young lyrics on every available space at home. She called radio stations and requested songs in the ancient days when DJs had the freedom to sometimes stray from their play lists. She knew the role of a lead singer, part coquettish flirt and part storyteller, but she mainly seemed entranced by the sheer tragic romance of life on a high school stage. She lived to test the microphone, project out to the last kid in the audience.

I hear her husky voice from those days, straining for a Janis Joplin edge but never quite getting there. Sometimes she played the flute solo from Chicago’s “Color My World,” an instant romance classic for Proms and weddings from a big band that seamlessly merged a killer horn section with rock, progressive jazz, and great hooks.
Lauren was the template for cool when she was singing, the searcher, and the listener. She was the first person I knew who listened to Dylan, to the long songs like Traffic’s “Low Spark of the High Heeled Boys,” or Yes’s “Roundabout.” These were the long, ruminative songs that sometimes filled an entire album side. One look at the dark vinyl grooves and I knew the song would be atmospheric and brooding, maybe a long piano solo, repeated organ riff, a classic saxophone solo like Clarence Clemons’s on “Jungleland” or Mark Knopfler at the end of the nearly fifteen minute “Telegraph Road.”

This was the start of my tumble, my extremely extended adolescence, the transitional era that lasted too long, my last years of high school and those early years of trying to find a purpose. She was living in various places looking for parts of herself, always bouncing back home. I was looking to her for something I still can’t understand. We had gone through raging physical fights, tough days of silence. I had seen her through mental illness, bulimia, men trouble, and what seemed to be eventual renewal.

Music was always the constant in her life, those dusty and warped Joan Armatrading and British Blues compilation albums.; Steely Dan for cerebral college rock/jazz sarcasm, Rod Stewart for carousing, and Dan Fogelberg for the sensitive poetic musings of a singer/songwriter. She set up a stereo in the barn out in back of our house. This was the barn our father had made ten years earlier for a horse and a pony that were now long gone, the barn where we stored everything, where my brother temporarily shacked up on a dirty mattress with one of his old girlfriends. From that loft we played “Jungleland,” the nearly ten minute epic from Bruce Springsteen’s 1975 album “Born To Run,” on a dusty old stereo record player plugged into an outlet under a bare 60 watt light bulb on the ceiling. The music was a warm, soothing, smooth balm for my soul.
Saxophone giant Clarence “The Big Man” Clemons, a key member of Springsteen’s E Street band, took those two and a half minutes before the final verse to tear out your heart. He built up a theme and ran beautifully with it, weaving in and out of the lush string and full band arrangement. Mark Knopfler was the heart of Dire Straits, and their 1982 classic “Telegraph Road” was a beautiful rumination on the growth of a nation. The piano solo Alan Clark did for us what Clemons’s sax performance did on “Jungleland.”

We took those clear, singular moments from great music and sat there on the ledge of the barn loft’s open door, our legs hanging down, our eyes staring straight ahead at the garden and the thick green trees in our backyard. Now, over two decades later, those trees and everything else are gone. The only things remaining are the memory of those signature musical moments and time with my sister I’ll never be able to get back.

There was always going to be time in those days for something big, time to enjoy the rewards of being good, but we never knew that back when we listened only to the wisdom of The Who’s “Tommy” or The Rolling Stones’s “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” Placing all your faith in the wonders of a simple pop song or a complex rock opera will get you nowhere once the record ends. We constantly hear it in our heads, run through alternate versions. How did Cheap Trick play “I Want You to Want Me” on their live “Budokan” album? Was it different from the original? How about Heart’s Anne and Nancy Wilson really feel about their ballad “Dreamboat Annie”? They were a rock duo. They had guts, right? Were the ballads too schmaltzy? There was time enough to wonder about the musical choices, why one musician made this choice and the next made another.
There just was never enough time for the important things. This is all I knew. We never understood these things until it was too late.

Lauren was killed by a drunk driver, Easter Sunday morning, 1985. She left our house Saturday night, excited to go out with a few friends for some fun, and she never came back. A drunk in another car turned the corner and hit her- head on- severed her aorta. Cops came to our door at probably at four o’clock that morning and I can picture the scene now that I never saw then: their hats in hand, eyes connecting with Mom and Dad, and the announcement. What I did hear was Mom’s cry, long and extended, like a wolf caught in a hunter’s trap. I went downstairs and watched as Dad kept sweeping the kitchen floor and Mom wiped down the counters, both of them desperately trying to remove permanent stains. They made calls. I watched the sun come up and went outside to wait for friends and family.

Nothing is guaranteed. The world is a juggling act, and on that day, all the balls fell down. Tragic ballads helped me through the first few years, but they were no substitute. Sudden death will unavoidably start a long period of everything bad for a family, and ours was no different. Time reminded us at every moment that somebody good was missing; a powerful force was gone and would never come back. We had never really been a close family, usually going through the motions during holidays and birthdays, usually ending up in screaming matches and everybody going to their own corners, but now all bets were off.

This was the point. Look at it statistically, and maybe the distance will help with the understanding. Lauren was the fourth of six, and I was the fifth. She was the older of our “second half,” my best friend, and she was suddenly gone. Her absence devoured me.
It still does, but I remember the music. I remember what it did for me, how it never let me down. When everything else let me down, the music was always going to be there. Every song from “Rumors,” “Blood On The Tracks,” “Let It Bleed,” or “Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band” told me that she lived on in those days when people hungrily studied large album covers and compared session players on James Taylor and Jackson Browne liner notes. It was always a point of pride to know the drummers, bass players, and producers of any track on any album.

Here is what happens after a drunk driver rams into your sister on Easter Sunday morning: you die for a while, a few years maybe, and the damage is impossible to measure. We convened at the cabin deep in the woods where she had been staying, off on and on. Inside it, I remember seeing the quilted blanket on her bed, the dusty Joan Armatrading album on her turntable. The log cabin was built on a small hill overlooking the lake.

“Here’s what you want,” Sandra said. She was one of Lauren’s best friends. She and her family owned the cabin. We had set up the stereo on the cabin’s porch and aimed the speakers so the songs played out towards the lake.

“Will it be too loud?” I said. “I don’t want to bother anybody.”


“But people probably won’t listen,” I said. Even there, even at that point, I was worried about reactions, too concerned with analysis. I was there, but not really.

I watched from the porch as people gravitated on the front lawn, others took the canoe out on the lake. It was a beautiful early spring day that Saturday, six days after Lauren’s death. The frost on the ground was gone. Things were preparing to blossom.
We had been through the wake, the funeral, walking through tears and a haze of hugs.

There were endless bowls of macaroni and cheese, potato salad and lasagna, and we went through Lauren’s material possessions. We went through her clothes, jewelry, books.

Now, it was just the albums. Many of them were warped and musty. Some of the albums were covered in dust. These were the artifacts, the last things.

“Play this,” Sandra said. She gave me Fleetwood Mac’s *Tusk*, and asked me to play “Sara.” This was about Lauren, about what she represented, especially the line

“You’re the poet

in my heart.”

“Do you want to play anything? Sandra asked.

I couldn’t talk. I didn’t talk. I put on a tape of Bob Dylan’s “Oh Sister,” from *Desire*. This was the line that got me:

“We grew up together from the cradle to the grave/we died and were re-born and then mysteriously saved.” (Dylan, 362.)

I don’t know if the others really heard this song that afternoon, but I heard and I listened. I didn’t know about being re-born or saved in a Christian sense, but I understood the meaning of the words. In the distance I watched people get in and out of the canoe. As they paddled away, the canoe sliced through the clear blue lake and the sun shined and life moved on.

Maybe this is when it all started, not the sweeter days of childhood. Maybe this absolute tear in the fabric of our hearts was the grand, brutal lesson. Maybe I was supposed to see that music was the only thing that could ever save me. I looked through every book I had and nothing could tell me about stability. Nothing and no person could tell me anything about healing, no sad lovers, no grim priests, no stupid self-help books.
I went to a therapist that summer, but it would be another seventeen years before I understood that process. That’s always how it happens, too little too late. I played no music for the longest time after Lauren’s death. Even the grand spectacle that was the all-star rock benefit concert “Live Aid” that summer felt tinged with sadness deeper than its stated goal. They wanted to raise money for the starving people of Africa, but my sister was still dead and no all-star concert special was going to bring her back. Once again, the music that was supposed to heal instead tore another hole in me and I surrendered to the sadness by going silent.

Eventually, it started coming back. I turned away from radio and records and played my own music. The harmonica had brought me through Lauren’s death, the loss of parents, isolation, hopelessness, sporadic good times that somehow seemed to surface through the cold crevices. I had played at a wedding, jammed with a tuxedo-clad band on some standard Blues in “C.” I learned every sloppy Bob Dylan solo, (“All Along the Watchtower,” “I Want you,” and “Visions of Johanna”) every Bruce Springsteen riff, (especially from the *Nebraska* album) even some of the tougher Stevie Wonder improvisations. It was my entrée into the coolness. The great thing about the harmonica wasn’t just its portability or its still somewhat tenuous status as a toy in some parts. The harmonica was comfortable as a respectable instrument sometimes played in classical settings.

I knew “Ode to Joy” and the “Simple Gifts” melody from Aaron Copland’s “Appalachian Spring.” I knew most Woody Guthrie songs, (two or three chords, and simple blowing in “C” or “F” was all you needed, the sleaziest blues riffs from Little Walter, Muddy Waters, and Junior Wells songs. These were the guys, the originators.
There were enough random pop songs from the 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s to keep me busy, but I never knew how to duplicate the solos in any of the J Geils Band classics. The key to the harmonica was the key to life. Everything came down to improvisation, tonal control, and breathing. We couldn’t always follow a script or count on sharp clarity in the road ahead. Learn the basic melody, adapt to all the different formations of the same theme, even if they sound like mistakes, and breathe with confidence.

The harmonica was what I wish I could have been, at home in the worlds of hoe downs and campfire sing-alongs, dirty blues bar dives, and concert halls. There was nothing magical or miraculous about the way I blew. Bend the harp, pucker up your lips, and the sound of the notes would follow suit. I had asthma, a condition that started as a child but never came back in full until I was thirty-three and a particularly cold winter started to constrict my windpipe. I spent more time than ever in the Emergency Room that winter, as usual without good Health Insurance, hanging with my crowd of noble working class and just sad people whose time was long gone. Maybe the energy and grit of the music that could potentially come from my harmonica saved me from scrambling to salvage every last puff from a spare inhaler. Anything was possible.
Chapter Twenty-six

Final Movement

In another life, I might have been that happy, functional, working guitarist taking trains to every imaginable gig. Imagine the freedom of sitting in a comfortable sleeper car headed south, looking out the window at kids running through wet laundry hanging on backyard clotheslines. Time would have been frozen. I wouldn’t have been able to pinpoint any of it except to know that life was about working for the next gig, soaking in the applause, and staying just long enough to know my welcome wasn’t going to be played out. I would have played “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” and “Georgia” at nursing homes, and covered every imaginable Beatles classic at high school dances.

The 2007 documentary “Young At Heart” told the story of a chorus Director (Bob Cilman) assembling a chorus (here it’s the “Young At Heart” chorus in Northampton, Massachusetts) for a big performance at a downtown theater. The chorus is comprised of people from perhaps their late sixties through their nineties. The chorus does their takes on contemporary rock songs like The Ramones’ “I Wanna Be Sedated.” An unforgettable moment comes when a featured duo who’d been working on their version of Coldplay’s “Fix You” reaches performance time only to find one of them won’t be able to make it. “Fix You” is a soft contemporary ballad about fidelity and a love that will transcend everything:
“When the tears come...when you lose something...when you love someone/ but it goes to waste. I will fix you.”
(http://www.metrolyrics.com/fix-you-lyrics-coldplay.html)

An old man sits alone on the stage, singing to his friend, in a tired baritone, with soft piano backing, and it’s more powerful than any over-produced power ballad that passes for emotional on mainstream radio.

In the life I might have had as a professional musician who started as a child and never put down my instrument, Lauren would never have died. She would have been my vocalist, my fellow traveler as we sang old Crosby Stills and Nash songs at family functions. In that life the music might have kept things together longer and I might never have had days where it didn’t seem to be worth the effort to get up in the morning.

We make these bargains at every stop of our train rides. What might have happened had I gotten on at a different platform? The hunger to finally learn guitar gave me the chance to switch tracks, and that’s a rare opportunity for anybody. I bought it in the summer of 2006, took one lesson at a nearby adult education center, but that didn’t work out. The teacher was sour, more than a little bitter, like he’d been waiting at the station for years to board his train, took a nap, and woke to find that it left without him. Again, the freedom I felt leaving the class that night was indescribable. This was not about the fact that I was due a refund. Like everything else, learning guitar would have to be on my terms and I was at peace with that.

I was insatiable during this process, and I felt as if I was coming out of a long hibernation. This was how everything was supposed to be, all of a sudden and immediate. I wanted the chance to discover something real, to take the guaranteed freedom of music.
I found the chord structures on my guitar for all the Beatles and Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan songs. I heard Sinatra’s schmaltzy “My Way.” I heard Elvis Presley doing a sincere version of “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” Lulu’s theme for “To Sir with Love,” and The Left Banke’s “Walk Away Renee.” I collected hundreds of songs. Where others might have spent weeks trying to master one song, I felt like I’d let so much time slip away. This was about collecting and finding my own voice and not having to deal with standards others chose to dictate.

I don’t want my life as a musician to be about finding an audience. I don’t want it to be about fancy fingering flourishes up and down the guitar’s neck, brazen barrages of braggadocio jumping from one 7th chord combination to another. The tan cedar wood finish body is still embarrassingly pristine, like the buff-white sneakers purchased for a pale desk jockey in the futile hope he’ll get them dirty during Saturday afternoon pick-up basketball games with the neighborhood guys.

I play in my study, quietly, usually early in the darkness of a post-midnight morning when the rest of the world is asleep. I go through standard chord patterns and in the process I’m convinced I’ve nailed down the blues power of the G7 chord. I play for probably an hour a day, alone, variations on the same theme. I hear a song, get a notion, download chord patterns, and practice the melody at whatever pace feels comfortable, whatever key sounds logical. I am a simple strummer with good rhythm. My voice is strong in the music, and other parts of my life. With guitar, voice and harmonica, all that was lost now seems at least temporarily found. My fingers are supple and nimble and I feel like I can make every song my own: a pop classic, a symphony, a recurring melody, or a tired plot lifeless on paper but brilliant when we give it the breath of life.
Coda 2009: encores and second thoughts

It’s over now. The drummer has gestured for the first guitarist to take a bow, and together they motion to the rest of the band. As one, they rise to accept the applause of the audience. I saw you in the audience, front row middle. I noticed you stayed through the entire performance. There was no ghost-like glow about you. In fact, you seemed all too alive, all too real, as if you’d never stopped being. Nobody else showed up; the kids you could have had; the husband you might have married. I was interested to see who else was going to join you, but that didn’t matter. The circle had broken that night long ago, but last night it was fixed because you came back. I know it wasn’t fully repaired. I know it wasn’t really fixed, but at least for the time it took for this performance to play itself out, you came back to me.

If you had been able to stay long enough for us to talk, and if you had been interested to know what happened after you disappeared, after you died, I would have told you that I started composing. I thought this act of creation might bring you back. Years passed, nothing happened. I didn’t meet the perfect woman and raise the ideal family. I let positive opportunities and worthwhile people slip through my fingers. I retreated to a dusty old garret in a place where nobody could find me and I came out with this statement, for whatever it’s worth.

That front row seat you had gave you access to every part of the performance, and you might have noticed me at times pacing in the stage wings. I am older, balder, and a bit heavier. My body shape is stocky and my chest is high. I can’t say I’m “happy” or “satisfied.” I can’t be part of the shiny happy people brigade right now.
The idea of happiness always seemed like something I should have at the end of the rainbow, at the end of the life, not now. Just go back to the middle of this concert. It will remind you how quickly a sweet-sounding pop song can turn sour.

The goal of family stability was never really anything I wanted after you went away. We fell apart. You should know that. We fell apart and for the most part really didn’t come together like we could have been. The others found good partners and raised families, but I chose to keep that part of my life in the dark. I saw no need to bring girls home, to bring them to a stable family life I never felt I had.

Was I embarrassed? Probably. I just wanted to build a reservoir of something else, to energize parts of my brain I would never have used had I gone down the immediate path of what was expected. You know that’s probably why my memory is still so sharp, and probably why there’s a fog of bitterness hanging over some of my work. That’s always been the case, and if anything, I know I need to work on understanding that the bitterness needs to transform itself into the strength and focus and positivity that an artist needs to persevere.

I wanted to call you during parts of the performance. How did the tone and mood and melody come across? Part of me still wanted validation, sibling approval, somebody to put their inspection sticker on my work and pat me on the head and tell me I had done a good job. I wanted to call, but I didn’t have your number.

As for this performance, I know you always understood what it took to face a blank canvas and have no idea where it might go. You were a representational artist, very focused with your still life studies of nudes and bowls of fruit. Sometimes you worked with splotches of color, with abstract images that looked like things we knew.
Sometimes they didn’t. That’s the point. You understood that it took time for something to find shape.

I know your presence was all over this song, from the beginning to now. Some people might think it was mainly about me, a sometimes trite and sappy and manipulative ode to loss, about searching for purpose and identity through music, but that was the only way I knew how to put it together. There was a score, definite sheet music, but I was constantly changing my mind. There were entire passages I had to erase, while others got enhanced, and, probably, bloated as a result. That was an understandable risk, and I started the project knowing that the original vision I had (however clouded it is in retrospect) is better now.

What I hope you understand is that your disappearance was not destined. It was not planned. Look at the reality. Even if you had not disappeared, we all would have probably faded away after that sentimental overture, after the brightness of that opening statement. Everything that we were and could have been disappeared about halfway through and everything that came in the second part of this song was filtered through a cloud of sadness and detachment. The melody was established in the beginning, as it should have been, and what followed was just a series of constant push and pull, with everybody desperately crying out for attention.

I will probably retreat back to my garret after I beat this monster pop song for all it’s worth and that’s probably okay. Maybe there’s a follow-up somewhere, but I can’t expect you to appear again for that one. This is the statement, for now. This is the unvarnished truth. This is the exact way I want the song to end. You meet me in the lobby of the theater, quietly, softly, right after the last member of the band has gone.
You tell me that there’s no way you can stay, that your time back here is over and I should try to come to terms with the others who are still here, the others who are still living.

“Don’t waste time,” you’ll say. “Even if it comes off as something you read from a script, I want you to call the others. I want you to be part of the family.”

I can’t e-mail. I can’t call. I can’t do anything but write another pop song, find the best hook and build a melody around it. This is the way it needs to finish now. Maybe I’ll play lead guitar at the next performance, if there is one. Maybe I won’t. I won’t ask if you liked it because that really can’t matter. I’m just glad you came tonight. When the time is right, maybe we’ll meet again.
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VITA

Christopher John Stephens was born on July 20, 1964 in Salem, Massachusetts. He earned his M.A. in English from Salem State College in 1993. His first book, MAN ABOUT TOWN, a collection of columns he wrote for The Boston Metro from 2001-2006, was published privately in 2007 by The Mermaid Café Press. For over twenty years, Christopher has been an educator, from grade school through college. He has worked as an adjunct college English Instructor for Wentworth Institute of Technology, Suffolk University, Northeastern University, North Shore Community College, and various other institutions. He lives in Lynn, Massachusetts.