

THE LAST BOY ON EARTH:
A POST-INDUSTRIAL CHILDHOOD

Rick Middleton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan
May 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Karen, and my three children – Anne, Daniel and Luke – for their support, encouragement and for being patient with a family member who was often distracted, unavailable or completely missing in action while working on this large project.

Thank you also to Steve Bailey for believing in this project and for providing valuable insights along the way.

Finally, I want to thank my parents. Just because.

ABSTRACT

THE LAST BOY ON EARTH: A POST-INDUSTRIAL CHILDHOOD

by Rick Middleton

Growing up in the 1970s in the Rust Belt city of Elyria, Ohio (just outside of Cleveland), we knew things were changing, but it was hard to see just how profound, and permanent, those changes were. In 1974, Nixon was resigning and we were lurching toward a brave new post-industrial future; but for my family, the biggest concern was my new little brother, battling spinal meningitis at a hospital in Cleveland.

In this collection of essays, I explore the landscape of my life and my interactions with my family between 1974 and 1981, tracing my own rapid changes which I see as a microcosm of the larger changes hitting Elyria like a tidal wave. I found myself drawn to the narrative of comic books during this time, sensing that the radical changes in the larger culture were mirrored in the fantastical adventures of super-heroes and the dystopian themes of science fiction. I also found common ground with my father and grandfather in our shared enjoyment of football, a rite of passage in northern Ohio.

This collection of essays covers common themes of birth, death, and self-discovery, but it does so in a time and place – the working class suburbs of the Midwest in the 1970s – that is often neglected in modern non-fiction. I hope to fill that gap in a small way with these essays, as the changes which are now evident in the global economy and in the larger culture today began in places like Elyria a generation ago, in homes just like mine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| CRITICAL REFLECTION | 1 |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| The Genre of the Personal Essay..... | 5 |
| RAINBOW BABY | 17 |
| UNDER THE TABLE | 33 |
| THE LAST BOY ON EARTH..... | 47 |
| SPINNER RACK..... | 59 |
| ONE LAST RIDE..... | 81 |
| WORKS CITED | 97 |

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

This thesis project consists of five inter-related personal essays which grew out of material developed in my graduate classes at Central Michigan University. The essays span 1974-1981, encompassing my boyhood from age 10 to age 17 as I grew up in the northeast Ohio town of Elyria. I originally chose the 1974-1981 period because it correlated with the years I collected comic books, a hobby that in a brief period grew into a consuming passion and then, almost as quickly, was abandoned. Later in life, I became re-acquainted with the art form, both as a reader of graphic narratives and of the growing body of literature that examines these works, their history, and their impact. I was curious to explore the question of *why* I liked them so much, and at such a young age, and I had the idea that these essays could intertwine observations of my boyhood life with the comics I was reading at the time. As the essays developed, however, I found that the inclusion of too much comic book-related material often intruded on family-related stories that were strong enough to stand on their own. I therefore centered two stories, rather than all of them, on my love of comics.

The 1974-1981 timeframe, however, still proved fortuitous. That seven-year period was a time of significant change for me, my family, my community, and the entire country. The timeframe is bookended by two major family events: the birth and subsequent serious illness of my younger brother, in 1974, and the death of my grandfather in 1981. Those events are recounted in my opening and closing essays.

That seven-year period was also a significant time of cultural change in the United States, and although I don't explore big-picture issues of politics, economics, or culture in the essays, I

do think they form an important backdrop. In the United States, the year 1974 – besides being the year that President Nixon resigned – is marked by two landmark economic measures: it is roughly the point at which middle-class wages seemed to reach a peak before stagnating, and it is fully one year into our classification as a “post-industrial” economy.

In an examination of median household income between 1953 and 2009, Timothy Smeeding of the University of Wisconsin, Madison reported “family income rose strongly and consistently up until about 1973” and then stayed flat for more than a decade. It was at this moment that towns like Elyria and many others in the Midwestern United States, with economies firmly based on manufacturing, should have realized that they were being left behind; being an industrial city in a post-industrial economy was for most municipalities a death sentence. George W. Knepper, in his book *Ohio and Its People*, described how Ohio took it on the chin during the 1970s:

For years to come historians will be arguing about where to place the beginnings of what appeared to be a shift in American economic life from the industrial to the post-industrial age. A date of convenience might be 1973, the year in which the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), an international cartel dominated by Middle Eastern oil producers, more than tripled the price of crude oil, ultimately settling the price above \$30 per barrel. This price increase had devastating effects on the industrial nations of the world and on third-world nations that lacked their own energy resources. American industry generally, and Ohio industry specifically, depended heavily on imported oil, and price increases affected the cost of everything from gasoline to pharmaceuticals. Furthermore, Americans now realized the necessity of conserving fuel, and the public scurried

to adopt small, fuel-efficient automobiles, a change with far-reaching consequences for the automotive industry. (454)

Echoing the importance of that date, Philip Yale Nicholson cites Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell as the first to write of a post-industrial society in 1973. Nicholson writes, “As ever, these changes were largely outside of the control of workers, and contributed to fear and insecurity” (294). That year and the rest of the decade was a wrenching time for the country in general, and the Rust Belt in particular, marked by inflation, significant job losses in Ohio and surrounding states, and ultimately culminating in a rightward political shift with the election of Ronald Reagan. My father, as a member of the United Auto Workers employed in a General Motors factory, was directly impacted by these trends. By the time 1980 rolled around and I landed my first after-school job, the community was reeling from one of the century’s worst recessions, restructuring and downsizing of the auto industry, and the beginning of the erosion of the manufacturing base (a process that continues to this day). “Between 1972 and 1982, Ohio lost 246,553 manufacturing jobs, an 18.3 percent decline,” writes Knepper. “The job drain continued after 1982 at a slower pace, but throughout this period unemployment in Ohio exceeded 11 percent, well above the national average” (454). Although that upheaval forms a background to these essays, the pieces themselves don’t address the intricate cultural strands of the times directly. As a boy and then a teenager, I was mostly unaware of the larger changes and the meanings behind them; I tell the stories mostly from the standpoint of myself as a young person, though I do provide context in many places that comes from being able to see the events in hindsight. I hope that by focusing on the details of my life and my interactions with my family, I can illustrate one perspective on what was happening in that time and in that place.

I won't presume that this project will be read widely enough to make a mark on the literature of the region, but I do think it is important that Midwest voices continue to be heard. I'm happy to depict a time (the 1970s) and place (the Rust Belt city of Cleveland) that has not often been explored. In comparison to the West Coast or the East Coast, it seems that the Midwest of the era is under-represented in literary terms. In literature about Cleveland and surrounding communities, comic book writer Harvey Pekar stands out as a significant voice, a chronicler of the region who finds meaning in mundane events. Even after achieving critical success, Pekar never gave up his day job as a file clerk in a VA Hospital, and he claims he never attained financial independence as a result of his writing. His work is an important contribution to the literature of the working class. While Pekar, strictly speaking, is not a blue-collar worker, Ben Hamper is. His book *Rivethead* is another notable work that chronicles the author's life as a young man, and then a fourth-generation GM factory worker, in the Rust Belt town of Flint, Michigan from the 1960s through the 1980s. Pekar and Hamper represent two of the most notable working class/Rust Belt non-fiction authors of the late 20th century, but it is difficult to point to many others. Relatively few memoirists have attempted to depict the upheavals and everyday lives of families tied to the fortunes of the Big Three automakers during a time of major transition in the fortunes of those companies. In my own small way, I hope to at least add to the body of stories that deal with a time and a place and a culture that is essentially Midwest American. I insist that we have not fully come to terms with the condition of being a post-industrial culture; we relate to our industrial past uneasily, and few stories have emerged as a result. I want to work against that, hopefully providing some insight to a place that I love and a time that I remember fondly.

The Genre of the Personal Essay

This work consists of five inter-related personal essays. The personal essay is an evolving literary form, often situated under the larger umbrella of creative non-fiction. I enjoy reading personal essays, and in one of my early graduate classes I realized that I enjoy writing them as well. When it was suggested that I develop my thesis as a work of creative non-fiction, I agreed to do so, and developed these personal essays that explore several topics that are important to me. The genre proved capable of capturing much of what I wanted to say.

“The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form,” writes Phillip Lopate in the introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*. “It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions. It acts as if all objects were equally near the center and as if ‘all subjects are linked to each other’ (Montaigne) by free association” (xxxvii). I view three of these essays as examinations of my relationships with significant people in my life. The first essay, “Rainbow Baby,” highlights my positive relationship with my mother. The second essay, “Under the Table,” is an examination of my complicated relationship with my father. The final essay, “One Last Ride,” is a reflection of my maternal grandfather.

Two essays – “The Last Boy on Earth” and “Spinner Rack” – are meditations about my enthusiasm for comic book collecting. In the former, I discuss an apocalyptic 1970s comic book series, *Kamandi: The Last Boy on Earth*, and attempt to draw some larger implications about that series and what was happening in popular culture during the decade. “Spinner Rack” discusses my relationship with comic books as collectible items during my childhood.

I read widely in preparation for this project. The works helped me grasp some of the common elements of the personal essay, and also helped me develop various strategies for dealing with challenges that were arising in my own writing. At the suggestion of a faculty

member I read *This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff. *This Boy's Life* is a seminal work, “the book that started the modern obsession with memoir” (Granger). Wolff explores territory familiar to personal essayists, describing a difficult childhood, raised by a single mother and the troubled men with whom she was romantically involved. Wolff keeps to a finite timetable, beginning when he is on the cusp of adolescence and stopping just before he departs for a boarding school in the eastern U.S. He offers an unsparing look at his life, revealing admirable qualities as well as moments of selfishness and anti-social behavior; this focus on providing an honest account of one’s life, rather than a sanitized or self-aggrandizing narrative, is one of the hallmarks of the genre. I hoped to do the same in these essays. These events occurred in my youth, and I was as self-absorbed, and selfish, as any other youth. To gloss over that fact would be dishonest, and also make the work less interesting. I believe I managed to portray myself and the people around me as multi-dimensional characters.

Perhaps Wolff’s most important contribution to the genre is his ability to incorporate story-telling techniques into a life story. According to Elizabeth Glass in *Writer’s Digest*, Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* is the first literary memoir, employing “aspects of creative nonfiction – recreated dialogue, a fictive-narrative structure, use of scenes instead of mere retelling – to add excitement and meaning to a traditional essay structure” (Glass). Wolff’s assertion of artistic license was instructive as I came to grips with my own story; in order to craft my essays into cohesive narratives, I had to stitch well-remembered events to conversations that are less clear in my mind, or which were invented based on my best guesses about what was probably said. In a *Writer’s Digest* interview, Wolff discusses the issue of authorial privilege in writing one’s life story: “A memoir is literally the story your memory tells you. You’re not going back to source documents in your memory. The memoir tries to preserve that story” (qtd. in Glass). He goes on

to explain that the writer is primarily searching for deeper meanings, rather than providing dictation of verbatim conversations. “You’re not just going to write down, ‘Well this happened to me, and then this happened to me, and then this happened to me.’ You’re trying to discern a pattern from these experiences. What is significant about what happened?” (Glass).

I read *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, a popular memoir published in 2005. Walls tells the struggle of herself and her siblings to overcome not only the circumstances of severe poverty in rural West Virginia but also the dysfunctional patterns established by her alcoholic father and her non-conformist mother, neither of whom seemed able or willing to obtain steady employment. While the book does not break ground artistically, it does raise interesting questions about our responsibility to people who are mentioned in the stories we tell. Walls discusses family, friends, teachers and employers, often in unflattering terms; and the most unflattering portrayals are reserved for her parents. Though Walls’ father died before the book was published, her mother was still alive. The book is unsparing in its descriptions of a mother who is startlingly neglectful of the needs of her children. In books like *The Glass Castle*, the memoirist must make decisions as to whether a “warts and all” approach is fair to family members who appear in the story. The author herself seems comfortable with her decisions to write candidly about her family. “The most important goal of a memoir writer is to tell the truth,” she wrote in *Publisher’s Weekly*. “But truth is subjective. . . . My brother, my sisters and my mother have all said that while they felt my book was substantially true, any memoir they would have written would have been entirely different” (Walls, “Truth and Consequences”).

Walls presents her family members as three-dimensional people; the same person who can hurt your feelings one day can lift your spirits the next day. I attempted to emulate that in

writing about myself and other people. My mother, for example, is portrayed in various ways; she is wise, naïve, kind, or impatient, depending on the circumstances (or on my memory of what was said).

As mentioned earlier, I read the work of Harvey Pekar, specifically the first two volumes of *American Splendor*. These graphic novels contain pieces written by Pekar and illustrated by numerous artists. Pekar was important to my preparation both for his unique voice and for the regional appeal of his material; Pekar is a lifelong Clevelander who writes about his life in the city, and he is regarded as one of the most important voices from northeast Ohio. Because I was seeking to situate my project as a narrative set in the same region, I wanted to immerse myself in Pekar's work to get a flavor of that time and place. Pekar's art is subtle – so subtle, in fact, that it's easy to miss what he's doing. His stories about mundane events and minute observations, enlivened by his volatile personality, almost appear as the ramblings of the town curmudgeon. But a closer examination of the work reveals an insightful observer of life. And the common-man persona, which Pekar cultivated legitimately as an artist who also worked a menial day job, co-exists with his literary ambitions; as a writer, Pekar's decision to write about ordinary life was a deliberate artistic choice. "I wanted to write about everyday experiences, which had not received enough attention in any art form," he wrote in 2007 (Pekar, "My Dual Career").

Pekar's memoir reveals a complex man, impossible to categorize. Like any other working class Clevelander, he complains about the Browns, the Indians and the weather; but turn the page, and Pekar is going to an independent film festival in one of Cleveland's artsy neighborhoods. He collects obscure jazz records, but also gets angry at long lines at the supermarket. He reads Russian novelists for fun, but could not endure the rigors of college, and never finished. He lives simply, despite a degree of fame, including being invited multiple times

to appear as a guest on *Late Night with David Letterman*. While it would be a mistake to call him a normal Clevelander, he does seem to embody the complexity of the city, and further, he seems like the type of person who has sought commonality with people at every strata of society.

I tried to emulate Pekar's ability to tell universal stories with a distinct Cleveland flavor. I included points of civic pride – our pro sports teams, athletic heroes like Jim Brown and Gaylord Perry, our world-class hospitals – and also focused on the peculiarity of Elyria, with its heavy reliance on manufacturing and its status as a blue-collar melting pot. These details likely resonate with the people who grew up in Northeast Ohio without alienating those who didn't, since people in every community have similar touchstones. The stories themselves touch on more universal themes, such as a boy's relationship to his family members, the types of narrative that young people are drawn to, and the impact of popular culture artifacts on young people who are searching for their own identities.

For this project, I re-read Ben Hamper's 1991 book *Rivthead*, which offers a rare look inside the life of a contemporary autoworker. I had read the book 20 years earlier, and my second encounter with the book reminded me of Hamper's unique perspective on life as a General Motors worker. Hamper, a native of Flint, Michigan, echoes some of the same sentiments that I heard from my Dad over the years, and of the sometimes odd dynamic that plays out in considering the role of unions in contemporary society. There is a tendency among memoirists like me, a generation removed from the factory, to bemoan declining union membership, and the eroding industrial capacity of the United States; in other words, to let nostalgia creep in. But when an actual union member like Hamper authors the rare memoir, the struggle is discussed in much different terms. He considers how he can maintain his own job during times of economic retraction, how he can make the workday bearable despite the repetitive work, and how he can

maintain his independence despite pressures that work against autonomy. D. Fieldes, reviewing the book for *The Journal of Industrial Relations*, writes, “Hamper’s life as a ‘shoprat’ tells a lot about the best that capitalism can offer in dehumanizing work – monotony, periodic lay-offs, danger (the management abuse workers for stopping the line when an older woman worker is knocked unconscious) and a million petty humiliations (the plant’s barbed wire fencing faces *inwards*).”

This conundrum is illustrated by looking at the relationship between Hamper and Michael Moore, the filmmaker. Hamper’s earliest work was published by Moore, when Moore served as publisher of a Flint-based alternative newspaper. As an outsider, Moore is bothered by GM’s abandonment of Flint and other Rust Belt cities and the subsequent loss of jobs. Hamper, however, sounds a much different tune. His concerns are with the clock, the drudgery and with the constant flow of paychecks. I find this dichotomy in my relationship with my Dad; I am a white-collar worker, the son and grandson of UAW members, and I see the diminished state of the UAW as indicative of larger problems. My Dad, meanwhile, sees the union in more complicated terms. A GM retiree, he agrees with the anti-union sentiments he hears on Fox News. He feels betrayed by a union that has made numerous concessions over the years. There is the curious phenomenon of the Left supporting the unions, and union members often feeling no loyalty to the Left. Hamper’s memoir echoed many of the same sentiments I heard growing up. The lesson that I have drawn from such inconsistencies is that it is easy to categorize people from a distance, but when you get close to them, the categories (the stereotypes and assumptions and preconceptions) often dissolve. And these essays were an attempt to get as close as possible, so that I could explore the unique nature of people as individuals.

The challenges I faced are familiar ones to personal essayists. There is the problem of truth. In the effort to craft stories, do we necessarily need to remember how every conversation went, or the exact order of events? Much has been written about the essayist's responsibilities, and his license to invent. In some cases, my memories were clarified by quick Internet searches. For example, I was able to quickly discover the dates for major sporting events such as the 1979 Super Bowl and Game Six of the 1975 World Series. I found that some of my memories were not accurate at all; for example, a Cleveland summer day I remembered as oppressively warm was actually only 75 degrees. In some cases, I adjusted my prose to better reflect the actual circumstances.

In "Playing It Straight by Making It Up: Imaginative Leaps in the Personal Essay," Marilyn Abildskov explains that this "problem" is actually not a problem at all:

The dichotomy of "making it up" versus "telling the truth" is a false one altogether since, in able writers' hands, we see the two sitting on the page, gracefully side by side, as essayists play it straight by making it up – artfully tipping their hands, in other words, and exposing the seams of the writing process along the way. That these writers lie to tell the truth is obvious. Put more precisely, they lie *openly* to tell the truth, so that their ethical posture as storytellers lies in their aesthetic authority, in their ability to lie openly *and* artfully (24-25).

My essays include conversations that are true *in their essence*, if not accurate in the word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence order I present them. I also place events in an order that works for the stories themselves, and if my order represents leaps, elongations or shortening of the actual timelines, I trust the reader understands the other need of a storyteller – to eliminate the

superfluous and boring. My goal was to seek the meaning in these stories, to examine events and impressions in order to uncover truths about myself, my family, and my environment.

Another problem I encountered is the tension between telling an honest story and revealing too much about living people. As stated earlier in regard to Jeannette Walls, I weighed one need – the right of private people to remain private – against my need to tell a story that is important to me. Sheila Bender, in *Writing Personal Essays*, insists, “You have the right to say what you want about your experience” (5). I trust that the subjects of these essays, in reading about themselves, see that the intent is to be truthful and to find meaning in that true recounting; and that, conversely, there is not an intent to be malicious or scandalous. That consideration of intent is seen as one of the important determining factors in what is disclosed about loved ones: “Most critics, even those who are deeply aware of the power exercised by writers and the potential abuse of that power, believe that writers are, in the end, ethically justified in writing about proximate others as long as its [sic] done skillfully, conscientiously, and without malice” (Bidinger 14).

One problem that I continually faced was finding the language to convey abstract ideas and idiosyncratic interests in a way that a general reader would find understandable. I am aware that my interest in comic books is not shared by everyone, and this assumption has caused a great deal of second-guessing as I considered various ways of explaining the hobby. As a boy, I remember explaining the difference between Marvel Comics and DC Comics to family members, and understanding exactly what their blank stares were implying. I learned that my hobby was both complicated and utterly un-compelling (a bad combination) to many people, and thus it seemed better to avoid discussing it. Maybe that hesitation persists today; if I mention a 35-year-old issue of *The Fantastic Four*, I’m pretty certain you have little reason to care, unless

you're a fellow fanatic. While I did end up writing about comics in two essays, and I mention it in passing in another, I pivoted away from the original idea of using my comic book hobby as a unifying theme in every essay. The pieces which focused on my mother, father and grandfather stood strong enough on their own, and when I attempted to insert some observations about comic book reading or collecting into these essays, the result was awkward and unsatisfying. Thus, I limited my comic book memories primarily to two essays that are very specific in what they address (one of them is focused on a comic book that gave me a nightmare, and the other discusses the difficulty of maintaining a comic book collection).

The draft version of "The Last Boy on Earth" seemed to be missing the flavor of action and adventure that I gained from comic book reading, and I thought it was important to insert that. I again revisited the question of whether I could examine a particular comic story, in depth. Because comic books are a highly visual medium, I worried that re-telling a comic story in an all-text essay would be boring or confusing to my readers. The story in question is not particularly notable; it is from a 1975 comic book, issue number 120 of *Brave and the Bold*, published by DC Comics. The story features Batman teaming up with a character known as Kamandi, and although the story is remembered fondly by older readers like myself as a nice piece of escapism, it is not considered a particularly noteworthy example of comic narrative. It is simply a run-of-the-mill superhero comic, and certainly not a critical darling like *Maus* or *Watchmen*. Could I take the raw material of forgettable pop culture and pull it apart in new ways? I wanted to do so, but I wasn't sure how.

Fortunately, I came across a recent book that does something very similar. Paul Auster's 2013 memoir, *Report from the Interior*, contains a lengthy examination of the author's encounter, at age ten, with the 1957 film *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. Auster, writing in the

second person, says “this film turns you inside out and drastically alters the way you think about the universe” (106). It was instructive to see the way in which an esteemed writer like Auster attributed such power and force to a film that isn’t normally considered a leading science fiction film. But Auster implies that much of the impact of the movie is due to the fact that he is very young when he sees it – an impressionable child who feels the twists and turns of the plot without pretense. “The shock of *Shrinking Man* is a philosophical shock, a metaphysical shock, and such is the power of that somber little black-and-white film that it leaves you in a state of gasping exhalation, feeling as if you have been given a new brain” (106).

Auster devotes the bulk of a long chapter recounting the film’s plot in intricate detail. He presents the information from the awestruck viewpoint of a young boy, and this stance helps give the description a freshness and an energy that might have been lost if he had discussed the movie from the standpoint of a 60-something writer objectively evaluating a 1950s genre movie. “From the ominous music that plays during the opening credits, you understand that you are about to be taken on a dark and menacing ride,” he writes (106), and throughout his retelling he offers regular observations about the way the film thrilled and surprised him, as well as instances in which special effects, camera angles, and screenplay choices had a profound impact on the way he viewed the events on screen and, more importantly, the way he perceived life in general. “The sensation of surprise and dislocation overwhelms you, thrills you, disturbs you, as if everything you have ever assumed about the physical world has been thrown abruptly into question,” Auster writes, explaining the shock of seeing the film’s convincing portrayal of a man’s rapidly reducing stature (115). Details such as shots of the actor in an enormous armchair, built by a clever Hollywood production designer, disorient and thrill the young Auster.

Auster shows that the film has a grip on his younger self, not only as escapist entertainment but also as a piece of art that raises questions he has never considered before. He describes the film's closing scene, a voiceover narration by the main character:

a quasi-mystical interrogation of the interplay between the divine and the human that both stirs you and confounds you. . . his words seem to touch on everything that matters most – who are we? what are we? how do we fit into a cosmos that is beyond our understanding? – which makes you feel that you are being led toward a place where you can glimpse some new truth about the world, and as you transcribe those words now, recognizing how awkward they are, how scumbled their philosophical propositions, you must travel back into your ten-year-old's mind in order to re-experience the power they had for you then, for wobbly as those words might seem to you today, fifty-five years ago they struck you with all the force of a blow to the head. (129)

Auster's lengthy examination of the film, and his reaction to it, helped provide a model as I pondered how to discuss a dystopian comic book that likewise took hold of my consciousness, and which I frequently thought about. Patterned after Auster's dissection of *Shrinking Man*, I got over my reservations and likewise dissected a single comic book story in order to tease out the meaning, both for my younger self and as it relates to the overall themes in this project.

A final thought concerns my age. Having just turned 50, I find myself well-positioned to explore my past. There is enough distance between when the events happened and when I am writing about them, and thus I'm able to be more objective, almost as if I'm writing about someone else. Age is seen as an advantage in the genre of the personal essay. "While young people excel at lyrical poetry and mathematics, it is hard to think of anyone who made a mark on

the personal essay form in his or her youth,” writes Phillip Lopate in *The Art of the Personal Essay* (xxxvii). “It is difficult to write analytically from the middle of confusion, and youth is a confusion in which the self and its desires have not yet sorted themselves out.”

Ruth E. Ray has conducted numerous life-writing groups among senior citizens in the Detroit area, and she has written at length on the unique power that age provides to the writer of the memoir: “We could surely make a strong case for life-story telling as an ‘age-marked’ behavior. As a person ages, she is more likely to be approached by friends, family members, and associates to tell about the past” (36). While I’m not yet a senior citizen, I am getting close, and the urge to tell stories of my former selves grows stronger. This collection of essays is the result.

RAINBOW BABY

Around 1974, everything changed. They say that was the year, give or take, that we became a “post-industrial” society. I didn’t notice. I was 10. I just remember a few things about 1974: Mom was pregnant, Gaylord Perry won 15 straight games for the Cleveland Indians, and the school was finally going to serve lunch.

That last one was most relevant to my daily life. Until I was in fourth grade, no one ate lunch at Windsor School. The school simply shut down at around 11:30 in the morning and legions of kids in kindergarten through sixth grade marched home. It sounds weird now but at the time it seemed perfectly normal. Mom made sandwiches or soup, which my sisters and I ate silently, our eyes glued to the Bugs Bunny re-runs broadcast out of Cleveland. As soon as we were done, Mom would tell us to get ready again and we groaned, sluggish and full, dreading the trek back. The school then welcomed us back for a few more hours. I remember some days, coming back in the afternoons, so high on sugar and feeling silly after watching a particularly manic Daffy Duck cartoon, spurred on by my funny friend Todd, that concentrating on school was tremendously difficult.

Before things changed, the principal came to our classroom and told us that, starting next year, the gym would be transformed into a cafeteria every day. We could buy a “hot meal” or bring a “sack lunch” (there were chuckles over the word choice). We would need to eat quickly, within a half hour, because the whole thing was going to run on factory-like precision, and every lunch shift depended on the one before and affected the one after. The major benefit, they told us, was that we’d be coming home an hour earlier. Our Moms would be home to receive us, it was implied. Moms were always home.

The plan seemed good to me, though I wondered if my Mom would miss the daily lunch hour-and-a-half with us. I shouldn't have worried. She had something else on her mind that school year: her pregnancy, which was a hard one. In the mornings, my older sister, Yuvonne (whom we all called Yevi) and I would get ourselves ready for school; my younger sister, Stacey, then in kindergarten, must have also been pretty self-sufficient as well, or maybe Yevi helped out. I don't really remember. But I do remember grabbing our lunches and books and running out of the house while Mom gagged and splashed into the toilet upstairs. When we got home, she'd still have that same dazed, exhausted look, the same dark eyes, the same shaky posture.

"I had morning sickness with you other three," Mom explained. "But at least then it went away. Not this time."

* * *

By June, she was thoroughly sick of the whole process. She was glad to have us home for the summer break but still counting down the days to her delivery date. I hoped the baby would hold on until August 7 (Mom's birthday) or August 8 (Dad's birthday). A shared birthday would be fun.

Summer meant an end to the tyranny of clocks and schedules. It meant riding my bike along the streets and sidewalks of my neighborhood on the north side of Elyria, among rows and rows of similar-looking houses perched on tiny lawns. It meant playing and hanging out with the boys in the neighborhood. We played with Hot Wheels at one house and then compared baseball cards at the next one. We'd get popsicles from one kid's mom and scolded by another.

My parents (Dick and Beverly) were most closely acquainted with the neighbors immediately next door on the right hand side (Ray and Sylvia) and the neighbors across the street (Bob and Joyce). My Dad was a Chevy guy, making the daily commute from Elyria over to Brook Park, which sat on the border of Cleveland. Bob was also an auto guy, but he was a Ford man and, as my Dad pointed out, a foreman. When I asked if that meant he was a boss, Dad said, "Well, he probably thinks so." I had no idea what any of these vague statements meant. Ray worked at the airport, as a mechanic for one of the big airlines. Sometimes they sent him to work in places like San Francisco. I thought his job sounded impressive.

There was also a family down the street (Wayne and Sharon) that went to church with us. I say "us," but Dad didn't actually go to church. They were quite a ways down, probably 15 houses east of ours, and their lot butted up against the railroad tracks, which I thought was a very cool thing. And scattered around us, all up and down the street, were various people we knew in shorthand; we knew one or two facts about them, and that's it. A trouble-maker boy up the street, who was several years older than me, supposedly dropped acid and something bad happened and now he walked endlessly, up and down Wilder, limping and alone and mumbling, forever destined to live with his parents. Another family was Pentecostal or something and the Mom and daughter wore only dresses. The lady across the street was retired and a widow. Two doors down from her, the guy was a real-life fireman. Mom said his shifts were 24-hours long, which meant he slept at the firehouse, and then when he had days off from work, he slept all the time (because who can sleep at a firehouse?). A pair of brothers was "trouble," and sure enough, they later stole things from us. The woman behind us looked like Julie Newmar and went all out for Halloween, dressing like a witch and sitting on some kind of witch-throne in her decorated living room while B-movie haunted-house music played on her stereo; you had to take a few terrifying steps into

her living room if you wanted one of the giant candy bars sitting in a bucket at her feet. Some other woman on our street, a bosomy bleached blonde, was “going out every night while her poor husband is home with the kids.” A family down from us consisted of two good-looking, youngish parents and their little daughter, until the good-looking couple got divorced, and then it was just the little girl and her pretty divorced mother. At one of the houses located just as you turn onto our street, there was a suicide.

By 1974 we had been in that house for six years. My parents bought it in 1968 for \$20,000. The lawns were tiny, and the homes were so close that you could hear the neighbors’ arguments. We lived in a three-bedroom split-level, with a splash of brick to offset the aluminum sided front. The split-level was one of about three styles on the entire street. The next street over, Livermore Lane, offered only one style; they were all red brick, lined up in uniform rows. When we rode our bikes to visit friends on Livermore, we had to pay attention to the addresses and the tiny differentiating details so we wouldn’t miss their home.

The north side of Elyria was one of the newer parts of town. When they bought it, my Dad worked right in town, at the massive Fisher Body plant on the city’s west side. My grandpa on my mother’s side, whom we called Boppy, also worked there. But in the intervening years, there was some shakeup at Fisher Body – a downsizing or something – that put my Dad out of work for a while, until he eventually landed at the Chevy plant in Brook Park. Now instead of living and working in the same town, Dad faced a daily 30-minute commute.

* * *

My mother had an excellent grasp of history, and typically shared small bits of interesting information with us kids. Sometimes we had no idea what she was talking about. She once read a book about Alexander the Great and told us, “After a war, he just stood there and cried. They

asked him why, and he said there was nothing else to conquer. Isn't that something?" And we would nod, or even go back to our cereal bowls with no acknowledgement at all, but these things stuck with me. I'd later mention the same little tidbits in school and sometimes impress teachers.

Another day, Mom observed, "All my children were born during tragedies."

I asked her what she meant. She explained: "Yevi was born in October, 1962. It was the Cuban missile crisis. You probably don't know much about that, but it was scary. We thought we were going to end up in a war with Russia. You were born a week after John F. Kennedy got shot. Stacey was born in April of 1968, right after Martin Luther King was killed."

"What about this one?" I asked, meaning the baby on the way.

"We're in the middle of it. Watergate."

I shrugged. It didn't seem like a tragedy. It was more of a slow-motion nightmare. Watergate had dragged on so long, it was simply background noise to me. It was on the radio, TV, on the cover of every magazine. Nixon was a crook, but my Dad said they were all crooks. Maybe I just wasn't seeing it.

* * *

The summer was a cruel time to be pregnant, but Mom soldiered on. Our house had no air conditioning, save for a room unit in my parents' bedroom. I think I remember the heat so vividly because I have so little tolerance for it; during hot and humid Cleveland days I would get light-headed and sluggish, unable to do much more than sit around and read. I was always mystified by friends who could ride bikes and play baseball in 90-degree weather, and I wondered guiltily if I was simply lazy. However, the weather was and is a constant topic of conversation in the Midwest, and extremes of weather are doubly so; for Clevelanders, the memory of the deadly July 4, 1969 storm, when 100-mph winds tore across Lake Erie without

warning and killed several people at Fourth of July parties, was still fresh. That day, we went down to the basement while the rain blasted the house, and later, when we finally came upstairs, the only way to get down Wilder was with a canoe. Also, only a few months before, in April of 1974, a powerful tornado struck several hours away in Xenia, Ohio, killing 34 people and leveling a quarter of the city.

June melted into July, and July was no easier for Mom than the previous eight months. Finally, as the last days of the month ticked off, it was “time to go.” My sisters and I were packed off to Nanny and Boppy’s house. For entertainment, I had my baseball glove and a ball, some toys, and a small stack of my beloved comic books. Nanny (my grandmother) stayed with us all day, taking a break from her job in a small Elyria factory that made golf balls, and Boppy was there too, though he left in the early afternoon to work the second shift for Fisher Body.

The news came after a day or so. Mom had a boy, named Nathan, on July 31, 1974. He was born at Elyria Memorial Hospital, just like the rest of us.

I was glad I had a little brother now. My best friend at the time, a boy across the street named Dan, had two older brothers and, much later, a younger brother. I imagined life in a house with four boys, a place where all dolls were replaced with action figures, where all Easy Bake ovens were replaced with slot cars, and thought that would be great. Mom warned me not to expect too much. “You’re ten years older. By the time he’s your age, you’ll be twenty. He’s going to be a tiny little bugger for a long time, Ricky.”

I realized she was right, but it was still nice to even things out. I really wanted to see him. We all did. But we couldn’t come to the hospital right away.

* * *

A few days after the baby arrived, Dad showed up at Boppy and Nanny's house. We peppered him with questions.

"What does he look like?"

"Like you," he said, nodding at me. "He sleeps mostly."

"When can we see him?"

Dad paused. He looked tired. His normal swagger was gone. He seemed to be searching for what to say.

"It will be a few days yet," he said, vaguely. He looked toward Boppy and Nanny, and I followed his eyes. Boppy simply nodded, and Nanny wrung her hands nervously, then looked down. I looked from Nanny to Dad, and from Dad to Nanny, trying to figure things out.

"What's going on?"

I was old enough to know that when a baby was born, the family goes to the hospital. You bring balloons and flowers and the Mommy is in a hospital bed and the new baby is there. But we were sitting at home. Something wasn't right.

"Eh, don't worry about it," Dad said, waving a hand in the air. "He's a little sick. Maybe you can see him in a few days."

I got the hint and retreated. The adults huddled in the kitchen, and then Dad disappeared again. I sensed a black cloud settling over the house. Whispers and worry and secrets were dead giveaways.

It was already difficult being there. Boppy and Nanny did their best to keep us entertained and fed and out of trouble, but it wasn't the same without Mom. She was the one person in the world who best knew our moods and our routines. I missed her, desperately. And it got worse each day.

* * *

After a week had passed with little news from Dad, and no hospital visit in sight, I couldn't take it anymore. I sat in the living room and started to cry.

"Why are you crying?" Yevi asked.

"Leave me alone." I slid off the couch and sat on the floor. I wanted to flee the sight of sweaty, sniveling Richard Nixon on the TV set, but there was nowhere to go; the living room was the lone room in the house that was air conditioned, and I wasn't willing to leave it. I ruffled the edges of my comic books and cried some more. Nanny came into the room and asked what was wrong.

"Nothing," I blurted. "Everything. I can't believe Mom isn't here."

"Aw Ricky," she said. "She wants to be here. But she has to be with the baby."

"How do you know? Did you talk to her on the phone?"

"I talk to her everyday," she answered. This infuriated me even more. I had no idea Mom was regularly calling. Now I was sobbing.

"She's never coming," I said. The room swam in front of me, as tears blocked my vision. I was tired of being here. My grandparents were fine as caretakers but I needed more than that. And that made me feel guilty. It wasn't their fault that Mom was so much more central to my existence.

Nanny seemed at a loss for words. She wanted to comfort me. And she seemed to sense that my meltdown was contagious; my sisters, especially Stacey, who was then 6, seemed unnerved as well, now that I had so baldly articulated this pain. But I think Nanny wanted to avoid any false promises about "going home any day now" or "seeing the baby soon."

* * *

Eventually, after a week or so, Mom and Dad came to get us, and took us home. But the baby remained in the hospital. Until then, all the explanations from Dad or my grandparents were maddeningly vague, contradictory and confusing.

“The baby is sick.”

“They took him to a hospital in Cleveland.”

“Don’t know when the little guy is coming home.”

Mom, however, made it a point to tell us everything now that we were all home and getting back to normal. She rattled off the details: A few days after baby Nathan was born, he contracted spinal meningitis. I didn’t understand the medical terms, but was impressed that Mom did. She said it was extremely serious, the kind of thing that can kill people. The doctors in Elyria said the baby’s best shot would be to go to Rainbow Babies and Children’s Hospital in Cleveland, so when he was a week old, Nathan was whisked away in an ambulance and driven to Cleveland. And that’s where he stayed, for the first six weeks of his life.

“It’s one of the best hospitals in the world,” Mom told us. I had never heard of the place.

She said the doctors did something called a “spinal tap” on Nathan, and that it was one of the most painful things a person could experience. I was horrified. The baby was so little, defenseless. Mom explained that the doctors didn’t have a choice, and that if they didn’t do it, things would be worse. To me, this whole thing seemed unfair and weird. To think of a baby being so sick was awful.

* * *

He was still at Rainbow Hospital when the fifth-grade school year started. I looked forward to the year. My teacher, Miss Nemeth, was youngish (she had gone to high school with my Mom) and intolerant of nonsense, without being a stick in the mud. She looked like Gloria

Steinem. She would stop mischief immediately, pointing to an offender and yelling, “If you don’t keep your hands to yourself, you’re going to take them home in a paper bag.” It was a nonsensical comment that managed to scare the addressee to death and silence the rest of us, though some of us stifled smiles. She would act irritated if you didn’t behave and if you didn’t work hard. I remember she used to hound me for details about my little brother, and she would keep pushing for more details if I just shrugged or gave one-word answers. “I can’t believe you or Yuvonne didn’t tell me about this sooner,” she said, annoyed but not in a mean way. She scared me but I also liked her.

In the initial weeks of that year, Mom would get us ready for school in the mornings, and once we left she’d get in the car and make the drive into Cleveland, spending the day at the hospital. As the weeks dragged on, Mom seemed to grow less worried and anxious. Having a baby in the hospital was still a concern, but his condition wasn’t getting worse. And if her time at Rainbow wasn’t exactly pleasant, it was certainly interesting to her.

“The nurses are so nice. They treat me like a real person,” she’d say. “In Elyria, they shoved Nathan into an incubator and said to leave him alone. At Rainbow they actually let me hold him. I asked if that was really okay and they said that’s the best thing for the baby. I couldn’t believe it. It’s just so different.”

The hospital served great food, she said. They had bright young doctors from all over the world who were friendly and talked to you right there in the cafeteria, she said. They had beds for Moms who wanted to spend the night, she said. You could see the whole city from the hospital room, she said. They must have spent millions on all the machines and the nice rooms and everything else, she said. She went on and on.

I was jealous. I liked Cleveland. It was only 40 miles away but might as well have been another world. There were the odd times we'd drive through the city on our way to visit family in Pennsylvania, or the school field trips to the Natural History Museum or the Cleveland Zoo, or the once-a-year Indians game. But Dad didn't care much for the city. He made it sound like a race riot was going to break out at any moment. Mom, however, was a different story. You could see her eyes light up when she talked about the city and the people and the history of the hospital.

"Rainbow is the hospital that invented baby formula, in 1915," she told us. "Isn't that something? Just think, it never existed until someone in Cleveland figured it out."

* * *

It was a Saturday when we all got to finally see him. Mom was staying there for a stretch of days, so we packed in to the car – Dad, Boppy, Nanny in the front seat, and me and my sisters in the back. Boppy's car was a massive, stately 1972 Olds 98, an impressive machine that he had purchased brand-new with his GM discount. I always loved riding in that car. It had air conditioning, leg room, an eight-track tape player with concert-hall quality speakers and pretty much every other luxury one could want. But despite the sweet ride, the mood was weird. My grandparents were no more happy to be driving into Cleveland than my Dad. The sky was overcast. Inside the car, it was quiet. I didn't feel like disturbing the silence, though I would have preferred some good cheer. It made me miss Mom even more.

The highway took us to the edge of Lorain County and deposited us into Cuyahoga County. There was the green of the westernmost Cleveland suburbs, beginning with Westlake, then the quaint Rocky River, then the funky urbanity of Lakewood, and finally the passage inside the city limits, to Cleveland's west side. The lawns got smaller, the bustle became faster. Endless

rows of houses then gave way to buildings – factories, churches of all kinds, shopping centers, supermarkets, restaurants, diners – and finally the buildings that defined the city, the Terminal Tower and Municipal Stadium and the other tall banks and offices, burst into sight. They remained in our view as we drove through the hairy turns of I-90, including the most famous one, the Innerbelt Curve near downtown, which all the locals – even the traffic reporters – refer to as Dead Man’s Curve. On our right, a sign announced that a large building was home to WJW TV-8, the local CBS affiliate. These were small thrills to us. Past the heart of the city, heading a few more minutes east, we came to our exit, following the signs to University Circle, where Rainbow Hospital was located. We navigated a crazy quilt of streets and museums and hospitals and colleges. Boppy slowed down. Dad scanned the area and pointed to a parking deck.

We got out of the car and entered the hospital. I looked around at the smiling receptionists and people in wheelchairs and nurses and doctors in white coats. I supposed it was miserable to be sick but at least you were doing something and out mingling with people. No wonder so many TV shows took place in hospitals. We rode up in an elevator and walked down a series of halls, and arrived at the room.

“Mom!” I said.

She smiled and motioned us to come in. She nodded toward a little bed, sheathed in clear plastic.

“There he is.”

* * *

“He’s sleeping,” Stacey said.

“Babies are always asleep,” Mom said. “They eat and sleep and poop. Not much else.”

We laughed, but I found that disappointing. Where was all the fun baby stuff, the goo-goo and gah-gah and silly antics of the babies in TV shows?

His hair was long on the top, but the side had been shaved for some medical reason. It was a Mohawk haircut, we decided. Actually, to me, he looked more like an old man with a sad little comb-over, the long part unkempt and sloppy from this never-ending sleeping. It was strange to see this new baby but not be able to hold him and pass him from person to person. We stood there, around an incubator. Then we started talking with each other and relaxing.

I sat down in a chair and looked around at the machines. There were signs of normal human life – a tray of hospital food, a bed with blankets and pillows – but they were surrounded by institutional markers like printed signs and chalkboards and beeping devices and plastics tubes that methodically dripped fluids. I wondered if the baby would die inside this place. I wondered what would happen to my mother if that happened. I was ashamed to have these thoughts, but I couldn't help it.

I didn't want to think about that anymore, so I moved to the window along the far edge of the room, which was several stories up. I could see the city down below, a fascinating interplay of streets and buildings and tiny cars. Across from us was a wing of the hospital. I wondered about the kids in that wing, whether they had cancer or broken necks or something else horrible. Were they here for weeks or months or longer? A small playground had been erected on the roof, and that produced another cascade of questions. Why would anyone allow kids, especially sick kids, to play on a roof? Mom explained that they were certainly safe, and that this is what happens in cities.

“What is that?” I said, pointing to a gold dome a few blocks away, alternately reflecting the sun and then diminishing as clouds rolled past.

“A really old church,” she said. “It’s an orthodox church.”

“What does that mean?”

Mom tried to explain it. “They’re like Catholics. But not exactly.”

I nodded. She explained that Cleveland had all kinds of people, from all kinds of places in Europe – Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, Ireland, Slovakia, and so on. And usually, people brought their faith with them when they came to a new country. And that’s why parts of Cleveland had churches that looked like they were straight out of Europe. “If you were Catholic back home, you probably are Catholic here,” she said.

We were surrounded by Catholics in Elyria. They spoke in a lingo of “CCD classes” and “first communion” and they all went to St. Jude Church, or sometimes even St. Jude School, and they talked about nuns and they had a priest whom they called “Father.” We also went to church, but it was nothing like that. We attended Church of the Open Door in Elyria, an evangelical “mega-church” before there even was such a term. We had pastors (not priests) and they wore suits and ties (not robes). Instead of a gold dome, our church’s architecture blended right in with suburbia; it was a red brick building that looked like an extremely tall house, except that it had a steeple on top, and was surrounded by a parking lot to accommodate the thousand or so people who attended every Sunday. Oddly, Rainbow Hospital reminded me of our church. It was large and full of energy and gave off a vibe of positivity and cheerfulness.

In among the patient rooms were little lobbies and places where nice couches were set up and there were things to look at. My only experience with hospitals were the couple times I had been in the ER locally; most recently, I had gotten five stitches in my left foot after ripping a

gash open underneath the sharp end of a chain link fence. That was about a year or two before the new baby arrived; I just remember our hospital being noisy, crowded, small and filled with a lot of accident-prone sad sacks like myself. By comparison, Rainbow was a palace.

I had brought my comic books with me, so I opened one, a *Justice League of America*, and went through the story. After trying multiple times to read the breathless dialogue I gave up, as the commotion and the people-watching was just too enticing to fully concentrate on whatever Batman and Green Arrow and The Flash were up to. I convinced someone, my parents or grandparents, to give me money for the vending machine. I looked down, embarrassed, when a pretty nurse smiled at me and told me how brave my brother was. Returning to the room, chips in hand, I sighed heavily and paced to show my restlessness. I was told to knock it off and be patient. But eventually the rest of them realized it was time to go and we said our goodbyes.

“Why can’t you come home now?” I asked Mom.

“I can’t,” she said. She drew me near. I didn’t want to face another evening without her around. However, I had no choice but to accept it.

The drive home was even worse than the ride in. The anticipation of seeing the baby was past; my thoughts were now occupied by questions of why they still needed to keep him in the hospital, and how much longer we could live in this disjointed way. After being halted by yet another red light, Boppy uttered a disgusted groan. We all wanted to be out of the car, away from each other, to find something to distract us.

When we finally arrived at our grandparents’ house, Boppy quickly prepared for work, and we found something to watch on TV. Dad got into his little car, a Chevy Monza, and sped away. I was never sure if he just sat in our now-empty home all alone, surrounded by unwashed dishes and dirty laundry, or if he was working or playing softball or sitting at a bar.

We spent that night, once again, at Boppy and Nanny’s house. We used the makeshift shower in the basement and got into our pajamas and Nanny made us popcorn while we watched *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. I allowed myself to smile.

* * *

It didn’t continue like that forever. In the end, the spinal meningitis went away. Mom told us that the disease often had lasting effects – like robbing a child of his hearing, or affecting his gait, or something else – but Nathan was, in her words, “healthy as a horse.”

“So bring him home.”

“Patience, Rick,” she said. “These things take time.”

And so they did. I came home from school one warm September day. The front door was open, as were the windows, catching the last nice breath of summer. Mom’s car was there (some large, used Dodge that none of us liked). I walked into the house and Mom greeted me. She seemed to have been waiting for this. In a quiet voice, she told me to go upstairs. “There’s a surprise.”

For a crazy second I envisioned new bunk beds, or some coveted toy. But of course she didn’t mean that. I got to the top of the stairs and ducked into his room. The baby was there, asleep, breathing easily, content. Nathan was finally home. There were now four kids in the house, like it was supposed to be.

UNDER THE TABLE

Ohioans are addicted to football. They bond over it, play it, go to games, buy the t-shirts, watch it, and give Browns tickets as Christmas gifts. Dads and sons and grandfathers and sometimes the women watch the games together and wear the team jerseys and sweatshirts. Woody Hayes and Jim Brown are talked about like beloved old family members. Office workers and welders review the previous game on Mondays, and on Thursdays and Fridays they start talking about the next opponent. And on Saturdays and Sundays, if they know someone, they call a bookie.

* * *

They looked so harmless. They were just little slips of paper, about the size of lottery tickets, with point spreads for pro and college football games. I remember the first time Dad handed one to me. Ohio State is favored by 18 points? The Cowboys were supposed to lose to the Vikings? For a kid who loved football, looking over teams and point spreads was fascinating. Some of the point spreads made perfect sense, and others did not; as I went down the list, I'd be ecstatic one second, outraged the next.

* * *

I had another good teacher that year. I had only ever had women teachers in school before that, from Mrs. Church in kindergarten all the way to Miss Nemeth in fifth, but now, in sixth grade, my teacher was a guy. His name was Craig Halttunen. He was a World War II vet, but he looked younger than a lot of those guys.

Sometimes, when we'd be taking a test, the room would be perfectly still. Our heads would be down, our eyes glued to our papers as we wrote furiously. In the middle of that velvet silence, a horrendous crash would shock us, eliciting gasps and screams. Looking up, we'd see

Mr. Halttunen, his hand still clutching the broom that he'd banged against the metal trash can, a trick he'd probably learned from his old drill sergeant. The gasps evaporated into "oh my gods" and laughter, but he'd feign surprise and insist that we get back to work.

Other times, he'd call on one student – "Patrick?" – while looking directly in the eyes of another student on the opposite side of the room. He'd maintain a frozen, goofy newscaster grin. The other student, confused, would ask tentatively, "Me?"

In response, he'd repeat himself, once again looking one way but calling on a student on the other side of the room. "No. Patrick?"

There'd be nervous giggles, and finally Patrick from across the room, who had his hand up, would speak. And our lesson on the 1976 presidential primaries or the world capitals would continue as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

He was subversive. His humor was liberating, a gift. For an adult to offer children the gift of silliness – to play the fool, and not care – forged a confidence between us. The age difference no longer mattered when we shared the same jokes, when he trusted us enough to know we'd get him. Going to school that year was a pleasure.

* * *

In the front yard, I caught the football for the hundredth time, whispering to myself like an announcer – "he makes an unbelievable catch!" – and looked up and saw his car coming. Dad's Chevy Monza was a cheap gray job that looked good for a year or so and then went to seed in a hurry. The car pattered to a halt and parked on the street directly across from the house. He smiled as I walked toward him.

"Come here, I want to show you something," he said. He was holding a small ticket.

* * *

Years later, after things had gone south with them, my mother told me this: “He once disappeared for days. I had no idea where he was. Finally, he comes home, and tells me he had gone to the Kentucky Derby. I mean, how far away is that? I’m like, okay, I’m here with two little babies and you’re going to a horse race in another state? I was just shocked that a person could do that. But that’s him.”

* * *

“What do the numbers mean?” I asked, turning the ticket over in my hand.

“Point spreads,” Dad said. “It shows the number of points that a team is supposed to win by. You bet some money and if your team covers the point spread, you win.”

“What do you win?”

“You win even more money. And if you’re wrong, you lose it.”

I looked back at the list. The pale green card was smudged with my Dad’s oily fingerprint.

Pittsburgh 10.5 BUFFALO

Los Angeles 6 PHILLY

CLEVELAND 4.5 San Fran

“Why are there capital letters for some teams?”

He smiled again, perhaps proud that I had noticed.

“Those are the home teams.”

“Who cares about that?”

“Because teams play better at home,” he said.

Now he seemed more impatient. Apparently I had missed something very obvious. He sighed heavily and turned his body. I moved back to avoid the swinging door. I noticed an

aluminum softball bat in the backseat of his car, even though the season was long over. The interior was filthy. He lifted himself out of the car and slammed the door. The sound was a hollow, American-metal thunk.

“Do you need this back?” I asked, handing him the card as I walked beside him in the road.

“No, I have plenty,” he told me. He shuffled slowly, the unhurried walk of a man who was now off the clock.

* * *

He always liked sports. Dad was an only child, and was called “Ricky” as a boy growing up in various New England cities. His father had a Master’s degree from Harvard, and his mother graduated from Radcliffe. She also studied in France somewhere along the line. They sent my Dad to private schools and camps and dance lessons, and my grandmother recorded his progress – the first 12 years, at least – in an old, dusty memory book. (I retrieved the book from my grandparents’ home in Arkansas, where these two New Englanders, in true fish-out-of-water manner, had retired after Grandpa’s tenure as an editor at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.) In 1949, when Dad was ten, his mother wrote the following:

Ricky’s fifth-grade experiences are painful to contemplate. His teacher, Miss Adams, irresponsibly waltzed off on an extended trip to California during the school year; her successor, Mr. Bauchard, after teaching a few weeks, took off for a Florida vacation; and the class then had a substitute for a substitute. Then, the first teacher returned. Discipline had long since disappeared from the classroom: ruler fights, flying pencils, spitballs and incessant talking were the order of the day. Not much education was possible in the pandemonium.

At the end of the year, Ricky spent a month at Camp Fuller. His counselor was Stan Burdick. During his stay, Ricky took part in a burlesque of *Red Riding Hood*; he became a Flying Fish in swimming.

His keenest interest is baseball. He listens to broadcasts of games on the radio; reads magazines devoted to the sport; and prefers attendance at major league games to any other recreation. He has started a collection of players' autographs; among them, Mel Parnell, John Lindell, Bob Elliott, Buddy Kerr, Sam Jethroe, Ernie Johnson.

On one occasion, Patsy Blake was Ricky's guest at a Red Sox game; upon another, John Cragan was his guest at a Braves' game.

Ricky often plays baseball with members of David Norman's Scout Troop, and the Cragans. He spent \$12.75 of his own money for a glove, and delights in wearing Red Sox shorts and a Braves' ball cap. He wanted a Louisville Slugger for his birthday more than anything else.

* * *

Dad and I entered the house. My mother was in the kitchen, looking after Nathan, now a year old, and stirring a steaming pot of spaghetti noodles. She smiled as we entered the house, then quickly scolded me for not removing my muddy shoes.

"What's that?" she said, pointing to the card in my hand.

"It's the football games for Sunday." I offered her the card. "Dad gave it to me."

She examined it. She spoke in a quiet voice.

"I don't like these in the house," she said to me, while looking at Dad. She pitched the ticket into the trash.

* * *

I remember one specific day, a little later in the fall. It was October 22, 1975.

The school was cold. I pulled down the sleeves of my oversized Washington Redskins sweatshirt to warm my hands. It was white with yellow around the neck and sleeves and an image of the team's helmet sat square in the center; below that, the team's name was written in angular letters meant to be evocative of "Indian" writing. That morning I yawned constantly and tried to shake myself from sluggishness.

"Did you watch the game last night?"

I nodded and smiled sheepishly at whoever asked the question. It could have been Mike, or the other Mike, or Eric or Pat or Steve or any of the other boys; I don't remember now.

"They let me stay up," I said. "I can't believe Boston won like that."

A lot of them were Reds' fans. The team was easy to root for, since they won so often. And they were from Ohio, which might have meant something. But I disliked them. The Red Sox' Game Six win the night before was an extraordinary thing, and my parents had let me watch the whole thing.

"Are you watching Game Seven?" I was asked.

"Yeah," I said. It was a dumb question. Of course I would watch.

That World Series seemed to mean a lot to my Dad. I reminded myself that the team I was watching on TV, attempting to steal a championship from the clutches of a Reds team that had no weaknesses, was his boyhood team, wearing roughly the same uniforms and playing in the same stadium that he had visited as a child.

"Did you ever go to Red Sox games?" I asked one night as Carl Yastrzemski stood in the batters' box.

"Uh huh," he nodded. "I saw Ted Williams play."

I was impressed. It was like saying you had met the Beatles.

“What team did you see them play?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe the Yankees.”

I wanted him to go on, but he didn’t. He never did. I always mined for nuggets like this as best I could but I was not persistent, and he never gave up much.

The night before, we had watched Game Six together. The Reds were cruising toward a win, and the end of the Series. I watched sullenly as it got later and Mom fussed about the time. By the eighth inning, Cincinnati had a 6-3 lead and the announcers were lauding the Reds as an all-time great team. And then Bernie Carbo hit a 3-run homer to tie the game and the crowd went insane and I realized I’d never seen a game like this. They played 12 innings of tense baseball, with the season on the line, and my parents let me stay up to see the greatest baseball game ever played, until Carlton Fisk finally hit that home run, waving his arms to keep the ball fair.

It only hurt the next day.

“I let you sleep in as long as possible,” Mom said the next morning, as I tried to get myself moving. “Hurry and get ready for school.” Hours earlier, Dad had somehow managed to get up at 5:00 am and drag himself to the Chevy plant.

In school that day, which went on forever, I yawned. I was a skinny kid, and the chill of fall made me shiver, even indoors. My Redskins sweatshirt was warm. It was a gift from my Dad.

A year or so earlier, Dad and the rest of the UAW had gone on strike. I remember the tense conversations between my Mom and Dad, talking about when he was going to be manning the picket line and how they were going to pay the bills. Dad talked about “strike pay” and “SUB pay” and food stamps and unemployment.

“And Wayne said he could hook me up, under the table,” Dad said. Mom shrugged. Dad seemed to relish this period, as I remember. It was an adventure. A chance to prove his resourcefulness.

“We go on strike, and we get strike pay, at least for a few weeks,” he told me. “If I work the picket line, I get even more money. Then we get SUB. And we sign up for food stamps so we’re covered there. And I drive a bulldozer with Wayne and he pays me in cash.”

“All right,” I said, grinning. Dad had it figured out. “You should do this more often.”

“It’s only good for a while,” he said. “It goes on too long and you’re in bad shape. But for now, might as well beat the system.”

He loved it. This little boomlet brought out the guerilla entrepreneur in my Dad. Mom and Dad used their little pile of cash to buy a freezer for the basement, purchased solely for the purpose of refrigerating a side of beef.

“What’s a side of beef?” I asked.

“Half of a cow,” they said. And it truly was half a cow, complete with brain (which they, shockingly to us kids, cooked and ate) and heart (which I took to school for a science project).

I had no idea Dad could drive a bulldozer. This was one more skill of his that he never wished to share. Or maybe he really couldn’t do it but was going to bluff his way through a job until he either mastered it, or they canned him. Dad’s job was going to be “under the table,” and I asked what that meant.

“They’ll pay him in cash, and not report it,” my mother said. She didn’t expound. The area was definitely “gray.”

Since I never had any of my own money, I found these discussions of work and pay fascinating. Being an adult meant you did a few things and they paid you all this money, which

you could just use however you wanted. The job didn't exactly make sense to me. Dad would be driving bulldozers but somehow he'd be able to get his hands on merchandise, still in the wrappers. He often brought things home that he'd poached. I realize now the job was probably something involving a disposal company.

One day, among the things he brought home was the Washington Redskins sweatshirt. A Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt would have been more treasured, since I was a rabid Cowboys' fan, but beggars can't be choosers and it was still a decent team, and that was good enough. I thanked him for it and put it on. It was huge on me, but I didn't care.

"Are we now the family that picks through the garbage?" Mom wondered aloud. There was an edge to her question. I shrugged. I liked what I had, it looked brand-new, and I didn't care where it came from.

The strike didn't last long – maybe a few weeks. Life returned to the old rhythms. Dad was relieved to be back to his normal job but I think he missed what the strike had afforded him – the ability to make some choices and take some initiative and work a well-constructed strategy. It was a mini-boom for our family; long after the strike was done, we were still eating steak, I was wearing the Redskins sweatshirt until it no longer fit, and in the summers we used that new freezer to make homemade popsicles in little Dixie cups. This "under-the-table" stuff seemed like a good deal.

* * *

Throughout the fall, Dad continued to bring home the football betting tickets. He knew I was fascinated. This gave the games an entirely new dimension. It wasn't just one team against another anymore; it was the idea that some people had the authority or audacity to declare one team eleven points better than another, and everyone who wanted to play along had to put up

*money to lodge their agreement or disagreement. I probably asked him the question directly:
“Who decides the point spreads?”*

“Vegas,” he said, as if that settled it. And I guess it did. You can’t argue with God, the banks, the doctors, your teachers, or Vegas.

On Saturdays, we watched college football together, unless Dad was at work or doing something else. Sundays were more predictable. I’d get home from church, and we’d watch the pro games, all day long. Late in a game he’d remark that he hoped a team ahead by four points would kick another field goal, and I’d ask why it mattered. “They need to cover the spread,” he’d say.

* * *

In his day job, Dad was a millwright at the Chevy plant. I looked up the definition, and learned that millwrights were union guys who assembled and maintained and repaired equipment in the plant. If I had asked my father for a definition, the answer would have been less straightforward; depending on his mood, he would have told me that he “does what they say” or “tries to hide all day” or “fixes things.” And then he would have changed the subject.

Dad didn’t subscribe to the “work hard, play hard” philosophy. It was more like “show up for your job so you can afford to play.” In the summers, there was an endless string of softball games for teams in beer leagues, church leagues and every other league. He dealt cards for auto worker poker games that lasted all night. He’d earn some money for his efforts – \$50 or \$75 for the night – and then head straight back to the plant in the morning, bleary-eyed, where he’d punch the clock and look around for a discreet place to get some sleep.

“I was working at the welfare office after college,” Dad told me one night. He was drunk and chatty. “I would process the cases of autoworkers who lost their jobs for whatever reason.

You had to really be a bum to lose a job like that. I'd look at their paperwork and see these guys were making twice what I did, and I was a college guy. So I went over to the auto plant and got a job.”

Mom confirmed the story later. “He had two babies at home. We needed the money and he figured, why not? Why go to an office job if it doesn't pay anything?”

* * *

I realize now that the betting tickets were his “in” with whoever ran the local sports book. Dad and some other guys distributed the magic tickets throughout the Chevy plant, just in time for the weekend. He probably made a few extra bucks. And it just grew from there, until he took his own bets.

* * *

Sometimes he was reflective. Beer could loosen him up, but there were other times when he was a little different; less cocky, more philosophical. I remember this one time.

We were in the funeral home, at the viewing for Boppy, in 1981. Dad was uncomfortable. He constantly tugged at the white collar of his dress shirt, as though it was strangling him. He was making me nervous, so I tried to give him the cold shoulder. Still, he hovered around me, making small talk. Maybe, I thought, the son-in-law never knows what to do, because he's just the son-in-law, not blood; but I still wished he were different, especially right now.

“He never got to retire, you know that?” he said to me. “61 years old.” It was obviously on his mind, and he shook his head. I nodded cordially but had no idea why that was profound, or even relevant. As a 17-year-old, I thought retirement sounded about as dreadful as working. I shrugged, and said nothing.

Men, some middle-aged and others a little older, came to pay their respects, shaking my hand and telling me they knew my granddad and that they thought he was a good, decent man. I nodded and assured them that I agreed.

“Dick, how are you?” said one man, thin and hunched over, his gray hair hanging from his head in wisps, and my Dad returned the greeting and shook his hand. He had the watery eyes of an old man, the teeth that had seen better days, and a pained shuffle. I thought he was 75 or so. He shook my Dad’s hand and the two of them exchanged insider stories about Fisher Body and people they knew. I sometimes forgot that Dad and Boppy worked in the same plant for a few years, before Dad went out to work in Brook Park, and that they had mutual acquaintances. Dad introduced the man to me, he said some nice things, then he left us.

“Wow.” Dad’s voice was low. “I barely recognized him. I worked with him not that long ago. He looks like he aged fifty years.”

Dad gave me his look, where one eyebrow is cocked, which means that wisdom is about to be imparted. “The factory really takes it out of you,” he said, nodding over to the old man, who was across the room shaking hands with Nanny. “You work that long and end up broken down and beat up.”

“Why do you think I don’t want to work there?” I said.

He shrugged at my callous comment. I probably had missed the point, or maybe I subconsciously wanted to hurt someone.

“What I mean is,” he said more slowly, “that kind of work, you can do it for awhile. But some of these guys stay in the factory forever. And at some point the body can’t take it. You end up like him. I don’t know.”

He left me, ducking outside for the comfort of a cigarette.

* * *

I went home for Thanksgiving in 1983 and realized my parents' house was changing, subtly but definitively. Mom and Dad were now just past 40, and cool towards each other.

We sat at the Thanksgiving table with blank looks. Dad insisted that the television remain on while an uncompetitive game from Detroit droned on. As Mom lifted bowls and platters to the table, and forks and knives clinked against plates, the phone rang incessantly. Men were calling the house, asking for my Dad. Each time it rang, our spirits sank a little lower, and the dinner became a greater disaster. Dad confirmed the details of each conversation – “Two on Philly, sounds good” – and scribbled on a little notepad. He had to know we were annoyed.

All of this was new. This was no longer a matter of little sheets of paper with the week's point spreads. This was now a home where the family phone took calls from anonymous guys, and Dad jotting down the details like a nervous short order chef trying too hard on his first day at work. We were witnessing the chaotic birth of one man's entrepreneurial dream, helpless to stop any of it.

* * *

In the 1980s, my parents' marriage ended, and mine began.

I saw a lot of Dad. He would take me and Karen, along with his girlfriend, to the same prime rib restaurant where the waitress knew his name and the owner, an old man from Serbia with gold necklaces and a huge head, would come out and talk with my Dad, and they would kid with each other and everyone would roar with laughter at some inside joke. And other people would sit at our table – some old guy and his somewhat younger wife, who worked at a convenience store and would supply Dad with huge stacks of Ohio Lottery tickets – and Dad would pull out a wad of \$100 bills and pay the bill for everyone. By now the economy was good

and autoworkers were making solid money and the Browns were winning again. Dad was nearing 50. He drove a Corvette and had season tickets to the Cavaliers.

And eventually, he got to retire.

Sometime in the 1990s, GM made early retirement offers. Most people declined the offer, still needing full paychecks to pay off mortgages, college bills and boats. My Dad, however, took the offer. He had other income streams.

Dad stayed in his apartment all day Saturday and Sunday during football season, answering the phone and jotting down bets. During basketball season, he took phone calls every night. It was a good decade. He was very happy to get out of the plant.

“He didn’t even bother to take his tools,” one of his co-workers told me later, still laughing about it. “I think he took that retirement package and walked out on the spot. Bye-bye GM, don’t miss me too much! Your Dad’s a character, yes sir.”

THE LAST BOY ON EARTH

I stood at an upstairs window of our house, looking down into our backyard, and saw them. They poured over in a flood, climbing over the six-foot-high fence that separated us from our neighbors to the back. At first there were only a few of them, then there were scores of the beasts, their dark fur visible under heavy leather military uniforms, their heads in helmets, all of them muscled and aggressive and frightening.

We're done for, I thought. I left the window and scrambled through my house, trying to think of a plan but coming up empty. No one was home. I was alone. I was the last boy on earth.

* * *

"I had a nightmare," I said at breakfast. I ate Rice Krispies in whole milk, topped with sugar. The heavy heat was already creeping into the house. Every warm day was a reminder that the world was divided into houses with central air, and those without, and we were squarely in the "without" camp.

"What about?" asked my mother. She held my brother in one arm and shook a bottle with the other hand, working to get the powdered formula to mix with the hot water.

"Don't laugh."

"I won't," she said.

"I dreamed that the apes were taking over," I said, feeling silly. "It was so real. I got scared."

She looked at me and thought for a moment. "It's because you watch *Planet of the Apes* movies with your Dad." She stopped shaking the bottle and popped it into the baby's mouth.

"It's not the movies," I corrected her. A *Planet of the Apes* movie hadn't been on television in quite a while. "It's from a comic book. *Kamandi*. The apes and the lions take over

the world, in the future. I dreamed about it. It seemed like it was really happening. They were in our yard.”

She shifted my brother on her lap and fanned herself.

“Maybe don’t read so many of them,” she finally said. “Do something else. Go outside, ride your bike.”

I shrugged. There was no easy response to that. I certainly had no intention of reading fewer comic books.

* * *

Kamandi: The Last Boy on Earth was a monthly comic book that told the post-apocalyptic story of a young boy, trapped in a world where animals were in charge and humans were diminished. It borrowed liberally from *Planet of the Apes* but also – thanks to the magic of comic books – incorporated any element from 1970s culture that would make for a good story, including books and movies like *Chariots of the Gods*, *The Day of the Dolphin*, *The Exorcist*, the Watergate hearings, *Westworld*, *The Andromeda Strain*, and whatever else the comic’s legendary creator, Jack Kirby, could squeeze in.

* * *

After talking with my mother, I returned to my bedroom upstairs. I turned the window fan to the highest setting and stood in front of it.

From my room I could see down to the street that ran in front of our house, a split-level on a modest lot. Along an unbroken row of tiny front yards there were precisely three types of

houses, all built in the 1960s; assembly line houses for assembly line Dads. We were richer than poor people, but poorer than the families who lived three streets over, where the homes showed more variety, the pools were below ground, the Dads wore ties to work, and the backyards butted up against lovely stands of trees.

I collected my stack of comics from below my bed. The offending issue stared up at me. *The Brave and the Bold*, issue number 120 – the only comic book that ever gave me a nightmare.

* * *

Since the late 1930s, DC Comics has had two dependable cash cows: Superman and Batman. By the time I started reading superhero comics in the 1970s, the two characters had already survived three American wars, a censorship scare that nearly killed the industry, the collapse of competing publishers, and the changing tastes of several generations of young readers. And more than survive, these characters were thriving. In some of the earliest comics I purchased, a house ad told readers that Superman appeared in six regularly-published DC titles, and Batman appeared in just as many. By comparison, none of the company's other characters appeared in more than their own lone comic, unless they were lucky enough to have membership in the Justice League of America.

I liked both characters. I read five of the six Batman comics: *Batman*, *Detective Comics*, *World's Finest Comics*, *Batman Family*, and *Justice League of America*. I wasn't yet reading a comic known as *The Brave and the Bold*. DC had originally launched the comic in 1955 as an anthology book, featuring stories of the Viking Prince and Robin Hood and several other heroes of years past. It later morphed into a try-out title where science fiction, espionage, and super hero concepts were tested. Issue 28 of the series, in 1960, featured the first-ever appearance of the Justice League of America, and a 1964 issue featured the first-ever Teen Titans story. When the

Batman television series debuted on ABC in 1966 and became an instant hit, DC changed *The Brave and the Bold* once again, making Batman a permanent character but teaming him up with a different guest star each time. This format continued in every issue until the title was canceled in 1983.

* * *

Kamandi's own comic book first hit the stands only a few years earlier, in 1972. The creator, writer, and artist for the Kamandi comic was Jack Kirby, then in his 50s and viewed as the greatest artist the medium had ever known. I was aware of the character; the covers, drawn each month by Kirby, were typically over-the-top scenes of Kamandi on the brink of being killed, trapped in a ruined, illogical world. In one memorable cover, Kamandi is walking through the ruins of a building, downcast, as a broken speaker blares behind him: "You are leaving Chicago . . . come again . . . come again . . . come again." It was intriguing but dark.

* * *

I finally picked up *The Brave and the Bold* when that 120th issue came out (cover date: July 1975). By this time, Batman had spent upwards of 50 issues teaming up with every kind of DC character imaginable, from World War II hero Sgt. Rock, to The Flash and Plastic Man and even, perversely, The Joker. Just as on *The Johnny Carson Show*, every guest was new and wondrous, and the novelty became addictive. For this particular issue – a larger-than-normal comic that cost the princely sum of 50 cents on the newsstand – Batman was inexplicably teamed up with Kamandi, The Last Boy on Earth. The team-up itself was a shock, because the regular comic book reader knew that the characters, though both belonging to the same publisher, exist

in entirely different timelines; Batman is the protector of the fictional Gotham City in the present, while Kamandi claws the ruins of real places like Las Vegas, New York and Chicago in a post-disaster future.

But somehow, impossibly, these two characters were working together. The cover blared out the melodramatic story title, “This Earth Is Mine,” and there was Batman, in terrible danger, tied by the feet and being dragged by the gorilla soldiers, who are on horseback. From the right-hand side of the cover, Kamandi rides a horse and crashes toward Batman with a dagger in his hand, while one of the gorillas aims a gun toward him. In the background is the Mt. Rushmore monument. These representations of Americana are a familiar trope in the Kamandi stories, where nightmarish scenes play out against the backdrop of a once-proud nation, and the comic book panels feature such bald symbolism as a toppled Statue of Liberty or a crumbling Nevada casino. The excellent cover artist, Jim Aparo, conveys enough information in this thrilling scene that no dialogue is needed.

I was intrigued. The story looked interesting. I stood at the Gray Drug newsstand, began flipping through the interior pages, decided I’d take the plunge into Kamandi’s world, and asked my Mom to buy it for me. As usual, she said yes.

* * *

Kamandi’s appearance in *The Brave and the Bold* is the first time he has ventured outside his own comic, and appearing alongside Batman gives him instant credibility in my eyes. When we arrive home, I walk upstairs, drifting away from my sisters so I can concentrate on the story. I sit on my bed, my knees drawn up to my chin, staring intently at the full-page illustration (the “splash page”) that constitutes page one of the story. Kamandi, a teen-age boy with long yellow hair, perpetually shirtless and wearing only blue cut-offs and odd future-earth boots, is sprinting

through a deserted, rocky landscape (presumably near the same Mt. Rushmore depicted on the cover). Terror is etched on his face, and he looks behind him to see Batman and the gorilla soldiers, unfairly astride horses, chasing him at top speed. Unlike us readers, Kamandi is unaware of Batman, having never heard the stories and legends from the days before the great disaster.

The narration box rushes me into the middle of the drama: “Planet Earth, A.D. (After Disaster). Animals Rule! Men Obey!”

A gorilla soldier shouts from horseback: “Ho! Captain Bat will run down that yellow-haired animal! Follow him!”

The comic has thrown me a curveball; Batman and Kamandi were allies on the cover, but they’re enemies on page one. Batman chases Kamandi through the rocky landscape, until it is just the two of them, face to face. Kamandi shouts to him: “I’m a human being! Heir to a great past! You can’t enslave me . . . you bat creature!” Then, inexplicably, Batman, without speaking, allows Kamandi to escape. Kamandi climbs to safety, manages to find a horse of his own, and is once again pursued by the gorilla regiment. However, they are too frightened to follow him through a radiation belt, and Kamandi escapes. Batman, however, continues to surprise; he uses his strength, agility and cunning to lasso a line over the radiation. Both figures are climbing up toward the Mt. Rushmore monument.

“Again, Kamandi knows the fear of being relentlessly pursued by the same grim figure!” we read. “Higher, ever higher he scampers. . . until—”

Kamandi is suddenly yanked, by human arms, into a cave. He is now face-to-face with some off-shoot group of humans that, like Kamandi, can still talk and reason. They tell Kamandi that they have performed magic to send for Batman, a “champion of pre-Holocaust days.” The

elder of the tribe shows Kamandi the “holy book”, and he is holding a comic book – an actual issue of *The Brave and the Bold* from a few months earlier. This is DC Comics’ clever version of breaking the fourth wall, and my eyes drink it in.

“Without this Batman to lead us,” says Manton, the leader, “we can never break through the ranger patrols who regard these old carved faces of the presidents as gods . . . to be guarded to the death!” Batman then shows up, walking in to the cave and removing his mask, showing the people that he is merely a man – Bruce Wayne. Batman explains that back in 1975, he was going about his business, when he suddenly collapsed: “I was aware of the ambulance taking me to the hospital . . . aware that, fantastically, my body was splitting in two . . . one body remaining in the vehicle, another traveling into time.” Later, he adds, “It suddenly dawned on me I’d come into some incredible future world where animals prowled and hunted its few human survivors . . . so I joined the slave squad to protect myself . . . and led them in hunting you, Kamandi, the better to let you escape!”

I’m relieved at this explanation, but I hurry on through the story. Batman indeed acts as a deliverer, deceiving the apes by using Mt. Rushmore’s speakers and imitating the voice of a god. He commands the rangers (a pack of bears in uniforms) and gorillas to move the remains of an ancient jet plane, a time-consuming, laborious task that distracts the regiment, while he leads the small tribe to safety in the other direction. “They swallowed the bait, Kamandi!” Batman says. “Every ranger and gorilla’s busy with the plane – leaving most of the mountain unguarded!”

The vulnerable humans nearly reach sanctuary, until a youngster in the group makes an error in judgment and is pursued by a gorilla, Gorgo, on horseback. “The brave new world has suddenly become a terrifying, lonely place for one young human,” the tense narration reads. We see the young boy fleeing, while the gorilla swings a menacing lasso.

But Batman notices, and launches into action. He invokes his Captain Bat persona and commands the gorillas to halt – but now they aren't listening. "I suspected something rotten," says Gorgo. "His voice – it's the same as that of the chief stone god!!"

With that, the gorillas throw their ropes and ensnare Batman, then take off on their horses, cruelly dragging Batman along the ground behind them. Kamandi tells the rest of the escapees to keep moving, while he moves in the opposite direction to help Batman. He mounts the horse we saw earlier in the comic, catches up to Batman and slices the ropes (the same scene we saw on the cover), and pulls him to safety as bullets zip by their heads. At last, Batman, Kamandi and the small group of humans escape to safety.

As Batman gets ready to be magically flung back to 1975, he asks, "How about you, Kamandi? Why not come back with me to my time and live a normal life?"

Kamandi's answer is quick: "No, Batman, for better or worse, this is my world, and I must stay and battle to make it fit for humankind once again!"

And with that, the story concludes, as Batman wakes in a hospital bed, and Commissioner Gordon tells him he has been in a coma for days. Batman stares out the window at the Gotham skyline and thinks, "Goodbye and good luck to you, Kamandi, there in your harsh and terror-filled world! If only we could learn to make this world here and now a better one . . . so your future life could be bright and happy!"

The philosophizing continues with the final panel: "A worthy wish, Batman, but mankind's fate is to struggle – and that's why heroes like yourself and Kamandi are born! The End."

And I raise my head and blink. I rub my eyes and yawn. Not only have I read a Batman story unlike anything I've ever read before, but now I want to explore Kamandi's world in his

own comic. And I realized, even then, that that was the whole point of *The Brave and the Bold* – to use the popularity of Batman to boost less-popular characters.

* * *

From that point, I got hooked on the *Kamandi* series, and bought the issues each month until the comic was cancelled in 1978. I loved how it made a nightmare future world accessible and a great platform for adventure.

Much later, in graduate school, I tried to understand the appeal of this weird character and the world that Kirby had created. As critic Charles Hatfield writes: “Jack Kirby created a world ‘after disaster’ which was everything I wished, but dared not hope, a post-apocalyptic world could be: Fun. Such audacity!” (Hatfield 20). And much, much later, I talked about *Kamandi*, at the 2011 Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Popular Culture Association annual conference in Philadelphia, making the point that *Kamandi: The Last Boy on Earth* bridged an important literary gap. Not only did his work pre-date much of the popular dystopian literature that is targeted at today’s younger readers, it also echoed the great stories of previous generations of children’s literature with which Kirby was intimately familiar, as Hatfield asserts: “Despite the frequent violence of his adventures, *Kamandi* remained an ingenuous man-child, too capable to be destroyed, too wonderful to be quite corrupted by his brutal surroundings. He has literary cousins in Kipling’s *Kim* and in Jim Hawkins of *Treasure Island*” (Hatfield 20).

* * *

The *Kamandi*-Batman story was set in the desert Southwest, against a backdrop of canyons and dust and blazing orange sunsets. The heat permeated every panel of the comic, and resonated with me in the heat and humidity of an Ohio summer. I eventually took my mother’s advice and rode my bike up and down Wilder Avenue, then down Georgetown which ran

perpendicular to ours, then up Livermore, where every house was identical – red, brick and tiny. There were no apes and tigers anymore, just bikes and kids on lawns and hot cars baking in the street and people messing with sprinklers.

* * *

Escape from the Planet of the Apes was the second of four sequels to the original Charlton Heston classic. To boys in the Midwest at this point in time, these were the greatest movies ever made. *Escape*'s plot revolved around the apes hopping on a rocket and arriving on Earth in 1973. It was in theaters in 1971 and (more important to us) was broadcast on one of the TV networks a few years later; I remember when it aired, and our family gathered on the couch and on the floor of our living room, our hair still wet from baths, eating potato chips, attentive and blissfully happy and hoping to be scared, but not too much.

Dad loved these kinds of movies. In scenes where the apes and humans were busy pontificating on the differences between species and the nature of civilizations and the question of who dominated whom, Dad would say, very deadpan, “Does that mean I can have that banana now?” We’d smile, or outright laugh, and Mom would shush us, so as not to wake the baby. I still remember the movie’s ending; after humans seem to have re-asserted their dominance, and the future-apes are dead, the camera closes in tight on the surviving baby ape (Milo) in a circus cage, and he looks at the camera and says “Mama? Mama?” We greeted that final shocker with oohs and “no ways” and “look for another sequel.”

The next day I looked at my brother in his playpen, squirming and looking around, leaned in to his face and repeated “Mama, Mama” in a plaintive, infantile wail, and of course he smiled at me and I smiled back. I repeated “Mama, Mama” over and over, until Mom told me to knock it off. I was toying with it and playing with it and trying to understand its remarkable narrative

power. Two words that told you, as did so many other pop culture artifacts, that your comfortable life was going to end, sooner than you ever would have thought.

Dystopia was everywhere. It was part of the stories we were telling each other, the visions that energized and terrified us. The country was scared by the Russians, and by a crook in the White House; half my neighbors were scared that another plant was going to close. One night, Mom and Dad left us with a babysitter and the next morning, drinking her coffee, Mom went through the movie *Westworld* scene by scene, while we ate pancakes wide-eyed. I marched daily to Windsor School and the boys I walked with chattered excitedly about *The Six Million Dollar Man*. Other times, a few of them who were allowed to stay up for *The Stepford Wives* would go on and on about robotic Moms and evil Dads. The stories of tidy suburbs filled with secrets, power struggles, gender tensions and conspiracy theories titillated and unnerved us, and we couldn't put them down.

In Elyria, the cracks were already starting to show up, in lost jobs and closed factories. Our weird lives were echoed in the weird movies we couldn't stop watching. We were outfitted in garish polyester, like the mid-70s actors; we flashed fake smiles when neighbors came to the door. We too had secrets hidden in our homes, unhappiness we couldn't acknowledge to others. Everything, all of it, hung on our lives uncomfortably.

* * *

Riding my bike, I was hot and unable to escape the misery of the day. I headed home and soon I was lurching up the curb and onto my lawn, where I dropped the bike in one quick motion and headed in to the house, ripping my damp shirt over my head and dropping it on the floor, forgetting again that my mother would yell the moment she saw it laying there.

The heat of that summer day persisted, even after the clouds gathered. I lay on the floor in front of a box fan, and the living room started to darken; storm clouds which formed over Lake Erie always whipped swiftly over Elyria, changing the tenor and smell and mood of the day. A blessedly cool breeze was now entering the house, and inevitably – as if in a horror movie – I heard loud “slide . . . snap” sounds, going from room to room, but it wasn’t a demonic house presence, it was Mom, running around to close our windows in advance of the storm.

“I’m going outside, I want to get cooled off by the rain,” I told her.

“You are not,” she replied. “You’re going to the basement if it gets bad.”

I turned this over in my mind. People got rained on all the time: football players, lovers in TV commercials, me on my way home from school sometimes.

“What’s the big deal about a little rain? I won’t catch cold. It’s a billion degrees today.”

“Do what I say.”

That settled that. I didn’t go to the basement right away, however. I wanted to watch the violence of the storm, see the dark clouds form and listen to thunder roll in awful waves, hopefully see some lightning and talk about it later with my friends who would swear that “it almost hit them.” I sat in the living room which was now remarkably dark, and cinematic, thanks to the drama of the storm. I turned to the coffee table in front of me. Dad’s stuff – cigarettes, lighter, a Mack Bolan paperback – was mixed with Mom’s stuff, which included a church bulletin, a women’s magazine with Janet Lynn on the cover, and *The Late Great Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsey.

The storm raged outside. The lawn which last night was overrun by ape generals and a fearsome search party was now being battered and soaked by a mid-afternoon Ohio rain.

SPINNER RACK

When I first started, collecting comic books was hard. Everything was sold on magazine stands or spinner racks. Pharmacies and convenience stores nearly always carried comics, as did grocery stores. Big toy stores and department stores sometimes sold three-packs of comic books, where a publisher like Marvel or DC shrink-wrapped random issues of unrelated comics and sold them at bargain prices; you inevitably got an issue you loved, one you didn't like much, and another one that you already owned. Bookstores, oddly, were not an ideal source for comics; the big chains didn't bother with comics at all. Even some Hallmark shops had magazine stands, complete with comics. Comic books, generically, were everywhere in the 1970s; but sometimes the one you wanted – the specific issue of a particular title that you collected – never turned up.

My age (11 or 12 years old) was the first hurdle. The only kid with money was the one boy (it was always a boy) who managed to snag the Elyria *Chronicle-Telegram* paper route for his street. My allowance when I first started buying comic books was 50 cents a week – enough for two comics. However, if I played my cards right I could ask nicely at the grocery store and persuade my Mom or Nanny to add two or three comics to their carts. And I often got extra money from Nanny or Boppy, a dollar or two, which I immediately spent on comics. It didn't take long to build up a little stack of 50 to 100 superhero comics this way.

Another problem is that little kids are stuck at home. Most good newsstands were outside of walking or biking distance. However, Abbe Road Pharmacy, which sat about a half mile from home, was the exception. I visited regularly, weather permitting. I'd ride my bike down Wilder a few hundred feet, then turn right on Georgetown Avenue for most of the trip. Georgetown was quiet and lined with towering trees, and I pedaled several blocks before turning right on Duffey for a few hundred more feet until I reached the store, on the corner of Duffey and Abbe Road. A

tall grass embankment sat next to the store, created to support the elevated lanes of the Ohio Turnpike, where 18-wheelers roared overhead. Abbe was a busy four-lane street that ran underneath the Turnpike, and on the other side of the underpass Abbe intersected with state Route 57, one of the main highways through Elyria. Despite its location at this noisy crossroads, the store felt intimate and inviting, as much a part of the neighborhood as the nearby ice rink and the small suburban houses that sat a stone's throw away. The head pharmacist owned the store, and his daughter or wife worked the register. The spinner rack, unfortunately, sat right by the register, putting me square in their line of sight.

I acted odd and obsessive when searching for comics. The cashiers asked “can I help you?” in that “get out of here” voice. One day, a cashier even suggested I hurry up and choose, because “other people might want to see the magazines.” This was absurd, as no one was near me. My system started with hunting for the latest issue of a comic that I normally collected, like *Flash* or *Batman* or *Superman*. Next, I checked the spinner rack for other comics that looked interesting. The final step – the one that ate up precious, anxious minutes – consisted of second-guessing, self-doubt and extreme anxiety.

* * *

The two big publishers looked forward to finding the new pot of gold that would enable the industry to resume its growth. From 1975 to 1978 they engaged in a mutual war of market saturation by launching a hundred new titles, two-thirds of which folded within two years of their debut issues (Jean-Paul Gabilliet, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, 74).

* * *

For the first year, I read only DC Comics; Marvel's irreverent vibe was intimidating, as though I'd wandered into a room of cynical boys several years older than me, so I avoided them for the more straight-forward heroism of DC. Yet I resented this self-enforced rigidity from the moment I made the decision to buy from only one company. Marvel produced better comics, employed better artists and writers, told more complex stories, had a more interesting universe, and featured the medium's most popular character, Spider-Man. I looked at the covers of *Captain America* and *Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk* and countless other titles and wondered if I should dive in to that fictional universe. Standing at the racks for a half hour or longer, the questions froze me.

I eventually started reading Marvel while also continuing to buy DC comics. That resolved a huge dilemma but also led to other problems, as I now wanted more different comics than ever, despite limited resources. At the store I'd have eight comics in my hands but only enough funds for five; or I'd think *Luke Cage* looked good, then wonder if maybe it wasn't good at all. My casual reading of Marvel became obsessive in a very short time. This prompted new rounds of soul-searching; was my new loyalty to *The Avengers* taking me away from DC books? Was it a mistake, even a betrayal or naked disloyalty, for me to quit buying *Detective Comics* after reading it faithfully for several years? This second- and third-guessing and indecision made my legs ache. "Maybe this one" I'd think as I flipped open an issue for the third time and scanned the opening pages. I hoped something would stand out, such as a great illustration or an interesting situation. But few comics were noticeably better than any of the others; the decision wasn't going to be made for me. I was on my own.

* * *

*To reduce . . . self-imposed tension, collectors must be able to achieve a sense of closure, perhaps by completing a set or aspiring to perfect objects (Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, 81).*

* * *

The spinner rack at the Abbe Road Pharmacy was a stand-alone wire rack that did just what the name suggests – it spun – and I turned it slowly around, looking up and down to see if I missed any good comics. I checked for stray and misfiled comics in the wrong racks. Finally, I got down on my knees, as if in prayer to the comics gods, and searched through the bottom-most racks.

The squeak of the perpetually-turning rack annoyed the cashiers. They sighed, folded their arms, and sighed again. Finally, when I decided the time to buy was long overdue, I put the comics on the counter. By this time I was halfway to dehydration, dizzy and cotton-mouthed and sweating uncomfortably under my arms. If a little money was left over I got a pretzel rod for a nickel, or small Tootsie Rolls for two cents. The wife or daughter of the owner placed the comics in a paper bag and I walked out and got back on my bike. Riding home, I tormented myself with new questions about whether I bought the right comics. The cashiers had no idea what I went through, mentally, while inside their little store; they had no idea why I was taking so long, why it was so hard to decide, why these things were so important. They only had to worry about a cash register, but I had to make dozens of interlocking decisions, month after month, about what stories to follow, what comics to collect, and how to get my hands on the elusive “comic that would be valuable someday.” I suffered like this during every trip to local magazine stands and spinner racks.

* * *

They are the perfect consumer product. Most mainstream titles today are published monthly, with stories that sometimes continue for more than a year, so fans “need” to buy every part of the series and “need” to go to the shop regularly for new issues. This cycle never stops, creating an almost infinite stream of comic books (Pustz, 19).

* * *

The goal of comic collecting is to obtain consecutive issues. With some comics, you do that simply to have them; there’s the satisfaction that comes from having an uninterrupted run of issues of a comic title over several years. People collect *TV Guide* or *The New Yorker* for the same reasons. But with other comics, there’s another reason to seek consecutive issues: to obtain every part of a storyline that has been in motion for months, years, even decades. Comic publishers – especially Marvel – are ingenious for giving their fans multiple reasons for wanting to buy their publications, issue after issue.

This trend started in the mid-1960s when comic legend Stan Lee, the primary writer for most of the company’s comic books, borrowed the narrative technique of soap operas, where stories never really ended. Storylines at Marvel continued for numerous issues, overlapping with sub-plots that lasted even longer, while a rich and complex cast of characters grew ever larger. Lee employed it to compelling effect in Marvel’s line of books, particularly *Fantastic Four* and *Amazing Spider-Man*, and later Marvel writers maintained this style in nearly all of the company’s comics after Lee retired from writing in the early 1970s. In addition to individual titles having long storylines, Marvel also made liberal use of the cross-over as a narrative device; Spider-Man showed up in another character’s comic, or shared a villain with Daredevil. In limited fashion, this fictional device shows up in other media – TV shows like *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* existed in the same universe, for example – but it was perfected in Marvel’s

superhero comics. Characters in an Avengers story referenced an event from an eight-year-old issue of *Fantastic Four*; the reference naturally produced a desire for the enthusiastic reader to seek out these back issues. The effect delighted me as a reader (as stories were based on a rich and intricate history), and also frustrated me as a collector; I realized I'd never be able to read the entire Marvel history. DC used the "continued next issue" style less frequently; even into the late 1970s, most Superman stories began and ended in one issue. These shorter stories offered immediate closure but also made them feel less substantial, like episodes of a sitcom. It's why DC comics started to bore me as I got older.

As I moved from elementary school to junior high, I became even more engrossed in the continuing stories, and I sought consecutive issues with even more intensity. To miss *Avengers* 135 and then proceed straight to issue 136 was as frustrating and confusing as skipping a chapter in a mystery novel. Of course, no one – not parents, sisters, or drug store cashiers – understood this dilemma. They just saw kids like me at spinner racks with disappointed, sometimes desperate looks, searching in vain for that one coveted comic book, and conclude we were weird immature little nerds who needed to pay and get out.

* * *

Marvel realism also involved the company's reliance on continuity, on how the stories about the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and all the rest fit into a single narrative that had a past, present, and future. By the 1970s Marvel was publishing comics set in all three of these periods, requiring fans have knowledge of hundreds of years of events to completely appreciate the Marvel universe and its continuity-based realism (Pustz, 52).

* * *

The comic book publishers really ramped things up in the summer, when their customer base was out of school. To get an idea of the difficulty of simply choosing what to buy, consider the publishing output of DC in the single month of July, 1977 (the summer between my seventh and eighth grade years):

Action Comics #476

Aquaman #58

Batman #292

Batman Family #14

Binky #82

Brave and the Bold #137

Challengers of the Unknown #83

DC Special Series #3

DC Special Series #4

Flash #254

G.I. Combat #204

Ghosts #57

Green Lantern #97

House of Secrets #148

Isis #7

Jonah Hex #5

Justice League of America #147

Kamandi: The Last Boy on Earth #53

Limited Collectors' Edition C-52

Metal Men #54
Mister Miracle #20
New Gods #14
Plastic Man #20
Secret Society of Super-Villains #10
Secrets of Haunted House #8
Sgt. Rock #309
Shade, the Changing Man #3
Showcase #95
Star Hunters #1
Starfire #8
Super Friends #7
Super-Team Family #13
Superboy/Legion of Super-Heroes #232
Superman #316
Teen Titans #50
Unknown Soldier #208
Warlord #9
Weird War Tales #56
Witching Hour #74
Wonder Woman #236
World's Finest Comics #247

Marvel published even more comics than DC. That same month, their newsstand offerings consisted of:

Amazing Spider-Man #173

Avengers #164

Captain America #214

Conan the Barbarian #79

Crazy Magazine #30

Defenders #52

Doctor Strange #25

Eternals #16

Eternals Annual #1

Fantastic Four #187

Flintstones #1

Ghost Rider #26

Godzilla #3

Howard the Duck #17

Human Fly #2

Incredible Hulk #216

Invaders #21

Iron Man #103

Island of Dr. Moreau #1

John Carter Warlord of Mars #5

John Carter Warlord of Mars Annual #1

Kid Colt Outlaw #220
Kull the Destroyer #23
Marvel Classic Comics #25
Marvel Classic Comics #26
Marvel Premiere #38
Marvel Preview #11
Marvel Special Edition Star Wars #1
Marvel Tales #84
Marvel Team-Up #62
Marvel Two-in-One #32
Marvel's Greatest Comics #73
Master of Kung Fu #57
Ms. Marvel #10
Nova #14
Power Man #47
Rampaging Hulk #5
Savage Sword of Conan #22
Scooby-Doo #1
Spectacular Spider-Man #11
Spidey Super Stories #27
Star Wars #4
Super-Villain Team-Up #14
Tarzan #5

Tarzan Annual #1

Thor #264

Thor Annual #6

What If #5

X-Men #107

I read many of those DC and Marvel comics regularly, and coveted most of the others that I didn't buy. In addition to the above comics, publishers such as Archie, Gold Key, Harvey and Warren also pumped out comic books. My friends, as far as I knew, weren't as interested in comics, which meant I had no one to trade with (although friends at school handed me stray comics, *Kamandi* and *Our Fighting Forces*, which they found "boring"). I doubt I would have traded anyway. I had the collector's mentality of accumulating, rather than giving anything away.

* * *

A few years earlier, still in my first year of reading comics, Boppy took me to the Midway Mall, just for something to do. Vendors filled the main concourse. At first, I thought it was just antiques – Roy Rogers stuff, old records or something. I drifted over to a table. Atop the table I saw long white cardboard boxes, filled with comic books. I eagerly flipped through, and noticed how the comics were ordered, newest issues to the front, and older issues at the back. They were arranged by title, and also by publisher. This weekend gathering of comic book collectors and vendors was the first time I had seen anything like this.

I quickly found my way to *Detective Comics*, which always featured a Batman story. I found the first and second installment of a five-part story called "Bat-Murderer" that I started reading, mid-story, several months before. Boppy happily paid for the issues, and we walked past

dozens of other vendors, each with impressive numbers of comics. The hobby I was half-embarrassed about, which engendered sneers from my older sister and which consisted of a single humble stack below my bed, was now displayed openly, by a surprising number of people. And none of them were kids. I listened to the dealers talk to each other.

“I just paid \$50 for a stack of *Iron Man* issues,” said one guy, who looked about 25, talking to an older man. The younger guy shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably not worth that much but I like reading them.”

I wondered, *Who spends that much on comics? Where does money like that, the kind you spend on comic books, come from?* My lack of resources hit home. What would it be like to buy any comic you wanted? What would it be like to buy every comic ever made? Heck, what would it be like to just have five or ten more dollars a week to buy more comics? I wasn’t poor – *we* weren’t poor – but I wasn’t rich, either. When I thought of the comics that I couldn’t obtain, that bugged me.

* * *

Distributors and retailers . . . had little respect for comic books (Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 255).

* * *

In addition to the Abbe Road Pharmacy, a drug store in the mall had a spinner rack, plus extra comics mixed in with the regular magazines. I grabbed the oversized cross-over comic, *Superman vs. Spider-Man*, at this store. The comic represented the first time the two big superhero publishers put away their knives and cooperated. Our regular grocery store, Fazio’s, located right in the parking lot of the mall, also carried comics; I liked going here, because the complacent magazine jobber assigned to Fazio’s often left comics on the racks well past their

return date. Sometimes a six-month-old *Batman* or *Action* ended up tucked sideways behind *Mad* or *Cracked*. I became a very agreeable pre-teen; when Mom wanted to go shopping, I usually went along, my eyes peeled for a magazine rack.

I always wondered who decided what comics ultimately appeared in the stores. Was it the distributor at the warehouse, or the local magazine vendor or jobber or even the store employees? Even as a kid I knew adults didn't care if a particular store had stocked all 12 of that year's *Justice League* issues, or if they figured 10 or even 8 were enough. To them, it was just product. To me, a missing issue was a hole in my collection and a missing chapter in an ongoing storyline.

Things were tougher during the school year. I had less time to read comics and fewer opportunities to hit the mall. And sometimes the weather kept us in the house for days on end when a winter storm blew in off Lake Erie. During the blizzard of 1978, many distributors simply failed to deliver comics to several U.S. cities. This is why kids like me were often missing an issue or two, despite our best efforts.

* * *

Fans who began reading comics in the 1960s and 1970s often faced a true challenge. Luck was sometimes the most important element in building a collection (Pustz, 103).

* * *

At that time, mail order was the only way to reliably obtain back issues. Several collectors, mostly on the East Coast, ran regular advertisements in the comic books: "Comics from the 1940s-1970s – send today for our free price list," the ads said. During junior high school, I requested the price list of a dealer in New York, and some time later it arrived. The price list appeared to have been created on a typewriter, printed and stapled together in a little

booklet. The booklet contained ordering information, few if any photos, and no hard sell copy. But it didn't need any; the catalog's contents were enticing enough on their own. The dealer offered precious early issues of many of the most popular comics, at dear prices. The price list included copies of nearly every Marvel comic worth having. Marvel's modern era began in 1961, with the publication of the first issue of *Fantastic Four*; I realize now he only had to catalog 15 or 16 years of Marvel by the time I ordered the price list (Marvel's pre-superhero comics, the romance and war titles from the 1950s and 60s, were not in demand by collectors). Getting complete runs of DC's super-hero comics, which dated back to the introduction of Superman in 1938, was more difficult, but the dealer had a lot of those issues as well.

I decided to buy a mid-1960s issue of *Fantastic Four* priced at \$8. I gave Mom some of my Christmas money, and asked her to write a check to the dealer. "That much for one comic book?" she asked, predictably, before giving in. In a few weeks the comic arrived, packed with precision and care, with cardboard to keep the comic flat and a mylar bag protecting the surface. It was lovely, the colors vibrant and brilliant, the corners unbent, no marks on the front and back covers. The original owner never clipped a coupon from the inside. I loved the faintly vinegar smell of aging newsprint. I opened it carefully, trying to keep my touches to a minimum. The story, written by Stan Lee and illustrated by the insanely talented Jack Kirby, blended science fiction, a little magic, and super-heroics. I didn't order any more back issues from this dealer, however. Paying eight bucks for a 10-year-old comic could only ever be a one-time indulgence.

* * *

New comics were usually purchased at drugstores or newsstands. . . . Other collectors developed a route that would take them from grocery stores to convenience stores to drugstores

looking for that month's comics. Having to search for comics this way was so difficult that, for many fans, going to a comic book shop for the first time was a moment of epiphany (Pustz, 104).

* * *

Mr. Fantasy's Comics and Collectibles opened its doors in downtown Elyria sometime around 1977, if my memory is correct. A heavy, unsmiling man with a beard and hair that hung past his shoulders owned the shop. He smoked cigarettes constantly – transferring the odor straight to the comic books, thank you very much – and stared off into space. The store was dingy and ancient. It had probably once been an antique shop, a shoe store, and heaven knows what else in the several decades it stood there. The bare floorboards creaked loudly under the weight of the store's customers, who never seemed to be more than a handful at a time. In the summer, the owner simply propped the door open to let the breeze in. Air conditioning seemed beyond his budget.

Nevertheless, the store for me was a revelation. I don't know how I discovered it. Perhaps we drove by and I saw the simple, hand-painted sign. Mr. Fantasy's had the same long, narrow boxes used by the comic book dealers that I happened upon at the mall several years before. Each box held about 250 comics. Even these simple boxes interested me. Who knew comic collecting was a big enough thing to merit specially sized boxes, where comics fit perfectly snug? The comic bags also fascinated me. The ideal shape to house a comic book, they protected them like artifacts, keeping them away from the oily, greasy violence of human hands. The same magazines that were unceremoniously flopped into magazine stands and spinner racks each month became sought-after collectibles a few months later. Dealers seemed to have cannily found a need – collectors' obsession for finding older comics – and exploited it. How absurdly

marvelous that an entire store was dedicated to comics, and was located right in Elyria. Mr. Fantasy, leaning against his smudged glass counter, hoping I'd hurry, was less enthusiastic about the whole thing. In fact, he was pretty grumpy.

Price stickers were affixed to the mylar-bagged comics. A comic that I missed nine months earlier, with an original price of 25 cents, now sold for 50 or 75 cents, or even more if the story was notable. The sealed bags added an extra element of risk; a comic with a great cover might also have lousy interior art and a lame story. Customers weren't allowed to unseal the tape and pull the comic out of the bag to confirm any such details. I stared at back issues from a few years earlier, when renowned illustrators like Neal Adams and Bernie Wrightson still drew monthly comics. I particularly wanted the *Green Lantern-Green Arrow* comics drawn by Adams from 1970-72, where the heroes encountered real-world problems like drug abuse and poverty and political corruption. Already in demand by collectors, these issues fetched \$5 and \$10 each. The shop featured comics going back to the 1960s, sometimes the 1950s. I pulled them out and gazed at the covers; they showed goofy situations, like Batman in a space helmet or Superman cowardly running from a fight.

When I visited the store for the first time, I went through the same obsessive tension that I experienced when confronted with too much choice, exacerbated by having limited funds to spend and little time to decide. But now, the feeling was magnified, the tension a hundred times worse than it was at a typical magazine stand. I tried in vain to focus; I looked through a box of old *Teen Titans* with curiosity, then remembered that I liked something else, then another title, then something else. My mind fired on too many cylinders at one time, thinking of too many holes in my collection, too many old comics that I wanted to check out.

“Anything I can help you with?” the owner asked after a while. He had me marked, correctly, as the guy who looks around for an hour and spends five bucks. I mumbled that I was just looking as I furiously moved my hands through bagged comics. I felt the familiar cotton mouth, the aching legs, the knees that were nearly locked from standing for so long. At some point I narrowed down what I wanted, calculated the total in my head, and placed the comics on the counter. After paying, I left the store and walked around to the back, toward our family car. My little brother slept on the front seat. Mom just looked at me absently, like a stranger.

“What were you doing in there?” she asked. “That took forever.”

I tried to explain “how many comics he had” (more than I’d ever seen a person have) and how “it was tough to decide” (I was crippled with every decision) and how I “want to come back” (every day for the rest of my life if I could).

That summer I redoubled my efforts to get my hands on as much money as I could, in the only way I knew how: by mowing our lawn. My Dad – who didn’t mind my comic book habit and who even used to hound me for new issues of *Kamandi* – paid me handsomely each time I mowed, sometimes as much as \$5 a pop. I would often do it twice in the same week, especially in the early summer when the grass grew quickly, so that I could collect from him on Monday and then again on Friday. I sweated and fought with the lawn mower in the beating sun, mentally counting my money, hoping Mr. Fantasy’s copy of *Green Lantern-Green Arrow* #86 (one of the first comics to address drug addiction) was still there when I finally saved enough. I thought then that if I ever became wildly wealthy, rich enough to bathe in gold coins like Scrooge McDuck, I would try to buy every Marvel and DC comic ever made.

* * *

The most important site [of comic book culture] is the comic book store. Unknown to most nonreaders, comic shops serve as a kind of cultural clubhouse where fans can spend time being themselves among their friends and other like-minded individuals. Born out of changes in the ways in which comic books are distributed, the shops began to become common parts of the American retail landscape in the early 1980s. By the beginning of the 1990s, perhaps as many as 85 percent of all comics were purchased at these shops (Pustz, x).

* * *

I made several more visits to Mr. Fantasy's, but never as many as I wanted. We lived too far away. I didn't want to bug Mom for a ride all the time. I rode my bike there once or twice, but that required me to go several miles. By the time I bought everything, I had to hang on to a paper bag of comic books while steering a ten-speed.

After a while, the hobby got weird for me. What was delightful in the fifth grade was getting to be less pleasurable by high school. In search of stories that had some degree of complexity, I had already shifted from a mostly-DC guy to reading more Marvel. But as I grew into a better judge of quality, I realized that many of the comics were deficient in some way. The art and writing was haphazard in many comics. The publishing philosophy for both Marvel and DC seemed to be no more complicated than "flood the market." The good artists and writers drifted away from books as soon as you started liking them. Or the titles got cancelled altogether, with no warning (this happened to *Kamandi*, in 1978). A handful of Marvel titles stood out – *Uncanny X-Men* and *Daredevil* broke new ground around 1979-1980, when I was a high school sophomore – but by this time I was tired of trying to keep up.

That same year, I was placed in an Advanced English class. My reading list included familiar books like *Of Mice and Men*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*,

A Tale of Two Cities and several other classics. I especially loved *Jane Eyre*, which I read in two days over Christmas break. Against the backdrop of great literature, the lack of quality in comics stood out starkly. I read them less often; they were simply boring. My obsessive need to maintain my collection became less fun, and felt like a chore.

It ended with an issue of *Thor*, around 1980. Comics had doubled in price – from 20 cents to 40 cents – in the six years I read them, a testament to the era’s maddening inflation. I lifted the issue out of the spinner rack. The art looked alright. I tried to get into the story, but couldn’t remember what happened to Thor the issue before. I closed the comic and realized I didn’t care any more.

* * *

One day, I decided to stop reading comics – something I never thought I would do (Pustz, 200).

* * *

I eventually purchased five full-size comic boxes (known by comic book fans as “long boxes”) to house my entire 1974-1980 collection. I also purchased mylar comic bags for each comic, to maintain their good condition. My years of obsessive care, never bending or folding a comic, had yielded a uniformly nice-looking set of comics. In total, I accumulated approximately 1,000-1,500 comics. When I left Ohio in 1982 to attend college in Michigan, the comics stayed behind, in the bedroom that Nathan and I shared for his first eight years of life, and which was now all his.

As I studied English and made friends in Grand Rapids, Nathan got older and soon became the comic book expert in the family. He wanted me to read them, but I was too busy, and too unwilling to revisit that part of my recent past. In 1986, Nathan – prescient for a 7th grader –

persuaded me to read two comics. He assured me they were like nothing else ever written, so I relented, just to keep him from pestering me. The first was Frank Miller's Batman mini-series, *The Dark Knight*, and the other was Alan Moore's *Watchmen* series. Thanks to my little brother, I read two of the three graphic novels (the third being Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which I read in the early 1990s) that changed comics forever. I enjoyed them, but not enough to plunge back into the hobby. I was at once impressed by how much better the writing had become in comics, and a little disturbed that a boy like Nathan read more violent, sexual and adult stories in comic book form, when for me comics were a refuge from adult concerns.

Being eleven years older than Nathan, the distance between us made it so we were never best buddies. At times I felt more like the older uncle, always offering advice. When my parents divorced, I was 20, and Nathan was only 9. I knew it hit him hard, and I felt bad for him. I wanted to help him out, to make the pain go away. Eventually he and Mom moved away from Elyria and relocated to Tennessee, and I took a job in Chicago, and I realized we'd see little of each other. I needed a gesture that mattered.

"I'm giving you my comics," I blurted out one day, as the contents of our Elyria house sat in boxes. His eyes lit up.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I hardly read them. It's a nice collection. You should have them."

Later, when we were alone, my wife whispered the same question. "Are you sure? Those are your comics."

I shrugged. Truth be told, I wasn't sure. But the best way I could think of giving a part of myself was by entrusting those five longboxes to my brother.

* * *

In 2004, I stepped inside a comic shop once again. Marvel Comics characters headlined big-budget movies. What was happening in the pages of the comics I used to buy regularly? I felt a tinge of the old indecision as I stood at the racks. Marvel and DC and newer publishers like Dark Horse were still flooding the market with an infinite selection of comics. It wasn't enough to buy an X-Men comic; the consumer had to choose between a half-dozen X-Men titles created by Marvel to milk the popularity of the characters. Fortunately, the indecision now resulted in little more than a shrug and a smile. My identity and happiness no longer depended on which comics I bought, and which ones I left behind.

Surprisingly for its size, my home city – Saginaw, Michigan – had three comic book shops, and I haunted each one regularly. The same characters still plugged away – Batman, Wolverine, Spider-Man, Hulk, Daredevil – and the same two companies, Marvel and DC, still dominated the business. But the writing and art were much better. And several creators told great stories outside of the superhero ghetto – folks like Harvey Pekar and Marjane Satrapi and Craig Thompson and many others. Re-embracing the hobby completed a circle. I allowed myself to reconnect with my past, and to enjoy an art form that still seemed vital and rich, and distinct from any other narrative form.

These days, I take my oldest son, Daniel, age 16, to Coy's Comics on Bay Road in Saginaw. He has a "pull list" – comic titles that the store sets aside for him when they come out, and for which he receives a discounted price – and reads widely, everything from *Sonic the Hedgehog* to *X-Men* to *Watchmen*. We look at the new comics on one rack, examine graphic novels on another rack, and then look at the older comics, displayed on the walls of the store.

"I used to own that one," I'll say to him, pointing to an old *Uncanny X-Men* or *Amazing Spider-Man* that the owner has marked up to \$50 or \$100.

“I wish you still had it,” he’ll say.

I shrug. I also still wish I had those comics.

Nathan drives trucks now. His phone calls from the road stretch for hours. We talk comics and movies and politics. If Daniel picks up the phone, he and his Uncle Nathan talk videogames and systems, in a code I can’t begin to comprehend. It is nice to see how alike they are.

I don’t ask Nathan about the comics. Whatever he’s done with them is his business. I feel like asking about them would be an intrusion, since he is their owner now. If he sold them, I don’t want to know about it.

In recent years, I’ve re-purchased some of the comics that hold sentimental value. I re-acquired *Justice League* #112, my first super-hero comic. I bought *Brave and the Bold* #120 (the only comic that ever gave me a nightmare), and I located my first *Superman* comic from 1974. I have a stack of old *Kamandi* issues and an even bigger stack of old *Fantastic Fours*. When Daniel and I go to comic conventions, there are men just like me, guys with gray in their beards, intently searching through the comic boxes. Each of us is seeking something, looking for that object that we’re trying to get back.

ONE LAST RIDE

My routine was to finish my shift at work and call my mother for a ride home. Some nights, it wouldn't work; the phone would be busy, or no one was home to answer it. Which meant I was stuck.

On that night, I held the phone to my ear and ran my hand through my slick, wet hair. At home, the phone was ringing, but no one was picking up. I wondered where they were. I sighed heavily, and hung up.

"Don't you have anyone else you can call?" a co-worker asked me.

I did. I hated to bug Boppy and Nanny. So, instead, I called home a few more times. Busy signal, every time.

* * *

For my first-ever paying job, I worked at a small convenience store, straightforwardly named Convenient Food Mart, in Elyria. It was a local chain. Each store was not much larger than a 7-11, but inside was a full butcher shop, a deli, and a bakery. I got the job in the summer of 1980, during the heart of the recession, after applying at precisely two places (the other one, Burger King, was farther from home) and being offered jobs at each. "There's autoworkers taking those kind of jobs right now," my Dad told me, ominously. "People are lucky to be working anywhere. It doesn't matter which job you take, but take one of them."

I listened to his advice, and to my own lust for money, and took the job at Convenient. I was 16. I was a clean-up boy in the butcher shop, a job which is as glamorous as it sounds. They worked me four or five days a week at first, and then, when my predecessor left for college and they had only me to do clean-up, they scheduled me seven days a week; I once estimated a stretch where I worked 70 consecutive days. I liked the steady paychecks, and so convinced

myself to put up with any drudgery in order to continue the money flow. On weekdays, I worked from around 4 pm to 7 pm. In the early part of my shift I filled the cooler with cuts of meat, shrink-wrapped packages of ground beef, fetched things for the ladies working at the deli counter, and assisted with anything else needing doing.

Once the butchers left for the day around 5:00, I got down to my primary duty. I washed the butcher's blocks, tore down the meat slicer, emptied and scrubbed the garbage cans, and cleaned the floors. The last task was particularly intense, requiring me to go over the floors three times. I would sweep them with a broom, collecting dirt, dust and leftover pieces of meat from the floor. Then I would scrape the floors with a metal blade attached to a long handle, to remove the greasy film that accumulated each day from the messy work of meat-cutting. Finally, I'd mop the floors clean. I was under orders to do all of these tasks as quickly as possible. By the end of my shift, dressed in a shirt, tie, red Convenient Food Mart butcher jacket and white apron, I'd be soaked with sweat and caked with blood and meat-gunk.

* * *

I liked having the job, even if it could at times be disgusting. When I showed up for my first-ever day of work, early in the summer of 1980, I was terrified, a tall and skinny boy with acne and a devastating self-consciousness. I struggled to lift heavy barrels and frozen carcasses of meat, and the butchers enjoyed watching me struggle. To them, I was the new "Willie," the racist nickname that was given to the person who cleaned up after everyone was gone. In a few weeks, as I struggled through various jobs, they developed a more fitting nickname, "Slick Rick" or just "Slick." My first paycheck was \$64.

The butchers cut all day, tossing bones and fat into barrels beside their tables. Through some kind of osmosis, the floor quickly became greasy and slick, almost as if the fat hung in the

air like clouds and rained down a film that covered the ground. I wore steel-toed work boots. By the end of a full day – sometimes twice a day – each butcher’s barrel would be full. There were 17 components to the job, which I listed on a sheet of paper each night so I wouldn’t forget (to the amusement of one butcher, Paul), and one of the tasks was to empty the barrels into a special “meat-only” dumpster behind the store. In the summer, some days were so warm that the metal door at the back of the store was hot to the touch, as the sun beat down on the brick and the door and the dumpsters parked out back. Dumping the bone barrels into the meat-filled dumpster on a 95-degree day was like entering a level of Hell. Sometimes I could hold my breath throughout the task, quickly moving away from the dumpster abomination and tossing the empty barrels further against the brick wall, where I would later scrub them out with soap and a hose. Other times I ran out of breath and inhaled the stench of death, of decaying flesh, a horror that sought to pry open my mouth and invade my nostrils, while flies made for my eyes.

I worked the meat grinder, as the butchers showed me how to make ground beef, ground chuck, and ground pork. I stood in the cooler and pushed the meat down the mouth of the motorized grinder, my hands aching and throbbing from the cold that penetrated the rubber gloves. Other times I lifted heavy chunks of frozen beef onto the metal surface of a large slicing machine, and wrestled with the frozen hunk as I ran the saw through; Paul laughed and shook his head and said, “Damn, Slick, you’re going to slice your fucking hand off.” He showed me how to position myself correctly and how to grip the slab, but I still found it difficult, as my basketball-player arms were thin; I tried in vain to leverage the monstrosity with my hips and thighs. “They shouldn’t even have you using this machine until you’re 18,” he said under his breath. He was 19, having risen from “Willie” to full-fledged butcher pretty quickly. “But they had me on it, too. If they ever get caught they’ll be in deep shit.”

I took the band saws apart every night, scooping the hamburger mess that sprayed into the inside of the 5-foot high apparatus and hoisting the large metal pieces into an industrial sink of scalding hot water, my hands barely protected by the gloves. We used an industrial detergent that irritated my skin and left my hands dry and cracking. I earned \$3.15 per hour, until a paycheck arrived several weeks later that was a tad larger. “You got a raise, Slick,” said Paul, slapping me on the back. “You’re up to \$3.35! Don’t thank us, thank Jimmy Carter!”

Religious fervor had gripped me a year or so earlier, and the meat department was run by a guy from my church, Frank, who also hired several other church members to work for him, so I suppose I had an “in” when I landed the job. As I worked I prayed that God would help me to not be lousy at the job, to figure out ways to work against my nature and actually be crisp, quick, and effective (rather than daydreamy and sluggish). The combination of vigorous work and religious sensitivity sometimes managed to work me into a nightly frenzy. I was scared of letting Frank down, so I scraped and mopped like a crazy man, and sometimes my co-workers complained about the noise I was making. It was difficult to understand. People always seemed willing to tell you how to work when they were older than you.

I had plans for the money I was earning. That made me work even harder. My church expanded that summer, adding space to their school, known as Open Door Christian School (ODCS). ODCS had begun as a K-6 elementary school in the same year that I entered seventh grade, and they added a grade every year, so I was always a year too old to attend there. But that year they planned on adding two grades – both 10th and 11th grades – and I wanted to attend. The thought of going back to the huge and impersonal Elyria High School depressed me, whereas the thought of going to school with a lot of the church kids I knew was appealing. Also, I knew I could start for the basketball team at the smaller school, after riding the bench at Elyria.

I asked my parents if I could attend. They hesitated. The cost was prohibitive, and “Elyria Schools are good.” I persisted.

Finally, during that long summer I spent mopping and freezing my hands and gagging at the dumpster, my Dad said I could go to the new school. “But I’m not paying for it,” he said. The 1980-81 high school tuition was \$900. I decided my paychecks could cover that, and enrolled.

Paying my own tuition gave me a sense of power and autonomy over my own life. The reason I wanted so badly to work after turning 16 was that I was sick of depending on my parents for purchases large and small. And a private school was definitely a large purchase. I was proud of myself for doing this, and probably a little full of myself.

* * *

That night in the butcher shop, I tried to remember my grandparents’ phone number. I felt guilty that I no longer knew it by memory. Finally, it came to me, and I dialed the numbers.

I heard Nanny’s voice, and quickly said hi and that I was fine and told her I was at work. “I can’t get ahold of Mom,” I explained. “Do you think Boppy can give me a ride home from work?”

“He’ll come get you, don’t you worry,” she assured, in her Tennessee lilt. I felt bad again. They had their routines. Trucking across town and picking me up wasn’t one of them.

I thanked her and hung up and leaned against a butcher block table. It was still wet from when I had cleaned it earlier. I waited around a while, and then, on a whim, dialed home again. This time, my mother answered. She said they had been out doing some shopping. I had forgotten that she mentioned it earlier.

“I called Boppy for a ride,” I told her.

“I wish you hadn’t,” she said, her voice going soft.

“I didn’t know what else to do. They said it was no problem.”

“Of course they would say that,” she said. “But Daddy is really hurting right now. His mother just passed away.”

I had also forgotten that. She told us the news earlier in the week that Granny Cole, my great-grandmother, had passed. She lived in Tennessee. I barely knew her.

“Okay, well, I didn’t have a choice,” I said. “I’m sure he’s okay to drive, right?”

“That’s not the point. When people are hurting, you shouldn’t ask them to do things,” she said sharply. “You could have waited for me.”

With no ability to go back in time 20 minutes and handle the situation correctly, I resigned myself to repeating “okay . . . okay . . . okay” until she was pacified.

“I’ll tell him I’m sorry,” I offered, and hung up.

I stood near the front door of the store and watched the parking lot. Cars passed on Cleveland Street, their tailpipes trailing crazy wisps of smoke. The small store had two registers, and the cashiers, with little to do, gossiped while refilling the cigarette stacks. Few customers were present. This night, Elyria was bitter cold, too cruel for people or cars. My mother’s expression, “it’s cold as blue,” came to mind. I shifted my weight from one aching leg to the other. I felt the cold air seeping in through the doors, which chilled the sweat on my neck.

Cars pulled in and out of the parking lot. I watched each one, and was disappointed each time. Finally, Boppy’s car appeared. I slid my arms inside my winter coat and ran outside, feeling the bitter air sting my face.

“Hi,” I said, getting in. “Thanks for the ride. Sorry you had to do this.”

“It’s okay,” he said quietly.

I climbed into the passenger seat of his familiar red Pinto. He had purchased it in 1971, when they were first on the market. Nine years later it just seemed sad and rickety.

But it was not always like this. The car had once been a fun little conversation piece, a peppy compact that was his everyday car, his work car, his fun car. His gargantuan and gorgeous Oldsmobile was saved for important things, like church or travel to Tennessee, and otherwise was crammed into an old garage barely larger than the car itself.

I couldn't remember the last time I had been inside the Pinto. By now my life was terribly busy, with classes and homework and my job and basketball and my church youth group. I no longer went to the mall or the hardware store with Boppy, and he no longer offered. When I was younger, Boppy would pack Stacey and me into the Pinto and push it to 70 mph for the short ride to the mall. He'd laugh at the disturbing rattle the car made, like Chuck Yeager testing out some rickety test plane. He'd take us to Sears and look at the tools, then get us lunch in the little cafeteria that's no longer there. He'd buy me Hot Wheels cars from Zayre's or Woolworth's. He took us to Cascade Park, to Burger Chef. He took us the K-Mart over in Lorain.

On that night I had a crazy notion he was going to turn off once more, toward Kenny Kings or some other diner, and he would tell me to get whatever I wanted, just like when I was little, and I'd order the cheeseburger and orange pop and he'd get meat loaf and mashed potatoes and it would be like ten years had never passed. But even then, in 1980, many of those places had long since vanished.

The Pinto's heater roared but the air in the car was still cold. Boppy wore blue work pants, a hooded sweatshirt and a jacket over that. He looked tired. I remembered what my mother had said earlier, about his mother having just died, and I tried to read his face. He seemed sad, if

a bit stony. We moved down Cleveland Street and onto Abbe Road. Stores were lit up: gas stations, drive-thru beverages, Hardees, Drug Mart. Boppy sighed heavily as he drove.

I glanced at him again. The soft material of his old coat was full of holes, evidence of a life where lawns had to be mowed, gutters cleaned, basements de-cluttered, oil changed, and timeclocks punched. Dressed as he was, I wondered if he had just come home from work. I also wondered what he thought about me now that I was also working a job and punching a clock, though I never thought of my part-time job pushing a mop as the kind of “real job” that men held. I knew I didn’t want to work where he did. I wanted to go away to college, I wanted to drive something nicer than a Pinto, I wanted to maybe leave Ohio and see what Chicago or some other city could offer. The silence between us, broken only by the whine of the Pinto’s struggling engine, was solid, a tangible thing, built mostly by me, by my disconnect from him and from his way of life in the factory.

In that moment I wanted the years back. I wanted to go back to that kid who greeted his grandparents with a smile, who listened to stories about growing up on a farm, of the Indians winning the 1948 World Series, of his beloved dog, Butch, who loved Boppy and (according to my Mom) hated everyone else. I wanted to rush over to his house and climb the tree in the backyard and eat Archway cookies in their little kitchen. I didn’t want to be the skinny tall kid who looked past his grandparents in church to wave at someone more interesting. But of course I couldn’t say any of that.

Boppy turned off Abbe, then on to Wilder. He had come this way a thousand times, though less often as we kids got older. He pulled in to the driveway, and stopped, without cutting off the engine.

“Thanks for the ride, Boppy,” I said.

He nodded.

“Do you want to come in?”

I hoped he would come in and at least talk to Mom. Perhaps that would animate him more than I was able.

“I need to get home,” he said. I saw a brief spark in his eyes, a glimmer of affection. Mostly, though, I felt his pain, his stolid aloneness. There is no creature in the world more acquainted with loneliness than an aging, introverted man. I assumed, based on how they interacted and how stoic Boppy was, that he didn’t even share much of this pain with Nanny, but I could have been wrong. His mother’s death was bothering him, surely. But what else was? Asking him would have done no good. No clever question could have restored the years.

I reached for the door handle, opened the door with a creak and jumped out. I ran toward my house as he backed down the driveway. I waved to him. His car took off, bouncing down the street, getting smaller and smaller until it turned a corner and disappeared from view. The dark blue night was quiet again. I stood by myself, my hand on the doorknob, not willing to go inside just yet.

* * *

The ambulance passed, but we didn’t think anything of it.

The next year, in early September, my mother took me to the doctor. I was a senior in high school, not yet 18. Oddly for my age, I was suffering from severe gout in my ankles and feet. The day was warm. I hobbled out of our Chevy Impala, balanced on crutches, and once I was out, my mother drove around the block to look for a parking spot. I entered the building. I was perched awkwardly on crutches in the lobby of the building, watching as businesspeople passed by me and entered elevators. Finally, my Mom opened the door and came into the lobby.

And just as she opened the door, the wail of an ambulance sounded just behind her. For a split second the lobby was filled with the panicked shriek of the vehicle, taking our breath away, making us all look in that direction. Then the lobby door closed and the sound faded and we returned to whatever we were doing. Mom pushed the elevator button. Dr. Meyers' office was on one of the building's higher floors.

The ambulance passed, but we didn't think anything of it.

Dr. Meyers' examining room had not changed since I was little, and I imagine it looked the same for a few decades before that. He had framed Norman Rockwell images on the walls, mostly the *Saturday Evening Post* illustrations devoted to visits to the doctor, along with his impressive-looking diploma. An ancient radiator stood below an impressively large window, and the floors were marble, appropriate for the stately Elyria Savings and Trust Bank Building, which at 10 stories was, I believe, the tallest in the city. Dr. Meyers assessed my swollen foot, pressing the skin and palming the swollen ankle. He asked questions and my mother and I answered. I had the uneasy feeling that he was stumped by my condition.

"Beverly?"

It was Dr. Meyers' nurse, popping her head into the office. My mother looked up.

"You have a phone call."

"That's odd," Mom said as she quickly rose and left the room, clutching her purse. She shut the door and I talked some more with Dr. Meyers. Then he left me in the room. I stared out

the window of the old building, down at the streets of Elyria's compact little downtown. I had the impression the doctor was dusting off medical books from the 19th century, getting up to speed on "the gout," trying to come up with something more profound than simply "stay off the foot for a while."

Finally Dr. Meyers let me go. His advice, sure enough, was "stay off the foot for a while." I hobbled out of the exam room and into the little area where the nurse sat. She still wore the nurse's cap, and the tight white nurse's dress hugged her plump figure. In the 17 years I had been going there, she always had a warm smile – the perfect counterpoint to the dour, dry Dr. Meyers – and even now, she remained composed. But she wasn't smiling.

"Rick, your mother said she'd be back shortly," she told me. "You can wait for her in the waiting room."

I nodded. I made my way to a chair, propped up my foot, and opened a magazine. The wait was interminable, the pain a continual thud, pushing outward, like it wanted to break the tender skin of the foot. I don't remember what I read – maybe a *Sports Illustrated* or a news magazine – and I don't know how long I waited there. But it was long enough to see some of the people arrive, be seen by the doctor, then depart. This is ridiculous, I thought.

At last, Mom returned.

"Rick." The voice was soft, almost a whisper. She was in the doorway of the waiting room.

I tossed the magazine onto a side table. I collected my crutches and stood and began the familiar awkward shamble of movement.

"Where. . ."

She waived a hand, silencing me. I followed her down the hall. We disappeared into the elevator, walked down the lobby and outside into the warm sunshine.

In the car, she told me. Boppy had had a massive heart attack, while mowing his lawn. The neighbor lady found him, collapsed on the grass. He was gone.

“That ambulance that passed us on the way in,” Mom said, wiping her eyes, “he was in there. They were rushing him to the hospital.”

* * *

I remember him standing shirtless at the sink, shaving cream on his face, a razor in his hand. I watch these quick motions with interest.

“How old are you?” he asks me.

“Five. How old are you?”

He smiles. “I’m fifty.”

I repeat the number with disbelief. “How?”

“Well, I was born in 1919,” he tells me, and I turn this over in my head. 1919. I can’t comprehend a date like that. Boppy is ancient, like a piece of history who walks around and takes me to Sears and tickles me.

I’m at the sink and I look up at him. Suddenly I’m alarmed.

“What’s that?” I point to his abdomen.

“That’s a scar,” he tells me. “I had my appendix removed when I was young.”

The scar is ugly, impossible to miss.

“Did it hurt?”

“It sure did.” He shaves under his nose. “The doctors cut me open and fixed me right up.”

He keeps shaving. His glasses are off and his hair is wet. His arms are browned but his torso is pale, the tan of a factory worker who only sees the sun on weekends. I love him but even better than that, I *like* him. His eyes are bright and lively, his smile always quick. I suppose because I am little I'm still a fascinating novelty to him, a curious little boy that follows him around like a happy little dog.

* * *

I learned more after that, from the childhood stories he shared happily, and from my Mom, who would fill in the other parts, the parts he talked about only rarely.

I learned about Boppy as a boy, growing up on a farm in Tennessee. His real name was Marshall Lawson. He had an older brother named Carl. One day, Carl climbed up into the hayloft of the family's barn, waited until Marshall walked underneath, and let fly his yo-yo, made of hard metal and attached to an extra-long string. It struck Marshall square on the head. Years later, he told the story with a perverse smile, and the violence shocked me. This was no sanitized TV version of rural childhood. Maybe that's the reason he told me.

I once mentioned a toy I really wanted, and he likewise told me about the thing he coveted most as a child – a little red Radio Flyer wagon. Despite the constant poverty he saved his money, then marched into town and bought one. He described his pride, but I was young and didn't totally understand the draw of a simple wagon. However, I did understand the heartbreaking conclusion to his story, when he told me of his little sister who rode it down a hill, lost control, and hit a rock. The wagon was broken beyond repair, and even 40 years removed from the accident, he still sounded sad.

In another story, he told me of a kindly aunt, a rich woman who visited the family frequently. She scooped up the Lawson children into her roadster and took them into town and bought them ice cream. Marshall had never tasted ice cream before that day.

Poverty was the underlying theme of these stories, but another theme was opportunity. In the depths of the Great Depression, Marshall left the family farm and joined the three million other young men who found work in Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps. He loved the outdoors and the steady pay he could send back home, but he missed his dear mother desperately. "I cried every night . . . every single night," he told me, without an ounce of shame. "Just as homesick as a person can be."

When I complained about school, he told me how he wished he could have gone past the fourth grade, and how he tried so many times to make progress, but there was too much to do on the farm. I told him that sounded great, but he shook his head. "It wasn't great, Ricky. It was very hard."

I learned of his time in the Navy not from him, but from my mother. "He just doesn't like talking about it," she said. "It was awful." My grandfather was in Japan after the surrender, a young man with two infant daughters at home, shocked to see waves of little Japanese children, begging the American boys for food. Marshall gave them chocolate and sandwiches and anything else he could give away. He was so silent about the war, in fact, that I was startled at his funeral when they kept referring to him as a veteran. As far as I knew, he never attended a veteran's event, never advertised his veteran's status on his car, never erected a shrine in his house, never bragged or reminisced or made a fuss about it. These vast silences are something I marvel at, years later, trying to understand what they mean. They make him look more impressive than a hundred men who wear their achievements as bumper stickers or ball caps.

After the war, my mother told me, Boppy bought a little farm in Tennessee. “He just couldn’t make it work,” she said. He made his way to Ohio, where General Motors was hiring, where he rented one house in Elyria before buying the one he died in, where he used his G.I. Bill benefits to take classes to improve his reading, where two daughters are raised and graduate high school. Brothers and sisters and in-laws followed, traveling South to North, finding jobs and paychecks and stability in Ohio that they couldn’t find at home. I heard the accents and the laughter when they came to visit, and I heard the hypnotic, strange mountain music on Boppy’s stereo.

I was the second grandchild, and the first grandson, and whenever he looked at me he smiled. I was the apple of his eye.

* * *

There is one last story. I see now that he wanted to connect, even as I was getting older and taller and growing away from him. It is Sunday, January 21, 1979.

“Boppy wants you to come over to his house to watch the Super Bowl,” my mother tells me while hanging up the phone.

I blink, confused.

“Seriously?”

“Yes,” she says. “He knows you love the Cowboys. He wants to watch the game with you.”

I feel weird. I was always at his house when I was 8 or 9. At 15, not so much.

“I don’t want to watch the game on a black-and-white TV,” I offer, weakly.

“They’ve had a big color TV for a year,” she says impatiently. “It’s better than our set. Don’t be like this. Go over there. This means a lot to him.”

I go there. Boppy and Nanny make a big to-do. They feed me and constantly ask me if I want additional food. I'm the grandson again, the guest of honor. We both hate the Steelers but Boppy's hatred is palpable, black and bottomless and shocking to see in such an otherwise nice man. It is the rare Super Bowl that isn't one-sided and dull.

The beauty of watching football with someone is that even when you don't have anything to talk about, there's something to talk about. And so Boppy and I talk about the magnificent Roger Staubach, my favorite player since I was little, and Coach Landry and the rest of the Cowboys. Boppy points out how dirty the Steelers play, how he's sick of Terry Bradshaw and how Franco Harris always runs out of bounds, a cowardly thing that the great Jim Brown never did, not one time. The generations congeal, and our conversation mixes past and present interchangeably. I look around at the living room and think of Boppy and his brothers-in-law and maybe my Dad, much younger, sitting here on a Sunday many years ago, watching Browns games in black-and-white, cheering as Jim Brown lowered a shoulder and punished a Chicago Bear or Baltimore Colt. Now I'm here, and the game is in color. We watch younger players but it's the same game, on the same 100-yard field. We can talk, grandfathers and fathers and sons and grandsons, and for that time we speak the same language.

The Super Bowl goes nearly four hours and we're united in joy and tension, and then ultimately sadness. The two teams play a tight game before the Cowboys lose a heartbreaker. Boppy assures me the refs and the announcers are in the bag for the Steelers, and thus the Cowboys had no chance anyway. I shrug. Pittsburgh is just too good, once again.

"Well," he says as I pull on my coat. "Glad you came over. I love you, Ricky."

I hug him and hug Nanny and dash toward Mom's car. It's good that I went there. I get in her car, and I'm smiling.

WORKS CITED

- Abildskov, Marilyn. "Playing It Straight by Making It Up: Imaginative Leaps in the Personal Essay." *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 25-34. Print.
- Auster, Paul. *Report from the Interior*. New York: Holt, 2013. Print.
- Bender, Sheila. *Writing Personal Essays*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1995. Print.
- Bidinger, Elizabeth. *The Ethics of Working Class Autobiography: Representation of Family by Four American Authors*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2006. Print.
- Fieldes, D. "Book Reviews : Rivethead: Tales From the Assembly Line: By Ben Hamper. Fourth Estate, London, 1992, 234 Pp., \$19.95 (paperback)." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 36.2 (1994): 305-06. Print.
- Gabilliet, Jean-Paul, Bart Beaty, and Nick Nguyen. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2010. Print.
- Glass, Elizabeth. "Mastering the memoir: Tobias Wolff." *Writer's Digest* July 1997: 25+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 6 Feb. 2014.
- Granger, David. "Trust me." *Esquire* Nov. 2011: 34. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 6 Feb. 2014.
- Haney, Bob, and Jim Aparo. "This Earth Is Mine." *The Brave & The Bold*, Vol. 21, No. 120, July 1975: 1-28. Print.
- Hamper, Ben. *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line*. New York, NY: Warner, 1991. Print.
- Hatfield, Charles. "Earth A.D.: Kirby's Playground of Imagination." *The Jack Kirby Collector*. Summer 2004: 17-22. Print.
- Knepper, George W. *Ohio and Its People*. Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1989. Print.

- Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.
- Nicholson, Philip Yale. *Labor's Story in the United States*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 2004. Print.
- Pekar, Harvey, Kevin Brown, and Gregory Budgett. *American Splendor: The Life and times of Harvey Pekar: Stories*. New York: Ballantine, 2003. Print.
- Pekar, Harvey L. "My Dual Career." *Contexts* 6.4 (2007): 34-38. Print.
- Pustz, Matthew. *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999. Print.
- Ray, Ruth E. *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-story Writing*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2000. Print.
- Smeeding, Timothy. 2012. "Income Wealth and Debt and the Great Recession." Stanford, CA: Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.
- Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*. New York: Scribner, 2005. Print.
- Walls, Jeannette. "Truth and Consequences: Why Memoirists Don't Always Have the Last Word." *Publishers Weekly* 19 Sept. 2005: 74. Print.
- Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1989. Print.
- Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001. Print.