

*PAINTING WITHOUT
NUMBERS*

by

JOE SAMBATARO

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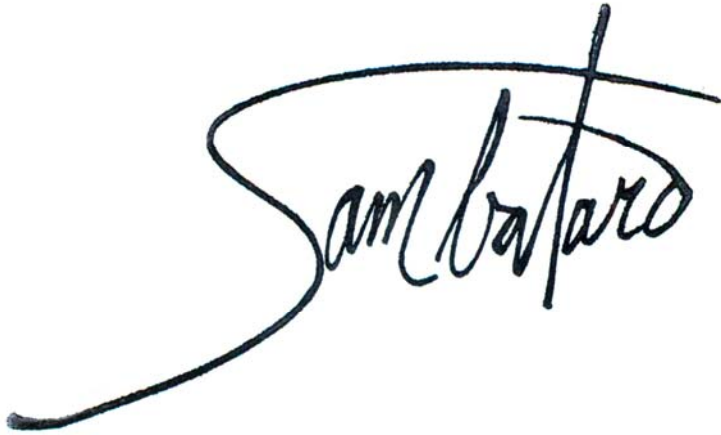
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INTRODUCTION

You may not know me but that doesn't matter. We are all related. We are born, we live, and we die! We try to make sense out of it all, but we only know one thing for sure – that our time here is *always* too short!

This is a story about trying to make the most of it all; trying to fulfill a dream and reach a goal. But most of all, it's a story about the importance of creating your own experiences and opportunities. It's a story about not giving up and keeping a sense of humor. It is my story, the story of the Forever Optimist.

The book is dedicated to all of those wonderful people who have helped and encouraged me and have made it possible for me to have something to write about.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Baturo". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "S" that loops around the first part of the name. The letters are connected in a cursive-like fashion.

I dedicate this book to my beautiful wife Karen. She is not only “The Wind Beneath” my wings... she is “The World Beneath My Being”. She has supported me through many rough stretches and has taught me how to enjoy the good times. She is my soul mate and my best friend. My successes are a direct reflection of her kindness towards others and her joy in life. She is a precious gift that I get to receive every day!

Special thanks to my family, Pam Berry, Kathy Williams, Duane Williams, Amanda Starr, Jennifer Wheelock, Dan James, Paul Herman and the fine folks at Minuteman Press.

I am proud to be represented for 25 years by my good friends, Bob and Maloree Banks of Banks Fine Art, Dallas, Texas.

And a special thanks to Bentley House Publishing, California for the fine reproductions of my original paintings into art prints.

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS LIGHT

As I arrived in this world, the first thing I must have seen was the small candle on top of a slightly stale brown cupcake that the nurse was placing on my mother's stomach. My recently vacated dwelling was still swollen as the tiny dish of light gently glowed, while the nurse whispered an off-key version of "Happy Birthday." What did this mean?

I then found out that not only was I born on my own mother's birthday and I would be sharing presents with her until I was eight, but that we were born on March 15th, the infamous date of which Shakespeare wrote, "Beware the Ides of March." Of course, I could not ignore this obvious sign and took it to mean, "Look out world, here I come!" I have a sneaky suspicion that one is born with certain natural abilities and mine must have been art, because I could swear the doctor that delivered me said he saw drawings on the inside of my mother's stomach.

As I grew older, and like many young children between the ages of three to six years old, I loved coloring. However, even at that early age, I preferred making my own coloring books and drawing my own imaginary scenes. Crayons and colored pencils became my new best friends and no blank piece of paper was safe from my creative wrath!

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One might think this would be a great start to becoming an artist, but I would soon find out, not everyone appreciated art!

My creative spirit seemed to take charge right from day one. That is, my first day at parochial school went fairly well, I thought, considering how frightening it was to feel yourself abandoned by your mother and having to face “The Nuns” all in the same day.

The good news was that my teacher was young, sweet and very beautiful – and a nun! The bad news was, Catholic schools obviously did not recognize young talent, and at the end of that first day I was summoned to the principal's office to face charges! The principal was as opposite as you could get from Sister Marie Janene. She was old, mean, and resembled a dockworker, with a voice and name to go with it. It was hard enough being the shortest boy in the entire first grade, but standing in front of Sister Belena Ignatius reduced me to what I felt was a small insect shaking at the foot of a giant black and white deity. I was being accused of desecrating my schoolbooks. This was hard to accept, especially considering the fact that I had absolutely no idea what “desecrating” meant.

Boy was I glad to see my mom after that first day. Even though she had been the one responsible for leaving me alone in this questionable environment, she was more than making up for it by rescuing me from the clutches of Sister Ignatius. It was explained to me that I was not allowed to draw in any of my school books and that the blank pages and open spaces in the books were meant to be that way, and I was to leave them alone. My opinion, however, was that they did not look good and that my illustrations were a vast improvement.

Thus, the first of the many conflicts I would have with the Parochial School System was over, but not forgotten. Years later I would be commissioned to do religious paintings and church ceiling restorations for the same Catholic Church, and as I itemized the bill for these projects, I happily added 10% for Sister Ignatius!



Me, in Chester, PA
A sign I would end up in Texas?



My mom, Mary Jane
She always encouraged me, no matter what

HALLOWEEN

It was not easy in the early fifties to be a single mother with two children. I am very thankful for the education I received, even though the Catholic Church really laid a guilt trip on you for not being married. I think it was called, "The Mary Magdalene Complex." Guilt was running rampant everywhere, but I am glad that I never really believed we would all end up in hell for not resembling "The Donna Reed Show!"

We were quite poor and lived in the projects of South Chester, Pennsylvania, where *we* were the minority. I was always apologizing to my friends for not being black. Once, when I was about four, I went up to a black man sitting next to us on a bus and tried to rub the color off of his skin. Thank God he was not offended and explained to me that this was his natural color. Needless to say, I grew up quite unprejudiced.

Even with Mom working two jobs, we had little to nothing extra, so when Halloween came around that first school year, I started imagining what costume I could rig up to wear. All the students wanted to stump the beautiful Sister Marie Janine so that she wouldn't know who we were. The really good thing about not having much is that it forces you to develop your imagination. That's why I encourage parents who ask me about their child's art talents, to leave them alone, encourage them, but don't get too serious too fast – and never feel bad if you can't get them a lot of expensive art supplies. I can tell you first hand, they will do a lot more with less.

As Halloween got closer, I had narrowed it down to two costumes I knew that I could make with Mom's help and no money. The old standby "Hobo," modeled after Red Skelton, who we saw on TV at my Grandparents (and it was easy finding plenty of old tattered clothes), or the "Pirate;" (it's amazing what a few old scarves, a cardboard sword and an eye patch will do). The only problem with both of these was that they didn't hide your face very well, so I was quite worried

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that I'd be recognized and wouldn't be able to fool Sister Marie Janine.

Well, my concerns must not have gone unnoticed, because on the night before the big classroom party, as I was leaning heavily toward the Hobo outfit, my Mom walked in with the most magnificent Halloween costume I had ever seen. It was bright red and covered your entire body; with a full three-dimensional mask in the shape of – you guessed it – my favorite cartoon character – the bird to which I could most assuredly relate – Woody Woodpecker!

To this day, I am not sure where Mom got it, but I can still see myself, teary eyed, as I tried it on. It was a perfect fit. This would surely fool Sister Marie Janine! When I arrived at school that morning, I was bursting with anticipation. I couldn't wait until after lunch when we would be allowed to change into our costumes and start the party. Therein lays the parallel between Woody Woodpecker and me. We were both traveling at animation speed, and like my bird friend, I couldn't sit still for one minute, and I absolutely could not keep my “beak” shut!

There we were standing in line all dressed up in the most colorful array of costumes that Sister Marie Janine would ever see. We had ghosts, witches, princesses, cowboys, and the brightest red bird you ever saw! The minutes seemed like hours. The giddy buzz of voices grew louder as the antsy trick-or-treaters waited in the school hall. As the buzz grew rapidly into a full voice ensemble, Sister appeared and tried to settle the crowd down.

The next thing I knew, she was whispering in my ear, “Joseph, if you don't want me to guess who you are, then you will have to be quiet!”

First grade was great and so was Sister Marie Janine. Not only did it take her a long time to guess who that bright red bird was, she even passed me at the end of the school year!

NOVOCAINE AND NUNS

Back then, I'm not sure what the legal age for retirement was in the public sector, but in the Nun's profession, it must have been around one hundred, because that's how old my second grade teacher looked! I actually felt sorry for her, especially when she would stand in front of the class and cry as she appealed to our sense of compassion. The only problem was in the second grade, no one had any sense – of anything!

My wife had the same experience with one of her “Over the Hill” nuns. She would scream at the class so loud that one day her false teeth shot all the way across the room! Now that I'm older, I don't know how poor Sister Isabel ever made it through that year, but by the time I left Immaculate Heart Elementary School, she had retired and left. When I was nineteen, and home on leave from the Air Force, I was walking through the Philadelphia Train Station when three slow moving Nuns waddled up to me.

The middle one spoke in a familiar voice and said, “Joseph, how are you?”

I almost fell over! It was Sister Isabel.

As the word “Fine” trickled out of my mouth, I couldn't believe she could have even recognized me – let alone remembered my name. Heck, maybe she called everyone Joseph! That was not the case; she remembered me, my brother, Rick, and my Mom. I wanted to tell her how sorry I was for contributing to those unruly children in the second grade, but I just couldn't – though, somehow I knew it didn't matter.

I would have loved to have been there when that unlucky old nun shot her dentures across the classroom. Of course, losing your teeth is not always so painless. The one truly bad thing about being poor is that you can only afford doctors when it's absolutely necessary (like close to death), or the resemblance thereof. This reality also applies to dentists.

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After several agonizing days of pain, it became apparent that my mom would have to take my brother and me to the dentist. We were taught not to fear doctors, and even at that young age we really didn't. It was more what they would *do* to us that occupied our little minds. The dentist's office was crowded, and all three of us squeezed together on one chair. When what seemed like days later, we were ushered into a large room, partitioned off by a tall, pale green fabric screen.

My brother, Rick, was taken to the dentist's chair on one side, and I was seated in the other. There was a funny smell that soon became synonymous with dentists, and the sound of running water as it swirled around a suspended white bowl attached to the long sculptured leather chair. The chair would have made the perfect slide, as it seemed impossible for me to keep my little body from slipping on its large, downward slopes. I grabbed both arms and held on for dear life.

It was good that my brother was the first victim because it would give me an indication of whether I had anything to fear. From time to time, I shouted out words of encouragement to him, hoping it would help. Both of us had to have one tooth extracted. I was glad we didn't know this before we went in, but, as bad as it sounded, Rick seemed to be doing quite well. I didn't hear one agonizing scream from him. Of course, I didn't know he was shot up with a million cc's of Novocain.

Soon after the dentist was finished, Rick leaned around the screen and said, "Ouu don hab nuttn oo uurey aout."

I had no idea what he said, but it seemed this would not be too bad.

The middle-aged dentist was very good and very fast. By the time I felt the needle, it was out, and my jaw was starting to numb up. At high anxiety times like these, I relied on my imagination the most. I closed my eyes and dreamed of better things, like conquering the great hill in my grandmother's back yard – and winning the battle single handedly. Just as I raised my sword in victory, I heard a loud

crunch, and my eyes bolted open. The expression of the kind dentist's face made me realize something was wrong, even though he tried to hide it. My tooth had broken in half, with the root still in place.

The only thing I remembered after that was the relief of getting out of that chair and walking through the still-crowded waiting room. I couldn't figure out why I was being stared at with such impatience. After all, I was the one who had just finished having the scariest experience of my young life!

Once again, Mom made it almost worthwhile by rewarding our good behavior with a trip to Woolworth's Department Store and letting us pick out any thirty-five cent toy we wanted. Oh, what a joy! I played with that big farm tractor for hours and never realized that I had been in that dentist's chair for almost an hour, as he had to surgically remove the root. No wonder the patients in his waiting room were so irritated. I'm just glad that back then they didn't charge by the hour, because we certainly would have had no money left over for our exciting reward, and it wouldn't have been the same without my big tractor!

OH SAY CAN YOU SEE

The projects were pretty rough, especially at night, so we stayed in a lot. This turned out to not be such a bad thing because I found myself occupying time by creating toys fashioned from clothespins, rubber bands, small boxes and a myriad of interesting shaped pieces of broken stuff I kept in a cigar box marked "Joe's junk." I'm not real sure why I called it that, because, to me, this was *not* junk! It was all the things you would need to build a fort, a train station or even a space city. The few *real* toys we had were always embellished in an imaginary world I would create just for that object. I would play

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for hours, eventually making up games with each plane, boat or racecar in my fantasyland.

I remember one Christmas my grandfather gave me an old metal electric caboose. Remember the ones you couldn't tell the front from the back? Well, it had its own track and everything, and the best part was that it *worked*. I was so thrilled that I immediately built a covered bridge out of a shoebox for it to go through – like a tunnel.

Of course, I needed to create something more than just a train tunnel; it had to have *action*. Something had to crash, blow up or be launched! Choosing the latter, I fashioned a trigger or release switch between the box and the track, launching the imaginary missile. It never went in the same direction twice! I did things like that with almost every toy I got, whether they worked or not. These were the best building blocks a young mind could have, especially for a future artist. It made me realize all things were possible and that you didn't need to depend on pre-existing subjects, objects or ideas to create. To this day, I still get a big kick out of dreaming up new game ideas. I guess it's hard to break old habits!

My mom, like many other moms, used to go around the house singing her favorite songs. Back then, before my voice dropped (like a ton of bricks) from soprano to base, my brother and I had no fear of joining in from time to time, making a serious attempt at hitting all the correct notes, which probably was one step up from musical noise.

We didn't know it then, but we were preparing ourselves for our grade school debut. This brings me back to Sister Isabel and the end of the second grade, because, you see, that's when the nuns put on their "Tribute to America" stage extravaganza.

The first, second and third graders were joined together to form the ultimate mostly boys choir. My brother, now being a proud member of the first grade, would be a welcome comfort to me, just knowing he would be close by as we raised our voices in celebration. A group of gifted mothers

volunteered to make our simple, but effective costumes. The first graders would be in red, we would be in white, and the third graders would wear blue. If that wasn't American enough, they would position us on bleachers so that we would resemble – you guessed it – Old Glory herself, the flag.

When that fateful day finally arrived and we were all in place on the stage, what we actually resembled was several rows of red, white and blue – Q-tips!

It got worse. As the curtain opened, the good sister gently lowered the arm of the donated Victrola until the needle made contact with the most outer edge of the record, and as the volume was turned up, the squeaks, scratches and skips indicated that our orchestra was ready. With a wave of Sister Isabel's hand from beside the curtain, we would break into a heavenly chorus of "God Bless America."

The music filled the auditorium – that is, the music from the record, because it became rapidly apparent that the only voices on that entire stage to join in were those of my brother and me. I'm not sure whether it was sheer fright or panic that kept us going. All I know is that we finished that song, all three of us – one red and one white Q-Tip and one U. S. Marine Corps Band recording!

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

On the home front, my rapidly improving talent took a turn toward the practical, especially now that I had figured a way to illustrate my books and still not upset the nuns. I accomplished this by taking cheap wrapping paper and making book jackets out of them. Then, I would draw my heart out, making up characters and scenes to go with the subject of each book. I was extremely proud of them – not only because I drew them, but because they were much easier to locate in my already crowded desk.

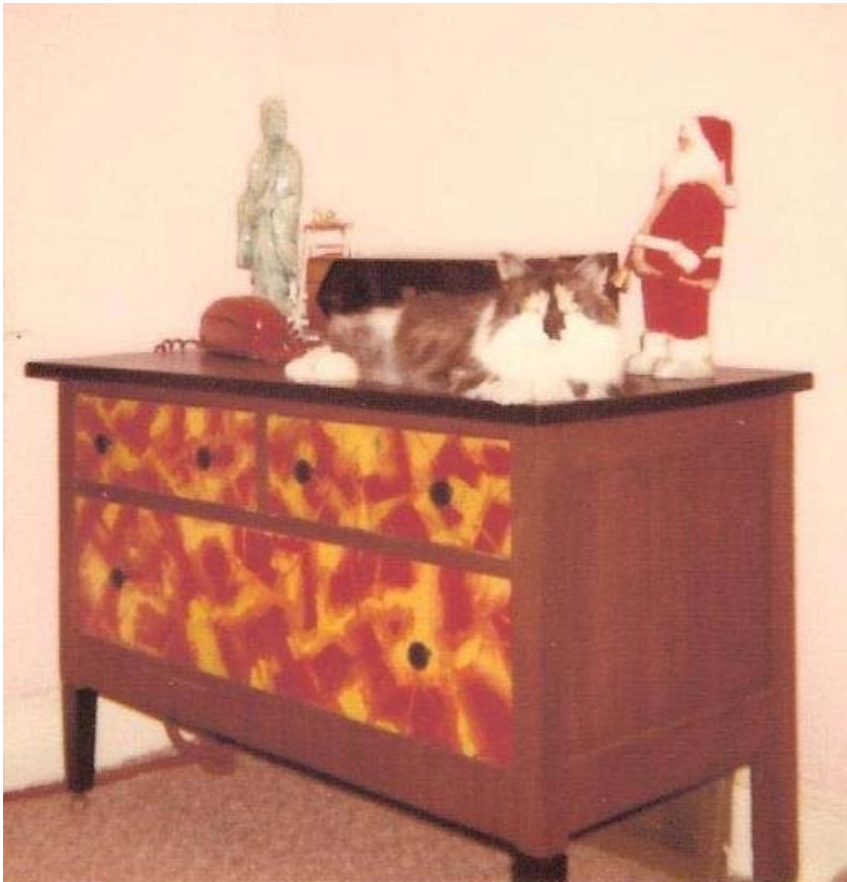
At home we would get a lot of hand-me-downs from several caring friends and the Salvation Army, who, without their efforts, Rick and I would not have had several Christmases. Besides toys, we would get clothes, household stuff and some well-appreciated furniture. However, mostly everything was old and used, especially the furniture, so I would take it upon myself to make them look new. Sometimes this was quite a task, but I always had confidence that if I could figure out a way to paint it, I could restore it to a new level of attractiveness.

Having very little knowledge of paint variations at that time, I would invariably get stuck when things wouldn't go as I envisioned them, but I never let it keep me from finding a way to solve the problem. After all, if you think about it, artists are problem solvers – and, even at that age – I realized I could always find a way.

Once, when I was trying to put a new coat of paint on an old brown coffee table, the white paint not only wouldn't cover, it kept separating. Now, I realize that the table had been varnished and that I should have sanded it down before trying to paint it, but, back then, I was not armed with such knowledge. Following my code of never giving up, I started to work with the problem and not fight it. As I applied the paint in small areas, I would take the back of the brush and score lines through it, creating a kind of *stylized* wood grain pattern.

I would follow the general direction of the wood beneath, and as the paint separated, I just continued to “technique” it with that wood grain effect. The end results were astonishing, even to me. The whole table took on a new textured look that was bright and pleasingly unique.

Whether that old coffee table would still impress me now, I can't say. The only thing I know for sure is that it impressed Mom, and that was good enough for me. When I think about it, Mom was pretty good about letting me express myself, and I did, all over the apartment. She even let me paint a mural on the wall. At that time the space over the



Joe's Fix-Um-Up furniture from Goodwill
I'd paint anything



A typical Christmas in the Projects, sharing gifts
More predictions of Texas?

couch seemed so large, but now I realize it was only about two feet by three feet. I didn't know it then, but years later, when I was in the Air Force, I would be painting murals twenty feet to forty feet – but the one in the apartment was a start!

I must have stared at that space for hours trying to think of what to paint that would look good. It finally struck me. I noticed a small pattern in the couch that included flowers and buds. The key word here was *matching*, because how could I go wrong if it matched, unless our couch fell apart and we had to get rid of it. But, wait – we never got rid of anything – we couldn't afford to.

I worked on that mural all weekend and awoke Monday morning to see it with the fresh eyes that I had progressively lost through hours of determined dedication. I was so lucky to have discovered at such a young age my passion in life. It's so easy to learn the art of hard work when you love what you do and do what you love!

I was awfully proud of that mural. I had tried to make it look as real as possible by painstakingly painting in each shadow and texture, leaf and flower. It must have worked, because Petey was totally fooled.

ANIMAL KINGDOM

As the loud clumping sound of footsteps echoed on the stairwell leading to our small project apartment, we made a mad dash to secure the front entryway. The door vibrated with the thundering sound of a stranger's knock, which broke the early morning silence. Was it a potential burglar that we feared? An unwelcome guest? Why were we now scrambling from room to room? Was it to hide, or merely the panic that goes with trying to tidy up at the last minute before unexpected company?

Well, it was none of those things. You see, to understand, you first need to know that the one weakness my

mother had, was animals. She regarded them as important as any human being and as loveable as any friend. She was on a constant quest to find homes for all abandoned creatures, and the ones she couldn't – we kept. Of course, these were always the pets that had some physical or mental abnormality, and they were also the ones Mom loved the most.

Mom's insurance man waited patiently at the front door as we continued to search for Petey, the family parakeet that was on leave from his cage and perched quietly somewhere in the apartment.

"He's on the curtain rod in the bedroom," my brother Rick, reported in a breathless voice.

"Okay," my mother replied as she hurried in the salesman.

The dwelling was secure. Petey could once again enjoy the freedom of inter-room flight without the fear of straying off course toward the door and finding himself outside and lost to his loving family.

I, too, had a special place in my heart for this beautifully colored bird, whose feathers were streaked with shades of cobalt blue and white, for Petey was not only an interesting character, he was an art *connoisseur* and loved the mural I had recently painted over the couch.

At the small, round kitchen table, my Mom signed some legal looking papers for the plump, always smiling, man sitting across from her and sipping on a cup of cold coffee. And, then, his eyes leaped open when suddenly a flurry of flapping wings landed precisely on the rim of his coffee cup, which he was still holding.

"Don't move," my mom directed, "and don't scare him."

Well, I knew the 'him' she was referring to was not the insurance salesman, but as he sat there frozen in suspended animation I could tell it was he, not the bird, who was scared.

As Petey skirted around the edge of the cup he would lean over from time to time and peck at the liquid inside of it. We still don't know if the bird was actually drinking the coffee or just playing with it; but, the one thing I knew for sure was that Mom's guest was getting first-hand experience in her special way with animals.

Oh yes, and how did we know Petey liked that mural? Well, as the man got up to leave, Petey flew from the table and did what he had been doing for the last couple of weeks – he tried desperately to land on the branch in my wall painting. He kept sliding down the wall, with his little claws clutched together, continuously trying to get hold of that illusive perch.

All of us laughed out loud, especially the salesman whose deep voice filled the room like the sound of Santa Claus in the department store at Christmas. But, to my mom, it was always Christmas, especially when it came to her animals. She was always surprising them with doggie treats and cat toys, but it was the animals themselves who surprised us with their unique personalities and filled each day of our lives with joy.

The variety of animals we took in over the years read like the manifest on Noah's ark. Chris, the dog with the curlicue tail; Petey, the parakeet who drank coffee; Thumper, the rabbit who was housebroken and loved to play with Boots, the one eyed cat. The memories of them will never be forgotten. But, with all the joy, also came the pain. The death of an animal to us was as traumatic as anything our young minds could handle. Yet, at the same time, it helped us understand and accept death as a natural part of life.

My first real childhood memory of this left a burning impression, which is still very clear and vivid to me today. We were visiting our cousins' farm in Maryland. We hardly ever got to visit there because Mom didn't drive – so we usually had to wait to be invited along by another member of the family. Mostly, we went with Uncle Bob and Aunt Mary Pyle and their two boys, David and Donnie, with whom we got along famously.

To city kids their farm seemed big and magical, with a large house, hundreds of trees and hills that seemed to go on forever – not to mention the animals – millions of them. Big ones, small ones, fat ones, skinny ones, quiet ones, loud ones, slow ones, fast ones and even some that would *lay* breakfast!

In reality, it was just a modest size country house on approximately two acres, with an assortment of minor farm animals like chickens, a rooster, geese and ducks, rabbits, a horse and plenty of dogs and cats.

One evening, my cousin's daughter ran into the house crying hysterically. As the family gathered around her, trying to make sense of her tear-ridden voice, one of her older brothers came in holding a bundle of fur in his arms with two floppy ears draped over his hands. Everyone in the room immediately recognized the soft, motionless bundle as one of their rabbits.

The boy spoke firmly, but quietly and said, "He got out of the pen and one of the dogs got him!"

The young man put the wounded animal down in the middle of the living room floor on an oval shag rug. All of the children circled around the poor, unfortunate brown and white cottontail before us with its little body shaking.

As I leaned in closer, I braced myself to view the awful wounds it must have received. Even though I felt scared and confused, something made me look. I saw nothing, no blood, no cuts, no teeth marks, nothing!

A few seconds later I heard myself cry out, "Get a doctor! We can still save him!"

My outburst seemed even louder because of the horrible silence that followed. I looked around and couldn't understand why no one was running for help. What was wrong with these people? Didn't they care? Was one less rabbit unimportant to them? Is this what farm people were really like?

Then, as my frustration peaked, the deep, clear voice of Mr. Jimerson filled the room and said, "Internal bleeding."

With just those two words, my little heart stopped. I knew that was bad, but something deep inside me still swelled with a glimmer of hope until I heard the tall, rugged-faced man continue with, "His neck is broken, and there's nothing anyone can do for him now."

His words echoed in my mind, and, as much as I wanted him to be wrong, I knew he wasn't. My chest felt like a huge, empty hole that immediately filled up with a kind of helplessness I never before knew existed. As we all stood around, that little rabbit finally died.

We buried our floppy-eared friend that night in a casket generously donated by Mr. Jimerson himself. It was a shoebox marked, "Genuine Leather Loafers, Hold for Mr. Jimerson, Size 13 D."

POETRY IN MOTION

It seems hard to believe that the convent could have run out of nuns, but in the third grade, that's exactly what happened. I was exposed to my first lay teacher, Mrs. Bower. She was one of us, a plain-clothed commoner with no angelic stares, no constant swats from a ruler and no bad habits (and I'm not just talking attire).

Mrs. Bower was warm and friendly and spoke in a firm, but gentle manner, unlike her counterparts, whose voices were almost always at a high volume and in the key of a spiritual soprano.

To a third grader, it was very unsettling to face a nun every day at school, knowing that not only was she a bonded representative of God Himself but she was also somehow a relative. I thrived in Mrs. Bower's class. Not only did she enthusiastically encourage my artwork, but also my interest in, of all things, poetry!

All during the year, as we received our first dose of rhyme in literature, Mrs. Bower would allow me to submit,

along with my regular homework, original sonnets of my own. She even gave me a beautiful hard cover folder to keep them in and had me recite them from time to time to the entire class. I felt so proud, but didn't realize what I was getting myself into until the final week of that school year.

Now, to be absolutely fair, it wasn't that the nuns discouraged artistic talent – it's just that most of them thought it was the least important of all the attributes one could possess. Almost all of my poems were 'holy' in nature; (I was definitely influenced by my environment), but it was a poem I wrote that had absolutely nothing to do with divine fantasies that became the sticky subject.

You see, my poem was about *glue*, and I was picked to recite it at the school commencement on stage in front of not only the entire student body, but all of their parents, too. They kept telling me this was a great honor, but all I could remember was the "Tribute to America" disaster the year before – only this time *I* would be the disaster.

Well, to be as frightened as I was – I was also prepared. How do I know this? Because, even to this day, I can recite that little poem, exactly word for word. I don't remember that afternoon very well – I don't remember the audience either. In fact, I don't even remember breathing, but somehow I delivered that poem, and it went like this:

*I am a bottle of glue.
I am very proud, too.
I fix the children's airplane wings,
And all their other broken things,
I fix anything from games to cans.
Oh, but when I get on your hands,
Sometimes I'm a great big mess.
But, if you're careful, the mess is less.*

I have to admit, even though I did not go on to be a poet, I can still draw on those early years of encouragement

from Mrs. Bower to expand my imagination and skills in writing, which I used to create catchy headings for the many advertising illustrations I was called on to do during my first years after college. Each time I reflect on that fateful day and my enlightening verse that brought thundering cheers from the audience, I am reminded how lucky the world is to have one less poet like me!

Poetry did enlighten me to one fact in my young life, though. While I was sure I would never be an unquestioning religious follower, I did discover that I was spiritual. I believed there was more to life than we knew – I believed in good and evil, and I believed that God was not responsible for all of the crap we humans blamed on him.

I could never picture God as a wrath-slinging creator that just sat around thinking of new catastrophes to test our resolve, our perseverance and our faith. I truly saw him as a kind, forgiving spirit that gave us the freedom of choice, who was sad when we failed and happy when we succeeded.

Of course, I kept these thoughts to myself, even though the concept of hell and damnation did get to me from time to time. This spiritual side of me must have shown itself in more ways than my poetry, because I was selected by my teacher and classmates, along with only two other boys, as a candidate for the “Pontifical Order of Altar Boys.”

This was a great honor. For the next several years, I would be one of the boys who would serve on the altar at Mass (church services). There was just one small catch – first, we had to pass the “Holy Test.”

The way I saw it, this test consisted of three major parts. 5% church rituals, 5% choreography, (mainly how to kneel so the Priest wouldn’t trip over you during Mass), and the dreaded 90% Latin responses. And I don’t mean castanets, margaritas and dancing! I mean the holy language that the Catholic Church used to make simple sentences incomprehensible to everyone else. Another horrendous realization was that the test was given by Sister Ignatius, who

we now affectionately referred to as “Sister Iggie”. Once again, my future would lie in her callused hands. Only, this time, I would be prepared for her – or at least that’s what I convinced myself.

Memorizing was never one of my stronger suits, and trying to remember information that I didn’t understand was even worse, *worse* being the key word, because learning the Latin responses was (that word). With words that sounded to me like “et cum spiro tu tu oh” and “mayin a mecuse,” it was as confusing as trying to understand a two year old on the phone. I was getting nowhere fast, and I started to worry that I’d never be able to pass Sister Iggie’s altar boy test.

It was my grandmother who came to the rescue, and I really shouldn’t have been surprised. She was the resident “holy person” in our family, always going to church and praying, for whom or what we never knew, but it didn’t matter to us – at least someone in our family was communicating with God on a daily basis.

Grandma Penny was the only one in our family who also believed in, and never questioned, *all* of the teachings of the church. So, when I was selected as altar boy material, she was thrilled.

Grandma bought me two, long playing records that contained the entire Latin litany needed to answer the Priest during Mass. With no musical background or heavenly choir, the record boringly repeated each response over and over again, like an echo that would not go away. I breathed, ate and dreamed Latin until I had not only worn out my own ears, but both records.

Finally, the day of reckoning arrived. I was numb by now and knew my young brain couldn’t absorb one more word. If I didn’t know the Latin responses by now, I knew I never (and I mean *never*) would.

To my utter surprise, when I walked into the Principal’s office, Sister Iggie was smiling. I had never seen her smile, and for a brief moment, at that certain angle, and with

the light just so . . . she looked remarkably like Richard Nixon, although it was years later before I could make the connection.

"Dear Lord," I prayed, "please keep her in a good mood."

You know what – he did! I was beginning to believe in the power of prayer, even though it had never worked for me in the past.

"Are you ready, Joseph?" her deep voice resonated throughout the room, and, still with a half-smile on her face, she pointed to the single chair directly in front of her desk. Was I ready? Well, put it this way, by the time I sat down in that lonely chair, my mind was a complete blank.

I couldn't think of even one response as Sister Iggie patiently read on from the Latin Mass Book. I knew it was all over – I had failed horribly. I had never done this bad, especially on tests I had really studied this hard for. Even if it was not by much, I would have at least squeezed by with a passing grade.

I hung my head down, my eyes filling with liquid disappointment as I thought of how much I had let down my family, especially my grandmother. A ghostlike silence soon filled the room as I struggled to hold back the tears.

It was at that point that the miracle happened. Sister Iggie came from behind her desk and lifted my head with a tug of her finger on my chin, and, with the softest voice I had ever heard, she spoke to me and said, "Joseph, I know you know this – so let's try again."

With that single act, Sister Iggie became Sister Ignatius, and I saw for the first time that underneath that gruff exterior, she really cared about her students. She was human after all, and I had been given a second chance. With the cloud of fear lifted off my mind, I began to give the Latin responses as clearly and correctly as if they were coming directly from those two playing records themselves. I hardly had to think – it was all there!

As Sister Superior closed the book on her desk, she rose and declared, "Joseph, you are now an altar boy."

In that brief session, I went from total despair to emphatic jubilation, and I was exhausted.

With my new accomplishment and also my new rapport with Sister, I turned to her as I left the room and asked, "How did you know I knew the responses?"

She smiled in her Nixon-like grin and said, "Joseph, that's all the entire school has heard from you for the last two months. What did you expect?!"

She was too smart for me, still answering me yet with another question I couldn't answer.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. A worse thing than fear is to give up. Also, be careful what nicknames you give to others. You may have to take them back one day.

THE CALLING

Sometimes in the struggle to achieve one's goal, we forget to read the fine print. Of course, in this situation, (i.e., being in the fraternity of altar boys), there was no fine print. Any contract between a humble servant and the church required only "the calling," that is, a blind willingness to do anything asked of you in the name of the Lord. Not that it was all that bad; after all, it most assuredly guaranteed you a place in heaven! Of course, the job description for any altar boy could never be publicized ahead of time because, heaven or no heaven, it amounted to HELL on earth!

Altar Boy Wanted, (full) part-time position. Must have no personal life. On call 24 hours per day, seven days a week, year round. Must work for NO salary and require NO insurance. Must get up at 5AM and walk sixteen blocks to church each morning through dark, cold alleyways. Must wear clean, over-starched robes with stiff sandpaper-like collar. Must be able to communicate with sickly old priests who may forget



Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church
My brother and I, the *innocent* altar boys



Me – about 8 years old – 1955
I knew, even then, that I wanted to be an artist

where they are from time to time. Must follow any given instruction without question, whether it makes sense or not.

Looking back, becoming an altar boy taught you discipline and patience, but back then, five minutes seemed like five days, and my attention span was as long as a gnat's nose. It is hard to imagine how I ever got through it.

We had a saying in those days, "Old priests never die, they just disappear into the Confessional."

The confessional was a Catholic concept many of my non-Catholic friends had a difficult time grasping, but it really wasn't that bad. It was kind of like a place you could go to and get stuff off your chest. It made you reflect on your behavior and make an honest (in some cases) attempt to try harder and do better.

The only thing that really made it all work (at least in one's mind) was a thing called *anonymity*. Thinking the priest didn't know who was confessing to him made the act of confessing tolerable. But as I, and the rest of my altar boy compadres, grew older, we started to realize something. Now, since science and church have been at odds with each other for years, this would then be another point made on the side of "scientific fact."

In the small dimly lit box of the confessional, the only thing between you (the anonymous person) and the Priest was a small mesh screen. A sliding door behind the screen would be opened when it was your turn to speak. *Speak* being the key word, don't you know! We (being myself and other advanced thinking science fiction-crazed altar boys), began to realize that unless the confessional screen had a "voice changing monologelizer" built into it, our voices were being recognized. Since we could clearly identify the Priest's voice, we could only conclude that the one element of confession we so dearly depended on NEVER EXISTED!

After the initial shock and betrayal wore off, we decided that since we could not avoid participating in this ritual, we would simply disguise our voices. We were sure this

would work, and it seemed to for a long time until one day my Aunt Pat told me *her* story.

As Catholic luck would have it, Pat would always find herself in the confessional of the one priest she most wanted to avoid, telling her most intimate indiscretions. That's because this priest was also her coach!

Knowing she would need to face him again *on the outside*, she wanted to disguise her voice. Determined to throw him off, she used many voices, and after several months, she was sure she had beaten the system and fooled her coach. One day, the morning just before the "Big Game," Pat once again breezed through confession and was about to leave when a voice from behind the rectangular mesh screen echoed softly.

"Have a good game tonight, Pat . . . Pat . . . Pat . . . Pat . . . Pat . . . Pat . . ."

All the way home, that's all she could hear ringing in her ears was her name, "Pat," and, to think all of these months she had made herself look worse by sounding like a combination of Donald Duck, Sylvester, Minnie Mouse and an assortment of other cartoon characters she was too afraid even to recall.

It must have been about this time that my visits to the confessional subsided dramatically. I just hope God doesn't have any trouble hearing from me *directly* and in my own voice!

SERVING TIME

After being an altar boy for the next *six* years, I am convinced that when I get to heaven (which, after this, should be guaranteed!), every single Catholic up there will have their legs missing from the knees down. This, of course, is the direct result of having to kneel in church for hours and hours, day

after day. And those without kneecaps will be former altar boys.

I have to admit, though, I did my time bravely and without much complaining. After all, this effort was for the Hereafter, but there were those occasional moments in God's house when I, shall we say, forgot where I was.

The first time was when my brother and I were very young, sitting with my mom in the front row during a particularly lengthy mass. We were so small; I remember I couldn't even see over the pews without standing up on the seats. My brother, Rick, and I proceeded to have one of our antsy fights. Those are the kind you get into when you're so bored you just instinctively pick on the first person you see who is smaller than you are.

What started off as a low chain of verbal abuses rapidly grew into a medley of lowly, brother-to-brother, insults. All the while, my mom raised her degree of threats to remove both of us from the premises. Of course, neither my brother nor I took her seriously. After all, we were sitting in the front row, and she would have to walk us down the center of the aisle during the middle of mass and in front of all those people. That would have been much too embarrassing for her to ever actually do.

However, as our quarrelling got louder and louder, Mom looked like I had never seen her before – beyond mad and beyond furious – she became stone cold livid.

As my mom dragged my brother and me out of the pew and down the center of the church, during which time the blood left my wrists, I experienced real embarrassment for the first time. But, probably more important, I realized my poor mom was just as embarrassed. She knew what she had to do and did it. For that, a lesson well learned and my respect!

Now, you must understand, even though I learned a valuable lesson that Sunday, I was much older by that time I became an altar boy, almost ten. I had self-discipline, or so I thought. . . .

It was odd, being that young and having to get up at 5AM to serve 6AM mass, especially when it was still dark out and I had a good sixteen blocks from the Chester Projects to Immaculate Heart of Mary Church. Of course, being the artist type, I made up a lot of different games to play on my way, like “Soda Can Soccer” or “Kick Stone Field Goal Challenge.” So, I solved the problem of having something to do until I got there. Now I had the problem of how to stay awake during mass.

This really presented a problem since I actually had to participate, and dosing off was not a very good option, even though the six old ladies who actually attended this early morning ritual also seemed very much asleep – or even dead.

You would think the old priests, who outranked the young ones, would stick them with the unpleasant task of saying early weekday mass, but for some unknown reason, all the old priests liked to get up early.

Well, they may have liked to get up early, but that didn’t keep them from being cranky . . . not that the half-awake, half-bored, half-committed altar boys would contribute to this condition. I mean, why would ringing the altar bells out of sequence, bringing the wine and water at the wrong time and messing up the Latin response make anyone *cranky*?

Over the following years, I eventually got it all right. The old priests got to be in a better mood, and the old ladies attending mass actually stayed awake. There was just one other problem I would have to resolve until my altar boy tenure was over – that was something affectionately called “the giggles!”

WEDDINGS . . .

To a young altar boy, the *ceremony* was a strange and frightening experience.

It was an adult thing that seemed to have one purpose only, and that was to completely intimidate small people. This was definitely the case when it came to WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS in the church. There's only one way for a pre-adolescent to deal with such excruciating tension, and that, of course, was the contagious epidemic mentioned at the end of the previous chapter – “the giggles.”

I do not remember it as a self-imposed infliction, but rather one that was thrust upon you by another afflicted victim. That is to say, even the most common task, movement or especially facial expression, could *set you off*. This disease had no mercy on us as youth, and when it struck – it was fatal.

The best thing about serving at a wedding was that you got paid for it in the form of a tip. Unfortunately, the amount was not based on a percentage of the cost of the wedding. Most likely, it was based on whether everything went well during the ceremony. That is why the more experienced altar boys tried to collect before and not after the wedding. They were well aware of the affliction that beset altar boys and knew that once they had their money, this disease could run its course and they would stay monetarily unaffected.

We, on the other hand, did not know this, and our first few weddings went something like this:

They would all start off innocently enough, with everyone smiling, everyone laughing. The church pews would fill up with chattering fans – those cheering for the bride and those cheering for the groom, but once the music from the organ player started, it all changed. Suddenly, everyone got stone serious, and that is when the altar boys would start to feel the tension!

We tried to be serious – we knew this was a serious event, but, after all, we were only attendants – why should we

be subject to such scrutiny? The perfect wedding dress – the perfect flowers – the perfect music – the perfect altar boys?

It was then when we were standing next to the priest, facing the entire wedding party on the steps of the altar, that I first noticed my partner staring at the bride.

As I watched him, he looked back at me and started to tilt his head sideways, in a gesture that could only mean he wanted me to look, too. At this point, I desperately tried not to make eye contact with anyone, especially my compadre, but I felt if I didn't his head would fall right off of his neck.

It took me a couple of seconds to notice it, but there, right in the middle of the bride's small, but exposed cleavage, was what looked like a miniature bird's nest. I turned back to look at Freddie with a puzzled look on my face, still trying to be serious, but it was too late. Freddie had become stricken. His face turned bright red – his cheeks filled up with restrained air, and his eyes began to water. I looked away as fast as I could, hoping I would avoid the inevitable, but as I gazed at that strange object, slowly sliding down her chest, I, too, became stricken.

This, of course, only happens to you during the quietest moment of the service – when everyone in the entire building can hear a pin drop. Only, we sounded more like a pair of defective automobile tires that had just sprung a leak.

First, it was a low pitch grumbling noise that came from the back of our throats as we tried not to laugh. Then, it turned into a high pitch squeak that became loud giggles. The more we tried to hold it in, the louder it got, until everyone there was staring at us with clenched teeth and eyes, wide with displeasure.

There were brief moments when we were able to keep from looking at each other (the key word being *brief* here), but every time we glanced over at the “stuff” on the bride's boobs, we cracked up all over again. Finally, with tears flowing down our faces and severe pain in our bladders, we were able to restrain ourselves just long enough for the service to end.

We figured out what the bird's nest thing was – just a clip of small dried flowers that fell off her wedding bouquet, but to us it may have well been a huge eagle's nest, and we were the only ones in the whole church who noticed it.

Freddie and I received a very meager tip that day. It was what we deserved, but I have to admit, even to this day, when I'm at a wedding, I still feel a little giggle trying to get out!

. . . AND WAKES

Up to this point in my life, I had never experienced the death of any human (relative or friend), so, again, the funeral was just another ceremony.

The really cool thing about serving at a funeral was that they were always during the week, so that meant you got out of class, plus got paid. Wow, what could be better? Except for maybe some maturity.

With the seriousness of this kind of ceremony, the giggles became a substantial problem – and, try as we may, as altar boys, we had little ability to resist it. As the priest recited the words of comfort over the small gathering, my partner on the other side of the casket was holding a large vertical candle like the one I was holding. The only difference was that I was standing erect, and he was leaning over, in an effort to read the inscription on the small gold plate on top of the casket lid. This was bad enough, but he was leaning over so much that the white liquid candle accumulating beneath the flame was starting to spill over and splash down on top of the dark brown casket.

Of course, this was not funny, at least not to normal human beings, but we were not normal human beings – we were altar boys. Finally, Ralph looked up and caught sight of my bulging eyes. He followed my gaze toward the growing clump of wax that decorated the top of the casket like vanilla

frosting on a chocolate cake. He instantly blew up with laughter, but held it in. Then, he started to giggle, with high tone squeaks, emanating from his tightly squeezed lips. I looked away, hoping the sad faces sitting in the pews would help me stave off the spectacle I was now viewing across the church aisle from me. Even all of this couldn't help, and soon there were two distorted altar boys, giggling profusely. The worst part was I don't think we ever stopped giggling, even through the long lecture the priest gave us after the service. The more serious he got, the giddier we were.

As I look back on those days, I do feel bad for my behavior, though truth be told, in serious situations today it is still hard for me not to cover up the tension with . . . you guessed it!

MUSIC

The eighth grade was the start and finish of many new things that would have a long lasting influence on my life. Like most young people of that age, I loved music, but I also loved musical instruments, especially the trumpet, and I can tell you why.

I still remember to this day the very first time I heard the trumpet sounds of Al Hirt. I just knew from that moment on I would have to try and play that instrument. Of course, the only musical lessons available in parochial school were for the piano. I also loved the sound of that instrument, as well, but, at first glance, this rather large object seemed to be too much of a challenge for me. It had hundreds more keys to push down, compared to only three on the trumpet, not to mention that my short legs were unable to reach the pedals, another part of the piano of which I had absolutely no idea what the functions could possibly be, other than something that made it even harder to play. So I chose the trumpet.

Well, as usual, I wouldn't let a little thing like having no trumpet or any place to go for lessons stop me! I forged ahead, saving every penny I could and scouring every pawnshop in the area until I finally had enough money to buy a used trumpet. To me, it was a thing of great artistic beauty, like a fine sculpture, only better because you could play with it – that's how I thought of it.

Music was like child's play. It was fun, and trying to get this shiny horn to make a sound was the best fun ever! I quickly became aware of the fact that this form of musical recreation was not as appealing to those who had to hear my early (and I'm being kind to myself) trumpet styling.

I still have that same trumpet today. It was a Getzen Super Deluxe tri-colored (finished in gold, silver and bronze). I was astounded to learn that this \$50 trumpet, which I bought second hand many, many years ago, is worth \$3,200 today. Whoa – who knew? Well, I guess if you live long enough.

My big musical break came when I heard about a thing called Drum and Bugle Corps (known today as DCI, Drum Corps International). Drum Corps today costs a lot of money to run and requires major sponsorship. Back in my day, all you needed was a bunch of fanatical horn players, a parking lot (to practice marching maneuvers), a Lions Club or VFW to sponsor you (free sandwiches and an old unmarked school bus for transportation), and, if you were lucky, a music director who actually knew something about music.

Of course, I'm not talking about the "A" class Drum & Bugle Corps. I am talking about the ones I started in – the infamous "D" groups. If you must start somewhere, and you'd never had a trumpet lesson, this was actually a great place to launch one's career.

Let's consider the following inducements. A bugle is just like a trumpet – only simpler because it only has one key (it was loaned to you while you played in the drum corps). The other bugles were different sizes and equivalent to instruments such as French horns, trombones, baritones and tubas –

basically, an all brass band with, of course, a drum section that provided the much needed synchronized cadence and also, in our case, that very, very much needed super loud pounding that mercifully drowned out the horns.

Since you memorized the music, each part was taught to you by demonstration; (the music director would simply play your part, and you would repeat it over and over until everyone knew it by heart). Thus, no need to read music, which was fine if you never planned on joining an actual band.

Then, there were the uniforms! What could be finer than a man (boy) in uniform? That alone would enlist even the most hesitant candidate. At least from a distance, in “D” class corps the uniforms were well battle tested and usually two sizes too big, but the dedicated volunteer seamstresses (mostly moms) would diligently tuck, hem and seam your elite garment so, at the least, you wouldn’t trip over it while you were marching.

And, finally, the topping on the cake – parades and competitions. Just think, marching in real parades in front of thousands of cheering fans – like the Rose Bowl Parade, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and *The Prospect Park Parade*! Yes, this was the fate of a D class corps, no nationally televised performances and no state televised performances. Not even city-televised performances. At best, we ended up on a thirty-second segment of somebody’s Sony home movie video.

To be fair, that is probably all we deserved since we weren’t really on that level. Though, hearing us was not the problem; we played so loud, no one could even come close to recognizing what song we were playing. The theory was, “The more volume, the better you sounded.” (This is still the theory of some bands, even today). We took our music very seriously, and, I have to admit, we tried very hard. There were even times I think we were sort of good, but, again, I’m not sure, I really couldn’t hear us either.

Parades were always fun, though, no matter what happened, with the exception of having to march behind a mounted police unit, and I don't mean bicycles, either. The real humbling experience came from participating in Drum and Bugle Corps composition. Especially, the ones that included A and B class corps. They were so good and we were so bad, it made marching behind the mounted police a step up (literally)!

A drum corps competition is an exhibition between corps, which is scored by deducting tenths of a point from one hundred for each mistake made during your specific timed show. Music, marching and overall presentation are taken into account. There are several judges scoring you, both on the field and up in the stands. Of course, the really scary ones are those that are actually on the field with you . . . like mice with clipboards, racing between the lines of marching drum and bugle players (which included me). These judges were known to actually come up in front of you, face to face, while you were playing, to hear if you were making any mistakes. Now, I ask you, could you even be able to play *one correct note* with this, in-your-face critic staring, without mercy, directly into your eyes?

Since I didn't want to be responsible for losing valuable points, and I had no idea of how many incorrect notes I was actually playing, (remember, one could hardly hear oneself), I concluded that the best course of action was no action. In other words, I stopped playing. I didn't stop marching, and I didn't stop filling my cheeks with air, I just didn't make a sound. So, if this irritating judge did hear a bad note, it was not ME!

I don't remember much about the first few Drum and Bugle Corps contests I marched in, other than I was petrified. I was so afraid of making a mistake and adding to our decline. The first few times we took the field, I actually thought we could win. As I got into competing with and seeing the A class corps, I soon realized, "I had nothing to fear but fear itself." In other words, we didn't have a chance in hell!

Sometimes, conquering fear is not always a good thing. For example, in one of our final competitions, and after marching to the same routine for a whole summer, I was beaming with confidence. In other words – *No Fear!* Good, you say. Well, for most of the show it was, but, as we were maneuvering to start our final song, I found myself *alone*. This is never good in a marching band, unless you are playing a solo, and I, unfortunately, was not. As the snare drums rolled off and the symbols crashed, we raised our bugles to start the final number and exit the field. Only, as I turned my head around, I realized everyone, (and I mean *everyone*) was heading off the field but me. I was still facing the stands, and in those stands were hundreds of screaming people, probably wondering, as I was, what the hell I was doing.

There are many times I've had to give art lectures in front of large crowds of people, and I've learned, if you make a mistake, just keep on going and act like you meant to do it all along. Since most of the people have never seen you before, how would they ever know?

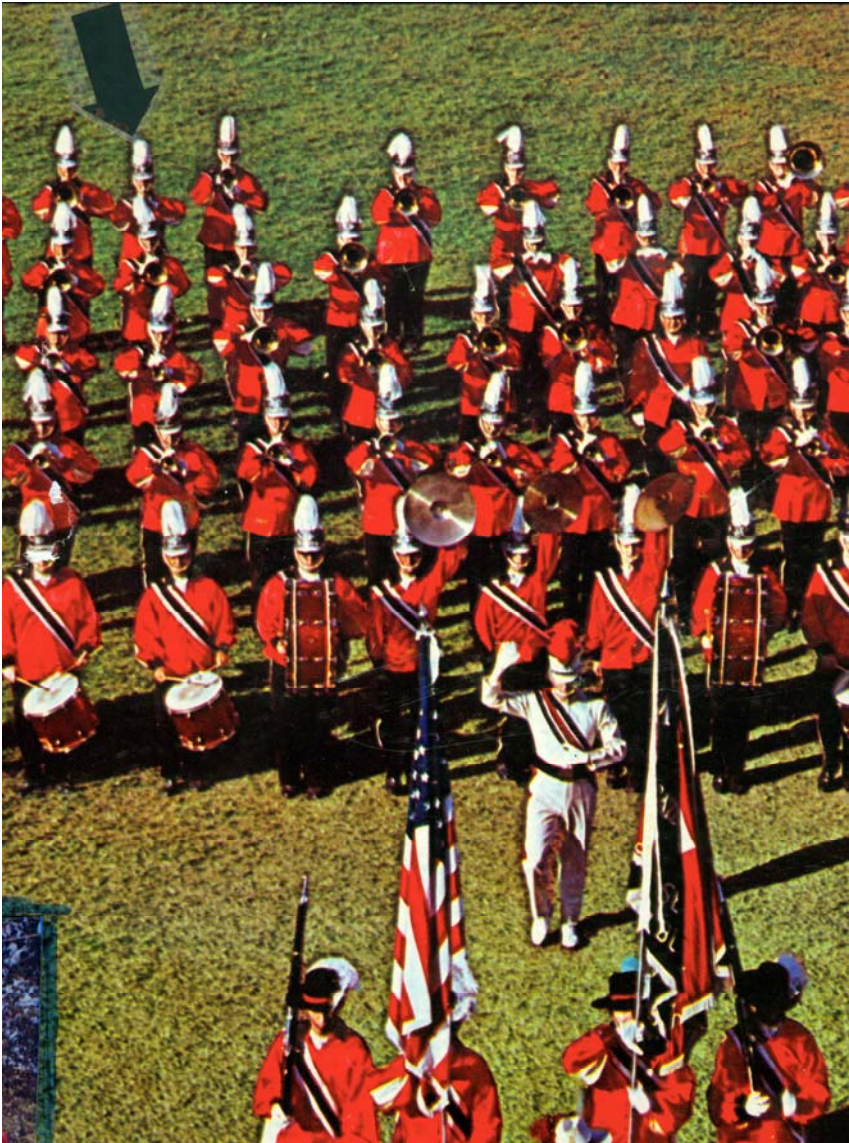
This was the beginning of that philosophy. As the music rose, and the higher soprano bugles reached the dramatic part of the melody, I instinctively raised my bugle, hit the highest note I could, and held it until I could rejoin my fellow musicians in line at the end of the field. It would be the first and last solo of my career!

Now, before you feel too sorry for me, I should let you know that I went on to play bugle in several "A" Class Drum Corps. We won two national championships, marched in the Miss America Parade, as well as the Macy's Day Parade. We also played at New York's Carnegie Hall and on halftime shows for the Philadelphia Eagles football games – not to mention, traveling all over the United States and Canada.

For a poor boy trying to escape the life of the projects, these were golden opportunities, and I took advantage of every one of them. Not only did it get me out of harm's way, it taught me teamwork and social skills. It showed me the value



Proud member of a Championship Drum Corps
The Musketeers



1961-1964, Philadelphia, PA
Championship Drum and Bugle Corps
It's tough being the smallest musician and in the
back row!



Equipment truck painted for Drum Corps
This was one of my first *big* commissions
I found out you could actually get paid for this!



Pennsylvania State Champs, 1961-1964

of self-discipline, an absolute necessity if you ever want to be a Fine Artist. And, speaking of artists, the Drum Corps experience afforded me the opportunity to try my developing talents by designing Drum Corps logos, developing uniform emblems and painting large, colorful murals on equipment trucks, depicting drum corps in action.

Back then, we might not have had luxury sponsorship like they do today, but for me, the experience was just as rewarding, and I know that somewhere in South Philly there's an abandoned garage with an old equipment truck in it, and on its sides are meticulously painted murals, slightly faded and tattered, but in the dim light they still appear new – like the dream of the young artist who painted them.

MUSCLES

If the Incredible Hulk was a ten, on a scale of one to ten, then I was most definitely a one. I was short, skinny, and the only fighting I wanted to participate in was watching the Friday night fights on my saint of a grandmother's TV. It was the only thing I remember crystal clear about my grandmother.

Yes – my daily church going, rosary bead praying – quiet like a nun – Grandmother. On Friday nights, when the bell rang (and I don't mean church bells), there she was, glued to her chair. Her fists clenched, and with a diabolical stare on her face that transformed her right before my very eyes from a gentle soul to a growling spectator. All eyes were fixed on that little 13" TV screen as the music from the sponsor rang out that familiar call to arms. I can still hear the "Gillette Blue-Bladed Jingle" as the entire room came to a stern *hush*. No one dared to make a sound as they announced the boxers.

My grandmother would always have a favorite. As the fight began, I could see her from the corner of my eye, throwing punches at the TV screen, and, God forgive any God-fearing man who would interrupt her! Though she never

uttered any recognizable profanities, her deep ‘huffs and puffs’ still remind me of an old locomotive. As for me, even though those boxers were very tiny, I could still tell it HURT A LOT. That was not for me. I would have liked to think of myself as a lover, not a fighter, but, back then, at that age, I was petrified of girls, so lover was out, so maybe a peacemaker.

Now, you might think in the projects you would be in fights all the time – and some kids were, but even though it was a very rough place to grow up in, most of the time I managed to survive by becoming aware of two things that always seemed to work:

1. Observation.
2. Make them happy.

Let me start off with survival tactic number one – observation. It was really helpful to spot trouble, and I quickly developed a keen eye for approaching kids I knew were up to no good. The trick was to immediately change directions, head for the nearest alleyway and *run like hell*! One thing about being small was that I was very fast, and I’m sure there are some kids that are still wondering where I had disappeared.

However, if this did not work (a lack of alleyways, etc.), I would go to Plan Two – chosen from “make them happy” or “give them what they want” or “what can I do for . . .” All were part of Plan Two.

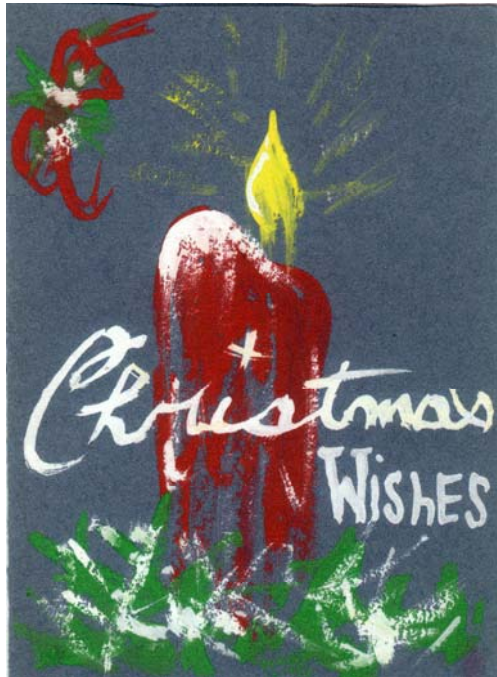
They didn’t call them gangs back then, but while a bunch of bullies, wearing leather jackets with a logo and name to identify their particular group may not have been called a gang, I can assure you they were. It’s a shame we never had any money – it would have made dealing with these ‘brotherhoods’ much easier. I was very lucky, because, even though I didn’t have money, I did have artistic talent. Even this bunch of roughnecks could appreciate that, especially when it came to painting their favorite subjects on their bikes and jackets . . . like skulls, daggers, swords and, my favorite, naked women, though mostly drawn from imagination.



1958, age 11, pencil drawing, earliest artwork found



1959, age 12, always loved custom cars



1959, age 12, Christmas cards

It's amazing how I avoided fights and scuffles by appeasing my foes by doing artwork for them. So, it's no wonder that I realized the value of using one's talents, even at that age. As in life, all good things must come to an end, and so, one day, did my ability to avoid *the fight*. You would think that since I lived in an almost all black project, the one guy who just had to beat me up would naturally be black. *No*, this was not the case here. It happened to be one of the few other white dudes who just took a terrible dislike to me for no apparent reason. Did I say "reason?" Huh, reason never entered into this kid's mind. He had no reason; therefore, of course, reasoning with him didn't work.

My brother, Rick, had the same problem when he tried to reason with a couple of bullies. It didn't work, and he got a little beat up. When we returned home, my mom asked me why I didn't jump in and help defend my younger brother.

I immediately said, "I did," with my brother looking like he rolled down the side of a ravine and me looking totally untouched.

My mother shouted, "What help?"

I quickly replied, "I held Rick's soda so he could use both hands."

I don't think that's what she wanted to hear, but she knew I was not much of a fighter. It was shortly after that we were obliged to take boxing lessons at the Boy's Club. One would hope this then would prepare me for *The Fight*.

The Boys Club only reassured me of *how much it hurts when you get hit!* I must admit, I found myself to be also very quick in boxing and really had the knack for avoiding punches, but at eighty pounds, I couldn't rely on a knock out to get me through the fight.

I didn't feel very comfortable in those huge boxing gloves either. It was like having two pillows wrapped around your hands. So, eventually, no matter how I danced around the ring (Mohammed Ali would have been impressed), my arms got so tired I could hardly hold them up. This, of course,

would lead to my demise, but at the Boy's Club, they would mercifully stop the match when they saw you were in trouble – no one ever got hurt.

Without boxing gloves, maybe I could take this loud-mouthed bully. I certainly could keep my arms up longer, but what about my pathetic eighty pound punch? I began to realize I couldn't count on two things – my boxing lessons or my confidence, as both barely existed. That's when I decided to engage the help of a really tough guy, Charles Bronson. Charles was a Stallone-type actor – famous in the 60's. One day, out of nowhere, mom came home with Charles Bronson. My little mother was dating "The Destroyer!"

Actually, her new boyfriend was Tony – he just looked like the famous actor. Even though my imagination was pretty wild, I was not imagining this comparison. People on the street would constantly come up to Tony and ask him for his autograph. We thought this was way cool, as did Tony. It's funny what you remember as a kid, and we never forgot Tony. He was the only boyfriend my mom had that my brother and I really liked, mainly because he took so much time and played with us. Like Charles Bronson, he was a very tough man, which made it even more unique to witness how gentle he was with my brother Rick and me. Though he was a Green Beret in the Army, and a nightclub bouncer as a civilian, to us, he was just a big gentle bear.

I have to admit, the minute we took my mom's mattress and positioned it in the middle of the living room floor, I knew this wouldn't be just a token lesson in the martial arts, but the real thing. My confidence started to grow as Tony demonstrated the many moves that would stun and cripple your opponent. As Rick and I enthusiastically threw each other over our shoulders and knocked one another off balance, we beamed with the feelings of being able to stick up for ourselves. This was exactly what I needed to stand up to that bully and I soaked up every move.

Soon, the day of reckoning came, and I would not run away. This scruffy-faced brute was in my face, calling me names even I never heard of. As we stood there, toe-to-toe, I was planning my moves! Now, the one thing Tony told us that seemed to go right by our ears was the fact that to really perform the moves he showed us, we would have to practice for years to perfect, but surely the dozen times I bounced my brother off of that mattress would be practice enough!

I had the perfect move all worked out in my mind – it was the “grab and kick.” All I had to do was grab this thug, drop down and pull him forward as I rolled back on the ground, kick upward into his stomach and flip him over me onto the pavement. I could see him lying there in pain, asking me to spare his worthless life.

Finally, with all the guts I could muster, I made my move. As I look back on that dark episode in my young life, I can truly say the first part of my “move” went extremely well. It was the second part (when I dropped down) and tried to kick him over me that went awry. He was so heavy that when I kicked upward, my skinny little legs just gave way, and there I lay on my back with him directly on top of me, where he proceeded to punch my lights out! I say this because that’s the last thing I remember, the sky getting dark.

Before you think I’m not appreciative of Tony or the martial arts, I am. Even though my “move” didn’t work, just the fact that I faced up to that thug must have made an impression. He never bothered me again. Maybe it was because he didn’t recognize me from the swelling!

FIELD OF DREAMS

You would think that, with my fighting fiasco, I would have learned to stay far away from physical contact with any individual larger than me. In other words, stick with the band. But my mom’s and Aunt Pat’s love for sports rubbed off on

me enough that I just had to join the eighth grade football team, the Fighting Eagles.

The title alone should have been a warning, but all I could see was the glory of making a touchdown and hearing the roar of the crowd! I loved the idea of joining a team and wearing a uniform, even though, to this point, the object was to keep one's uniform clean and undamaged. I was soon to find out football was not a game of avoidance, but one of *contact*.

Nevertheless, I still remember trying on that jersey and helmet. It was like I became bigger and stronger, especially when I wore the shoulder pads.

Once again, I was very fast, which seemed to encourage the coach, so he did what most coaches would do – he made me a halfback. That made sense because the halfback had to be fast and advance the football down the field. Hey, I could do this. In all the after-school practices, it seemed to be a great decision. There were just two small factors missing. One there was no real tackling – I didn't realize everyone was letting up because they didn't want to injure their own teammates. The second was, when practicing formations we were to run; I hadn't actually carried the football yet.

The first time we had a real scrimmage, I had a reality check. First of all, the football was so large in my little arms it felt like I was carrying a microwave oven. Every time I got hit, the football shot out of my arms like a rocket launcher. This is not good if you're supposed to be the running back. You see, the object is to avoid tacklers (which I sort of did), run fast (which I definitely did) and advance the ball (which I couldn't do) because I didn't have it. To make things worse, when I did manage to hang onto the ball, I was brutally gang-tackled, and the worst thing was, it messed up that neat looking green-and-silver uniform I was wearing!

Life on the *bench* wasn't so bad; at least I wasn't getting murdered on the field, and I was still on the team.

From time to time, I would get looks from the coach that indicated to me he was desperately trying to figure out how to use my speed without creating another disaster. Finally, before one of our big games with a rival school, St. Anthony's, he called me aside.

"Joe, listen very carefully and do exactly what I tell you."

As the microwave came plummeting down from the sky, I grabbed it with all my might and ran as fast as I could. I was now the kick-off return specialist, and I was streaking up the field with the crowd yelling and screaming. This may have been due to the fact that they were petrified I was going to drop the ball again. *No!* The coach's plan was fool proof. As I magnificently advanced the heavy football up the field, past the fifty yard line, and stared down the oncoming tacklers, I didn't even flinch. I didn't even grimace. I didn't even brace for the pain. I simply ran out of bounds. Whoa – lots of gain and no pain! I ran back kick-offs the rest of the year and never got tackled once – that is in *bounds*. This, then, would be my brief, but rewarding experience in my one and only contact sport, football.

I also loved baseball, but never was able to get on a Little League team. I would practice for hours throwing the ball against the tall brick building we lived in at the projects. I spent weekends pretending I was the pitcher, the first baseman and the outfielder, all in one game, which I almost always won. I would play until dark, running and leaping, grabbing balls out of mid-air and throwing men out at the plate with deadly accuracy.

But, when it came time to perform at Little League tryouts, I was a total failure. I had no confidence and would drop even the easiest fly ball. It was one of the few rare times when I felt that if I had a dad to help me and cheer me on, I could have gotten over the jitters and showed everyone what I could really do. To make things worse, on the last day of the last tryout, the last ball was hit to me, and on my last attempt

to make the team . . . I ran down an incredibly long hit ball that was sky high and deep to the wall. I was right there – this catch would surely get their attention and a spot on the team.

Well, it did get their attention – when they saw the ball go right between my hands and hit me squarely in the head! This was yet another time I saw the sky turn black. As most young people, my head was as hard as the ball. I managed to endure the incident with just a large bump and bruised self-esteem. My dreams on the field were a time short lived, but much better than time *lived short!*

A SIGN FROM GOD

The one thing I still remember most vividly about my old Catholic school days was Easter. I was getting ready to graduate from the 8th grade and, yes, you guessed it, my teacher for that year was the infamous Sister Ignatius, (i.e., Sister Iggie).

She turned out not only to be the best principal the school ever had, but also a good teacher, who, of all things, loved art. When she saw that I had some artistic abilities, she treated me exceptionally well and recruited me to paint signs for all the school activities, plus create posters for church functions. I was overwhelmed.

The best thing of all was that I was working on all of these projects during school time – that's right, I said *school time*. Now, how can you beat that? I'll tell you. I also got to use all of the school's art supplies, of which she would give me some to keep for my own personal artwork at home. Now, don't get me wrong, Sister Iggie was strict, but when it came to art, she definitely had a visible soft spot. I realized for the first time how art could have a profound effect on people, even on *nuns*.

Of course, most of the graduates were going to St. James Catholic High School. I was not sure I could take four

more years. After all, there was no guarantee I would get another art lover like Sister Iggie. This is also why I was in intense negotiations with Mom to transfer me to Pulaski Junior High, a public school with regular teachers – the kind where you could see their hair.

Meanwhile, as the year drew to a close and Easter approached, it was announced that Archbishops (the big wigs) would have an art contest and that the winner would receive . . . one million dollars? No. Maybe a thousand? No. Maybe *some* money? No. What then, you ask? Well, remember, you're dealing with the Catholic Church. They take in money, they don't give it away, even for art. If you don't believe me, just ask Michelangelo. He still hasn't been paid in full.

My first guess was maybe that the first prize would be the typical, "mass in your name" – how long do you have to be dead to collect on that one? Maybe an actual thing like a rosary, and guess how many of those we already had. Actually, for me, the prize turned out to sound very exciting. The winner would get their artwork reproduced on all the Easter Mass cards in the district. Just think, hundreds of people would actually see *your* artwork and on a professionally printed mass card. Wow, this would definitely be a great thing – your artwork on God's own stationary. But, wait – this included all the Catholic schools and all the grades – that's a lot of other kids. How could I possibly have a chance?

Well, no matter – Sister Ignatius made the contest part of our curriculum, and the entire class (artists and non-artists alike) had to come up with something.

Now, in my younger Catholic days, I loved to draw depictions of Christ on the cross, with blood dripping all over the place and, (well, you get the idea). I don't know why young kids, especially artist-types, love gore at that age, but they just do. Maybe it's because they haven't been around long enough to know how much that stuff really hurts. Anyway, I couldn't picture hundreds of parishioners going to church on Easter morning with bleeding Mass cards. I knew many students

would be doing the typical images of Christ rising from the tomb or an empty cross or what seemed like millions of other pictures I had seen before.

How could I come up with something different? I realized then how hard it is to think “outside the box,” especially since I was never actually “outside the box.” I gained a new respect for all the artwork I had seen on posters and in books that were so different and innovative. How did they do it? How were they able to see things from such a new perspective?

A feeling of real despair and doubt took me over.

I just stared at the empty paper, thinking, “I just don’t have what it takes.”

Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Sister Iggie. I felt embarrassed having her see me wrestling over a blank piece of paper with no good ideas in sight.

“Joseph,” she whispered, “anything the matter?”

Her soft, caring voice helped me blurt out the truth.

“I want this to be really good, even if I don’t win, and all I can think of is the same old things everyone else is.”

Sister paused and then motioned for me to follow her. She took me to a small room next door to her classroom, where they stored a lot of extra library books.

“Now, Joseph,” she said, “sometimes, the way to get the best original ideas for yourself is to see what other artists have done.”

The thing that struck me was that she said *other artists*. Could I really be one? Then, she continued.

“See all these books. Some have excellent illustrations, and I know if you go through them you will get the inspiration you need for your own idea.”

Maybe I could be an artist, after all. Win or lose, it didn’t matter as much now because I knew Sister Iggie believed in me, and wouldn’t you know, sometimes that’s all it takes.

Sister left me there to thumb through the many religious books piled high on the long table. Many of these books I had never seen before. Thus, much of the artwork was new to me. She was right! Seeing all the beautiful paintings and drawings did inspire me. Even more than that, I started to see a trend. The artist's works that I liked the best were not only drawn well, but they pictured the same subjects as other artists (in the books) in a different angle. Some of the best paintings didn't show the entire scene, but were cropped and composed to focus in on just the most important story telling images.

I knew one thing for sure, my picture would do the same.

"I'll keep the image simple and bold!"

I was back to square one as the bell rang for lunch. I was not hungry – at least for food. I knew I had realized something, and I just had to keep going. I grabbed the drawing paper from my desk, ran back into the small room and closed the door.

As I paged through the piles of books I noticed a graphic on one of the covers. It was just a part of a cross. I remember thinking how clever that was. All you saw was just part of it, but yet you knew what it was. Suppose it wasn't just a graphic and you drew the actual cross – maybe just a section of it lying on the ground empty.

I started to draw, moving my first image around on the page, trying to find just the right angle. Finally, when I was satisfied that I had arrived at the best composition, I tried to think what would go on an empty cross. If the empty cross suggested Christ had risen, did I need anything else with it? As I stared at the hastily sketched drawing, I knew I did need something else – something that signified hope! But what? One thing for sure, I was on a roll, and I loved it.

Then I remembered something I saw in one of the children's books. I can't explain why I thought of it – I just did. Knocking over a mountain of books in an attempt to find the

one I remembered, the loud noise prompted Sister Ignatius to check on me. I think when she opened the door and saw the look on my face; she knew my mind was miles away. Without a word, she just closed the door. There it was – the book. It didn't have drawings, though – it had photos – of birds. Not just any birds – these were red breasted and had a story.

THE STORY

One day, these small birds were flying and noticed a man below caught at the top of a tree. He was bleeding and in great pain. Even though these birds were very small, they decided they must try to help the man. The first thing they tried to do was remove the large crown of thorns from the man's head, but, as they tried, they cut themselves. From that moment on, and for all time, their chests would remain red, and they would be known as the thorn birds.

That was it! I would put those little birds next to my heavy cross, and they would show that if we try, God will love us – meaning, his sacrifice on the cross would have not been in vain. Though I didn't know it at the time – I had taken one huge step toward being a real artist. I emerged from that room a different person.

I remember working on that drawing for a solid week. I decided to draw it in pencil (black and white) and only add a little red color on the thorn birds' chest. When the drawings were hung up for display at our school, I couldn't help noticing how mine stood out. It was the only black and white art in a field of brightly colored entries. It really held its own and with just the small red accents on the birds, to me it seemed very special. Now, the only question was, did anyone else think so? I can't tell you how proud I was when it was selected to represent our school in the final selection. Not seeing the other artists work representing the other schools, I had no idea what

I was competing against. Then I realized, it didn't matter, as long as I knew I did my best.

To this day, I think the reason I make such a good and compassionate art judge is because I never forgot what it was like to enter your work in any kind of competition. Win or lose – it always takes something away from you, though winning made it less noticeable.

Sister Ignatius entered the classroom with a blank face. This was the day she would announce who won the Easter Art Contest. The winner would get to have his or her artwork printed on the Easter Mass cards over the entire archdiocese. There were eleven other schools, and to think my school was depending on me – well, as the nuns would always say, “It’s in God’s hands now!”

The only thing was I would be responsible if we lost. I would be letting down every individual at the school, especially one individual – me!

As Sister sat down at her desk and folded her arms, I thought to myself, “Whatever made me think I could win this thing anyway? What made me think I was any good? A picture of a cross with some birds – what’s so special about that!? How could I be so stupid? I’m not that clever. The other entries were probably magnificent and really clever. They probably think my school is dumb for choosing me. Poor Sister Ignatius is so embarrassed – she can hardly speak.”

Her words came out slowly.

“Class, I want you to know we are all very proud of the Easter art entries you all submitted, especially Mr. Sambataro, whose piece went on to the finals and represented our school.”

She paused and, with defining silence, everyone just turned around in their desks and stared at me. Good grief, I had become a minor celebrity and realized immediately the isolation that goes with fame.

Sister continued.

"The thing about a contest is that only one person can win, but that doesn't mean all the participants are not also winners."

A pause . . . then *Oh my God*, she was looking directly at me. She was trying to make me feel better before she told us that I didn't win.

She was trying to let me down easy. She continued in her soft voice.

"The important thing is that you did your best."

Another pause. Oh boy, here it comes! My thoughts were cut short when I heard Sister Ignatius raise her voice and say, "Congratulations, Joseph, you won!"

I was in shock, especially when I saw Iggy's face all lit up with excitement. I really did it, but, as I would come to realize later, most accomplishments are with the help of others, and without Sister's encouragement, I would have never had a chance. Little did I know how influential she really was in my winning until several years later?

I was home on leave from the Air Force and decided to drop by my old school. Sister Ignatius was still there, but only substitute teaching. As our conversation progressed, I thanked her for her encouragement and told her how much of a help she was to me.

Then, she told me how afraid she was that I would find out she was also a judge on the Easter Art Selection Committee.

"Wow, I had an insider," I blurted out.

"Not really."

She said each school had their own representative. The committee did narrow the artwork down to two pieces – yours and another boy's from St. Anthony's.

"You mean mine wasn't the clear-cut winner?"

"Oh no," she replied. "The vote was totally divided – six of us picked yours and six picked the other boy's from St. Anthony's."

"Well, how did you break the deadlock?" I asked.

The Sister smiled.

“We decided to ask the Monsignor to select one, and that would break the deadlock. He really liked both pieces equally, so we thought we were back where we started until he raised the question of which picture would reproduce the best. Father John, who was doing the printing said, ‘Both pieces are well done and would look good.’ We still had no answer until Father John continued, ‘You know the black and white piece will be a lot less expensive to print!’ The deadlock was over. After all, anyone who could save the church *money* would always win.”

I guess some artists would feel their art had been compromised, but to me, the excitement was trying to be different. Trying to be the best and finally winning was definitely a *sign from God!*

CHAPTER TWO

ADVENTURES OF MEADOW LANE

That summer seemed almost too good to be true. Not only was I going to transfer to a public school where they actually had *real* art classes, Mom also informed us we might be moving out of the Projects to a *real house*. How could this be? Were the gods finally looking down on us? What a dream, our own house. But how?

As it happened, a good friend of my mom's from work was taking a new job out of state and didn't want to sell her little house, just in case the job didn't work out. So, she decided to rent it to someone she could trust. She was so concerned about the house being kept up; she offered it to mom for a really low price, even though, at the time, it was more costly than the projects.

We were so excited and prayed mom could swing it, because I don't think my brother and I could have taken the disappointment. Mom decided to go for it, but she would have to take on a weekend job and *we* would have to become little men and really pitch in and help.

"No problem," we thought, "let the adventure begin."

Of course, all adventures at our house began with a *lecture* from Mom.

"I am really going to be depending on you boys," she said in a very serious voice. "There will be a lot more work to keep up this house, and I can't do it alone."

The look on her face and tone in her voice couldn't have been delivered with more fervor. It was like listening to a head coach before a big game.

"Now, can I count on you?" she said in louder tones as she pointed and stared at Rick and me. "Okay, can I?"

Like key players on a football team ready to take the field for a championship game, we yelled out, "Yes!" Normally, this would be the end of my mom's pep talk, but this was not a normal move for us. As a fine coach in her own right, she felt it necessary to end her motivational speech with a warning.

"If you can't be trusted at the new house when I am away at work, the state will come in and take you away from me. Then, there will be nothing I can do!"

These words were devastating. We actually thought they (the "state," large ugly men in Gestapo-like uniforms) could come into our house, with Rick under one arm and me under the other, and literally take us away. We were never actually told where we would go, but we were definitely certain it was a bad place. With the fate of our very existence hanging in the balance, we swore we would be angels. That seemed to be good enough for mom.

SWEEPING UP

As we approached our new house for the first time, we realized we were in a real neighborhood – the kind like on TV, and we felt like Dorothy on her way to Oz. Everything was different from what we were used to. Instead of trashcans, the street was lined with bright green bushes. Instead of alleyways, there were rainbow colored garages. Instead of electric poles, there were thick trees. Instead of cement yards, there was

grass! We did not care that our house was the smallest house on the block – after all, *we* were on the block.

Our first task was to sweep up and clean out our new little house before we moved in. As you walked in through the slightly squeaky front door, you were greeted with steps that took you up to the two small bedrooms, one bathroom and a skinny hall closet at the top of the steps. You could turn left and go into two large adjoining rooms that were the living and dining rooms. In between the rooms was a curved wall that arched over the ceiling. In the back dining room area, there was a very small, long, skinny kitchen with a pantry and a door to the cellar. Did someone say *cellar*?

For youngsters, there was nothing more mysterious and spooky than a cellar. Even our grandmother's cellar, which had painted walls and carpeting, could never be mistaken for just another room. We knew better. Anything *below* the ground level had to be haunted, and we knew one thing for sure – no matter what happened, Rick and I were never going down to the cellar at night. Lights or no lights!

At the other end of the kitchen was the back door. This was the best door of all because it led out to our own private, fully carpeted with grass, securely protected with a big fence, *back yard*. Just think, a *back yard* – a kid's own private park in which to play. It was heaven, but first we must clean up the place or there would be hell to pay.

With mom off to work, Rick and I proceeded to sweep up, and we were doing well until I noticed the two silver radiators at each end of the two rooms. I also noticed each room was almost the same size and that the radiators were both at the back walls and centered exactly opposite from one another. Now, for me, a creative child whose conscience was never totally grounded to reality (this was obvious), we were sweeping the perfect *ice hockey rink*, with a center line and two perfect goals at each end. The floors in the empty rooms were flat, and Rick and I were standing there with long hockey stick-like brooms.

Let the games begin!

It didn't take us long to find a lid from an old jar in one of the cupboards. It made a perfect hockey puck. Mom would never realize how *thoroughly swept* those two rooms would get as Rick and I ran back and forth, sweeping the jar lid across the floor trying to hit the opposing player's radiator. Excuse me, I mean goal.

It was a tie score when the unthinkable happened. I had gained a step on my brother as he swung his mighty broom across mine. I caught the puck just right, lifting it off the floor and into the air, flying directly toward the goal. As Rick and I watched in horror, the jar lid flew over the intended goal and hit the window. The cracking noise could be heard for miles. I had destroyed our new house and condemned us back to The Projects.

Of course, Rick was no help as he threw his broom and pointed at me screaming, "You did it, I didn't! It's your fault! It's your fault!"

I realized I was not going to get out of this mess easily – especially because there was an eyewitness. I decided to be brave and go see the damage up close. To my surprise, it wasn't that bad, just a small crack in the lower corner of the window.

"Hey," I exclaimed to Rick, "maybe we can cover it up."

All Rick could say was, "It was your fault!"

I yelled back, "You were playing, too. I'll just tell mom you did it."

After several minutes of screaming back and forth, we both decided my first suggestion warranted further deliberation. We went scouting around for something to cover up the crack. If we only had one of those security stickers they always put on windows, like Brinks, or even one of those that say "Support your local police."

We became desperate, as mom would soon be home from work, so we decided to look for something in the cellar.

It was still light out, so we braved the shadowy steps and explored the basement. There was a large black iron coal furnace in the center of the cold, drafty room. It looked like a prehistoric monster with silver tubes coming out of its head. We were just about to give up and get back upstairs to safer quarters when I spotted them, on the side of this large, ugly coal monster were several stickers. They all looked official, so we probed them to see if they were loose. As a reward for bravery in the cellar, one of those stickers *was* loose, and we easily peeled it off.

Mom never knew I cracked that window. She just thought that window always had a small red and white sticker on it. She never tried to read the small print under the word “Warning” that said, “Burn only coal in this furnace.”

BLUE LIGHTNING

Meadow Lane represented more than just a change of address. It was also a change of mind. This was an environment of families and neighbors who came together as a community.

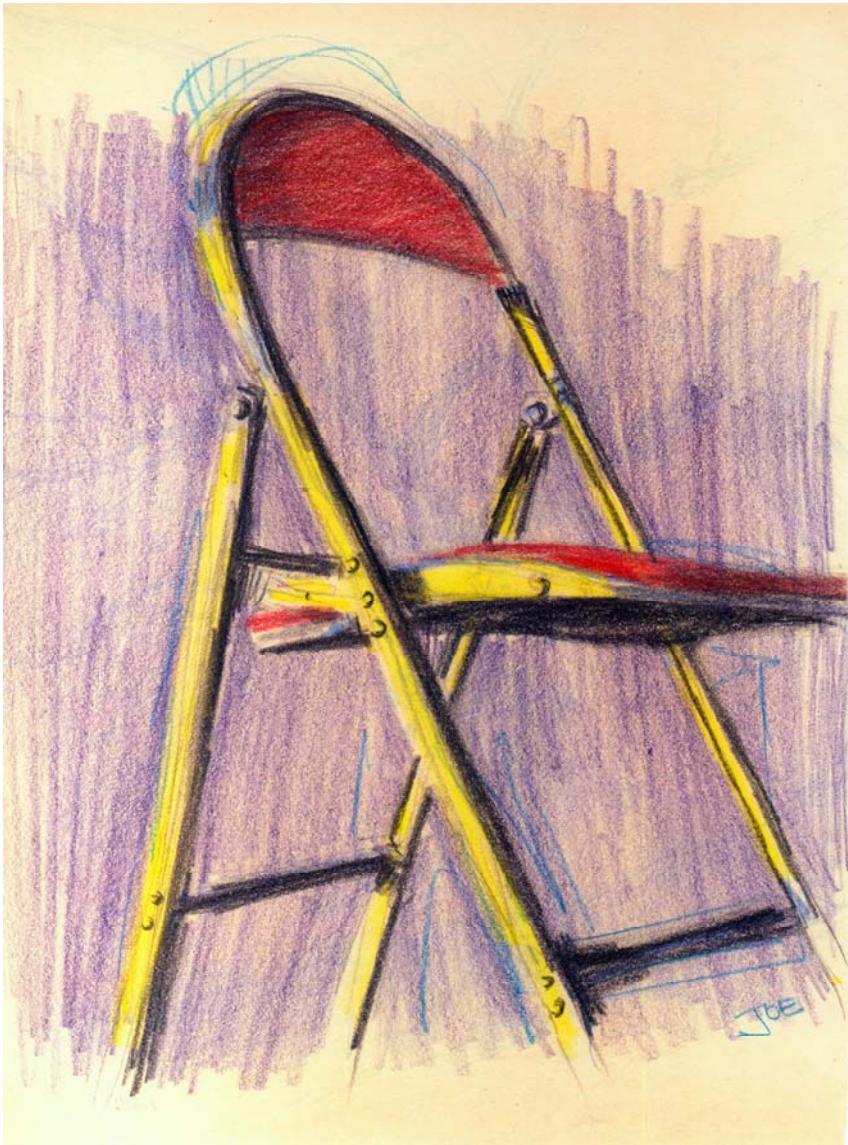
It didn’t take long to adapt to this new way of life, and soon my brother and I were making friends and rapidly blending in, despite our differences in income!

Of course, there was *some* pressure to “keep up with the Jones’s,” which manifested itself in the form of wheels. That is, every kid on the block had a bike but me. This became my new quest. I saved every penny I could and didn’t realize that at the rate I was going it would have taken me twenty years to buy even a modestly priced bicycle.

But, somehow Santa came to the rescue, and that Christmas I awoke to find next to the tree a shiny new bike – and not just any bike. This was a blue, silver and white, “Blue Lightning” model. And I loved it!



1960, age 13
Started to see the unique shape of things



1961, age 14, pencils
Loved to draw

Even my new friends were impressed, and as hard as I tried *not* to – I just couldn't help myself – I would show off with it. I jumped curves, did wheelies and raced all my biker friends until it got too dark to see.

Mom would always warn me about going fast on my bike, but like most kids, I thought I had everything under control, and it wouldn't take long for the powers that be to humble me dramatically!

At the end of our block we had a street that went downhill, and I mean, *downhill*! It looked like a ski slope, and whenever Blue Lightning and I would start down that incline we could gather up enough speed to create (what felt like) G-forces.

The only problem (a simple one?) was called *stopping*. At the bottom was a cross street and a little something else called *traffic*!

One day, in my attempt to break the world's speed record (again) I pointed Blue Lightning straight down that hill. Launching, my hands tightly gripped the handle bars, and I glanced down at the lightning bolts blazed across the fenders as the air raced through the spokes, each wheel gave off a high pitched squeal which sounded to me like jet engines screaming down a runway.

This was it. I knew I was traveling faster than any boy had ever gone before. It was awe-inspiring – until, well, now we get back to that small matter called *stopping*, which now became very important because I could see several cars speeding through the intersection below.

Instantly my heart stopped, and my muscles froze, when I realized there was no way I could stop before I hit the crossing.

Oh no – did I say *HIT*?!

I jammed on the brakes as hard as I could. The back wheel was smoking as it stiffened and slid sideways. Just when I thought I had a chance, I heard a loud crack. I looked down

only to see Blue Lightning's brake chain come apart in a million pieces. I was in God's hands now!

It truly was astounding that I wasn't run over as I went helplessly flying through that intersection. My young life was spared, or was it?

No sooner than I got to the other side, still rolling at a pretty good clip, I hit a rather large curb, which actually did stop me, or, at least, Blue Lightning. I, however, proceeded to fly through the air where I landed somewhat sideways on old Mrs. Chamber's rosebushes.

I limped away that day, being quite thankful for several things – that I was still here to talk about it, that the only thing bent up was the front wheel on Blue Lightning, and old Mrs. Chambers wasn't home when I rearranged her flower garden!

THE ICEMAN COMETH

It's not hard to understand why experts claim that a child's environment is so important. Our move to Meadow Lane was like being reborn into a new life. The stress of the projects, with its crime and gangs, was such a part of daily living, you didn't think about it. Casually stepping over a passed-out drunk lying in front of your apartment door, seemed only an occasional obstacle you tried to ignore as a child, but once removed, I can assure you going back would have been quite traumatic. So, we put that out of our minds and enjoyed our new surroundings, which included not one, but *two* parks within a few blocks.

Parks to a city kid are like water to a swimmer. They allow you to see a small bit of nature and use your imagination to run and play; a true oasis.

One of the parks was small with not a lot of trees. However, the other park was large and even had a small stream running through it, with thick trees lining its rocky

banks. Birds chirped, squirrels ran, and I pictured myself in exotic lands thousands of miles away.

Now, only a young boy can put himself into such a beautiful fantasy and still play “war games.” Using sticks for rifles and wearing a backpack full of emergency provisions, such as candy bars, I was ready to meet the enemy.

Of course, the enemy changed daily, and with each new battle, I would once again become the hero and savior of all the good guys. It never occurred to me that the bad guys were thinking the same thing!

As a young boy, it was easy to romanticize war, because after all, we knew nothing of its reality.

To be honest, I didn’t *always* win. That’s mainly because I loved to die. That is, I loved being shot and throwing myself into the air, screaming in agony as the invisible bullets shot through my body. What fun, wallowing around on the ground and down the side of a hill until my lifeless, tumbling body stopped moving. And, the best part was, I could get up and do it all over again!

That is, until one day when I fought “The Battle of the South Pole.”

This conflict was a war to regain the South Pole from the evil snow monsters, who went there when they were driven out of the North Pole by Santa’s Virtuous Reindeer Army. Now, it was *my* duty to rid the good people in the South Pole of these horrible man-eating creatures.

Of course, the other reason I probably dreamed up this new war scenario was because Chester, Pennsylvania just had 37” of fresh snow, the most accumulation in our area for the past several years. And what places, you ask, have lots of snow just like this? The Poles, of course. See, if you think about it, it all makes perfect sense.

This could be a great pretend battle, and the snow monsters were really in for a fierce fight because, not only would they be battling *me* (the most victorious warrior that ever was), but I also talked my brother into joining my army.

Of course, I had to make him a “General.” But what’s in a title anyway, as long as I was the “Supreme Commander!”

As we prepared for war, mom bundled us up in full winter attire. In other words, we could hardly move from all of the insulation we had tightly wrapped around our little bodies.

But, I preferred to think of it as “battle gear” and extra protection against the snow monsters.

As the afternoon turned into late afternoon, the skies grew darker, the clouds got thicker, and the air got a *lot* colder.

The General and I had killed and wounded millions of the ugliest snow monsters you ever saw, and signs that the war was ending became immediately apparent – when we realized we were cold, tired and most of all, hungry! Time to go home.

As we had “slain” the last remaining snow creatures on our trek out of the park, we fearlessly leaped over the frigid stream that was between us and home.

Like a gazelle, the General soared across the water onto the other side, screaming, “We’ve won, we’ve killed them all!”

And, as I yelled back in my victorious voice, “We did – we did – we did!” I slipped and fell into the icy water, waist deep! I was literally frozen solid. *And I was going to die!*

Trying to restrain my tears so my face wouldn’t also freeze, I slowly dragged myself out of the water onto the steep bank of snow and rocks.

Now notice I said, *I* dragged myself out. The General was way too busy laughing to be of any help.

I hobbled home, shifting my soaked body from one frozen foot to the other as my brother cleared a path toward home, screaming with laughter and pointing at me as if I was a freak of nature.

None of this really mattered now because I knew pneumonia had already set in and soon I would be a frozen corpse.

The General did finally stop laughing, not because I fell over dead, but because our mother didn't share his humor. As time went on I realized that there were *three* amazing things that came out of this battle: one, we killed so many snow monsters (until this day, I have not seen one!); two, it was the last time my brother insisted I call him General!; and three, I not only didn't die, I never even got a cold!

THE FIRST HAUNTED HOUSE

Have you noticed all the "Haunted Houses" they have at Halloween that raise money for needy charities? Well, I can tell you without hesitation, Rick and I created the first "haunted house."

Remember our spooky cellar? Well, what a great place for the first haunted house, and at Halloween, it didn't take my brother and me long to figure out we had a gold mine of ghosts in that basement.

Heck, we were scared to go down there, and we lived there, but how do we make that dark, cold room even spookier? And, how do we do it without freaking out ourselves?

With the bravery of the first Egyptian tomb archaeologists, and with two large flashlights, Rick and I braved the basement, surveying all its nooks and crannies. Now, we still had the door open, the windows uncovered and all the lights on, but there were definitely many dark spots and shadows unaccounted for, and it was our quest to use every space.

As we started formulating ideas, we realized we couldn't let our paying public just roam around. They might damage our displays, steal something. Or even worse, *never leave*. No we needed to make this a "ride." But how? The answer came in the form of a broken shopping cart we found in the alleyway. It was perfect – it had no upper basket part,

only the bottom (a place to sit) and the back hand rail (a place to push). We cleaned it up and brought it home.

We tried putting planks on the cellar steps and riding the cart down. This would have been a great start to the “haunted house ride.” Only it turned into more of a roller coaster with no brakes, not to mention the plank boards kept sliding around, and the cart’s wheels would get caught on the steps and flip over. (We weren’t allowed to nail anything down.)

Even when it worked, and the cart stayed on the tracks, it just crashed at fifty mph at the bottom of the steps. We almost killed ourselves trying it out, but smartly gave up.

So, our ride would start at the bottom of the steps. At least now we wouldn’t need insurance.

We spray painted some extra light bulbs red and replaced the white ones. We didn’t realize you could buy bulbs already colored.

We hung string all over, down from the ceiling so it would feel like cobwebs. We cut out the shape of a man hanging from the gallows and put it in front of a flashlight. The silhouette was projected on the large wall in the coal bin as screaming girls were pushed by on the cart.

We used our failed wooden planks on the floor, putting anything that would squeak, cry, howl or make any kind of sound when it got squeezed, under the plank. More screams of terror would arise when we pushed unsuspecting customers over them, as the cart would bounce and jerk to each noise!

We played haunting music in the background and wheeled our victims around our cellar, slowing down at each dimly lit corner, displaying skeletons, shrunk heads and other unholy figures.

We spent two weeks setting up the world’s first haunted house and convinced ten kids (seven girls and three boys) to come.

At 5¢ apiece, we made a whopping 50¢. I guess, like many meaningful things in life, we didn’t do it for the money.

Just hearing the girls scream would have been worth it. Though, we came to find out, those girls screamed at practically everything.

We weren't discouraged. We just realized, it's hard to make money in business, especially the "once a year" kind!

HOME ALONE

Most catastrophic events start off as a normal routine day, as did this Saturday morning.

It was not unusual that my mom had to work on a weekend, nor was it unique that she couldn't find a babysitter – strike that, an "overseer" – to watch us. (We were told we were at that in-between age where we were too old for babysitters, yet still a little young to be left alone). Mom usually only worked for a few hours, until about noon or one o'clock at the latest, so we only had to be "adult-like" for about three to four hours.

However, mom gave us her standard passionate speech, which always left us in a cold sweat. She would start off in a low voice.

"I need you to be my little men that I can count on while I'm at work."

She would pause, then her voice got a little firmer as she continued.

"Remember what will happen if you don't!"

At this point, my brother and I would clench our teeth and grimace, knowing what was coming next.

"Any kind of misbehavior, and we will be reported to the authorities."

With her voice rising and her eyes wide, she would speak the unthinkable, and with a quivering tone, she would finish.

"They will come and take you away from me and put you into a foster home!"

Our resolve was firm. We would never let this happen!

After mom left, the morning started off quietly. Rick was dusting, and I was sweeping up, but we managed to do those chores in about twenty minutes. Then we got “bored.”

“Hey,” I exclaimed, “*We have a back yard!*”

We were still getting used to the idea that this was a house and not an apartment. A modified game of semi-tackle football would be fun and definitely pass the time.

We ran, grabbed, pushed, rolled and dived, laughing uncontrollably as we fumbled the ball all over the yard.

Just when we started to get tired, and with my final lunge for the goal (bushes in the back of the yard), we both saw *it*. It was a real – live – *FROG!*

The chase was on, and with renewed energy, Rick and I pursued that frog from one end of the yard to the other until Rick finally caught it.

“Wow!” we cheered, “We got it, we got it . . .”

We put “Mr. Frog” in a large glass jar, and we both stared at our new prisoner, wondering what to do next.

Did I say “wonder?” While this *can* be a good thing for young minds, in some cases, too much “wondering” is not good, especially when it leads to *curiosity*.

Rick, (my academic brother) spurted out, “Let’s dissect the frog.”

Oh, great wonderment! That’s what big kids did in school, in biology class. Whoa, what an idea, except for one small thing – doesn’t the frog have to be dead first?

We both agreed the victim/frog would have to be dead before we could perform exploratory surgery. But how? And, there was an even bigger question – could we justify the demise of this creature? If you walked down the street you could see dead, pancake-flat frogs all over the road. Certainly schools had no problem shortening their lifespan. And, those were institutions of higher learning that had ethics.

Rick and I had no idea what “ethics” meant, but we wanted to stay objective. It’s not like we hated or were

disgusted with slimy toads. On the contrary, we were fascinated with them.

So this, once again, brought us back to our big dilemma – how do we snuff out the life of this noble frog, without hurting it?

First, we thought suffocation might not be painful, so we screwed the lid tightly onto the glass jar in front of us and waited. And, we waited and waited and waited for what seemed to be hours (which was in reality about fifteen minutes), and finally gave up when Mr. Frog was still hopping around inside his glass prison.

As we pondered what to do next, Rick suggested perhaps a quick death by electrocution.

Now, before you think this was all my brother's idea, you must realize that I was egging him on constantly and the major instigator of this venture.

Electrocution *was* a brilliant idea, but how?

"Let's tape the frog to the track from our Christmas train set, plug it in and turn the switch all the way up," I said.

Taping that frog down to the lead train track wired up to the transformer was not only difficult, it didn't work. We saw no sparks, even when we threw a cup of water onto our squirming victim. We looked like Dr. Frankenstein praying for lightning. Only in our case, it wasn't to *bring back* the dead!

Now, you might think we would give up at this point, the frog seemed too tough to kill – but, no-o-o. I had one more idea in mind of how to painlessly end Mr. Frog's life.

Gas. And I didn't mean the bodily kind. I meant the *stove* kind.

We placed our green friend into the oven, closed the door tight and turned on the gas, leaving the temperature off. Again, we waited.

Only this time it didn't seem as long. At least until we heard sirens. And, as we sat there, they got louder and louder until they sounded like they were right outside our window. And, you know what? They were?

As the fireman burst through the front door and swept Rick and I out of the house, the rest all seemed like a dream. Unfortunately, it was not.

Our neighbor smelled the gas and alertly phoned the fire station only a few blocks away. They were there in minutes.

Sitting on the back of the fire engine as the firemen raced through our little house, shutting off the gas and looking for leaks, we saw mom running up the block towards us.

Rick and I both realized this was the end of life as we knew it. We would most assuredly be taken away by the authorities, men in black suits (yes, MIBs) and taken to a cold government facility with bars on all of the windows, where we would wait to be placed in a foster home, never to see our mother again.

Of course, we deserved this, and years later, after being introduced to Kermit and the Muppets, we realized even more the full gravity of our escapade.

At first mom was in too much shock to kill us, but after talking with the firemen and police, she just asked us two simple questions. One, were we okay (and that was good, we thought). And two, did either of us turn on the stove?

The reason Rick and I are still here today (I will take credit for it), is because my answer was nothing short of brilliant.

"Mom," I said, "I might have accidentally turned the gas knob on when I was wiping down the stove," and before she had a chance to respond, I went on to say, "Rick and I were trying to surprise you by cleaning up the kitchen."

Mom smiled and said, "That was very thoughtful of you, but you must be more careful next time, okay?"

Rick and I immediately, simultaneously, and enthusiastically replied, "Okay!"

It was like hearing a not-guilty verdict from a jury, even though we knew we were not blameless. We vowed never to conduct experiments at home again.

We came out of this horrific experience more mature and more respectful of our green four-legged friends, the frogs.

Mostly because after searching the stove, kitchen and rest of the entire house, to this day we have no idea how Mr. Frog escaped, never to be seen again.

ART LIGHT

You may remember the Neil Diamond song from the movie, *E.T.*, entitled “Turn on Your Heart Light.” Well, for me, living on Meadow Lane also put me in the position to attend my first public school, Pulaski Junior High. This is where I met Mr. Mignona, a real artist and art teacher. His art class was like nothing I had experienced before, with paintings and drawings covering the walls, as well as all kinds of new art equipment I had only seen in stores.

Remember that Neil Diamond song? For me, this could have been written, “Turn on Your *Art* Light” because the artist in me “lit up.” From then on, there was no doubt in my mind – I knew I was meant to be an artist!

Catholic School was wonderful when it came to academics, spiritual awareness and, most importantly, *self-discipline*, an attribute one most assuredly needs to become a free-lance fine artist. But, for a creative youngster like me, drawing posters in an empty clothes closet for the nuns was just not enough to jump start a career in art.

Mr. Mignona provided me with my first real art instruction, and I soaked up every lesson like a sponge. By the end of the school year I found myself designing and painting the cover for our yearbook, which was not only prestigious, but also afforded me a school award in art.

Mentors like Mr. Mignona and hundreds of other teachers in all types of subjects may never see the fruits of their work and their profound influence on students, but, rest assured, to this day, I am eternally grateful for their unselfish

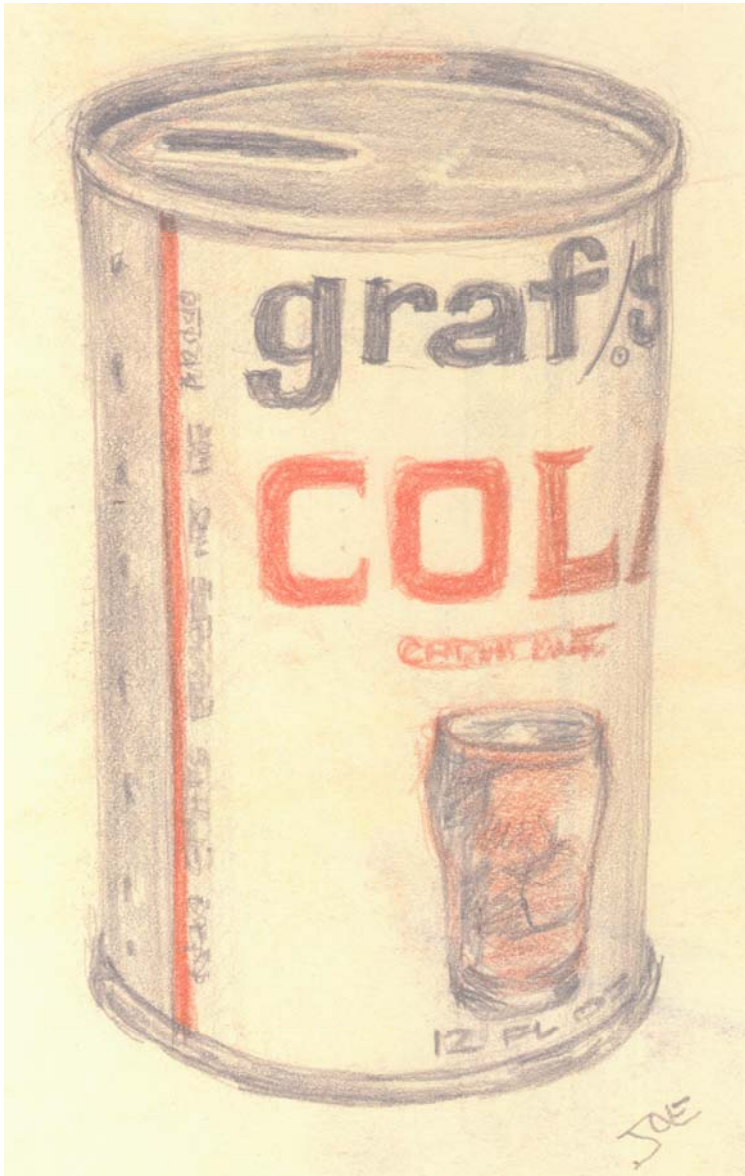
encouragement and dedication to educating and inspiring young career hopefuls like myself.

When looking back, it is very easy to see the many insecurities of a young man, but the lack of confidence I struggled with in many other things seemed to disappear when it came to my artwork, and that I attribute directly to Mr. Mignona, my first art teacher.

Another first that year was yet another graduation!

I had just graduated from eighth grade (Catholic school), and was now in public school (junior high consisted of 7th, 8th and 9th grades). I found myself graduating again, which also meant that, by the end of high school I would have graduated three times in five years.

Well, the good news for my mom was that I had barely grown an inch, so I was able to wear the same graduation clothes again. The bad news for me was, I was able to wear the same graduation clothes again!



1961, age 14, pencils
I was probably influenced by Andy Warhol



1961, age 15, pen and ink
First art class with Mr. Mignona
Pulaski Junior High, 9th grade

CHAPTER THREE

3RD STREET

When I was going to Pulaski Junior High School in Southeast Chester, we lived on 3rd Street. This meant we lived three blocks from the Delaware River. Unfortunately, it was not a pretty body of water, even back then. The heavy industrial plants and oil refineries along its banks contributed daily to its pollution.

We lived in a small apartment above a strange little store, run by a strange little man, who was also our landlord.

We called him “Mr. B.” I have no idea why, but it probably had something to do with not being able to pronounce his last name.

He resembled a Marine Drill Sergeant, tall, stocky, and sporting a short flat-top haircut, which was turning prematurely gray. His voice was deep and gruff, and when he was in a bad mood he sounded like a platoon leader. When he was happy, (which was most of the time), he sounded like the singer, Burl Ives. His potbelly and rosy cheeks added to the “Burl Ives” effect.

Mr. B. was the kind of character one always remembers from childhood, not only for his looks, but also because he would take time with us, telling my brother and me jokes and stories. But, the best story of all was about him!

Now, if you hadn't guessed it already, Mr. B's rosy complexion was not solely due to his happy personality, but more due to his choice of beverages, which most likely contained alcohol! Rumor was that once "Mr. B" was also a "Mummer."

"Mummer" comes from the old French word *momer*, to wear a mask – pantomime. It means a masked or costumed merrymaker, especially at a festival.

Mummery is an old tradition in Philadelphia, and the famous "Mummers Parade" dates back to pre-Colonial times, resulting from a blend of African-American along with Swedish, Finnish, Irish, English, German, and other European heritages. With the Mummers in full swing, New Years is celebrated in Philadelphia as it is nowhere else in the world.

Those who participate in the festivities are sometimes referred to as "Shooters" or "Mummers." In the late 1700's, when the Swedes came to Philadelphia, they brought their custom of visiting friends on the Second Day of Christmas, December 26. Later, the period of celebration was extended to include New Year's Day. The grandest of celebrations became grander and grander with each New Year. Celebrating the New Year was a noisy affair, with most people in those days carrying firearms for protection, many *shot in* the New Year. Hence the term "Shooters."

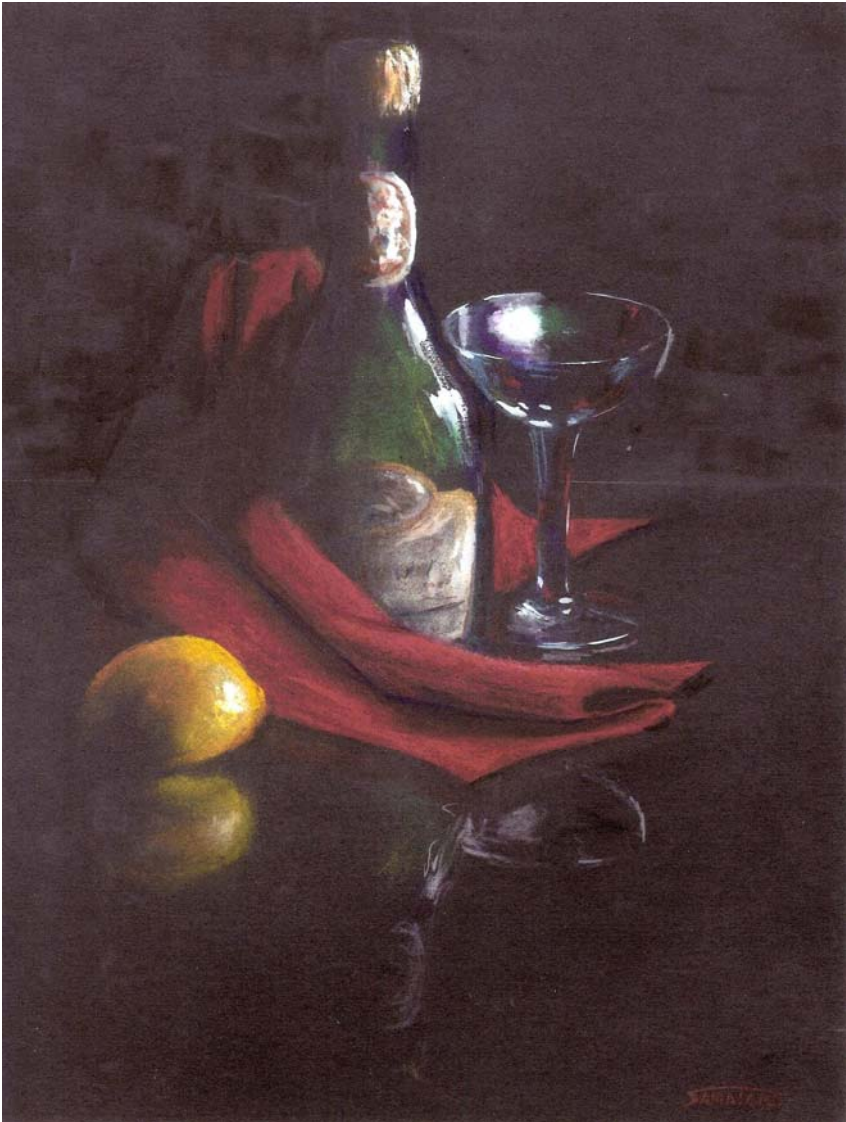
Today's parades include juried competitions. While firearms are no longer discharged, the revelry is as intense as the rivalry between the various mummer groups, assuring spectators and participants alike a wonderful time.

Currently, Mummers are musical bands and clubs that dress up in very elaborate costumes with huge feathered headdresses and brightly colored sequins. The outfits and music would follow a theme, with each group trying to outdo the other. I will never forget seeing my first Mummers Parade in downtown Philadelphia.

After being awakened from a sound sleep, mom hurried Rick and me out the door, still dressing as we headed



Mummers
New Years Day, Philadelphia



1961, age 15, pastel and acrylic
Mr. Mignona's 9th grade art class

to the train station. It was barely light out, which coincided with our groggy, half-awake groans, which everyone could hear echoing out for blocks. Mom dragged us along the quiet, early morning streets in an effort to catch the early train to Philly. If we were to have any chance of finding a place to see, we would have to squeeze in front of the huge New Year's morning crowds.

Evidently, a 4'11" mom and her two small children didn't travel very quickly, for as fast as our little legs would take us, we still ended up arriving after the parade had already started. All I could see was skyscraper-sized people, screaming and cheering. But, I could hear the music, and it was close.

Somehow the three of us slithered through the thick crowd toward the rhythmic sound of the mummers. Then, like dark rain clouds slowly opening up to let in the sun, I caught a glimpse of a sparkling green object with huge white feathers and black trimmed sequins. The colors were so brilliant, I tried to see more, but the thick "clouds" of people just closed back up again into darkness.

Suddenly, like a space shuttle being hurled into the sky, I felt myself being lifted upwards.

"Hey, sonny, can you see better now?"

Two kindly young men had lifted my brother and me onto their shoulders.

"Oh yes!" I exclaimed. The view was spectacular.

There, just ten feet in front of us, was a band of mummers, dressed in bright green with large snake designs in black curving around their costumes. White gloves and white plumes of feathers acted as a backdrop to their breathtaking outfits, and that was only the beginning. Each mummers group was even more unique and colorful than the last. And the music was awe-inspiring.

We couldn't believe those two young men held us up on their shoulders for the entire length of the parade, but they did, and we were eternally grateful. Mom somehow made it to the front of the crowd and would have to wave to us from time

to time. We all had a great day and celebrated it by falling asleep on the train ride back!

The main instrument in a mummer's band is the banjo, but clarinets, saxophones and drums, also contributed to their unique sound.

Now, in hindsight, it would have been much better for Mr. B if he had played the clarinet or saxophone, but he did not. He played the banjo. However, while this is probably the happiest sounding of all the string instruments (you just *cannot* play a sad song on a banjo!), for Mr. B it was not happy.

As legend has it, at one of these big New Year's Day parades, Mr. B fashioned himself a long straw by taping several straws together and ran it under his costume from a flask (of we'll just say libation) up through his collar. This made it shamelessly convenient to take a refreshing sip at any time.

While the concept of warming oneself up during a long, cold parade was clever, Mr. B obviously outwitted himself when he started to forget what direction he was marching in, which might have been overlooked, except for two small factors – he was directly in front of the judges' stand, and, he was marching solo into a crowd of spectators!

Mr. B marched all the way home (we heard) never to be a Mummer again!

Mr. B never talked about it, and we were too scared to ever approach the subject, but we did notice a sad glister in the old man's eyes whenever he would glance up at that dusty, stringless banjo that hung on the back wall of his shop.

BALLROOM DANCING

Our small apartment had three large vertical windows in the front living room where we had a "majestic and panoramic" view of the back of St. Hedwick's Catholic Church. True, it would have been better with a view of, say Pike's Peak in Colorado. But to my surprise, St. Hedwig's

turned out to be great for another purpose – it was a great place to meet girls!

James Maley and I started to notice that every Saturday there would be a wedding at St. Hedwick's, followed by a reception in the large hall next to the church.

My new friend, James (a veteran of the neighborhood), intuitively pointed out that these were not just ordinary weddings, they were *Polish* weddings, which I soon came to realize meant lots of food, lots of dancing – and lots of girls. Now the part about lots of food would have been good enough, but the part about girls didn't sound bad either. The only problem was, if we were to crash these weddings, the part about "lots of dancing" would present the biggest obstacle. Not that we couldn't dance (a little), it was just that we had no idea of how to polka, which was the dance of choice at *all* Polish weddings that we had been spying on.

Learning this dance would be a must if we had any chance of not only blending in, but also picking up girls. After all, how would you even know what to say to a girl unless you were asking her to dance?

Once again, we went to the expert, my mom.

There were very few dances my mom *didn't* know, and, thank God, the polka wasn't one of them.

After two weeks, two sore feet and two hundred polka records, it was time to make our move.

In order to blend in as a wedding guest, one only had to wear a coat and tie (not the most pleasant attire for a teenager, but necessary under the circumstances). Since Polish families were almost always extremely large, and with the bride's and groom's relatives combined at a wedding, it was almost shameful how easy it was to join in. If someone asked you who you were, you just said a cousin of the groom. If they were with the groom's family, you just said, "I'm a cousin of the bride's." After all, how many people at a wedding do you really know anyway?

It was a lot harder than we thought, though. Not the polka dancing, but actually *asking* a girl to dance!

James and I would pick out a favorite girl and then stare at her for hours, following her around all over, waiting for just the perfect time to pop the big question.

“Want to dance?”

Of course, the unspoken part of that sentence, “with me,” brought the most trepidation and fear.

Rejection was devastating. To this day I still have nightmares over the times I was rejected as a teen.

So, as it turned out, I had every reason to be petrified, but sooner or later I would have to make my move.

Finally, at one of the more lively weddings, a really cute girl actually smiled back at me after I stared at her all afternoon. Armed with this grain of confidence, I asked her to dance.

As we circled the dance room floor, bobbing around to the beat of the music, a miracle happened. I finally started to relax and realized not only was I a decent dancer, but I think this girl actually liked me.

After three or four polkas, she asked me to join their group, which consisted of her and three other girls. My friend, James, who still hadn’t asked a single girl to dance, was also invited. Wow, we guys were with not only one, but four “women.” If only our friends could see us now.

The dancing stuff really worked, and I left that night not only with a new sense of self-confidence, but with that cute little girl’s phone number, too!

Of course, all new relationships have their hurdles. In this case, it was where she lived.

Now, you know when you go back to your old neighborhood after many years, everything seems smaller. Distances seem shorter, and buildings don’t look so tall.

Well, all that was true except for the distance part. At least when it came to the route I walked to see her. I lived on

3rd Street in Chester, and she lived in the steel mill housing community in Marcus Hook.

I remembered the walk seeming long, but when I went back recently, it seemed even *longer*. And we were *driving*! No wonder her dad would drive me back home at night.

But, young love knows no boundaries, and I walked those five miles every weekend for over a year and a half.

That girl was really sweet, and lived alone with her father. Her mother had died when she was ten, and she was very hard working, keeping the house clean, cooking and going to school.

I have always been impressed with people who seem to take on adversity and never complain. She was one of those people. I often wonder how she's doing today.

Oh yes, there was another thing about St. Hedwig's that keeps it fresh in my mind even until today. My wife, Karen, went there. No, not the St. Hedwig's in Chester, but St. Hedwig's in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hundreds of miles away). And, yes, she's part Polish, and, yes, she can really dance the polka. Who would have guessed!

THE COMMANDOS

Another view we had from our second story window was the Nabisco Company. There were many mornings when the aroma of sweet cereal filled the otherwise gaseous-smelling air, a brief respite in this gloomy industrial area.

Other than its aromatic eruptions from time to time, we probably would not have given the Nabisco Company any additional attention if it were not for the tall barbed wire fence that surrounded it. This, then, was the big question – *Why would a cereal company need a security fence?*

I'm not sure we discovered the *real* reason to this question, but we did discover this – once, every couple of

weeks they would dump a lot of *something* in a huge dumpster out back. Which, of course, called for further investigation.

After one of these dumping episodes, I retrieved the longest tree branch I could find and carefully slid it through the bottom openings of the fence, attempting to sweep back one of the small items that were scattered all over the ground around the dumpster. Upon closer inspection, my pulse erupted when I figured out what it was.

“Why would they be throwing out . . . *cereal prizes*??!?”

Just to think of the agony I was always going through pondering over the hundreds of cereal choices at the grocery store, trying to select the perfect one, which also meant the box with the best toy inside.

All that effort in time and money, only to find out the Nabisco Company was discarding *billions* (it seemed like to me) of these sacred prizes.

Well, whatever the reason, it was my treasure now, and I knew one thing for sure – *I* would appreciate these toys a lot more than the trash men!

One week later and with my two dedicated friends, Jim and Steve, we devised a plan to raid the dumpster. We knew our time was limited to make our move because some time in the early morning hours every Wednesday, all of this would be gone.

Gathering our thoughts, we discerned that if Jim and Steve would pull up the wire fence, I (meaning the smallest of the commando group; meaning, why did I ever suggest this?) would crawl under the fence and stuff as many toys as I could get in all of my pockets.

With the agility of a Navy Seal, I slithered through the small space as Jim and Steve strained, with veins popping out of their necks and arms, to maintain their grip on the fence.

Like a chipmunk stuffing his cheeks with nuts, I feverishly crammed all of my pockets with hundreds of those plastic morsels until every space in my clothes was bulging.

Mounds of fabric stuck out from my body, giving my shadowy silhouette a monstrous shape.

As a security guard slowly made his rounds, his flashlight beams preceded him around the corner where we were. I sprinted toward my escape route where Jim and Steve were starting to panic.

“Don’t just stand there,” I shouted, “pull up the damn fence!”

Suddenly, they snapped back to reality and grabbed the bottom of the fence.

Unlike my stealth-like smooth entrance, this time, with my clothes full of loot, I wasn’t even coming close to fitting through the small space that Jim and Steve were straining to hold for me.

“Hurry up! Hurry up!” they were screaming at me. “He’s coming around the corner!”

With the fervor of a jail break and the fear of jail *time*, I squeezed through, and, even though parts of the fence were still stuck to my clothing, I never stopped!

We ran across the street and made our escape down an alley behind Steve’s house, all the while giggling and laughing like girls on their first date.

We did it. We made a clean get away, and now it was time to view our prizes.

Steve opened the back door to his house and turned on the kitchen light. Both of them just stood there staring at me.

“What?” I exclaimed.

Jim shoved me in front of a large mirror by the sink.

“Oh shit!”

My clothes looked like I had run them through a shredder, and hundreds of toy prizes in every color of the rainbow were sticking out all over me like Fruit Loops.

But, what the heck. We made it, and, as I held up one of the colorful toys to celebrate, our collective mouths dropped. Because, after all the planning, all the havoc and the

skin-of-our-teeth escape, the cereal toys we absconded with were colored plastic *fish*. Not army men. Not airplanes. Not battleships. Just stupid good-for-nothing *fish*!

As I pulled out one of the goofy toy fish from the bruised creases in my shredded clothing, it became obvious to me that Colombo was right – *Crime doesn't pay!*

D-DAY

One of the most traumatic experiences of my life took place on 3rd Street. It was “D” Day, aka, the day I met my Dad for the first time.

He left us when I was three years old, for greener pastures. He must have secretly wanted to be a farmer, because as time went on we discovered he headed for greener pastures *six times*. (The number of times he got married, two of the weddings my brother and I attended.)

Now, I was eighteen years old, but from the time I was *five* we would wait for him, all dressed up in our Sunday best, sitting on the front steps whenever he would call to say he was in town and wanted to “see his boys!”

Not only was he always promising to come and meet us, he also kept promising to send us exotic gifts, like the professional accordion I never got.

But, this day seemed different. Maybe it was because of the conversation I overheard between him and Mom, when, with clenched teeth, she growled, “You better show up this time or. . .” Mom lowered her voice, but I could still make out some words nice Moms very seldom used in Public and others I’d rather not repeat.

I don’t remember getting dressed up this time, but I do remember how nervous Mom was when she asked me to hurry up to the store and get some more donuts. In my mind, we had enough breakfast pastries to feed half the block, but this was no time to argue.

With my dozen mixed donuts, I anxiously walked back down the street toward the old antique gas pump that stood in front of our apartment building, but my eyes picked up something else as well. It did not fit the décor of the neighborhood – it was flashy and spry as it strolled toward the store we lived over. With focused vision, I stopped in my tracks. The object was *me*, only older and dressed in a three-piece suit wearing freshly polished white shoes.

My goodness, it was Dad!

After the immediate shock, I shuffled sideways behind a brick column next to me while staring in semi-disbelief, that the man I'd waited to meet all of my life was going into my apartment door. It was one of those strange moments in life that's almost impossible to describe unless you've gone through it yourself.

I just stood there, frozen in time, holding my fresh bag of donuts, staring down the now empty street, trying to separate the confusing mixed emotions that consumed my being.

I was a skinny little boy, in the shadows, wondering why he showed up now. Was I happy? Was I mad? Were the donuts getting stale?

I knew this was the moment of truth, and with all the determination I could muster, I walked up the stairs to meet "Dad."

I knew secretly mom was worried we would be so impressed with his colorful bullshit that we'd take off with him, leaving her alone after all these years. But, surprisingly, even as young as we were, it didn't take Rick and me long to figure out what Dad was all about.

Even though he was extremely likeable and loaded with charisma, one had only to *listen* to realize that most of what he said was . . . (I won't use that word again!).

When he left, we (Rick and I) were not only a little disappointed. We actually felt sorry for this self-absorbed, Italian Don Juan.

Rick and I held no grudges and made real efforts to see him over the years before he died. For me at least, I was never able to get close to him. Because unlike Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams*, even though I realized Dad was barely older than I was when he left us, he never did make an effort to throw me the ball.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

You may remember my friend, James Maley, both from “Ballroom Dancing” and “The Commandos.” This, then, is a strong indication that he was one of my first really close friends, with whom I bonded even further when I discovered Jim loved art. To be specific, he loved to draw cartoons.

One day he showed up on my door step, beaming.

“Guess what!” he exclaimed, “We can get *free* art lessons!”

Of course, the word “free” caught my attention first. And the thought of any kind of art lessons was also thrilling to me, the human “art sponge.”

“Where?” I asked.

Jim took a deep breath.

“You’ll never guess,” he said in a squeaky voice.

I stared at him for about an hour before he realized I was not even attempting to guess. Finally, he spurted out, “The Philadelphia Institute of Art!”

Whoo! This was the Vatican of the art world where I lived. Wow! To think we could get professional art lessons from real college art teachers – free!

This was too good to be true, it seemed.

As it turned out, it was true but the “good” part started to fade quickly when we realized we would have to come up with the money to take the train into Philly and more money to get the bus that took you to the Philadelphia Museum of

Art, where they held the free art clinics for underprivileged kids like us.

Underprivileged was the word they used in those days for people like us from neighborhoods like ours.

I didn't mind so much what I was called as long as it provided me with the opportunities I needed to get off the "underprivileged" list.

This was definitely one of those opportunities, if we could have walked there. But someone forgot the fact that if one *was* underprivileged how would they get the money to get to art classes?

Together, Jim and I pondered this dilemma and came to a collective decision that since they were going halfway and providing free art lessons, the least we could do was create a way to raise money for the deserving cause – us!

I believe most people are good at heart, and when our friends and family found out what we were trying to do, they all pitched in. Soon we had enough money to attend all the classes offered that summer.

It turned out to be an extremely valuable experience, exposing us to high quality art and new art techniques.

Jim and I got to know each other even better and became great lifelong friends (but that's the big question – how long is life?).

After that summer I saw less and less of Jim as our lives took different turns, until the day when I was serving in the Air Force, stationed at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa during the Vietnam War.

I recognized Jim's voice immediately.

"Joe Sambo, is that you?"

(I have chosen *not* to try and explain where the term "Sambo" came from!)

"I'm going on a six-hour layover at your base. Let's get together."

Jim had served in the Army and was wounded, for which he received a Purple Heart, and was on his way back to the States when I received his call.

We had six great hours together, reminiscing about our exploits, which seemed mild and childish compared to what we had experienced during the war.

There were many words we didn't say, but I remember loud and clear our voices as we said goodbye, promising to get together back in the states.

Jim went on to get married and had a beautiful little baby girl. Six months after receiving that news, I received an article from my mom out of the local newspaper back home. I never got past the bold printed headlines that read, "DECORATED WAR HERO AND FATHER DROWNS IN DELAWARE RIVER."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AWAKENING

HIGH SCHOOL

My entry into the world of higher learning and higher hormones actually started before I physically entered the hallowed halls of Chester High School.

Though most of the school was Afro-American, it made no difference to me! Even though I would be in the minority, I always felt bad when I witnessed the hateful prejudice directed at my black friends, who, in most cases, did not deserve to be slandered, stereotyped or ridiculed!

Observing first-hand the many hurtful adjectives hurled at the Afro-Americans during my next three years at Chester High School was only the first of many “awakenings” that awaited me.

THE LONGEST YARD

As I said in my introduction, I actually started my high school time several weeks before the school doors ever opened. This was because I let my friend, Mike, talk me into trying out for the football team. Now, I know what you’re thinking – didn’t I learn my lesson the first time? Well, apparently not. Besides, there were two main points Mike sold

me on. One, I was bigger and faster than I was in the 8th grade (I went from 4'11" and 92 pounds to a whooping 5'1" and 96 pounds, so I was bigger, but I'm not sure about the faster!). And two, the Chester High football team had not won a single game in the last two years.

According to Mike, they were so bad and so desperate all you had to do to make the team was show up!

I still loved sports and wanted very much to play. My thinking was that if this team was that bad, I most assuredly had a chance, and if worse came to worse, I would apply the fail-safe techniques I learned last time – run up the sidelines, and if it looked like I was about to get creamed, just leap out of bounds!

If I *was* faster than the last time I played football, it was hard to tell, since the shoulder pads, hip pads and helmet were ten times larger and heavier. Even though I resembled Danny DeVito doing *RoboCop*, my friend Mike cheered me on as I slowly maneuvered my new 200 lb., mean-machine, dressed-to-kill, game-ready body out to the twenty-yard line.

"I can do this," I thought. "It's just another punt return. I've done this a hundred times before. No sweat!"

Before I knew it, I was staring up into a beautiful blue cloudless sky, with only the shape of a small brown object descending toward me. Suddenly, instinctively the football landed directly into my arms. Holy shit! The kicker was good! However, this was *not* good – I was still smack dab in the middle of the field. And by the time the football finally came back down to earth, more specifically to me, the entire kick coverage unit on the scrimmage team was only ten yards away!

My fail-safe plan kicked into high gear, and I sprinted towards the nearest sideline.

For a split second, I thought God had spared me. I actually made it to the sideline and out of bounds. What I hadn't counted on, and hadn't known, was that in high school football, you could still be tackled out of bounds!

Perhaps, “tackled” is too mild a word. It was more like, “crunched, smashed, hit by a train, had a large building collapse on you”, or, basically, all of the above.

When the team doctor got me breathing again, I could actually see light with blurry forms moving around in front of me. My now “former” friend, Mike, helped me hobble back to the locker room where I humbly removed the so-called “protective gear,” vowing never, and I mean *never* to attempt this type of sports again. God was watching over me, though, because if this had been a good football team, I probably would have been *dead*!

SOCIAL STUDIES

Entering the realm of high school is truly an adjustment for any young person, trying to find a place to fit in with all its clics, gangs, groups and clubs.

After my brief, but impressionable, high school football career, I retreated to my other love, music, where I realized carrying a trumpet was much safer than carrying a football. Or was it?! (More about that later.)

In high school, we actually got to pick majors. I was one of the lucky ones, because I knew exactly what I wanted to be, so with Art as a Major and a Music Minor, I took my first big step toward the future.

The problem with being young, though, is that it’s usually hard to see the “big picture,” and soon the boy genius from parochial school was only getting good grades in the subjects he liked the most – art, music and gym. Trivial subjects like math, English and social studies didn’t deserve the same effort because, after all, how much would you use or need those after high school?

Sometimes wisdom comes from the most unlikely sources. Take, for instance, that football tryout. As it happened, my social studies teacher was the football coach,

your typical gruff, muscular, overweight, over-the-hill, ex-college star athlete, thirty years old, and, even though I liked him, his class (other than the occasional football talk) did not hold my interest – translating into a C grade.

One day after I blew (failed) a pop quiz, he asked me to report back to him after class.

I sensed he liked me, maybe because I cheated death that day when trying out for his team, or maybe it was because he liked art and admired artists (something I found out much later). Whatever the reason, he took time to give me one of his famous pep talks, in his low, forceful bullhorn voice, which grabbed my attention immediately.

“Joseph, you will never achieve your dream of becoming a professional artist because you’re missing out on the one thing you *have to have* to get into *any* college of art!”

Not too many people called me Joseph, but it was the tone of voice and the “have to have” part that struck me.

He went on to explain that my natural talent would carry me through, but if I had hoped to get accepted to a good art school, and even more importantly get a scholarship to one, it would be my poor academic grades that would keep me out, because, as he put it, “I’ve coached many super-talented ballplayers who will never get a chance to play in college and achieve their potential and professional dreams, because of their failed academics.”

Now, before he even took another breath, he finished by saying, “All of the artists you look up to are not just fabulous artists, they are also well-rounded, and that’s because they know a lot more than just *art!*”

I don’t think I ever answered him – I’m not sure I even thanked him, but I definitely heard him.

From then on, the lowest grade I ever got in high school was a B- with one exception, and you won’t believe in what subject!

With such a powerful voice and ability to motivate, you would have thought the coach’s football team would have won

a lot more games, but, as it turned out, they only won one game that entire year.

It was the last game of the season with twenty seconds left. We were losing by two points, but were ready to kick a 15-yard field goal to win the game, the first win in three long years. At that point, confidence should have been running high, but fate had not been kind to this team, and my friend, the coach, had come to expect that if it *could* go wrong, it usually *would* go wrong. For a few seconds, it seemed fate would repeat itself as the football left the kicker's foot, wobbly and crooked. Its awkward assent resembled a lame duck on takeoff, and only its strange angle kept it from being blocked by the frantically leaping defensive lineman.

The entire stadium gasped as the pigskin hit the left upright, but seconds later, it dropped within inches over the crossbar. It was good!

The euphoria of victory lasted that entire off-season, but, as most successes in life, it was short lived, as the memories of that great day faded away, and so did my friend, the coach.

There were many who considered his tenure at Chester High as a failure, but, to me, and I'm sure many others, he will always be a winner!

HOT WHEELS

Every high school kid (especially in those days) dreamed of his first car, and, it seemed that with my dismal financial situation, along with the fact that neither my mother, my grandparents or my aunt had a car, *my* chances of driving a "hot" car (or any car for that matter) were slim, to say the least.

Many of my friends got to drive their parents' automobile, but my mom couldn't drive. Not that my brother, Rick, and I didn't try to find a way for her to learn to drive.

One year, Rick and I saved and saved to give her driving lessons on her birthday. With mom finally learning to drive, we figured she would have to get a car, thus a great investment on our part. (We thought!)

After only one lesson, Mom came home looking like she had run over a pedestrian, or, even worse for her, an animal. Turns out her driving instructor, a wonderfully naïve man, was drinking a cup of coffee at the exact moment she slammed on the brakes! No one knows what caused her to panic, but the sight of her coffee-soaked passenger convinced her that God did not *ever* want her to drive. Looking back, considering how nervous Mom is, God was probably right!

Whether or not I would ever have my own car was secondary to the most immediate peril, passing my driver's test. With no cars or drivers in the family, and with most of my meager resources transformed into coffee stains, my chances of even getting a driver's license seemed dismal.

Amongst the many friends I had in the Drum and Bugle Corps, Max was the coolest. He was like a big teddy bear, 6'3", and just shy of 300 pounds, the kind of buddy you felt really safe with. Especially since I was half his size.

Another bonus about Max was that he drove and had his own car, and was my weekly ride to Drum Corps rehearsals in Philadelphia.

You know how they say people seem to pick animals that resemble themselves. Well, many musicians pick instruments the same way. So it was no surprise that Max played the tuba.

One evening on the ride back to Chester from music practice, I must have been talking about my bleak outlook on getting a driver's license when Max mumbled out in his low Jolly Green Giant voice, "No big deal – I'll teach ya!"

What did he just say? Were my ears deceiving me? Would Big Max really teach me to drive?

Dear Max was so easy going. Even during the worst crises he would always be cool and keep the rest of us from

panicking. This, then, was just another example of his “large coolness.” Only this time, with me jumping up and down in the front seat, Max’s “Now, settle down!” stare calmed me long enough to hear him repeat, “I’ll teach you to drive. It’s easy.”

With my ten dollars in hand and paperwork completed, I secured a temporary driver’s license, or learner’s permit. It was my first “official” card, and my first step into the responsibility of manhood.

Max was a surprisingly good instructor. He was very safety conscious, and never overlooked the seriousness of his teaching role. But, perhaps his best quality was his patience. This helped me a lot, especially when I would misjudge my distance and almost sideswipe a parked car. He would just sit there calmly and mumble, “Kinda close there!”

Max was really a great friend and let me drive both to and from Drum Corps rehearsals and even on weekends on his day off.

Soon, my temporary permit would expire, and I would have to go take *the test*. Of all the tests young people have to take during their adult years, *none* are more important and meaningful than the driver’s test.

As the day approached, I still had one more problem to solve – whose car could I borrow to take the test in? Max had already been more than generous and heroic to live through my driving classes with him, so I never even considered asking him. But, when he realized no one else was rushing to my aid, good ol’ Max came through once again and said he would let me use his car, a 1953 Pontiac, known as “The Gray Tank.”

Now, this, of course, was the perfect name. Its color was a battleship gray with no trace of wax or shine, except for the small strip of chrome that edged the two side wing windows that were permanently stuck open.

Tank accurately describes the rest of the entire car. It was big, bulky and loud, and its huge tires resembled tank

treads, making it hard to steer, and on top of that, I could barely reach the pedals. When accelerating, you would practically have to stand on the peddle to make it go, and, even then, the engine struggled to pull the heavy vehicle forward. Like a large gray turtle it would slowly gain speed until it finally blended in with the rest of the traffic. Not that it ever really blended in!

Don't get me wrong, I was 'not' complaining. I was thrilled to have *any* car, and the Gray Tank would do fine!

My appointment with the Bureau of Motor Vehicles was at 1PM on Saturday, and, even though I was nervous, I felt my driving was okay. I was more worried about the questions they might ask because a failed answer meant a failed test.

To break the tension and take my mind off of the upcoming ordeal, I agreed to play baseball that morning with a few of my friends. There was a small patch of dirt beside the railroad tracks at the back of the Nabisco building. Its only resemblance to a baseball field was an old rusted chain link fence backstop and a few patches of yellow-green grass that edged the pitcher's mound and diamond.

Once the game began, my nervous energy was shifted to hitting, catching and running the cardboard bases. My attention was finally on other things until I felt a sharp pain in my foot. And not just any foot, but my right foot – my driving foot!

I limped home, sat down and pulled a three-inch piece of glass out of the bottom of my sneaker. A white-cold sweat ran across my forehead as I looked up at the clock – 12:00 noon, and in fifteen minutes Max would be here to take me to the motor vehicle testing facility about twenty minutes away, and we couldn't be late.

I could hardly stand on my foot, but I was too scared to take off my sneaker and look – whatever the damage, it would have to wait until after *the test*!

Max made me drive, thinking there's never enough practice. I was pleasantly surprised to realize that my foot was now *numb*, no pain at all driving, only when I walked. And since this was not a "walking" test, I thought I might actually get through this test. That is until I realized who I had to take my test from.

In the State of Pennsylvania, at that time all driver's tests were given by state troopers. You know, the guys that dress like the Canadian Mounted Police, with black motorcycle boots, Smokey the Bear hats and, oh my God, side arms, (better known as *guns!*).

If I wasn't nervous before, I was petrified now. My foot was not even an issue at this point because it was the only thing on my body that wasn't shaking. To make things worse, in those days you didn't drive around familiar streets. Instead, the facility had its own "Driver's Obstacle Course."

Like in suspended animation, I led my 6'2", squeaky-clean, shiny-polished, stone-faced trooper to the Gray Tank. On the way, Max grabbed my arm and whispered in my ear some last minute instructions, but the trooper just frowned and gestured at me to get into the car.

With the look on his face, I knew he was not very impressed with my "wheels" or its interior, which was highlighted by a falling roof liner and missing dashboard knobs.

As he tried to adjust his wobbly seat, he growled, "Turn right down this road and follow the arrows."

To my surprise, the driving course was much easier than I expected it to be. Trying to park, turn or back up in an actual street was much more difficult. There were no other cars, only thick white lines to maneuver around, and after awhile I started to get a little confidence.

This became short lived when the trooper instructed me to drive around and between some bright orange cones. As I maneuvered around them in a weaving pattern, the Gray Tank started to pick up speed. We were on gravel and on a

decline, so by the time I got through the last two cones I resembled a stunt car driver. We both were flung back in our tattered seats as I slammed on the brakes at the stop sign that completed the run.

As the smoke cleared from the dry gravel road, I saw the trooper clutching his clipboard and bracing the dashboard with his right arm.

“Why so fast?” is all he said.

I just told him the truth.

“My friend, Max, said if I hit the brakes while going through the cones I would fail.”

The trooper took a minute, then said, “Tell your friend, if you hit the *cones*, you fail, not the *brakes*!”

Before I could figure out if he was going to fail me for going too fast, he asked me several traffic questions. After writing a bunch of stuff down on the sheets of paper that were attached to his clipboard, he repeated one of the questions he has asked me earlier.

“How fast through a school zone?”

I couldn’t remember what I had just told him (I had obviously gotten it wrong) but what had I said? The one thing I knew for sure was that my trooper was not a patient man, so I quickly replied, “Five miles per hour.”

He looked up at me and, shaking his head said, “No!”

That was it. I failed.

Then, he finished, “It’s fifteen miles per hour.”

For some reason, in a desperate attempt to save my driving future, I spurted out, “Well, five miles per hour is even safer!”

He never answered me and just kept writing until he opened the car door and handed me a legal looking form that was stamped, PASSED!

I was so relieved, so excited and so exhausted that I asked Max to drive home. When we arrived, and after overwhelming thank yous to Max, I got out of the car, beaming with joy, but grimacing with pain. My foot was no

longer numb. The adrenalin running through me had subsided, and unmasked the real pain in my foot.

I removed my sneaker only to find my sock covered in dried blood. This was not good. And after such a successful afternoon. I called my Aunt Pat and with the help of her friend, they got me to the Sacred Heart Hospital emergency room.

I bragged about my new driver's license as they probed the deep cut to find any pieces of shattered glass left in the wound.

As painful as that was, and even with the seven stitches, all I remember is the large red letters on the official paper clutched in my hand that spelled out . . . PASSED!!!

HOT WHEELS, PART II

LOVE AFFAIR WITH CARS

To this day, I love buying new cars. Especially considering that my first ones were used, cheap and not very dependable.

Back then, I could name every new car that came out every year, and I loved to draw them. I remember seeing a demonstration by a professional artist who drew automobile illustrations for Ford Motor Company. I observed each stroke and technique he used to create the body reflections and transparent glass effects on the car he was rendering. I practiced and practiced until my drawings captured the same effects. I didn't stop there, once I had achieved a certain proficiency at drawing my 'favorite' cars. (This does not include the Ford Edsel. I could tell this was a mistake the first time I laid eyes on it!). I would artistically enhance them by adding custom parts like futuristic grills, headlights and wheel covers, as well as graphics like flames, stripes or even eagles, snakes and the always popular flying skull!

All of my guy friends loved these drawings, and I got my first real taste of artistic envy. I was popular, and my sketches were in demand, so I did what most new, struggling artist would do – I gave them away!

Having a real driver's license burning a hole in my wallet, and, with no immediate prospects of purchasing a car, I did what many other desperate teenagers do – I tried to find someone else's car to drive.

This strategy manifested itself in the form of "The Philadelphia State Dealer's Auction," where local car dealers would hire licensed drivers to deliver used cars to the auction lot in upstate Pennsylvania.

I was amazed to find out how many of my friends were in on this, and, when I was invited into this elite circle of "recently licensed drivers," what was there not to like?

You got to drive all kinds of cars, from a Chevy Corvair to a Cadillac Eldorado and everything in between. The drive only took a little over two hours there and back, and they even paid you a whopping five dollars each way.

Of course, in most ideal situations, there was one small flaw – auction hours were only Monday through Friday, 10AM to 3PM. Now, why were these days and hours so familiar? Oh yes, that was the exact time I was supposed to be in school. Oops!

The thrill of cutting high school for the "big bucks" was short lived when, on one occasion, the car I was driving, an old Rolls Royce with about five million miles on it, broke down as I was just entering the auction lot. It stalled, and no matter what I did I couldn't get it started. Not that I had any mechanical attributes at all. I was, and am, mechanically challenged.

Each car we drove had to be parked in the numbered space assigned by no later than 11AM, with auction starting at precisely 12:00 noon each day.

If you were late, no five dollars. After straining every muscle in my entire body, I pushed that big old clunker down

the aisles of parked cars until I reached lot #75. I turned the wheels, then ran to the back of the car and pushed feverishly, repeating this several times until the car was parked. I handed my paperwork to the clerk on the 2nd floor of the auction house building where he stamped them, "Received - in at 10:58 AM"

I was amazed I made it on time, especially when I glanced out the window and saw the hundreds of parked cars neatly arranged in long rows. And, there, at the end of the very last row was the only car in the entire lot that was parked *crooked*. Guess whose it was.

Like your first girl friend, your first kiss, or your first something else, you always remember your first car. For me, it was when I was dating my high school sweetheart, Carol (sorry, no last names). Her uncle was selling his old car, and she pressured him into selling it to me because she knew I had been saving for a car, and I'm sure she was tired of bumming rides from her parents whenever we needed to go somewhere that was not within walking distance.

After driving her uncle crazy with phone calls and beating him down on the price so my savings would match, he sold me an old gold and cream-colored Plymouth Belvedere, with push-button automatic. I was so broke after buying the car that I had to wait a whole month to drive it before I had enough money to get insurance.

During that time I did drawings of my new prize, changing the colors and imagining how I could fix her up. There were things I could do immediately. The dashboard was discolored and scratched up, so I spent several hours blending paint to match the rest of the console. After it was dry I found a box of silver poker chips that were blank on one side, which were from some old game we used to have. I knew they would look really cool glued to my dashboard in a staggered pattern. They also would help cover up any scratches not covered by the paint.

There was also a turn signal on the front of the car next to one of the headlights that was cracked and broken. When I checked into replacing it, I found out you had to buy the entire light assembly. What a rip-off! So I scavenged around, and, with much experimentation, discovered that our plastic disposable kitchen cups fit perfectly. They were clear plastic, and the lip on the edge held them securely behind the thin metal headlight rims. After installing them, it gave the car a futuristic look, and I loved it.

Those turn signal cup lights lasted a long time, until one weekend when I had to drive Carol to her grandparents' place, which was in the country, and I had to keep my 'high beams' on. The next morning when I approached the car, I noticed my modern turn signal cups had melted, and, like Salvador Dali's painting of watches and time clocks, they were drooped down over the front grill.

The one thing I learned from being a creative thinking innovator of custom car parts was this one golden rule – "Whatever you use, always keep extras!"

There is no feeling of freedom greater than the first day you drive your own car, but there is no feeling of helplessness greater than the first time your car stops. I got very used to the latter since it broke down a lot. You would push in the button marked "Drive 1" and hear the transmission grumbling as it echoed out a loud banging noise going into gear.

The big winged Plymouth had no compression when the engine got hot. So you would constantly have to stop and wait for it to cool off in order to proceed. Carol's uncle must have regretted the day he sold me that car, because every time anything would break down she would call him, no matter what time of day or night it was and insist he run right over and fix it immediately.

Being a former mechanic in the Army was only another curse of being Carol's only uncle. During that first year we (or I should say *he*) replaced almost all of the parts

one could think of, things like the alternator, starter, battery, fuel pump, water pump and other parts I can't even remember.

I paid him for the new parts, but Carol was merciless because the car had so many problems she wouldn't let me give him a dime for all of his labor. He's the only guy I've ever known who after selling his car, it ended up costing him hundreds of dollars more than he got paid for it. And I paid him a whopping \$125!

The final blow to that poor old Plymouth was in the form of a "hit and run." Someone hit her and then took off while she was parked. I can't say I blamed them. They probably felt it wasn't worth the insurance hassles, and neither did I. That gruesome looking dent on the passenger's side rear trunk did need *something*. But what?

With a \$250 deductible on the insurance policy, I literally could have bought the car twice, and, needless to say, I didn't have anywhere near that kind of money, so I didn't report it either.

About a week later my Aunt Pat asked if she could borrow my car. No problem, I thought. What's the worst thing that could happen, another dent?

After returning the car, she had a puzzled look on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She just shook her head and said, "It's the darndest thing. I could swear people were pointing at me and laughing."

I took Aunt Pat by the hand and walked her to the back of the tired old Plymouth and pointed to the large dent in the rear trunk, over which I had painted in large white letters the word, "OUCH!"

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BOSS

My two loves in high school were art and music, and with the experience and discipline from the strong Drum Corps competitions, I had vastly more experience than anyone in the Chester High Clippers Band. At this point, during the summers, I was playing with one of the best drum corps in the country, not only winning the national championship, but also being selected to play a concert at the prestigious Carnegie Hall in New York. We had our own air-conditioned busses, which I was privileged to design and paint on the side not only the corps' name and logo, but also life-size illustrations of our corps in full uniform. We stayed at luxurious hotels and appeared on national TV, performing at halftime of the Philadelphia Eagles football games.

So, as you might imagine, our high school band, riding around in big, yellow, hot, school busses, seemed a little unprofessional. And worse than that were our band uniforms.

The school colors were awful, orange and black. In other words, an eternal Halloween image. Again, compare this to the drum corps, where we had beautiful sleek shiny uniforms, tailor fit in red, white and black silk, white gloves, patent leather shoes with a silver sequined sash.

The Chester High School band was talented, but the best musicians, who played in the school concert band, would

have nothing to do with the marching band. All of this changed in the beginning of my senior year.

We all sat there in the band hall waiting to meet the new band director, who was coming all the way from Houston, Texas. We wanted to see this tall, low-voiced Texan meander through the door, lowering his head because of his towering stature. This was the rumor; after all this was the former band director for one of the largest high schools in Houston, boasting of winning not one, but *four* state championships.

When Mary finally walked in (we knew her name was Mary because she wrote it in large letters on the blackboard), she was 4'11" tall, looked like she weighed ninety pounds, had dirty blonde short hair and wore an over-sized man's short-sleeve shirt that was embroidered on the front with bold lettering that simply said, "The Boss."

Still in a state of shock, it wasn't until she turned and spoke to us in a high, squeaky deep southern accent that reality set in – Mary was our new band director! How could this be the person who took her old band to nine state competitions and won four of them?

As we found out, looks are deceiving. Even though we should have realized by the words on her shirt that first day, Mary was a no-nonsense, no-bull kind of gal, who was down to earth, but demanded respect and took no crap from anyone, not even the biggest, widest, meanest guy in the band. Mary was afraid of no one, and I liked her!

"You are just as talented as any state championship high school band I've had," she belted out in her heavy southern accent. "We just need to make a few changes and a few commitments, and I promise you we'll be winners!"

Mary was definitely a motivator, and I learned a great deal by watching and listening to her. I realized you didn't have to be big to be big, and if you earned the respect of your peers, you could accomplish remarkable things.

Like a small blonde rocket, Mary launched her new policies with blinding speed. Within a few weeks, the band room was reorganized and re-painted. All instruments were required to be cleaned, polished and repaired. No one was allowed to show up late for rehearsals, and *everyone* in the music program was required to be in the marching band.

She also initiated band meetings where anyone could suggest new ideas for improvement.

It was at one of these meetings Mary found out I was an artist and immediately assigned me the task of painting our school logo (a clipper ship) on the freshly painted walls that surrounded us. I was given carte blanche and total creative freedom. And therefore, in my own attempt to show what I had learned from painting murals for the drum corps, I went, as they say in Texas, “hog wild.”

Instead of using our old school colors of orange and black (which couldn’t be changed), I used a bright red-orange with not just black and white, but also a shiny silver. I modernized our clipper ship logo and put it in a large sunset circle graphic with Chester High Band lettered around it in bold block letters, using black and a silver outline.

Noticing the large design looking isolated on the main wall, I created a graphic of red-orange and silver stripes that extended out from the main logo and ran around the entire room. To add even more, since this was a band hall, I painted in all of the musical instruments we played in black outlines over sections of the stripes in areas not covered up by storage lockers or other furniture.

I’ll never forget the big unveiling, when Mary first saw the room and all of my hard work.

At first, I thought she didn’t like it, because she was stone silent as she walked around, taking in each section of the room.

Then, she burst out with, “Damn, this is good!”, while smiling at me with a huge Texas grin!

"Where did you ever learn to draw this well?" she enthusiastically asked.

I didn't know what to say, I was just happy she liked it. So I said, "I'm just glad you like it."

She shook her head.

"Joe, I don't just like it, I *love* it, and so will the band."

Realizing timing was everything, I thought this would be a good time to bring up my biggest disappointment, our band uniforms.

Mary's response was incredible. She reiterated exactly what I was thinking.

"You're right, our marching band uniforms are pitiful, and I have been thinking about them, but can't get new ones appropriated until I have a design to show them."

Then, she looked around the room again and beamed, "You did it again, Joe. This is our new design."

Two weeks later Mary took me with her to a company in South Philly that made band uniforms. In her usual take-charge way, she unloaded on our host with her requirements for our new uniforms.

"This is Joe, not only a band member, but a very gifted artist, so I want you to listen to his ideas."

I showed him photos of the design I did of the clipper ship and the brighter colors I used. He showed me all the parts of a uniform you could select from in order to create an original look.

It was the first time I realized the importance of working with other craftsmen, not looking at it as a limitation, but a challenge.

By the time we left, I had all of the samples I needed to do drawings of our new uniforms to show the Appropriations Committee.

After only ninety days, they delivered our new uniforms, which were black, with white trimmed collars and sleeves to match our white gloves and shoes. Unlike our old uniforms that had black pants and ugly orange tops, I used a

bright red-orange color with all black stripes (like in the band room) and ran them over the entire white areas of the uniform, so the color would stay sharp and bright. Then, I used shiny silver to further accent the hat, collar, sleeves and jacket, which had the clipper ship design embroidered on them.

I couldn't believe how great they looked, and I couldn't believe I had actually done it.

As it turned out, I was not alone. Everyone loved the new look, and I felt so good seeing the excited faces on all of my fellow band members, especially The Boss.

I was about to get another surprise, and this one was on me.

The beginning of the football season was also the beginning of marching band season. At this point, our new music director had the whole school excited about the band.

We had new uniforms, new music and, with our group growing from 64 members to 107, we were now one of the largest high school bands in the entire state.

The most important new addition Mary initiated was doubling the drum line and creating a new up-tempo marching rhythm.

Seeing this little white, Texas woman working with our tall, all-black percussion line developing complicated drum rudiments (beats) was a sight to behold, but soon she would not be the only little person to seem out of place.

At one of our last indoor rehearsals before we started field marching practice, Mary had a "big" announcement. She would name the band member who would be this year's drum major and lead the Chester High Clippers in parades, halftime shows, and band competitions.

When she said, "Joe Sambataro!" I almost dropped my trumpet and collapsed on my music stand.

Is she insane? Has Mary totally lost it? How could I, a 5'1", 98 pound, third chair trumpet player, lead a 107-piece band?

As she stared at me (eye level) and applauded her selection, encouraging me to stand up, I was waiting for the other 106 musicians to stand – and, then throw their instruments at me while they laughed themselves sick. But, I received the biggest shock of my life when all around me I heard applause and cheering.

I had no idea I could have been that accepted and felt unworthy of the position I had just been given.

I hoped my black friends were not upset because Mary did not pick a tall black drum major, showing a hidden prejudice, but all suspicions were quickly relinquished when she made it very clear why she selected me.

“Joseph,” she said, and that was the first time I ever heard her call me by that name, “is not only a good artist, but, as many of you already know, he’s excellent at marching.”

She smiles at me and continues, “Joseph has been a member of a championship drum and bugle corps for the past several years, and this training has made him, in my opinion, the best qualified.”

I was still waiting for someone to raise their hand and argue the point, but, since no one did, she continued as she walked over in front of Pete, a tall, black boy, who we all thought was the obvious choice. “There are two reasons. One, Pete is one of the best musicians in the band, and I believe we need his talent playing. Two, Joseph is much better at art than his trumpet playing, so, as I see it, it’s a win-win situation.”

Her sincere and honest evaluation seemed to satisfy everyone but me.

I mean, let’s face it, it wasn’t easy hearing that you’re only an average trumpet player. After all I did truly love playing. But I had to admit being named Drum Major was a good consolation, and Mary did do me a huge favor in the process. I no longer had to debate in my mind what career I should pursue.

LEADER OF THE BAND

Now, try to picture this marching down the street in front of you. A 107-piece, (almost) all-black (like Grambling), high-steppin', up-tempo, horn-swinging high school band with a high-steppin', up-tempo baton-swinging "white midget" Drum Major leading the way! (I have photos to prove it!)

We didn't even have a Drum Major uniform that would fit me. I had to take parts from other uniforms and get my girlfriend's mom to sew it together. I painted the rim of my hat white and glued on a bright red-orange braid with shiny silver studs at the ends. When I look back, I can't believe it didn't all fall apart, especially with all that high steppin'!

Under Mary's direction, the band improved dramatically, and I was encouraged to implement many of the Drum Corps' techniques that added a lot of flash and precision to the group. Every single musician was proud to take part in this, and it showed.

We started getting asked to major parades and functions, not only Chester, but all over Philadelphia.

When football season finally arrived, the entire band came up with idea after idea for putting on a spirited and unique halftime show.

As an example, when we were ready to start, instead of having me (the Drum Major) out in front on the 20-yard line with the band in a straight formation on the goal line, the band formed a wedge with the center point extending to the 30-yard line. Then, on my whistle, the drums would start, and out of view, from behind the wedge, two huge tuba players would take each one of my arms and high step, carry me out to the 50 yard line, drop me down, then quick-time back to the line. As they reached the band, completing the formation, I would throw up my baton, give three fast whistles, and the band would step out to the tune of "Stars and Stripes Forever."

Mary found many ways to use my height in a showmanship forum, making it a positive, not a negative; thus,

another lesson learned on my part, along with the confidence one needs to maintain that position.

Chester High School started getting a reputation for being one of the most unique and talented bands in the state, and we started thinking of the state band competition in the fall.

Each week the band seemed to be getting even better, but in life one learns when things are going that good, get ready for the unexpected. The first sign that there may be speed bumps along the way happened to me.

We had just finished a great half time performance on a Friday night football game at a rival high school's stadium. We were one of the few bands I know of that got huge applause from the opposing school, so to say I was "on a rush" coming off that field was an understatement.

My girlfriend, Carol, was standing on the side up against a short wall (about four feet high) where the bleachers started. She was clapping and smiling as I approached her in my shiny drum major's uniform. I was so proud and could feel the entire crowd looking at me. The football team, (yes, the same one I mentioned earlier that only won one game), was ready to take the field for the second half, so, in order to get out of the way, I decided to lift Carol up onto the wall where she could sit and be just off the field.

With great confidence and with the entire stadium watching me, I lifted Carol skyward to the top of the wall. Carol was shorter than me and only weighed about ninety pounds, but with the adrenalin flowing, I never even considered this cute girl was only eight pounds lighter than me!

With my arms fully extended and Carol starting to balance herself on the top of the wall, it happened! My arms gave way, and I dropped her! I didn't just awkwardly drop her. She fell directly on top of me, throwing both of us to the ground in a heap of blonde hair and mangled band uniform.

I could say this was the most embarrassing moment of my life, but there were many more to come!

Carol was fine, thank goodness. /broke her fall!

I was not injured. However, I was not fine. My fragile ego had taken a devastating blow, which would take me a long time to get over, despite the forgiving and understanding nature of Carol, who insisted it would never have happened if she had grabbed the rail.

The band teased me unmercifully for the rest of the year, but when State Band Finals came around, a lot of things got serious.

Mary was one of those things – we thought it was because of the fierce competition we would face, we had never seen her so quiet.

Soon we found ourselves in the middle of the State Band Competition Finals. After two days and three shows, we had survived to make it to the last round, with only four high school bands left.

Needless to say, I was the smallest drum major in the entire competition, but Mary was right, my Drum Corps experience kicked in, and I felt extremely relaxed and confident on the field.

As the four high school bands stood on the field waiting for the final results, I remember being very calm. Maybe it was because I didn't expect us to even get that far anyway, or maybe it was the realization of how lucky I was to be there at all.

I stood there statuesque waiting for our school's name to be announced, through fourth place, third place and finally second place – and it was not called. Then I realized, *we won!* First place Chester High School Band, a feeling I'll never forget! We had accomplished the impossible. We won State, and in only one year we did what our predecessors had not done since 1956.

One week later we found out why Mary hadn't been herself. She had discovered she had breast cancer. We were all

in shock. This was the last thing anyone could have anticipated. We knew Mary was a woman, but she acted like one of the boys, so we never even thought of her as having breasts, let alone breast cancer. She would be returning to Houston for treatment and probably not return the next year.

As a Senior, I, too, would be leaving, but with a great sense of satisfaction in having experienced so much under Mary's tutorage.

I was with unequaled relief and happiness when we learned Mary had beaten that dreaded disease and was teaching at another school just outside of the Houston area.

That was the last band I would play in for the next 28 years, but I never forget the thrill.

Until this day, people are always asking me to slow down when I'm walking with them, and I just tell 'em, "It's from marching with six-foot tall musicians," then I attempt to take smaller steps, but it never lasts.

THE STALKER

You would think that after dropping Carol at the football game in front of a whole stadium of laughing teens she would have limped away forever. But, as I said, she was a very sweet girl, and I dated her for three years, all through high school.

I had dated other girls before Carol, like Susie, for instance. I met her over the phone when I called a wrong number. Somehow we started talking, and when she found out I was going to the same high school, it was a spark we needed to keep the conversation going. In fact, we kept it going for two weeks (but not continuously!).

Susie sounded so nice on the phone, but now it was time to meet her, when suddenly I realized this was just another form of a blind date. What if she turned out to be horror-film ugly?

My mother was quick to point out, "It's what's inside that counts." The only problem with that was no one can see your insides, and it's her *outsides* I would be walking around with!

There was a row of carbon-copy townhomes, but the burgundy painted door was unique and easy to spot. After three deep breaths I knocked several times, but before I could barely clear my fist from the door, it opened.

To my delight, Susie was cute as a button and had an effervescent personality. As I entered the small, but well manicured living room, I noticed Susie's graceful walk and sexy shape. I was definitely attracted to her, but the *big* question was, would she like me? Then, it happened, and I realized we wouldn't have a chance. She turned and offered me something to drink, and with each step toward me, she got *taller*. By the time we were face-to-face, it was more like face-to bosoms. If she had been large breasted, this would have seemed much more awkward, but as I looked up, my confidence went straight down. Susie was about 5'10"!

No girl taller than I would ever want to be seen with this short Italian, and even if she did like me, the embarrassment in public alone would be devastating!

I was noticeably shaken, and I think Susie thought I didn't like her. I couldn't believe after realizing our height difference she wasn't making excuses to leave. However, on the contrary, with the large smile on her face and twinkle in her eye, I knew she approved.

Poor Susie did everything she could to *not* to make me feel inadequately short. She wore nothing but flat shoes, and I swear she walked hunched over when she was with me, but I never did get over it.

When she moved away to Colorado, I finally realized how lucky I was and how immature I had acted, but immaturity is a way of life as a teenager.

Carol, however, was shorter than I was, which eliminated *one* of my adolescent problems, but unfortunately not some of the others.

Carol went to a rival high school in a nice part of town and was also in the band where she played the clarinet. Her dad was a fireman, and I seldom saw him, but her mother liked me, and that was a definite plus.

It was just after the high school prom when I realized things were changing. With the advent of graduation looming over the horizon, I was trying to picture myself married to Carol, a proposal I would hint at from time to time.

The reality of trying to get to art school by winning a scholarship and then getting a job as an artist, all while being married presented more questions than could be answered.

It was one of those moments as a young adult that horrified you because you realized *you really didn't know everything*.

The beginning of the end came when I was helping Carol with her cosmetology thesis. She was also applying for a scholarship, only she wanted to be a hairdresser. Her 75-page book could win her a free pass through school if it were selected among the top three.

I painstakingly illustrated forty pages for her, all in full color, and depicted everything from scalp inflammations to modern hairstyles. The weeks we worked together made me realize that there was a lot more to Carol, and I was not the only one who was just starting to discover who they really were.

After Carol cancelled an increasing amount of dates, I turned into the worst kind of person, a stalker!

I could feel Carol slipping away, but why? I hadn't changed. Or had I? Was she just tired of me? But, how could *anyone* be tired of me?!

Then, the transformation happened, like Jekyll and Hyde. I went from the nice, unassuming boy to the monstrous and suspicious stalker.

Even Carol's mom treated me a little different, and when I would ask her where Carol was, I could tell she was annoyed with me and wanted to get me off of the phone.

After one such call, I covertly drove over to Carol's house, parking just out of sight down the street in the shadow of a big oak tree. As the daylight faded away, I saw Carol leave her house and walk up the block. Thank God, it was in the opposite direction. I followed her in my car, at 5 mph and with the lights off. I realize now how absolutely stupid that was, but at the time I must have watched too many detective movies.

About four blocks and at least two intersection violations later, I saw her go into our local convenience store called, of all things, the "Wa Wa Dairy."

Just as I was wondering what idiot came up with that name, I saw Carol talking to a tall young man working behind the counter. My blood boiled as they smiled and laughed together. Was Carol just being friendly, or was there more to this than met the eye?

It wasn't until she left the Wa Wa Dairy, empty handed, that I realized my worst fears had come true – she really liked that guy.

At that point I drove home. I was furious. How could she do this to me? Hadn't I been the perfect boyfriend? I felt deceived and discarded, and I was going to do something about it. I was going to confront my competition, but since he appeared to be a lot bigger than me, and since there was no predicting how violent I might become, I decided to call on the telephone!

"Hello, Wa Wa Dairy," the soft-spoken voice answered.

"Is this Randy?" I asked in my most assertive voice – safely on the other side of the phone.

"Yes," he said, unshaken by my powerful intro.

"Do you know Carol," I asked, and went on, "do you like her?" I demanded.

After a very quiet pause, the voice on the line spoke in almost a shy tone, “Ah, yes, I do know Carol, and she is very sweet. I guess I do like her a lot, but I haven’t had the nerve to ask her out.”

His answer stunned me, but then again didn’t know what I was expecting. It wasn’t what he said, as much as the way he said it. But – the most surprising thing to me was what I answered back to him.

“Yes, you’re right. Carol *is* a great girl,” and, without hesitation, I went on to say, “You definitely should ask her out. I know for a fact that she likes you!”

Before he had the time to ask my name, I hung up. I was Dr. Jekyll again.

I couldn’t believe how good I felt, but why? I just gave away my girlfriend of three years, and I still had feelings for her.

As I sat there in the dark, it all became clear. All I was really thinking about was *me*. I had become unbelievably possessive, even to the point when I knew Carol and I needed to go our separate ways, I still refused to give her up. But, she was not a possession. She was Carol, a sweet, caring person, who somehow put up with me these last few months, and, in my heart, I knew it was time to go on.

I felt good. Randy was a nice guy, and Carol deserved the best. It just wasn’t going to be me.

Hopefully, Mr. Hyde would stay gone forever, even though I feel him trying to escape from time to time.

One year, when I was home on leave from the Air Force, I heard Carol had gotten her scholarship and married Randy. I was happy for them, although I was just a little concerned that the convenience store wasn’t Randy’s only job. But, money isn’t everything. I should know, because I’m the guy who lost his girl to the Wa Wa Dairy man!

THE FALL GUY

By now you probably realize I'm not one to give up very easily, so when I found out I was very good at gymnastics, I soon had visions of the Olympics.

I loved watching the competition on TV. The drama, the suspense and the intensity of its athletes. Size didn't seem to matter, especially in gymnastics where a smaller, more agile framed body was actually an advantage.

My gym teacher, Mr. "G", was great and very encouraging, but it became apparent that even in this sport, my chances of a gold medal were zero. Even if I had real talent, it was my age that defeated me since most Olympic athletes started their training as an embryo.

The one thing I did excel at, though, was *falling down*. Now, before you think this is not a skill, Mr. G would disagree. That is because he used to be a stunt man before he became a gym teacher and made extremely good money landing on his *butt*. Now, while anyone can fall on their buttocks, doing it without getting hurt or injured is definitely a skill.

I spent hours practicing the "tuck and roll" and many other falling techniques. Soon, I was falling over tables, tripping over chairs and rolling down steps.

One would think this kind of "skilled" activity would end after high school. I, on the other hand, found it to be a great icebreaker at parties, not to mention meeting new people and getting plenty of attention.

For several years I entertained friends and relatives by flying through railings, bouncing off of pool tables and tumbling over furniture, leaving unaware spectators in horror as my body smashed against the floor.

My most infamous fall was at the Playboy Club in beautiful Lake Geneva, Wisconsin not long after I met Karen, who is now my wife. She had no idea I participated in this type of activity, but my friends who were with us did and prodded me relentlessly to do my "special thing." Poor Karen

had no idea what they were talking about, which probably was a good thing, because she most likely would have left me right then and there.

The Playboy Club was really high class, with crystal chandeliers, thick red carpets and gold trimmed rooms. We were all dressed up in suits, ties and long dresses on the ladies. We had just come out from seeing actor and comedian, Frank Gorshin and stepped aside to let the flowing crowd through the doors and down the wide, double staircase that descended to the main lobby below.

I could feel my friend poking me in the side and nodding his head as his eyebrows raised and lowered with anticipation.

Karen just stood there, wondering why my friends were so strange when I spotted a clearing on the steps, which would be essential if I didn't want to endanger strangers in the process.

As the last couple vacated the bottom step, I hurled myself down the two flights, head over heels, and with one loud bounce, landed flat on my stomach.

After the initial silence, sounds of gasping and mumbling rose up from the crowds of people still in the lobby and coming out of the theatre, except for my friends, who were laughing so hard they were bent over and crying. Now, this would have definitely convinced Karen my friends were deranged except she was too busy trying to comfort me in my moment of need.

Within minutes, we could hear the security team phoning for the paramedics, which was my cue to get out of there.

Karen's mouth dropped when I leaped up and casually brushed myself off. Like nothing had happened, my friends were already out the door, still roaring with laughter.

A stunned Karen followed me out to the car, where my friends were screaming, "Get in! We're out of here!" And in a few seconds we were.

Then, *bam*, a sharp, deep pain bolted down my arm! Had I hit a railing on the way down the steps? Mr. G warned me that you took big chances doing stunts without using special props, but I never was in a position to use props. I just tried to plan my falls in a safe and controlled environment. But still, accidents happen.

My whole arm was numb. "What did I do wrong," I thought. Then, I noticed Karen's face. It had turned from worried to mad. Then, I saw her fist!

"Ow!" I cried out. "Don't punch me again!"

Karen held up her fist and shook it.

"Then, don't you scare me like that ever again!"

She was right, and as I got older I had to stop this foolhardy and chancy form of entertainment. Besides, I couldn't risk getting my hand damaged. After all I was an artist now!

A STATE OF GRACE

When I walked into the high school art department for the first time, I knew I was home.

The faint smell of turpentine and oil, the splashes of color decorating the corners of the floorboards, all the way to the ceilings, and the large monolith easels encircling the room like Stonehenge made my senses soar.

I couldn't get enough of this sacred space devoted entirely for the creation of art and sculpture. Its tall, expansive windows overflowed with natural light that illuminated the transparency of watercolor, the subtleties of pastels and the thick richness of oils on canvas. This was the fiber of my life, and I was eating it all up.

Surrounded by an array of art materials, some of which I had never tried, I couldn't wait to get started. The one good thing about being relegated to using around the house or cheap art supplies is that when you get your hands on the

good stuff, you're that much better. That's why, even to this day, I tell parents, "Don't worry about supplying your talented child with expensive art equipment – they're much better off learning to create using their imaginations."

As an Art Major, I had an art class almost every day, and I could hardly wait to get there. That's why for awhile my other classes suffered, and I didn't much care who knew it. Finally, when I realized the creation of art and ideas were fed by knowledge and experience I took my other academics seriously, but, even then, never as serious as my art lessons.

In parochial school they used the term "State of Grace," which I think meant what it was supposed to be like being close to God. Well, for me, the State of Grace was painting, so going to art class was like going to church.

It was hard to believe someone would ever pay me real money to do what was so enjoyable and so much fun, but as time went on I started to discover the hundreds of art jobs that existed, from fashion art to interior art, from graphic design to automotive design, from commercial illustration to fine art painting, but where was my niche? What could I do best?

I would have these three years to find out, but I knew one thing for sure – I had to get to an art college in order to have a chance at any of those careers. That meant a scholarship, and I would do whatever it took to get one.

Little did I know then that hard work, dedication, enthusiasm and talent would have nothing to do with it. My future would take a bizarre left turn!

My tenth grade art classes were nothing short of utopia. The young woman who fed our creative spirits never seemed to run out of new challenges or excitement for her role as teacher and mentor. Though she was very different from Mr. Migona (from junior high), she possessed the same qualities – a great artist and individual who commanded your respect and admiration. On top of all that, she was just a very sweet person you couldn't wait to impress with your artwork,

so you would work long and hard for her approval, which, in turn, developed your skills and abilities.

One day we were painting the houses across the street from our high school, with our canvasses propped up against the windows. We were trying to capture in paint the structure, texture and light.

As I struggled to get the correct highlights, it was apparent there was still something missing. Soon, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“May I?”

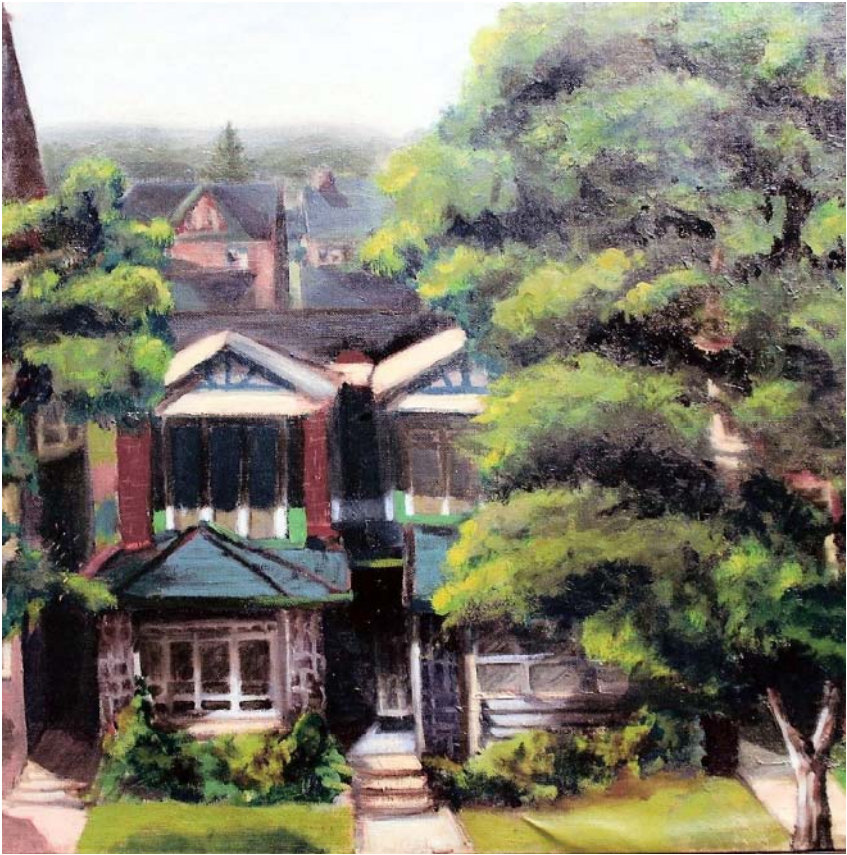
Miss Jones gently took the brush from my hand, and with a swift dip into my palette of colors, she touched the paint-thick brush to my canvas and instantly the building jumped out with radiant highlights.

She just smiled and handed the brush back to me. In that instant I could see what I had missed, because, even though I thought my buildings were highlighted, I saw immediately that I didn’t go far enough.

As I mimicked her brush strokes, the rest of the painting came alive. It was hard to believe those small highlights made such a difference, but as in all of my other lessons, I not only learned a great deal, I never forgot even the smallest detail.

My first oil painting in class seemed so familiar to me, I just took to it like a duck to water. Oil painting would become my favorite medium, although I also loved watercolor, pastels and ebony pencil.

The end of my sophomore year was sad, since I would no longer have Miss Jones as a teacher. But, with straight A’s in art, I was well on my way to that scholarship. Or so I thought . . .



1963, age 16
My first oil painting
It's the view from my 10th grade art class window at
Chester High School



1963, age 16
Art Class at Chester High School

A FALL FROM GRACE

I started my junior year classes with more enthusiasm than before and had established myself as one of the most promising art students in the entire school.

My new teacher was another woman, but much older. We'll call her "Mrs. M." From the first time she entered the classroom, I knew this year was going to be different, because, unlike Miss Jones, Mrs. M. never smiled. (To this day, people who don't smile make me nervous.)

Well, maybe she was just very serious about art? That would be okay with me. After all, *I* was very serious about art, too, but as it turned out, she was just *serious*.

As I look back, I'm not sure why she even wanted to teach. It was obvious she didn't enjoy it. In fact, I would use the word "tolerate" because it was the best anyone could expect from her. She was less than encouraging and didn't seem to like anyone's work, including mine. This made no sense to me since, up until this time, I had made straight A's in art and had won several small art contests, including being picked to do the artwork on the front cover of the yearbook, which always went to a senior.

As the year progressed, things got worse until one day when she was criticizing one of my art assignments, my frustration and patience ran out!

"If it's so bad," I exploded, "why the hell don't you tell me how to improve it?" I took a deep breath, and added, "Isn't that what you're here for?"

I couldn't believe I actually said that, but evidently I was not alone. The entire class applauded and nodded their heads in unison.

Mrs. M. turned bright red, and the look on her face transformed into what can only be described as a "she-devil." She never answered me and walked straight out of the room.

After class that day, she literally *pulled* me aside and with clinched jaws said, “Don’t you ever speak to me like that again!”

As mad as she evidently still was, I did feel bad for embarrassing her in front of the other students, but I couldn’t help feeling she also had it coming.

Needless to say, it got worse after that. Not only did she still not like anything I did, she wouldn’t even look at most of my assignments. My grades sank faster than the Titanic, and by the end of the year, no matter how nice I was to her, all I could salvage was a C-, and to make things worse, we had just gotten the news that President Kennedy had been shot and killed in Dallas, Texas.

Knowing I had no chance for a scholarship under Mrs. M’s tutoring and with the paltry grades she gave out, I decided to secure my senior year by begging the Registrar to assign me to a different art teacher for the next year.

“No problem,” he said.

“No problem,” I answered!

ART FOR CASH

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT?!

I remember playing tag football shortly after President Kennedy’s death. We had several days off from school during the national funeral, which was televised. It seemed unreal that something like that could happen in these United States, and each of us handled the shock and grief in our own way – for my friends and me, it was playing football in the street.

About halfway through the game (we were winning 21-7), some old lady shouted out the window, “Stop that noise! Don’t you know the President is dead?!”

After a few minutes, my friend, Jim, replied, “Don’t *you* know – he loved football!”



1964, age 17, watercolor

3 Your ability to observe

Complete the outline sketch alongside the original, using an ordinary soft pencil. Before you begin, study the pencil lines and shading in the original drawing. Notice which areas are darkest and which are lightest. Also note the character of the pencil work.



Grade A

1964, age 17

Famous Artist Talent Test

11th grade, first year with Mrs. M

I couldn't figure out why she thought I was not a good artist when I was getting A's on talent tests like this one

We won the game 28-14, but the old lady did hit a nerve. Poor JFK *was* dead.

Finishing the year with a C- in art was discouraging, but the promise of a new teacher next year gave me a renewed feeling of hope. The Christmas following Kennedy's assassination I figured out a way to make some money by painting people's favorite greeting cards on their front windows during the holidays using washable poster paints. The only trick was, you had to paint the image "backwards and backwards." That is, I was painting the scene inside the house on the back of the window (in reverse). Then, I actually had to work "backwards," painting the details first and the background last.

I charged a whopping \$5, but got so many orders I actually made over a hundred dollars that Christmas.

The Chester High School basketball team won the state championship for the second year in a row. After each losing football game, we would always yell out, "Just wait until basketball season!" We said a few other things, too, but I've forgotten what they were.

The Coach asked me to come up with a poster or something to honor the team. Getting carried away with this lofty assignment, I ended up doing large paintings of each one of the star players in full color and in full action! The poster-paintings were the hit of the school, and another thorn in the side of Mrs. M. By now, she hated hearing my name, which was all over the school.

One Monday morning, as I entered the hallway displaying the basketball trophies and my paintings, I noticed something was missing, and it wasn't the trophies.

Someone or some-many had, well, "stolen" might be too harsh a word to use. Let us say, "borrowed" the paintings.

At first I felt really bad, but the school principal optimistically reminded me, "Whoever took them must have really loved them and your art." I felt much better. Later we

found out that the Head Assistant Coach had given them to each of the players, neglecting to tell the rest of us.

I was thanked personally and enthusiastically by each individual basketball player, and it was *almost* as good as getting money, like charging one dollar for copying parent's signatures on student's report cards, who had, as they put it, "forgotten" to get them signed!

It was the first indication of my ability to copy exact detail, or it may have been the first indication I would eventually be doing jail time.

After a couple of close calls with the principal's office, my signature copying scam was discontinued. Though they couldn't actually prove *I* was the infamous forger, I knew it was time to quit and find another form of revenue.

It didn't take me long to come up with "temporary tattoos." My student friends loved the idea of having a tattoo, but their parents would not even consider their pleas for body art.

This, then, is where I come in. Using black, blue and red ballpoint pens, I would draw on various parts of their body an infinite array of subjects – hearts, butterflies, roses, skulls, snakes, spiders and my favorite – semi-naked women!

At fifty cents per tattoo, I didn't get rich, or even make enough for art supplies, but I always had change for lunch.

The year not only ended with that C- in art class, but also with an A+. Not in any of my other classes, but for my Aunt Pat.

I was decorating some old furniture we had by painting Mom's favorite subjects on it, animals. It was my way of camouflaging the worn out areas and making it look new and artsy.

The phone rang, "Joe, it's your Aunt Pat." Before I could say, "Hello," she continued with a shortness of breath, "It's time."

My mind was a blank. Time for what? It was too late for breakfast, too early for lunch. What the hell was she talking about, it's *time*?

Then, like a bolt of lightning, it hit me.

"My God, she's pregnant and . . . it's *time*!"

I lived the closest and had been selected as the emergency driver since Pat's husband, Bunky, worked too far away to get her to the hospital in a reasonable amount of time.

I carefully and gently helped my *very* pregnant aunt into the car and sprinted around to the driver's side, sliding behind the wheel, where I discovered I was still holding Pat's suitcase. It took me what seemed like forever to figure out how to remove that suitcase from between my stomach and the steering wheel, which was normally adjusted to about four inches from my chest because I had to have the seat so far up so my short legs would reach the peddles.

I actually had to get back out of the car to remove the suitcase, fling it into the back seat and shot out of the driveway with wheels smoking.

Pat reached over and grabbed my arm, "Take it easy. We've got time."

She was perfectly calm, but *I* was a nervous wreck, and she was the one having the baby. I wasn't even the father and I was still panicking.

Weaving through city traffic, we finally reached the Emergency Room, but I noticed Pat wasn't complaining about my NASCAR type driving. She seemed glad we arrived in record time, because we had less time than I realized. Mickey was born forty minutes after our arrival to the hospital.

It was a great way to end the summer and start the New Year, with not only joy and hope, but with a new family member, too!

YEAR OF THE LIVING DEAD

After receiving my curriculum report for my senior year, I dropped into a coma when I read, “12th Grade Art Major – Art Classes/*Mrs. M.*”

I bolted to the Registrar’s office to correct what must have been a typo. He promised me *Mrs. M* was out of my life, for good.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “this year they’re closing down another high school, and we’re getting all of their students. Since we have a shortage of teachers, *Mrs. M.* is going to be the *only* senior art teacher we have. So it’s her or *no* art major!”

Oh God, what a choice. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, except, in this case, the rock had horns.

I stumbled out of the Registrar’s office in utter disbelief. Staggering down the hall, I passed my friends, not even seeing them. I resembled the Mummy, and, like him, I felt I had been dead for years, wrapped up in hopelessness and despair.

After a pep talk from Mom, the eternal optimist, and learning I would be the new Drum Major for the high school band, I tried to convince myself that I could turn the tides with *Mrs. M.* and win her over! I didn’t even care if she liked my artwork, because I felt if she liked me, I would have a chance at good grades and for the art scholarship I desperately needed.

I still loved the atmosphere of the art room, and being surrounded with a multitude of talented, creative students made me constantly inspired and motivated to do my best.

I was unbelievably nice to *Mrs. M.* the first semester, keeping my mouth shut and my jaws clinched at any ridiculous remark she made.

With the band doing so well and having such great teachers in all of my other classes, things were looking up. My report card reflected this new hope. I had received A’s and B’s

in all of my academic subjects, with an A+ in Band and a B- in Art.

This was not quite good enough for an art college scholarship, but close, and, more importantly, my efforts with Mrs. M. seemed to be paying off.

As a senior and because of the many graduation ceremonies, we would receive three report cards, instead of the normal four, so I only had to persevere a little while longer.

With the start of the second semester, several of the senior art majors entered into a statewide art contest that required us to depict the important historical landmarks and themes in the area we lived. This seemed easy to me, because Philadelphia was drenched with history, and between the Liberty Bell and William Penn, the visuals were endless. The key factor for arranging this collage of images was something that would tie them all together.

I came up with the idea "Flight of Man," since I loved Sci-Fi, outer space and airplanes, even though I'd never flown. It was a great challenge for my imagination.

When the painting was finished, I felt I had done a good job, and my fellow art students were impressed, but Mrs. M. had no comments at all. This meant that she probably was impressed, too, so I mailed it out to the State Capitol with the hundreds of other art contest hopefuls.

As we were closing in on the end of the semester, I had high hopes things were still improving between Mrs. M and me, since she hardly talked to me anymore.

One day, when we walked into art class, there were about eight oil paintings arranged on easels in front of the room. You could tell they were not painted by twelfth grade art students, but perhaps by college students. When Mrs. M. entered the classroom, she actually had a smile on her face, a rare occurrence to all present.

After taking a seat in front of the paintings, we were requested, one student at a time, to critique the artwork.

Since we had never been asked by Mrs. M. for our opinions on anything, this seemed very strange, but it was a good feeling to be able to express ourselves.

Most of my fellow art students didn't quite know what to say, especially since the artwork was technically better than our own. I, on the other hand, didn't think it was that much better than my own work. And I always had something to say.

Looking back, I should have realized Mrs. M. didn't really want our *honest* opinions. She really wanted us to be impressed, but unfortunately I was not.

I like to emphasize the word *unfortunately* because that's what it was when we found out the paintings were Mrs. M's!

Needless to say, that was the straw that broke the camel's back, and if that wasn't bad enough, out of 3,000 entries, I won the State's Senior High School Art Student Theme Contest, taking first place and receiving \$500.

Though this was an incredible amount of money at the time, it was far *short* of the art college tuition I would need after almost assuredly losing all chances for a scholarship.

When I thought things with Mrs. M. couldn't get worse, I received my report card only to find she had given me an F in Art.

Besides the scholarship being out the window, I was now in danger of being held back from graduation, and this called for desperate measures.

First, we met with Mrs. M. herself. My mom demanded she explain how she could give me a failing grade when I just won a state art contest.

She told my mom it was a fluke, I was just lucky to win, and my paintings showed no real talent. She told her I was a terrible student, never completing assignments and telling other students in her class how bad they were and how good I was!

Mom looked at me with her mouth dropped. Did she actually believe her?



1965, age 18
I won the Pennsylvania State Poster Contest with
this painting, titled "Flight of Man"
\$200 prize

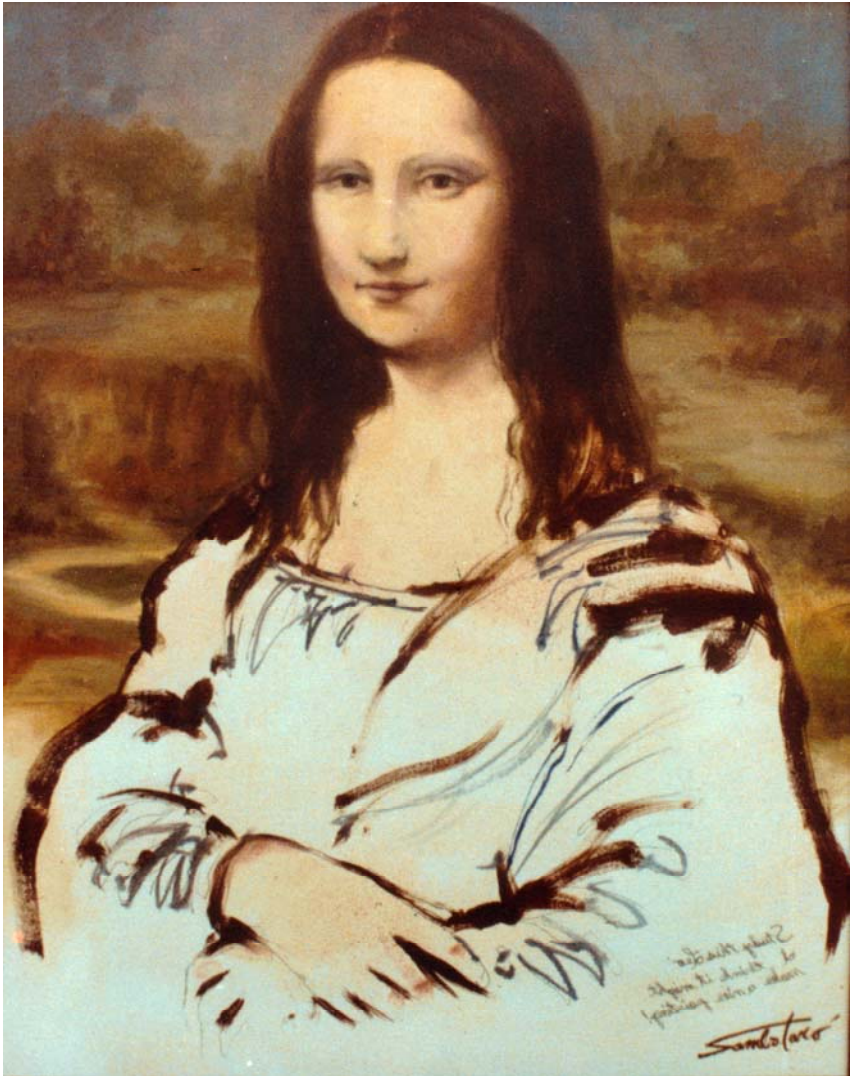
The achievement mark is cumulative, i.e., the mark is the record of the pupil's progress from the beginning of the year to date. The citizenship marks and the attendance figures are for the current quarter only.

	1st Quarter			2nd Quarter			3rd Quarter			4th Quarter		
School Year 19 <u>64</u> 19 <u>65</u>												
Days Absent (excused)	3			7			3			3		
Days Absent (unexcused)	0			0			0			0		
Times Tardy	0			0			0			0		
SUBJECTS	1st Qtr. MARK	CUM. MARK	Citiz.	2nd Qtr. MARK	CUM. MARK	Citiz.	3rd Qtr. MARK	CUM. MARK	Citiz.	4th Qtr. MARK	Final Mark	Citiz.
ENGLISH 12	C	C	B	B	C	B	B	B	B	C	B	B
P.O.D. ECON.	A	A	E	A	A	E	A	A	B	B	A	B
CONSUMER MATH	B	B	B	C	B	B	B	B	B	C	B	B
Science P	B	B	B	A	B	E	A	B	E	A	A	E
ART IV	F	F	B	F	D	B	F	D	B	C	C	B
BAND	A	A	E	A	A	E	A	A	E	A	A	E
HEALTH												
PHYS. ED. 12	A	A	B	A	A	B	A	A	B	A	A	B

Senior Year at Chester High School
 I was somehow failing art the same year I won the
 Pennsylvania State "Art & Poster" Contest



1965, age 18, still failing art
Loved to paint difficult subjects, always took it as a
challenge



1965, age 18
Loved to try copying the Masters

Mom took my hand, turned to Mrs. M. and said, “I know many of the other art students here, and my son never told them they were bad. In fact, they come over to the house often because my son is so encouraging. And, another thing, if Joe never completes his assignments, why are they all up on the walls of the art room with the rest of the students’?”

As we left, Mrs. M. had the last word, “He’s got no talent. And he’ll never be an artist!”

With a long and intense meeting between the school Principal, Mom and several of my other teachers, I was instructed to finish out Mrs. M’s class, not to open my mouth to her, and I would be guaranteed at least a passing grade of C by graduation day.

I don’t know what the Principal said to Mrs. M, but after that day she became very cordial toward me, almost nice, but that may be stretching it a bit.

I did finish with a C in art, not good enough for the art scholarship I had worked so hard for, especially considering I had finished the year with all A’s and B’s.

With such good grades I was encouraged to take the college entrance exams because if by some other miracle I ever did get to art college I would have to have taken these anyway.

I never thought of myself as a smart, or should I say *academic* person, but they were right. When I did well on the SAT I realized I could do whatever I put my mind to, and I would find another way of getting to art college.

I graduated in the largest class ever, 750 students. It was such a large graduating class, the commencement ceremony was held at the football stadium!

As I stood there in my cap and gown I realized I was standing on the exact spot, where only three years ago, when I was trying out for the football team, I ran back my one and only high school punt return, only to be creamed.

If I could survive that, I thought, I could survive the disappointment of not going to art school right away.

Mrs. M. didn't know it, but she gave me the most substantial motivation I could ever receive in my art career when she uttered those five little words, "He'll never be an artist!"

CHAPTER SIX

LIMBO

(AND I DON'T MEAN THE DANCE)

For many high school graduates the weeks following the last day of school are like being in suspended animation. You question who you are and where you are going.

You have walked through the door of puberty, and now you are in the *real* world, and you realize it is all up to you. There is no one who can make your decisions for you. You must live your own life.

An old familiar feeling overwhelms you, the one you had as an infant when the nurse first took you away from the only security you knew, your mother. Now you are in limbo!

Many of my friends had no idea what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. *I* was lucky because I knew exactly what I wanted to be, but had no idea how to get there.

After a few weeks of meandering around aimlessly, it was strongly suggested that I get a job.

It killed me to think of working just for money. It wasn't that I was lazy. I was a very hard worker, but the thought of doing something other than art was extremely discouraging, and my greatest fear was that I would get trapped there and *never* become an artist.

My family, especially my mom, was very supportive and assured me any job I got for the summer would only be temporary and that I *would* find a way to fulfill my dreams.

I answered a help-wanted ad at a hamburger joint close to where we lived called “The Steer Inn.” I’ll never forget their radio ads that sang out the words, “Steer in . . . the Steer Inn.” It took me years to get that cutesy jingle out of my head.

When I arrived for my interview I was greeted by a short, muscular man with a big smile.

“Welcome to the Steer Inn. I’m the Manager, Jack.”

He reminded me of Mr. B, our old landlord from 3rd Street, only Jack looked sober. I liked him immediately, and as I filled out the application form I glanced up periodically to see him grinning at me.

When I finished I was disappointed to realize another applicant had arrived. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, there were many kids my age looking for their first jobs, but it never occurred to me that I would be competing to flip hamburgers!

My competition was my age, only he was very tall and very blonde. He looked like a German SS officer by the way he walked, and he acted like he knew everything.

Jack informed us there was good news for both of us because he had two openings, one was for a full time position, and the other was for part-time.

Considering I could hardly boil water, cooking was as far removed from painting as dancing is to doing plumbing!

However, with Jack’s patient guidance and the “Steer Inn system,” I amazed even myself as I separated buns, laid out patties of meat in neatly arranged rows, sprinkled onions and lettuce on the toasted buns, while flipping over the now grilled hamburgers.

The system worked, and I was living proof. I created something someone could actually eat, and I cooked it!

Things were going well until I had to fill and mix the soda machines. The large soda containers were very heavy,

and I could barely lift them up over the tall soda dispensers. I didn't feel very comfortable working the cash register either. Math was not my strong suit, and back then you actually had to know how to add and subtract. The bottom line was I had no confidence and decided to save Jack the anguish of choosing between me and the blonde. I told him I would take the part-time job, even though I wanted and needed the full-time position.

Jack looked at me and shook his head.

"Joe, are you sure?"

I nodded yes.

Then he went on to say, "You know, I was going to pick *you* for full-time."

Inside, my stomach dropped. I had given up too easily. I had performed better than my rival and couldn't even see it. Walking home I realized I deserved what I got, and I vowed never to doubt myself again.

As fate would have it, my tall blonde competitor worked for one week and never showed up again, so I became the full-time guy after all.

Jack soon became my surrogate dad and made me feel like family. For him it wasn't hard, not just because he was such a friendly man, but because he was not intimidated by teenagers. He had seven (7) children!

Jack's wife was very attractive, blonde and shapely. You would never believe this woman could have ever delivered four boys and three girls into this world.

This wonderful family took me in as one of their own, and to show my appreciation I painted a large mural on their living room wall. That became the focal point of their home and Jack's favorite picture.

Jack had a special way of tempering discipline with unconditional love, of making a point without shoving it down your throat and inspiring you to be the best you could be.

He was one of the smartest men I had known, until the day he asked me to baby-sit. I thought he must have lost his mind when he wanted *me* to watch over seven kids.

Large families, out of necessity, have a great way of assuming responsibilities. The older kids supervised the younger ones, and each had their own duties and chores around the house. As it turned out, babysitting Jack's nine children was easier than watching my aunt's *three* boys. (Not that Aunt Pat's kids were bad. Just spunky).

Once, to keep Aunt Pat's boys out of mischief, I built them a submarine out of a large washing machine box. I cut out round circles on the sides and glued in coffee can lids for portholes. I painted control panels on the inside, came up with a periscope made out of a paper towel cylinder, adding two small mirrors inside so you could look through the bottom and see out the top.

Then, I devised a way of firing marbles by using (and I'll deny this if I'm asked) empty tampon dispensers, to hold the round "torpedoes" in place. On top of the box I built and painted an elaborate system that (through the homemade periscope) looked like the ocean with small islands in the far background.

What made this elaborate was that *underneath* the flat surface was another angled piece of cardboard that allowed the marbles (torpedoes) to roll down underneath the ocean surface, in any direction you moved the periscope toward. I then took paper clips and pulled them halfway apart until they took an "L" shape.

With a razor blade I cut slits into the ocean at different intervals, spacing them out over the blue cardboard. Then, I inserted the re-shaped paperclips so that one end would lay flat on the surface and the other would hang down beneath the surface almost touching the angled cardboard below.

Then, I placed the toy ships on each of the seven paperclips, so as you turned the periscope and looked in that certain direction, not only could you see the fleet of enemy

ships, you could fire your (tampon-marbles) torpedoes at them. As the marble rolled down the angled board, (if your aim was correct), it would strike the bottom part of the paperclip, exploding (flipping) the enemy ship, *right before your very eyes!*

It was worth the work because Pat's boys played with the "destroyer submarine" for years until one day it finally just fell apart.

I still think it was one of my finest inventions. If not for its many problem-solving techniques, then at least for its many hours of peaceful babysitting!

I still love to make what I call three-dimensional games where you use your hands to make things move and actual *skill* is required.

Over the years I have made several of these types of games, including a golf game using miniature clubs, small pearl beads for golf balls and a complete golf course with trees, shrubs, sand, water and grass. Most of which came from model railroading kits.

I also designed a football game where you actually completed passes by throwing a miniature football at the receiver and kick the football off a small tee with your finger for field goal attempts.

As a child I was always making up games from whatever scraps of materials and recycled toys I could get my hands on, so it's no wonder I still get the urge.

All seven of Jack's kids loved games, so it was exceedingly easy to keep all of us busy for hours. Once, when I had a date for the Senior Prom and Jack found out my car was waiting for yet another part, he offered to let me use his car.

This was a gesture beyond belief. Not just because *no one* had ever trusted me with their automobile, but because Jack's car was a late model *Cadillac*, and his pride and joy. It was the only luxury he allowed himself and was hesitant to even let his wife drive it!

“No,” I said over and over, “I could never drive your car! What if something happened, even if it wasn’t my fault?”

Jack just stood there with that trademark smile of his and said, “Son, that’s what I’ve got insurance for.” I couldn’t believe he was almost insisting, and by the end of the conversation I had his spare set of car keys.

I was so *careful* driving that beautiful car most observers thought I was ninety years old, but I was determined to justify his faith in me. Jack was right when he told me another thing, too – it made you feel like a million bucks!

I got to drive that car several more times, too, until one Friday afternoon when Jack would be driving me at speeds only a daredevil would attempt. Why would he be driving so fast and risking a speeding ticket. Well, all I can tell you is it was all because of *me*!

NO BULL

One Friday afternoon Jack informed me that he had not only gotten permission, but also the money for me to repaint the large logo sign at the top of the front of the building.

It was a big red bull’s head with two huge horns that stuck out from both sides and looked like the Chicago Bulls’ logo of today. (Do you suppose that blonde kid who only worked there for one week stole the design, moved to Chicago, and presented it to the basketball team years later?)

In any event, it was in desperate need of repainting, and Jack was determined I would get the job. Like the Dad I never had, he was always looking out for me.

With money from petty cash, I purchased all the paint and other supplies I would need to complete the job and started working on it that same afternoon.

I was used to painting large and was very organized. Jack was amazed how fast and proficient I was and kept taking breaks to watch me work.

"Be careful up there," he'd shout from time to time, while I would wave back with my 4" paintbrush atop the 22-foot ladder.

It seemed I might finish it that very day, except the sky was getting cloudy, and the wind was picking up. I had completed the bull's face, its longhorns and the large bold lettering on top. All I had left to do was some detailing around the edges and the bull's eyes.

As I stretched out my 5'1" frame to its capacity in order to reach the top extremities of the sign, I felt a cooling rush of air blow over my body. Unfortunately, it also blew over the ladder, literally!

Like a Saturday matinee cartoon, I stood there in mid-air, holding my brush and looking down at the ladder that was now lying on the ground. It seemed like a full minute went by before I dropped down from the second-story sign.

I knew from my stunt/gym classes that my best chance to avoid injury was to relax, cover my head with my arms and roll to help break the impact. The amazing thing was, it almost worked except for the unfortunate location of the ladder, which I landed on and threw me into the side of the building.

I didn't have a scratch on my body except for the sharp pain in my wrist. Jack came flying to my rescue and looked as white as a ghost.

"Are you okay?" he stammered out in his low, shaky voice.

At first I thought I was, but when I tried to get up I felt that sharp pain in my wrist again. As I raised my arm, the look on Jack's face told me the double-size swelling was more than just a sprain. I had broken my wrist as a result of being thrown against the building.

Jack took charge and told me not to worry. We were insured, and he would get me to the hospital as soon as he

made arrangements for the area supervisor to fill in since he couldn't leave the restaurant.

The only other person working was David, who had taken the part-time position and was only sixteen. My body dropped down right in front of his serving window, and to look at him you would have thought *he* was the one who fell.

Jack walked me to the front and pushed my injured hand into the ice cooler up to my elbow.

"It will help keep the swelling down," he said.

So, there I stood by the front serving windows, while David frantically took orders from the now increasing, dinner-hour crowd, where, from time to time, I would have to move to one side so David could get ice for the sodas.

The customers stared in at me like I was a freak, but I guess from their point of view a boy in paint-splattered Steer Inn clothes with his arm buried up to his elbow in the ice machine would seem a little strange!

It wasn't long before the area supervisor arrived, and Jack belted me in to the passenger side of his car. He seemed calm and in control until he hit the gas. Then we flew out of the parking lot like a NASCAR driver after a pit stop.

When you think of how careful I had driven this beautiful car and how intensely Jack was driving it now, I almost wish I hadn't been so timid. This car could really go.

As fast as we went, Jack was not reckless. He was a good driver and got me to the hospital in record time, similar to my experience in driving my Aunt Pat to the same emergency room, where she had her first baby.

Jack took care of the paperwork, and after a brief examination by one of the ER doctors I was told they were sending for a specialist who would reset my wrist and put it in a cast. That didn't sound so bad to me, and by now my arm was numb. I felt no pain.

Jack had to get back and told me to call my family and tell them what happened, and he would be back to take me home after the doctor was finished with me. No one was

home to take my call, so I left a short message because that's all you could leave on that machine.

It would only record ten-second messages, so I simply said, "I'm at the hospital, and Jack will be bringing me home later after the operation." I barely got that out before the machine shut off, never thinking I probably should have mentioned I only broke my wrist.

The specialist was a very nice doctor, and it was only when he had to finally move my arm that the pain came back. After some pills and a shot, my arm was thankfully numb again, and within twenty minutes he had set it.

With my brand new snow-white cast, Jack picked me up and drove me home, this time at a much less hectic pace. When I walked in the front door it was like walking into a funeral home. The whole family was sitting around in a circle like someone had just died. When they saw me, all at once they started shouting out questions.

"What happened? Are you all right? What operation?"

It was unanimous concern by all – and I was very appreciative. As it became apparent that I was not seriously hurt, my mom's voice echoed from the back of the room, "It wasn't your painting hand was it?" As I held up my cast for all to see, a collective sigh of relief filled the room. "No!"

Jack assured me my job was not in jeopardy, and as soon as I felt up to it, I was welcome back. This was good news, especially when I realized someone else was going to have to fill the soda machine with those heavy containers.

Three days later I returned to work, and as I approached the Steer Inn I saw how nice the brightly painted sign looked. I hadn't even noticed it after the accident.

There was just something that bothered me about it, though, and I couldn't put my finger on it until one day Jack said to me, "I have your check for painting the sign, but there's one thing." Then he paused and took me outside, and, pointing up to the bull, he finished, "Shouldn't you give him some eyes before you take this money?"

With a big grin, I answered, “Yes, but only if someone is holding the ladder, and I mean firmly holding the ladder!”

NIGHT SHIFT

Jack’s true ambition was to be a head chef, but with seven kids you took what you could get when you could get it.

About the same time they removed my cast, Jack came to me with surprising news.

“I got a job as a head chef at the Holiday Inn on County Line Road.”

I immediately had mixed emotions. I was thrilled for Jack, but depressed that I wouldn’t be working with him anymore. When he heard my weak, “Congratulations,” he quickly followed up with, “And, I’m taking you with me!” Wow, I was so relieved, but what was I going to do? He told me he would be hiring his own kitchen staff and not to worry, he’d find something for me to do.

I couldn’t wait to start my new job, whatever it was. The Holiday Inn, believe it or not, was a giant step up from the fast foods, and I was on my way up, too!

A week later Jack called me with the details, and my fantasies about my new job were quickly foiled. I would start out by making salads (in other words, I would be the salad boy) and if that wasn’t questionable enough, Jack forgot to mention that he was the “night” Head Chef, which meant our work hours were 11PM to 7AM, better known as the graveyard shift.

I have to say up front, I *never* got used to that shift, no matter how hard I tried, or how dark I got the bedroom I could never sleep knowing the sun was shining outside.

Salad boy didn’t last that long (thank God), again thanks to Jack. When he heard they were looking for someone to design and arrange conference rooms and wedding receptions he convinced them to use me, and I was eternally

grateful. I was also immensely better at arranging rooms than arranging lettuce!

One time when my grandfather got mad at my grandmother, and for reasons I still don't know, he pushed their upright piano down the cellar steps and proceeded to chop it up for firewood. This was a mortal sin in my religion. All musical instruments were sacred.

I never got over the waste of such a beautiful thing. Even though, as much as I loved to plunk around, I was seldom allowed to play on it.

That is why, when I discovered the shiny black baby grand in the main ballroom I couldn't keep my hands off of it. Or should I say fingers.

I would always finish hours before my shift was over at 7AM I had no problem following a seating chart and figuring out creative ways of arranging centerpieces and silverware, so I almost always was finished by 2 or 3AM, which left four or five hours with nothing to do. That was until I found that glorious piano.

Every night I softly played at picking out familiar melodies and simple chords, trying to teach myself how to play, but, unlike the trumpet, this instrument had many more keys, making it infinitely more difficult to learn.

I never got discouraged though, and had hours of joy just plunking out simple tunes I loved. The night staff was so familiar with my routine that on the many nights that I would fall asleep with my head resting on my arms, and my arms atop the piano, one of the wait staff would always wake me up before the day manager would arrive.

"Get up, Joe," one of the early morning waitresses would whisper in my ear, "it's almost time to clock out!"

I would visit Jack in the kitchen and was never hungry because you couldn't be around Jack (especially in a kitchen) and not eat. Of course, this is another reason I probably couldn't sleep during the day.

One night, when I was visiting the food bar, Jack told me he was offered yet another head chef's job, only this was at a really high class restaurant near Westchester Pennsylvania, a well to do suburb.

Not only could he *not* take me with him, he was almost sure if he got that incredible position he'd be moving his entire family there. Again, I was elated for Jack, but sad for me. Only this time I realized it was a sign for me to move on myself.

A few weeks after Jack left, I quit. It just wasn't the same, and I went for an interview at Boeing Aircraft. A friend told me they were training young people for skilled jobs needed in the helicopter division. Maybe they'll need an artist, I thought.

During the interview I found out what they really needed were welders. Vietnam was in full swing, and they couldn't keep up with the demands for more Huey helicopters. To my surprise I was a prime candidate for training. I had superior eye-hand coordination and had scored high on their pre-interview test.

Once trained, at \$27/hour (in the early sixties) seemed like a million dollars to me – I would be immediately wealthy!

Perhaps God wanted me to be a great welder I reasoned. But then I called Jack, who always seemed to know the answers.

After listening to my long sales pitch on my new career move, Jack patiently listened, and then, in a slow, soft voice, he brought me back down to earth with these simple words.

"Joe, do you *really* want to be a welder for the rest of your life?"

It was the last part of his short answer that really hit home, "for the rest of your life?"

But, "Jack," I said, "the money. Maybe I could save up and go to Art College."

Again, Jack, in his usual patient voice, said, "Joe, no matter how much money you make, you'll never get yourself

back to school, believe me I know, it just doesn't happen that way. Life has many surprises, and by the time you think you'll have enough saved for school, something always comes up. Not to mention that once you're skilled at that job, the more money you'll earn makes it even harder to quit and go back to school."

He was making perfect sense, and deep in my heart, I was glad to be set straight and back on the right path. All I really wanted to do was become an artist.

I told Jack he was right, but how was I ever going to get to art school with no money? Jack always had an answer, and this one would change my life forever.

"Do what thousands of other young men have done," he said. "Let the government pay for your school!" At first, I thought he was talking about school loans or grants, but then he continued with, "Join the Armed Forces."

Visions of myself dressed in army fatigues, charging up a hill with an M-16 in my hand was definitely not something I considered. I found out Jack was a Marine and had used the G.I. Bill to get his education, plus he was a cook during his tour of duty. He explained there were many kinds of jobs in the service besides tank drivers and infantrymen.

He was right again. One of the services must have an art department.

I thanked Jack profusely and set out to investigate the most promising course to my future goal, and set up interviews with the Army, Marines, Navy and Air Force.

Jack was promoting the Marines, of course, and even though the thought of them molding me into a confident, mean, fighting machine sounded attractive, I realized it would be hard to paint a picture with *two* broken wrists after hand to hand combat. The Marine obstacle course didn't sound so good either, with its motto "Can you make it through alive!"

The Army was about the same, only the uniforms weren't as nice, and neither one had art departments.

The Navy and Air Force were different stories. They both had what they called “graphic art departments.” I wasn’t sure exactly what that was, but as long as it had the word “art” in it, it was definitely for me!

The Navy recruiter was very honest with me. He said, because of my high school grades and especially because of my height (or should I say lack thereof) I would most probably be assigned to a submarine.

It wasn’t that I was claustrophobic, but the thought of drowning twenty thousand leagues beneath the sea was enough to make me re-visit the Air Force.

With promises of a job in the Graphic Art Department, and with my fascination for airplanes, I joined the United States Air Force in May of 1966 and had only to pass their physical before being sent off to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas for basic training. I was nineteen years old.

Jack was right – I could feel that I had made the correct decision and knew that with the G.I. Bill I was guaranteed money for college. It was a four-year commitment, which seemed like a lifetime at that age. But, I knew it was my only hope. What I didn’t know was that my struggle to become an artist would not end any time soon, even in the Air Force!

CHAPTER SEVEN

OFF WE GO

INTO THE WILD BLUE YONDER

My flaps were down, my gear was up. I was ready to fly!

Four years seemed like an awfully long time, but I was “guaranteed” art school, and I was willing to do whatever it took for that type of guarantee.

First, I would have to pass a pre-entry physical, and other than a slightly damaged wrist, I was in perfect shape. I reported bright and early to the draft enlistment building and went straight to the fifth floor medical facilities, joining a line of very young men cascading down the hall.

Nurse Ratchet (most assuredly trained by the Marines) screamed out instructions in the most masculine voice I had ever heard from a woman.

“Draftees, through the door to your right, enlisted through the door to your left.”

A pause and, “your other left” as she pointed at one young man who seemed to be in a daze.

“Let’s go, let’s go, we don’t have all day!”

“Good,” I thought. I was anxious to get this over with.

We were broken up into groups of eight and led into a smaller room where we were handed a pencil and forms to fill

out. I didn't realize it then, but for the next four years I would be making out many, many forms.

Then, another nurse came along with a doctor; neither one seemed much older than us, which made it even worse when we were instructed to take off our clothes, fold them and place them on the table behind us with our paperwork on top. We looked like a bunch of escaped refugees standing there in only our socks and underwear. That was also the time when I noticed how *cold* the room was.

All eyes were on the pretty young nurse as she followed the doctor around with clipboard in hand. As the physician went from one enlistee to another we were all thinking the same thing, "Was this nurse checking us out?" But, it soon became apparent that she could care less about a bunch of ready-to-be-shipped-off guys in their Fruit of the Looms.

After checking our eyes, ears and throats, the doctor also checked us for marks, rashes, scars and even tattoos, unlike now, (we were all too young for tattoos). But our bodies would become property of the U.S. Military, so it was all documented, and just when we thought there was nothing left to check . . .!

"Pull 'em down, boys," the doctor ordered, "pull 'em down."

We looked at each other to see if we all heard the same thing, and by the shock and panic on everyone's faces, I knew we had!

We all stood there frozen. What about the nurse? Wasn't she going to leave the room?

"Come on, guys," the doctor repeated, "pull 'em down."

Again, we stood there frozen. It was apparent the nurse was *not* going to leave, and none of us wanted to be the first one to expose the family jewels.

Finally, after staring at us and shaking his head in disbelief, the doctor got in our faces as we slowly and

painstakingly pulled down our drawers. I won't go into detail all of the things on us the doctor checked, except to say he went through a whole box of rubber gloves that morning, and we all became a lot less shy! I was never so happy to put my clothes back on again, not the least of which was to get warm.

It was not over yet, though. We were instructed to take a small plastic cup and deposit a urine sample and then roll up our sleeves for a blood sample. Giving blood was not my favorite thing, but I never expected to see George, a big black fellow who actually wanted to drive a tank in the Army, be so afraid of a small needle.

Finally, when the nurse got him calmed down, it looked like George would be okay, but when she raised the needle to stick him, he fainted! And, it's nothing like you see in the movies. Big George just fell to the floor like a ten story building, and it sounded just as loud. We thought George broke every bone in his body, that's how bad it looked. In reality, he escaped with just bruises, but would have to be re-evaluated before they would accept him into the Army.

I hope Big George wasn't depending on the military for school tuition like I was. That would be a real shame, and for such a small thing, but I was about to find out, nothing was a small thing when it came to passing your military physical.

As I sat in the small interview room with my paperwork on my lap, a salt and pepper haired doctor burst in and immediately took the papers from my hands.

"Um, um, your name is Joe?"

Before I could answer, he continued.

"Well, I've got *good* news." He paused. "Because of your height and weighing ninety-eight pounds, I can write you off as 4F, and you won't have to do any military time."

My mouth dropped. I failed the physical, I was too small! Why hadn't anyone mentioned this possibility to me before? I just about started to cry when the doctor asked, "What's the matter? Did you want to be drafted?"

"No," I mumbled, or "Yes."

The doctor seemed as confused as I was.

“Joe,” he commanded, “what is it?”

I told him I was trying to *enlist* into the Air Force because I wanted to become an artist, and I had no money for school. My disappointment streamed out my mouth in sentence after sentence as I went on and on.

The poor doctor passionately listened to my entire story, then opened up his desk drawer and pulled out a fresh set of forms.

“Well, Joe, if you really want in that bad,” he saw my face glowing at the prospect, “the Air Force will fatten you up a bit, I’m sure!”

With a swift stroke from his pen, I was physically approved for the U.S. Air Force and realized how much power some men have over others. If this doctor hadn’t slightly bent the rules for me, would I have been able to find another path to my goal?

A few days later, May 5th, I was to report back to the same building, only a different floor, the second floor, where I would be sworn in as a member of the U.S. Air Force, and that same day be put on a bus, taken to Philadelphia Airport and flown to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas for six weeks of basic training.

I was excited. I was anxious. I was scared, but, most of all, I was aware my life was about to change drastically, not just because I was now a member of the military and Uncle Sam, but because I really would be flying in a real airplane *for the very first time!*

UP, UP AND AWAY

After raising my right hand and swearing to defend and protect the United States of America, rescue Medicare from bankruptcy, make all Americans wear seatbelts, find a cure for Cancer and balance the national budget, with the words, “I

do,” I became married to the U.S. Air Force for the next four years. And, like many marriages, they would be the most unpredictable and most memorable years of my life.

As the large blue and silver bus pulled up to the curb, we were given our first order.

“Single file to the back, take a seat, and no smoking.”

Great, I thought, I can do this. After all I didn’t even smoke! I was told taking orders was the hardest part of military life, but so far, so good.

We pulled into the airport, and the twenty or so of us were given our boarding passes and whisked through the gate and out the door into the flight line where a huge airplane with bright red letters “TWA” was sitting. The closer I got, the bigger it looked, and I thought, I’m Air Force now and planes are my business. I own the skies!

As I boarded the aircraft, I marveled at its sleek contours and shiny metallic surface. For the first time, after drawing hundreds of airplanes, I was face-to-face with this mechanical marvel. With engines roaring, I felt the incredible power of this flying machine as we streaked down the runway.

Then, as we lifted into the air, my heart stopped beating. Was it the shock of actually being in an airplane for the first time? No. Was it the feeling of having my body leave the earth? No. Well, then what was it?

It was seeing the wings of the plane actually *move*. That is, flop around in the wind! This was supposed to be a rock-solid vehicle. Why was it so flexible?

These questions and many more would soon be answered. The one thing for sure was that things are not always what they appear to be, and until you actually experience them personally, you never really know. An important lesson to any artist – your best work is the images you experience.

My wonderment at viewing the country from 30,000 feet was not easily broken. Until they started serving food.

“Chicken or beef?” the shapely blonde stewardess asked.

My goodness, I have a choice? Where I came from you were just glad to see food. I couldn’t believe they were not only going to feed us, but we also had a choice.

I don’t remember if I took the chicken or the beef, but I do remember it tasting mighty good. It would be *years* later before I actually started complaining about airline meals.

When we landed, I was so excited about having flown for the first time and how extraordinary it felt, I didn’t seem to mind the Air Force Sergeant yelling at us to follow him and keep our mouths shut, which, for me, a talker, might seem harsh.

We boarded another bus marked “Lackland Air Force Base TEXAS.” It was a large bus, and there were plenty of extra seats, but the Sergeant made us all sit together. Even the seats were big (my short legs barely touched the floor), but I would soon become well aware of the fact that everything in *Texas* was *big*.

As we made our way to the base, I stared out the (you guessed it) *big* windows at the wide, expansive landscape all around. I had never seen this much land with nothing on it, and it made my soul feel free!

We stood in a straight line as the bus pulled away, and, for the first time, I felt the warm Texas breeze over my face. I thrived in warm weather and felt strangely at home in this new climate.

After a brief orientation, which included a map of the base that seemed as large as the entire state of Pennsylvania, we were shuttled over to a new air-conditioned barracks that would be my home for the next six weeks. I didn’t realize it then, but I was very lucky we ended up where we did, because as the days grew progressively hotter, air conditioning became an oasis.



1966, joined the Air Force



Me, bottom right
Basic Training
Lackland Air Force Base, Texas

It was hard to imagine what basic training would be like in Texas without air conditioning. Yet, they were just now putting it in extensively around the base.

In the barracks, the rooms were large and squeaky clean with bright ceiling lights and mirror-shined floors. There were five neatly arranged beds on each side of the room with a small Air Force-blue locker in between. I was startled to see my name printed in bold black lettering centered on one of the headboard rails.

This was my space, and we were told we were responsible for keeping it looking *exactly* the way it was now!

The visit to my bed was short lived; as once more we were whisked off to Supply, the Air Force equivalent of Walmart. I had never seen so much stuff in all of my life – rows and rows of shirts, pants, jackets, shoes, boots, blankets, pillows and on and on. But, the most amazing thing was when they measured me. They actually had uniforms that fit me!

Before we were allowed to change into our Air Force khakis, they walked us through the barber shop (or shall I say “chop shop”) where we were all given a quick G.I. haircut – that is, shaved heads.

It didn’t bother me too much because my hair was short and thin to begin with, but some of my new buddies were actually in *tears* as their long, thick strands of curly hair floated to the floor in piles. The loud buzzing sounds of the indiscriminate razors drowned out their whimpers as their shocked faces reflected back in the tall mirrors across from them.

It did accomplish one thing. We all felt equally violated, which started a kind of strange bond between us, which would grow even stronger as time went on. All of these young men from different backgrounds, different families and different races, all thrown together and all needing to help one another survive in this new strange environment called basic training. To me this was the original survivor reality show, only it never made it on TV!

The one good thing about not growing up spoiled was that even the chow hall food tasted pretty good to me. However, there were several in our group who said they would starve to death if they had to eat this sh** for the next six weeks. As much as they complained, I think they would have eaten it if they could have known what was in store for us next. We were about to meet our new drill Sergeant, better known as ‘Sir,’ or more specifically, “Yes Sir.”

Now, we all knew what the word Sergeant meant, it was obviously his rank. You could tell by the large number of step ladder arranged stripes that covered his arm. But as for the word “drill?” Did it mean drill as in *marching*? Did it refer to being “drilled” as in having to answer many questions? Or, even worse, the *pain* one endures from having your tooth drilled by an evil dentist?

When Sergeant D.J. marched into the room, we all knew it meant *all* of the above! He immediately made it clear his only job in life was to, as he so delicately put it, “whip our sorry asses into men.”

Now, most of us already thought by the virtue of our male organ we were already men, but obviously Sergeant D.J. noticed something missing, which seemed to be the case when he went on to say, “You think you know how to walk, well, you don’t! You think you know how to talk, well, you don’t! You think you know how to shit, well you don’t! You think you know how to think, well, *stop*, because you don’t!”

I was really starting to worry now, not because it was obvious he was trying to intimidate us (which he did), but because, for the life of me, I couldn’t imagine any other way of taking a crap!

I realized quickly it didn’t pay to think too much, because the Air Force and Sergeant D.J. were going to teach you the best way, the correct way, the accepted way, and, most importantly, *their* way!

We soon learned the fine art of cleaning toilets, scrubbing floors and washing windows – the culinary art of

making beds so tightly that one could bounce a quarter off of them into the air – the interior design art of arranging one's foot locker so that when finished, your soap was facing south, your hair brush was north, your razor faced east, and your toothbrush – with bristles down – was pointing due west, (I'm still wondering why they even gave us a hair brush).

Until this day, I have to credit the Air Force, and especially basic training, for my being so neat and organized. For some reason, I found it very desirable. Unfortunately, many of my roommates hated the entire concept. Especially those who had mothers that did everything for them!

It didn't take me long to realize that the point of basic training was to listen and follow orders, even if you didn't understand or agree with them.

Some guys just fought and fought, and it only made it worse on them. They just never got the point. Several were kicked out in only their second week, and I knew for them it would take a lot longer to grow up.

Those of us who stuck it out were awakened at 4:30AM each morning. After a 30-minute exercise routine outside in the dark, we ran in formation to the chow hall and scarfed down breakfast. I was in the best shape of my young life, and the doctor at the Enlistment Clinic was right, the Air Force *would* fatten me up. I gained 12 pounds and was now 110 pounds, including muscles where none existed before.

Like being organized, it also became important for me to stay in shape, of which I still strive, so again, the military experience (for me) was a lifelong influence.

Even though I found myself in a very rigid and disciplined environment and couldn't use my art talents to trade for favors, I *was* able to use another skill that proved to be just as effective!

*M & M'S**(AND I DON'T MEAN THE CANDY)*

"M & M" in the military stands for marching and maneuvering, an activity in basic training that the Air Force seemed obsessed with.

I guess, when you really think about it, what else can they have you do after you've cleaned the barracks to microscopic perfection?

The good news was that, with my Drum Corps experience and being a high school drum major, I was definitely qualified for this position, and my Drill Sergeant singled me out immediately and made me Squadron Leader. In other words, I would be in charge of training and marching the other recruits for two hours each day on a cement lot in 100 degree temperatures, while the Sergeant and his assistant were in their air conditioned office.

Now, before you start feeling sorry for me, this job did have significant benefits.

Each week the Sergeant would take me with him to march in a squadron presentation. Since I made him look good with my marching ability, he was extra nice to me. He excluded me from participating in the many garbage details, like working in the cafeteria, washing dishes, picking up litter around the base, working on the trash truck and pulling all-night guard duty. (I also have no idea why we needed a guard, unless it was to keep guys from escaping?)

For my entire stretch in Basic I never pulled extra duty because I knew how to march. Who would have thought?!

I grew to respect and admire my Drill Sergeant, who was tough, but fair and above all kept his word. We were all a lot more mature and self-disciplined in the short time we were under his command than we ever thought possible, and now it was time for "D-Day" to test our recent training.

D-DAY II

Toward the end of our six-week training, we were all getting prepared for the dreaded obstacle course. This was where you played “real soldier,” carried a heavy backpack and rifle, ran, crawled and climbed through the Air Force obstacle course’s rough terrain, hills, water, walls and barbed wire.

Since we all joined the Air Force and not the Army, this was not something we really wanted to do, but we were told many times by many sources that the Air Force obstacle course was a *cake walk* compared to any of the other services, like the Marines, for instance, who boasted of the many recruits who never made it through *their* obstacle course.

So, we all felt a little less apprehensive as we started weapons training.

I sat and listened intensely as the instructor pointed out the safety features of the M-16 (plastic) model rifle that was sitting on the table in front of us. It was an automatic, rapid-fire weapon with a large black clip that snapped easily into the loading block for instant fire power.

After several hours of practice with the plastic model, I was ready to fire the real M-16. With targets in place, protective glasses and ear plugs, we positioned ourselves on the firing range.

When I was instructed to pick up the weapon that was in front of us, covered with a small tarp to keep dirt out of the chamber, I was shocked to realize this was the same, exact rifle we were just trained on. The damned thing *was* plastic!

Well, not the entire thing but most of it. I soon learned that this light weight M-16 was superior to the old, heavy, slower firing rifles of the past, and even though to me it seemed more like a toy gun, it soon became apparent this was no *toy*.

After watching the many targets get shredded within a few seconds of our rapid fire testing, I couldn’t even imagine pointing that thing at a real person.

With new targets in place, we set our rifle for single-round fire. I, once again, was amazed. Not at the weapon this time, but that I had put 58 of my 60 shots into the inner circle of my target and earned a sharp-shooting ribbon at the end of the exercise. I had no idea I would be any good at target shooting, but I guess all you need is a steady hand and a sharp eye (traits one would attribute to an artist),

Unfortunately, if you think about it, there is a lot of creativity in war. Up until the space program, most new developments in technology were due directly to wars, and the need (along with the money) to develop sturdy vehicles, better communications and weather predictions, along with developments in food preservation and all-weather clothing, to mention a few.

Samuel Morse, known for developing the Morse code, was actually one of the finest portrait artists in America at the time, so I felt confident that I could contribute creatively to my country in my new role.

Friday morning we stood in line at 7AM with metal helmets on our shaved heads, heavy backpacks strapped to our shoulders and thick army boots laced tightly to our feet. This was “D-Day,” and I was ready. That is until they made this announcement:

“Because of the recent rains and new construction, the Air Force base obstacle course is not fit to operate and is closed. We will be bussing you north to the U.S. Marine obstacle course facility, and you will be instructed how to proceed once you have arrived.”

The blood in my entire body evaporated. My knees buckled under the weight of my war gear. Oh, my God, what did I get myself into? The only reason I didn’t join the Marines (to become a *real* man) was because I was convinced I would become a dead one on *their* obstacle course.

How could they take a bunch of ill-trained Air Force novices and expect us to survive the hell hole that was the Marine obstacle course?

I was too weak to run, and, like in a dream (and in slow motion) I entered the bus like it was my last day on earth.

I pictured the driver in a black hood with a sinister grin on his wrinkled face. He stared at each of us as though he knew the agony each of us faced at the end of the ride.

I sat there stone silent, watching the scenery whiz by the corner of my eyes, like scenes from my short life flashing before me, never to be experienced again.

The sun disappeared, and the wind grew cold as the bus screeched to a stop, like the voices of screaming souls that never made it out of this place.

I knew I would probably die on this day. Or at least be maimed for life, and I tried to be thankful for my family and friends and look forward to seeing them from above as they attended my funeral. I just hoped my little body wouldn't be mangled so badly that they would have to have me cremated. They could sprinkle my mangled ashes over the ocean – I would like that!

My wondering thoughts were interrupted abruptly.

“Stay in line – listen up and follow directions.”

The Marine sergeant was serious, and I knew my time was short.

As we approached the entry way to the course, I could hear loud blasts going off in the distance, along with intermittent automatic rifle fire, and I could see clouds of black smoke rising up from the “killing fields” in front of me.

I was just about ready to pass out from nerves when I heard a voice talking to me in a low whisper. It was one of several Marine assistants who ushered us into lines and gave us periodic instructions. He must have seen the look on my face as I was getting ready to start the course and felt pity for me because he wasn't supposed to talk to any of us *individually*.

“Listen up,” he whispered, “it isn't that bad. I've run this course three times already, and today they're pushing you Air Force guys through real fast.”

I was soaking in each word he said, looking for any speck of hope.

"Just keep your head down," he continued. "Do exactly what they tell you, and, above all, take this seriously. And whatever you do, don't smile!"

Well, he wouldn't have to worry about me *not* taking this seriously, and I was definitely not in a smiling mood. His words started to calm me down, and I realized they were more interested in intimidating you than actually *killing* you. This was good. I realized this was more of a simulation, like in a movie.

"That's it," I thought, "a movie! I'll pretend the cameras are rolling. The Marines shouting out orders to you on the course are really movie directors, and I'm the war hero!"

As the Marine Assistant blew his whistle for me to start, I played war songs in my head as I ran forward, down the hill and up the embankment to a ridge.

"Grab the rope and swing to the other side," they shouted at me, and, with the music still blasting in my head, I got to the other side and kept running.

"Under the fence and crawl," a voice bellowed into my left ear.

I hit the ground, slithered easily underneath the barbed wire fence. My small size was an asset in this environment, unlike the poor guy behind me, who was big and getting constantly caught in the fence, which would set off loud blasts on each side of us as we made our way through.

In a flash, I was off, running down the course road to a large wooden wall.

"Get the hell over it, man. We ain't got all day."

Like taking orders from a movie director, I grabbed the extended wood ends and climbed the wall as I pretended I was Audie Murphy, breaching the enemy's defenses.

"Stay low and cross the field."

The Marine sergeant pointed to a 50-yard patch of high grassland, and I darted into it, crouching low as I entered.

When I was about halfway across, I heard gunfire. They were shooting blanks over my head, but again, being so short, I could almost stand up straight and still be covered by the tall grass. Once again, I breezed through the field and across the clearing on the other side, only to be amazed at the fact that I had arrived at the finish line! It was over, and, not only had I made it in one piece, I was the first one finished.

I had gone through the course so fast that they put me on the next bus going back. It was hours before my squadron arrived back at the barracks, and I had real privacy for the first time since I had arrived there.

Sitting alone, I realized how much grief we cause ourselves by being worried about things we fear, and once we face that fear, many times it is not at all what we had imagined.

A feeling of real accomplishment came over me, and, even though I still feared war, I knew I would be able to do whatever I had to if I found myself in that position.

I realized heroes must be ordinary people just trying to do their best.

As my fellow airmen finally returned, we were all happy to hear, "Lights out" that evening because we were all totally exhausted.

THE TEST

I hate tests. I don't exactly know why, but it seems that no matter how much I study, the day of the test my mind always goes blank.

I was sent to the Graphic Arts Department in a large building close to the main gate. They said I would be interviewed, so I could be assigned to a graphic art department on another base.

Not only was I interviewed, but they gave me an art test, too. I was so nervous that I still don't hardly remember any of the questions, except for the one I got wrong, "circle the sans serif letter." I found out later that meant the letter without the "serifs" or tails on the end (H – Sans Serif; H – Serif). I also found out later that I recorded a 98 on the test, and, even though the Air Force Sergeant who interviewed me seemed like an ogre, I did well.

On my way back from the interview, I was startled to run into an old friend of mine from the drum and bugle corps. Steve was playing in the Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps and encouraged me to audition. Just the fact alone that I would get out of a day of work to go audition was reason enough to go. When I arrived at the music building I was told that all of the band groups were filled, and there would be no more auditions for at least a month.

I was disappointed, but I still had my first real art assignment in the Air Force to look forward to. Hopefully, in a neat part of the U.S., like California or Florida, or Colorado, or Arizona, or

The day before we left Lackland Air Force Base, we received our official orders.

As the envelopes were handed out, faces of panic and excitement glared down at the large black print on the paper below. When I was handed mine, I remember thinking how lucky I was, not only knowing what I wanted to do with my Air Force career, but by getting a 98 on my art test I guaranteed it, or so I thought.

My new orders read, "Airman Joe Sambataro assigned to: Dow Air Force Base, Bangor Maine. Command: S.A.C. (Strategic Air Command/Bomb Wing, 8th Air Force. Duty Assignment: O.J.T. (On-the-Job Training) Military Police.

What?! I couldn't believe my eyes. *Military Police*. I looked around the room.

“Do I look like a policeman to you?” I asked my fellow airmen, but they were all too occupied with their own future fate to answer me.

When things calmed down I took my questions to the Drill Sergeant, who was much more humane now that we were ready to leave the nest.

“You’re right, it’s there in black and white. 98 on your Graphic Arts Entry Exam.” I just looked bewildered at him, “Let me make a few phone calls, Sam, and I’ll see what’s going on.”

If you’re wondering who “Sam” is, it’s me. In the service it’s common to call guys by their last name, unless you have a really *long* last name, like mine. Then they shorten it, so I became “Sam,” and for the next four years I had two first names, Joe and Sam, depending on your individual preference.

The next morning I was called into the Sergeant’s office.

“Well, Sam, it seems the Air Force has all the graphic artists it needs.”

My heart dropped. I was never led to believe I would have to depend on an *opening* to get my dream job.

“It also seems,” he continued, “that the Air Force needs Air Policemen more!”

I just shook my head. I realized I was under the whims of the government and the U.S. Air Force and had little alternative or power to change the order.

Once again, I tried to make the best of it. Maybe police training would be good for me. After all, I did like uniforms and police uniforms were sharp, with their white hats and white gloves.

As I left Texas and Lackland Air Force Base, little did I know I would be back in Texas later to start the most successful period of my art career. But, for now I was heading home to Philly and a brief leave before I would report to Dow

Air Force Base in Bangor, Maine. I was told Bangor would be beautiful, and I was lucky I wasn't being sent off to Viet Nam.

My family was very positive and encouraged me to do my best at whatever the Air Force had in store for me. I also could see their pride at my becoming a police officer, an occupation we all admired and respected.

So, that's it, then. I would become the smallest Air Policeman in the entire history of the United States Air Force, and the only one who could carry a gun in one hand and a paint brush in the other!

CHAPTER EIGHT

INSTANT COP

I arrived at Dow Air Force Base July 1st, and my family was right. Maine was beautiful and so was the base.

Several new “one stripers” (privates) like myself were immediately informed that this base hosted the largest 4th of July fireworks display in the state of Maine, and we would become “instant cops” to help with the 60,000-plus that were expected that year.

For the next two days we had crash courses in traffic control, gun safety (since we were required to carry a loaded pistol) and police procedures.

The best time for me was when we received our temporary dress uniforms. Did they say “temporary?” This was one of the only saving graces of becoming an A.P. (air policeman) – wearing that sharp uniform with the white gloves, white hat and shiny silver police badge on your chest.

I soon found out the reason this uniform was temporary. It was because only the policemen at the entry gates and base traffic police wore those particular uniforms. The other 90% were assigned to guarding buildings and aircraft. Ooh! And, they wore dark, ugly green fatigues. *Aack!*

I wanted to be the policeman stationed at the main gate, using my personality to welcome newcomers to the base, but as I was rushed through my training, it was becoming

extremely apparent that most of the veteran policemen I met had no personalities and, to make it worse, it seemed to be the desired requirement.

I did meet one really nice Staff Sergeant, Rick. He was 6'2" and as clean cut as a Christmas tree. To me, he was the perfect A.P. prototype and was especially nice to me. He was the only one I could go to any time and ask whatever questions I had, and he would always take the time to answer me. Rick was very, very knowledgeable, and it was easy to see why he made Staff Sergeant so fast.

The Air Police were a tight unit, and one noticed they kept themselves separate from all the other squadrons on the base. Perhaps it was because they needed to be respected as they enforced the rules and laws of the air base, but I was beginning to find it harder and harder to relate to this kind of custom. That is until I saw myself in the mirror.

I stood there staring at that short, but sharply uniformed Air Policeman, with his white hat and gloves, a mean symbol of authority, ready to *take charge*. The only question now was, of what?

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

My traffic assignment was at a remote northwest entry to the base. The corner was shaped like a T with the bottom leg being the base road and the top being the civilian highway to the left and to the right of where I would be standing, which made me directly at the top and in the middle. In other words, I only had three lanes to worry about with a good view of the traffic flow coming and going.

When the patrol leader saw me standing there, he rolled down his car window and yelled "Wait!" at me, and then sped off.

"Wait," I wondered, "for what?"

I certainly wasn't planning to go anywhere. Soon he appeared again, only this time he pulled up to me and stopped.

"Mr. Sambataro, I couldn't even see you there, and it's still light out!"

I didn't know how to answer him. I knew I was short, but He handed me a blue square plastic box about two feet high.

"Stand on this, Mr. Sambataro, and maybe you won't get run over."

A slight smile came to his stone face as he drove off. Run over? I never thought of that. Would they really run over a policeman? Did I look that much like a rookie?

When I think back on it, I must have appeared to be a kid in police clothing, but I felt strangely grown up in that uniform.

As the sun disappeared behind the tall evergreen trees, I could see the car lights in the distance to my left and then to my right. As the sky darkened, the headlights got brighter and closer until I found myself smack dab in the middle of them.

With a deep breath and a quick glance at the shiny police badge on my chest, I assumed control, holding the traffic to my left with a firm straight arm, while waving the traffic to my right to keep moving.

Wow, what a feeling of power. Of course there were always some who took the time to throw me dirty looks because they had to wait, and those who almost *did* hit me when they sped off to make the turn. This did keep one humble, but still with a feeling of being special and important.

The fireworks were spectacular, with the wide expanse of the base and its huge runways. All 60,000 visitors and I had a clear, unobstructed view enveloping us as bursts of color exploded over us.

Maybe being a policeman wasn't so bad. Maybe God had something in store for me.

The fireworks' finally faded out, giving way to an equally magnificent array of shining stars that blanketed the night sky as the 4th of July finally ended. Then, like in the movie *Field of Dreams*, I saw the long line of automobile lights strung across the horizons as far as the eye could see. And they were all coming directly at *me*!

With renewed confidence, I directed the traffic to the left and to the right. Then I ran into my first challenge. When some of the cars found themselves in the wrong lane, I immediately split the lanes into three so that the left lane went left, the right lane went right (on their own) and I forcefully directed the middle lane to the left or right, blending them into the traffic flow. My God, it worked! And, for the rest of the evening everything went as smooth as glass.

My first successful assignment! And, as the police bus came to pick me up, I stood there proudly on my blue box and looked forward to what was next.

When I finally hit my bed, it was 2AM, but I found myself still awake from the adrenalin. It was hard to believe that, with only two days training, I directed hundreds of automobiles with no accidents, and I was still standing!

I don't know how long I lay there until finally falling asleep, but it seemed like my head had barely hit the pillow when I heard a low voice in my ear.

"The Captain wants to see you, and he wants to see you now!"

I was dead tired, but the forceful voice of the morning duty Sergeant propelled my limp body to get dressed.

As the fog in my eyes finally started to clear, I noticed the large black and white wall clock – 6:20AM Was it really that early? Oh yes, this was a military clock, and there was no mistake, since PM time started at 1300 hours (or one o'clock).

I was so groggy that I hardly made out what my escort was mumbling at me.

"Wow, are you in big trouble!"

When I realized what he was saying, I thought to myself, "How the heck could I be in trouble? I just got here?"

"Enter," the stern voice on the other side of the door ordered.

Sitting at the desk in front of me was a young police captain.

"Stand up straight," he again commanded without even looking up. "Do you know what you did?"

Anyone looking at me would certainly know I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, but again he never looked up.

"You were assigned to traffic control at Gate 7?"

Still half asleep, I had no recollection of any specific gate numbers. No one had told me the number.

"Did you hear me?" the rigid captain belted out.

With all the air left in my lungs, I replied, "Yes, sir!"

He finally looked up at me.

"I have a civilian complaint about you!"

A civilian complaint? I never even spoke to any civilians. They were all in their cars. When I tried to communicate this to my new commander, he just held up his hand to hold my answer.

Then, he finished, "Airman Sambataro, you directed several hundred cars over Mrs. Tomlin's front yard, destroying her flowers and leaving huge tire tracks on the grass."

My mind raced backwards. I remember allowing the row of cars to my left to turn right and keep the flow of traffic going, but I never noticed them cutting across Mrs. Tomlin's front yard.

"It seems the Air Force will be obliged to cover these damages, Mr. Sambataro, which will come from *my* budget, and I'm not happy about it!" He flipped aside the papers on his desk and shook his head, "What are *you* going to do, Mr. Sambataro, to make this up to me?"

It was at this point I knew this guy was trouble, asking me still another question he knew I had no answer for.

My instinct was to try to reason with him. I told him I never saw the cars that drove over the lady's grass, and I certainly never directed them to. I told him I only had two days of training, of which no one ever pointed out that possibility to me. I even told him I was an artist.

None of this made the least impression on him, and I was ordered to return to the barracks, where I immediately fell back to sleep.

I think I slept that entire weekend, and when I did finally wake up, I hoped the traffic ordeal was only a bad dream, but I quickly realized that with this gung-ho commander, this entire assignment would be a bad dream.

It became clear to me that I was not Air Police material, and if the Air Force didn't realize it, I did! It was crystal clear to me what I had to do, change jobs.

I'm an artist, and that's what I should be doing, not directing traffic. Not guarding airplanes, and definitely not breaking up bar fights! But, changing career fields in the military would prove to be as difficult as any bar fight I might imagine, but instead of broken bones and blood, it would be a battle of nerves and persistence. And my major opponent would be Captain Gung-Ho!

CHAIN OF COMMAND

THE MISSING LINK

My first task was to seek advice. My friend, Sergeant Rick, hated to hear that I wanted out of the Air Police and suggested I consider being a police sketch artist. Normally this would have been a good suggestion except for the minor fact that the U.S. Air Force didn't have any police sketch artists.

When Rick realized there was no way I could wait four years to apply for this position in a civilian police department, he suggested I talk to his boss, Master Sergeant Boyd.

Back in those days promotions within the services were based solely on inner-squadron testing and time served. Additional education, or, education at all, had no bearing, so at that time there were many lower ranking airmen with one or two years of college under the command of Sergeants who sometimes had not even a high school education. Boyd was one of these Sergeants, and even though he was very nice to me, when he suggested I should pass my Air Police tests and become qualified to do security duty (like guarding B-52 bombers on the flight line at 3AM in 10 degree below zero temperatures) and *then* apply for cross training. Something didn't add up. Why would I spend all of this time trying to pass tests to qualify myself for a job I was trying to get *out* of?

And, what incentive would they have to take me off of their duty schedule and let me go to cross-train to another squadron *after* I'm eligible?

This made no sense to me, as well as their concept of the chain of command. I was told emphatically, "You cannot go over the head of your immediate commander."

Now, let's add this up:

1. Rick could only refer me to his superior (supervisor)
2. Boyd didn't have enough clout to even get himself extended leave (vacation), and
3. Captain Gung-Ho felt everyone in his command *belonged* to him personally!

One didn't have to be an artist (or a mathematician) to get this picture. And I felt the only way to solve my dilemma was to go right to the *top*, the Base Commander, Colonel Flanagan.

With only one stripe (private) ranking, I felt I had nothing to lose, and being very naïve I had no fear.

In my dress blues I marched into the base commander's office with confidence and enthusiasm.

"I would like to see the Colonel," I asked in a firm, but polite voice.

The older attractive lady behind the large mahogany desk tried not to smile, but I could see her holding back her laughter as she spoke.

“What can I do for you, Airman?”

“I would like to talk to Colonel Flanagan,” I answered.

“You know, he’s the Base Commander,” she replied.

“Yes,” I said, “and he’s the only one who can help me!”

This piqued her curiosity.

“He’s the only one who can help you with what?” she asked in a kind voice.

I went on to tell her how I was an artist and was misplaced in the Air Police, and that I realized only Col. Flanagan had the power to reassign me.

The pretty lady behind the desk was Col. Flanagan’s personal secretary, Mary, and was as sweet as she could be, but she tried to make me realize that *everybody* wanted to see the Colonel, including other Colonels, and even *they* had been waiting for weeks.

“Weeks!?” I exclaimed. “I don’t have weeks,” I explained. “They’re going to make me pass this test, and then I’ll be trapped in the Air Police for four more years!”

I could see on her face she wanted to help me, but, as she explained, interviews with the Base Commander were strictly prioritized. I came to realize that a low ranking Airman like myself had no chance in He#&!!

When Mary saw the disappointment on my face and the tears filling my eyes, she came from behind the desk and put her hand on my shoulder.

“Let me think about this, Airman Sambataro,” she said with her eyes fixed on my name tag. “Call me in a few days,” she finished and handed me a military card with her name and office phone number on it.

This immediately lifted my spirits and briefly brought a smile to my face until I realize that tomorrow I would have to take the Air Police qualification test.

When I told her, she simply answered me with, "You don't have to pass the test, do you?"

Now, this woman was smart. No wonder she was the Colonel's executive secretary, and, I realized immediately, secretaries are the key to any boss, knowledge I would use for years to come.

After failing the test, Captain Gung Ho ordered me into his office.

"What do you think you're doing? No one fails this test."

I just stared at him.

"So, what's your problem, Sambataro?"

I told him I had no attribution for the Air Police and couldn't grasp the information.

"I know what you're doing, Airman," his eyes fixed in a devilish stare. "Failing tests won't get you out of *this* squadron." And without a breath, he continued, "What it *will* get you is a court-martial and a dishonorable discharge!"

Again, I had no answer for his remarks.

"Fail one more of *my* tests, and you'll wish you were never born!"

As I left his office I felt more angry than I did frightened, but he had me in a bind, and I really didn't know what he could actually do to me for not passing, as he put it, "his" tests.

I was not about to wait and find out. I called Mary desperate for help. Again, her soft voice and wisdom calmed me right down. She told me I couldn't be court-martialed for not passing a test, and she had come up with an idea for me to meet the Colonel and would call me in a few days and give me the details.

Meanwhile, Captain Gung-Ho had me assigned to every horrible duty available – cleaning toilets, waxing floors, polishing equipment and the worst, washing out the cans he used to spit his chewing tobacco in. Yuck!

Finally, with less than one week until my next scheduled test, she phoned.

Mary talked quickly like she had little time, but I digested every word immediately.

"I still can't get you a formal appointment, Airman Sambataro, but if you get to my office tomorrow morning at 10AM I'll personally introduce you. But, remember, be on time and keep your conversation to the Colonel short."

Before I even had time to thank her, the dial tone buzzed in my ears.

This is one appointment only death could keep me from making.

The next morning I put on my dress blues and over them I wore my working fatigues. With my hat hidden in a laundry bag, I volunteered to take the dirty sheets and pillowcases to the laundry room – say, around 9:30AM. I flew across the Base to the Colonel's office and after a quick change in the head (bathroom) I arrived precisely at 10AM sharp.

The waiting room was quiet and formal, and Mary would look up at me from time to time with a smile of encouragement. The large military clock on the wall across from me seemed unusually loud as it ticked off each important second in rhythm to my own heart. The longer I sat there, the more nervous I became and the more I had difficulty remembering my prepared speech for the Colonel.

Then, like a bolt of lightning on a clear day, the doors to the office slammed open!

Two of my fellow air policemen secured the doors as four more policemen stood at attention along the hallway. When I tried to say hello, they brushed me off with an intensely mean glare and returned their eyes straight ahead.

Now I was starting to get very nervous. Senior Master Sergeants, Lieutenants, Captains, Majors and Light Colonels, with briefcases and clip boards, all started to rush into the

room, and walking briskly up the hallway behind them was the Base Commander, Colonel Flanagan.

Even if I hadn't recognized him from the photos scattered around the base, by the intense attention and groveling that surrounded him, there was no doubt *he* was the Commander.

Oh, my God, what have I done? Now I realized not only why Mary couldn't get me an appointment, but how *truly* naïve I was to think this man (Colonel Flanagan) would *even* give me the time of day. And suddenly it was too late to run!

I remember Mary coming out from behind her desk. I remember saluting the Colonel as I approached him, and I remember leaving the building. However, I have absolutely *no* idea what I actually said to him.

Realizing I had probably made a complete fool of myself, not to mention persuading Mary into embarrassing herself by introducing me, I felt I probably deserved four years of punishment in the Air Police just for being so stupid.

I returned to my remedial chores, preparing myself to pass the Air Police Security test and become one of Captain Gung-Ho's miniature soldiers.

I was totally depressed but tried to accept my new fate when I got an urgent call from Mary.

"Joe," Mary blasted out (she had never called me by my first name before), "the Colonel wants to see you immediately!"

I was in shock. Was this good, or, did he want to punish me for breaking the chain of command?

"Put on your dress blues and get over here."

Mary's voice was serious, which made me fear the worst. But I had little time to analyze it because when the Base Commander says *immediately*, he means *yesterday*.

I ran to the headquarters building, and when I entered, Mary ushered me quickly into the Colonel's private office. Then, she whispered into my ear, "I don't know what you said

to him (that made two of us!), but I think it made an impression!"

The Colonel's office was large and had tall colorful flags that appeared to be at attention as they lined the wall behind his freshly polished antique desk. Plaques decorated the other walls, depicting each squadron under his command and were arranged in small groups like a military parade. But the plaque that came to my attention the most was the one on the front of his desk that was etched in gold and read, "Col. James L. Flanagan – Base Commander – 397th Bomb Wing S.A.C." He definitely was the *Man*!

With knees shaking, as Mary closed the door behind me, I stood at attention and saluted, "Private Airman Sambataro reporting as ordered, Sir!"

He looked at me and smiled. I knew instantly things would be okay. He motioned for me to sit down on one of the two heavily cushioned chairs and began to speak in serious tones.

"I need an artist," he started off, and my heart leaped for joy as he definitely had my full attention. "Have you ever painted on aircraft before?"

Without hesitation, I heard myself answer, "Yes."

"Great," he replied, "I've got an important project, and I think you're the man for the job."

The rather *large* smile on my face was a definite indication I felt I *was* the man. Now all I had to find out was, what was what the job.

It seemed that each year S.A.C. had a bomber competition in Spokane, Washington, and this year the Colonel wanted to add "nose art" to the aircraft, like they did in World War II.

"I'd like to dress her up," as the Colonel put it, "and I'd like you to paint Big Paul from Bangor, Maine on it and, in his hand, I'd like a gold bomb!"

I was so excited thinking Colonel Flanagan was depending on me to carry out his vision of this image on his

prize aircraft and crew that would represent our base at the competition that I forgot the fact that not only had I never painted on an aircraft, I had no idea of who or what “Big Paul” was.

Colonel Flanagan told me Mary would arrange everything, and I would be temporarily assigned to his office and the Base Sergeant Major.

As I left the room, I assured the Colonel he made the *right choice* and that I would design and paint the best nose art ever!

With one phone call from Colonel Flanagan’s office, Mary had me reassigned to Headquarters Squadron.

I had taken a big chance, but confirmed what I had suspected all along – if you want anything done, go to the top, but be prepared for a lot of road bumps.

When Captain Gung-Ho received my transfer papers he ordered me into his office. “I don’t know who you think you are, but when I get you back . . .” He stopped, probably wondering who I really did know and whether he should continue threatening me. I left his office praying I would never see him again.

THE PROJECT

Since I had no idea what I was doing because I had never actually painted on an aircraft before and had certainly never painted anything this large, I knew I needed help, but from where?

Dressed in my grungiest work khakis I reported to the huge concrete and silver domed hangar #28. I was greeted by the bomber’s crew chief, Master Sergeant Clark, who was endearingly nicknamed “Superman”, or Sgt. Super, and it didn’t take long for me to find out why.

As we entered the hangar my mouth dropped at the enormous B-52G bomber that spanned the entire width of the

interior. With hundreds of floodlights pouring down on its sleek body, it resembled a panorama of soft curves, sharp edges and sculpture.

It was hard to imagine this aircraft was capable of killing thousands of people within minutes.

When we arrived at the front of the plane, Sgt. Super pointed up (way up) to the *large* area just under the cockpit on the nose of the aircraft that would be my responsibility. Much of the rest of the B-52 was covered with light brown mask-out paper and was in the process of being re-painted and cleaned up.

I was told I had nine weeks to complete my task and asked what I needed to get started. Again, since I had no idea of what I was doing, I also had no idea what I needed to start.

Sensing this, Sgt. Super suggested I should practice painting with lacquers on some old metal aircraft parts since lacquer was the only paint that would endure the weather conditions at 30,000-plus feet.

He also suggested I try operating the lift machines that were scattered around the hangar.

"I'll get you all the brushes and paint colors you'll need, Airman Sambataro, but you'll have to do the rest. After all, *you're* the artist!" Sgt. Super was a great help, and my confidence returned when he called me "the artist."

"Yes," I thought, "I am the artist." I immediately went to work.

Lacquer (like finger nail polish) dries in seconds, so I realized blending colors would be a problem. I tried laying bands of colors, each shade one step darker or lighter next to each other since one shade would be dry before I could apply the next.

It worked. From as little as ten feet away it looked like the colors were blended, but like a paint-by-number kit, it was the viewer's eyes that blended them. My next problem was how to get the drawing on the aircraft nose.



1966

1. I wish to express my appreciation and thanks for your participation and artistic efforts prior to the 1966 SAC Combat Competition. Your excellent painting of "Big Paul" on the side of B-52 Number 248, the 397th Bomb Wing's entry, was especially noteworthy.

2. This will be included in your next Airman Performance Report.

J. L. Flanagan
J. L. FLANAGAN, Colonel, USAF
Commander

Letter of appreciation for painting "Big Paul"



Two story mural at base headquarters

I remembered a book about Michelangelo and how he would do large drawings of the figures he used for the Sistine Chapel ceiling. After correcting the drawings on large sheets of thin paper he would transfer them into position onto the ceilings, by coating the back with graphite pencil which acted like carbon paper, allowing him to transfer the image.

It worked like a charm, and by the week's end I had the large outline of Big Paul on the side of *our* B-52 that would soon be competing in the World Series of Bombing!

To Sgt. Super, and the many other airmen who worked day and night on the airplane with me, she became *ours*. And even though Big Paul would adorn her nose, she was still a woman to us, and we nicknamed her "Paulette."

I learned a great deal from Sgt. Super – not just about paints, but about aircraft, too. It was a wonderful experience.

Something told me not to drag out painting this mural over the nine weeks given me, and besides, this lacquer paint wouldn't allow me to. I finished in only two and a half weeks and pleasantly realized for the rest of the time no one was looking over my shoulder. This was great, almost like a mini-vacation, but it all would stop at the end of the ninth week, and, with my future in limbo. I was just praying that Capt. Gung-Ho wasn't there too!

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

With my temporary orders having run out, I was preparing myself to once again face, well, you know who, when Mary appeared in the barracks lobby looking for *me*!

"Joe," she started out, "Colonel Flanagan wanted me to find you and personally apologize."

"Apologize," I thought, "for what? Why would the Base Commander be apologizing to me?"

Mary went on to explain they had to activate *our* aircraft (Paulette) for an emergency mission before it had been

finished being renovated and customized for the bomb competition, and she told me that the Colonel felt bad that I had no time to complete my nose-art painting.

I told her that I had, in fact, completed my assignment. I realized now it was smart I didn't drag it out those nine weeks.

Mary was elated!

"The Colonel will be very happy to hear this," she said with a big grin of satisfaction on her pretty face. "Yes, he'll be *real* happy!"

Before I could discuss my future, she disappeared out the door.

"Oh well," I thought, "perhaps making the Base Commander happy was reward enough!"

The next day I woke up to see a rather large note taped on my barracks room door. "REPORT TO CAPTAIN . . ."

I didn't have to read the rest. I knew my days of hiding were over, and my brief life as an artist was also over. The only good thing was that I didn't have to report to him (Captain Gung-Ho) until the next day at 11 AM.

For the first time I realized what it might have been like for a prisoner of war awaiting his execution. Deep, deep depression mixed with feelings of hopelessness and despair came over me. I tried fighting off these emotions, but it was the most difficult battle I had ever faced. But I refused to think negative.

Later that same day, on my way to the chow hall, a police car sped up to me, slamming on his brakes as the front tire hit the curb where I was standing.

"Robert," I shouted out, "are you trying to run me over?"

My first thoughts were that Captain Gun-Ho found out I had been hiding from him for the past several weeks and *couldn't wait* to chew me out. Robert Noland was another

police friend and would let me know what was up, even if he was told not to.

"I've been looking all over the base for you, Sambataro!" Robert had a serious look on his face, and I was sure it was all over for me. "Get in quick."

He motioned me into the car and sped off. I realized we were heading in the opposite direction from the Air Police barracks and Captain Gung-Ho's office.

"Where are we going?" I blurted out.

"To the base headquarters. Colonel Flanagan wants to see you ASAP."

"Oh, God," I thought, and my heart dropped. Did the nose-art peel off? Did I put the paint on too thick? Did he see it and hate my rendition of Big Paul? Maybe his face looked like someone he despised in high school? Did I spell something wrong (I'm not known for my spelling skills!)?

Before I had time to think of any more possible catastrophes Mary was opening the door to Colonel Flanagan's office. I was so preoccupied trying to think of possible excuses that I never noticed Mary's sweet smile.

I froze when Captain Flanagan stood up to greet me with his hand extended, not in a salute, but a handshake.

"Congratulations, Airman."

I started to look in back of me to see to whom he was speaking, and realized it was me.

He shook my hand vigorously while explaining *our* B-52 bomber had taken third place in the combat competition. Not bad considering there were 25 aircraft competing, and ours was entered at the last minute, because it had been on emergency flight duty. But, the best news was that it won First Place for the best looking entry, which featured *my* nose-art painting!

This news brought me from total despair to total euphoria, especially after having Colonel Flanagan shower me with compliments for at least twenty minutes.

He was very impressed with my confidence and willingness to please, and as his conversation went on, I began to get antsy.

"Private Sambataro," he interrupted his own speech, "do you have to be somewhere at this time?"

"No sir," I replied, "I was just worried about taking up so much of your time."

A large grin came over his face.

"If you're going to be my artist, I'm not worried about the time."

My heart almost burst with excitement at being thought of as *his* personal artist.

But it got even better when he asked me, "So, what can I do for you?"

I couldn't believe that within 24 hours I was sitting in the personnel office, signing papers that changed my job category from Air Policeman to Graphic Artist, and I would never have to face Capt. Gung-Ho again. It was very clear to me that the higher ranking officers were a lot nicer to work with than the young academy graduates bucking for rank and power.

I had pulled it off and was now a registered U.S.A.F. Graphic Artist and would be temporarily assigned to the base headquarters' Graphic Art Department for training and to wait for my permanent assignment.

My new boss and teacher would be a black Staff Sergeant named Sgt. Brown, and, like the famous football player, Tim Brown, he was also a high school all-American running back and proudly displayed his many trophies on the top of the filing cabinets in the office.

Being from "The Projects" and sensing absolutely no prejudice, Sgt. Brown took to me right away, and, with my love of sports, especially football, we got along famously. I was in graphic art heaven!

When Sgt. Brown wasn't teaching me how to lay out charts, produce briefing slides or techniques for using lettering

kits or press-type we would be talking football. To this day, I am still amazed at the professional athletes who love to draw and paint.

I still remember noticing how his long drawing pen would disappear in Sgt. Brown's huge hands as he patiently and painstakingly drew delicate precise rows of lines on a flight chart.

I learned a great deal under his short six-week tutoring, and he respected my painting and drawing abilities as well, so, when I finally received my new permanent assignment it was hard to leave.

I was being assigned as *the* graphic artist to the office of Mission Intelligence, whatever that was, but it sounded important, and I was ready! That is, until I read the small writing at the bottom of my new orders.

"Report to Gate D at 7AM and take bus #1010 to Area Z."

Did it say 7AM? And, where is Area Z? I had been all over the base and had never heard of Area Z.

I stood on the curb at Gate D freezing, tired and hungry, waiting for bus #1010. When it finally arrived I was amazed that there were only three airmen on board. Most all of the base busses were packed in the mornings and in the early evenings, so this was strange.

As I sashayed down the aisle, grabbing the tops of the seats to steady my legs as the loud rickety bus pulled out, I asked the small group of half-awake passengers, "Why so few of us?"

The oldest of the group, a young lieutenant, looked up from his steaming cup of coffee and muttered, "Ain't many people work out at Area Z."

Oh shit! What does that mean? It took a good half hour for me to find out as we rattled around what seemed like the entire base. Finally we pulled up to a gate surrounded by a high barbed wire fence with signs all over that read, "Off Limits – Military Facility – Absolutely NO Admittance!"

Then, what was *I* doing here, and then I realized, *I* was the only one left on the bus.

"This is Area Z. Are you going to get off my bus or just sit there?"

I stared at the old bus driver from the civilian motor pool and realized I didn't *want* to get off, but I had no choice. This was my new assignment, and I had arrived.

I recognized the security policeman who was on duty, and that made me feel a little better. The one small advantage from my stint in the Air Police was that I knew almost all of them.

"Whatcha guarding?" I asked him with a slight grin on my face.

"Don't you know where you are?"

"No, not a clue," I replied.

"You're in Area Z. This is a top secret facility. You know, where they draw up war plans and stuff."

Then, it hit me. I would be the one "drawing" up the war plans, but where? All I saw behind the gate was a small concrete block square, about ten feet high and ten feet wide with a metal door.

The policeman opened the gate and led me to the steel door, unlocked it and pushed a button on the outside panel. To my amazement when the inner door opened I realized it was an elevator!

"Going down!" my friend exclaimed as he held the door open.

I entered.

"See you tonight," he finished.

I felt the floor drop and noticed there were no buttons on the wall. It was obvious there was only one stop. No way of getting lost, but, also, no way of escaping.

The doors slid open, and I entered a large, dimly lit room with maps covering several of the walls and large gray tables in rows of three and four. Most of them were not

ordinary tables, but “light tables,” similar to the ones I used for laying out charts and graphs, only these were used for maps.

For those of you not familiar with them, a light table is a table with a frosted glass top and underneath long tubes of florescent lights that illuminate the surface. The purpose for these tables is so one can overlay charts, graphics or, in this case, maps and position lines or lettering in the proper location before drawing them in on the final top sheet.

The second thing I noticed were the large round clocks spaced across the back wall, each one showing a different time and centered beneath each was a small plaque that read “India” or “Poland” or “Russia” or “Africa,” etc. I remember thinking, “Well, at least if I never make it out of here, I’ll know what time it is all over the world!”

I was greeted by a dark haired officer, a Captain, who welcomed me with a half-smile, then immediately took me to one of the large light tables.

The Captain explained to me that this would be my job – to trace over the areas drawn in by their staff and, using colored tape, stripe in the routes indicated.

“That’s it!” I exclaimed. “Tracing over somebody else’s pencil lines with colored tape!”

“Oh no,” the Captain answered. “You’ll have to hand-letter the code names and sortie numbers in, also.”

“Oh, whoopee!” I thought. You don’t need to be an artist to do this simple stuff, but from the blank look on his face, maybe you did?

It was the shortest job description I ever heard, and, unlike the Catholic books I had in the first grade, there were absolutely *no* blank spaces to add fun drawings! Come to think of it, “fun” did not seem to be a word anyone in this place would know.

I never saw such a serious bunch, not even in the Air Police.

Unlike Captain Gung-Ho, this Captain was very nice, but very aloof. He continued my inauguration by giving me the

“grand tour,” and, like my job description, it was very short. This was because I was only allowed in three rooms – the large map room, where I had a corner cubicle about four feet by four feet with a drawing board, supply cabinet and a small chair with wheels (I don’t know why the chair had wheels – there was certainly nowhere to go!), the break room, which had a refrigerator, soda machine and a coffee maker and the bathroom, which I found out was *my* responsibility to keep clean.

What, an *artist* had to be a maid? You mean they couldn’t afford a cleaning service?

Well, as it turned out, very few people were allowed in Area Z, and my security police friend was right – they did draw up war plans.

Every morning as I left for work it was still dark out, and every evening when I left work, it was dark out. For days I never saw the sun, but being surrounded by time zones, I knew it was out there somewhere.

I was told the facility I was in was large, but the only clue I had was the many thick steel doors that surrounded the room. They had code keys instead of door handles and high ranking officers running in and out.

The good news about my bathroom duties was that most of the staff was very neat and clean, so it was not difficult to maintain. The bad news was that *I* was the lowest ranking member of our team. The next lowest rank was a Senior Master Sergeant (or let me put it this way – many, many stripes to my one), so the latrine cleaning job would be mine for a *long, long* time!

We also had a full Bird Colonel, two Light Colonels, four Captains and half a dozen Lieutenants – the phrase “low man on the totem pole” had new meaning to me.

Again, I tried to adjust to my new job, the one I *begged* the Base Commander to give me. But, alas, be careful what you wish for

A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

As I placed long stripes of thin red tape over the pencil lines that ran from “Main” to “Moscow” I realized I *was* in the movie *Fail Safe*, and the three rooms I worked in each day for eight to ten hours were getting progressively smaller.

There was no way to go back to Colonel Flanagan and ask to be reassigned. It wasn’t his fault war rooms used graphic artists. But, I thought to myself, in the future I’m not taking on any job before I know exactly what it involves.

Even though I was very bored and disappointed, I was thankful to Col. Flanagan and was determined to stick it out, in hopes of a new departmental assignment in the future. That is until three months later, when I was told not to report to work “until further notice.” Was I being fired?

“Oh crap,” I thought, “even *I* couldn’t mess up this simple job. What was it,” I asked.

I was informed that this facility was taking part in “U.S. War Games” That is, a fictional attack on the United States. These intense war rehearsals would be overseen by Evaluation Officers, and the individual bases would be accountable for their performances.

At this point I still didn’t know why I was being asked to stay home, unless they thought my presence would somehow mess everything up?

In a way, it was true, but it wasn’t my work they were worried about. It was the fact that I hadn’t yet received my Top Secret clearance, an absolute necessity for working in Area Z.

“You mean, for all of these months I’ve been working here, I’ve been *illegal*!”

The answer was “Yes,” and I was expected to keep my mouth shut and stay in my barracks until the drill was over.

Well, I did keep my mouth shut, but I didn’t stay cooped up in my room, and it’s a good thing I didn’t, because in one of my trips to the main chow hall I saw the light at the

end of the tunnel. And it came to me in the form of large, long, empty walls!

MOVE OVER, MICHELANGELO

The main chow hall was having a major facelift – new floor, ceiling tiles, fresh paint and colorful chairs and tables. Even the kitchen sparkled with new chrome freezers, grills and serving rails.

As I further scanned the large eating facility, I saw him, and there was no mistaking who *he* was from the large Master Sergeant emblem on his cocked baseball cap to the huge cigar sticking upward from his mouth, dropping tiny ashes on his Jackie Gleason-like belly. Oh yes, there was no mistaking, this was the man in charge, the head honcho himself, the *Base Chef!*

“Looking good,” I casually commented as I walked over to him, getting off a crisp salute of respect from my right hand.

“Thanks,” he responded in a deep reassuring voice. “Yeah, she’s turning out okay!”

I don’t know why everything in the military became a woman, but it did, so I went along and answered, “Yep, she’s really looking great!”

As the smoke floated upward from his cigar in slow billowing swirls, it looked to me like transparent angels (probably too much Catholic school training).

But, they did seem to be prompting me to ask *the* question, and now seemed to be the right time

As our eyes swung around the cafeteria together, they finally met, and I boldly asked, “So, what are you going to do with all these large *blank* walls?”

The grin of satisfaction quickly left his rosy face,

“Oh no,” I thought. I didn’t want to spoil his crowning achievement.

He glanced around and then looked back at me.

"I don't know." His puzzled stare made me realize I had his attention. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

This is just what I was waiting for. I told him he needed murals on the walls. His eyes lit up, and he started coming up with all kinds of scenes he thought would look perfect on them. Then, his face returned to one of concern.

"But, who could paint these wonderful pictures?" he questioned.

"Funny you should ask" As I started to recite my resume, including my most recent achievement, the nose-art on the base's most famous B-52, "Big Paul," a smile took over his face.

"You painted that?" he exclaimed.

I could definitely see how important publicity and exposure is to an artist, and by the time we stopped talking, I had convinced him that I was the *man* for the job.

It was a real joy hearing his ideas for the wall murals. Some artists think only *their* perception is good, but by allowing others to participate in the creative process when it's a commissioned painting, the end result yields more than a *single person's* image.

"So, when can we start?"

His enthusiasm was as spirited as my answer.

"As soon as you get me reassigned!"

By now I knew the power and the politics these high ranking supervisors possessed, and I was not ashamed to better my career by offering my talents, especially when it gave me the chance to paint.

When the Master Chief stood up, we were total opposites. He was not only large, but tall and, again, I disappeared in his shadow. I knew rank afforded him many amenities. And I was hoping I would be the latest.

"So, who do I call, Airman Sambataro, if I want you working for me?"

I thought to myself, surely not the guys at Area Z. Not only did they *not* have a creative bone in their collective

bodies, they were so busy making war, they would have no idea what they were being asked, or why.

"Call Colonel Flanagan," I suggested. "I'm his artist, and I'm sure he'll be glad to loan me out."

"Great," the Sgt. Major responded and headed to the phone.

I never returned to Area Z and never got even a phone call or postcard goodbye, though I doubt most of the officers there ever noticed I was missing!

Mary told me Colonel Flanagan thought I was still working at the Headquarters Graphic Department, but no matter, he had no problem assigning me to his personal staff and loaning me out to his Chief Chef.

For the next several months I painted landscapes and wildlife scenes on the 8'x40' walls of the main chow hall, at times with a hundred or so airmen looking on, but it didn't bother me a bit. I was loving every minute and knew this was what I had to do for the rest of my life. Move over, Michelangelo, I've just begun!

LIFE AT THE TOP

"The Top" was Colonel Flanagan's personal staff. Not his office staff, not his duty staff, not his flight staff and not even his command staff. His personal staff consisted only of his secretary, Mary; his Base Controller, a Light Colonel; his driver, a Tech Sergeant; his Base Command Chief Master Sergeant, McMurphy; and now *me*, the one stripe wonder!

While airmen of my rank were answerable to everyone with two stripes or more, I was responsible only to two people on the entire base, the Base Commander, Colonel Flanagan and the Base Sergeant Major, Senior Master Sergeant McMurphy.

Now, if this is starting to sound like "the perfect military job," (not counting the supply officer who could trade

for anything on or off the base), it was. Considering my two bosses were the absolute busiest and most important commanders on the base, I had unprecedented freedom from military constraints. No one was looking over my shoulder, and no one was giving me orders. Since I wore special overalls to paint in, for weeks at a time I never had on a uniform, an old paint-splattered Air Force cap was the only indication that I was even *in* the military.

Becoming aware that there were *no* openings for another graphic artist at base headquarters and not wanting to be reassigned to another Area Z or X or Q etc., I knew the best way to keep painting was to come up with new projects.

As the murals I was painting in the main cafeteria were getting close to being finished, I scoured the base for more empty walls. I was like Christopher Columbus discovering the new world. There were blank walls everywhere, and I made it my personal duty to see that they not remain naked for long.

One of the nicest people I met on the entire base was Senior Master Sergeant McMurphy, the base Sergeant Major. That meant he was in charge of every non-commissioned officer and airman on the base, as well as me.

With Colonel Flanagan in such demand, it was Chief Master Sergeant McMurphy that I went to with my new ideas for “base beautification.” He was a great commander and great listener, who almost always loved my ideas, so, naturally, I loved him.

Once I attended the base chapel on Mary’s suggestion. She said, “You really need to go, Airman Sambataro.” I had no clue why she wanted me there, and without explaining (I had enough church as an altar boy in Catholic school to last a lifetime) I went anyway!

The first fifteen minutes I just sat there looking around for hints as to why I was there, then I heard from the choir loft the most beautiful Irish tenor voice filling the entire chapel with “Ave Maria.”

Did Mary love this song so much she just wanted me to hear it? It is, of course, one of the most beautiful songs ever written, but, as I turned and looked up at the choir I discovered why.

It was Sgt. McMurphy who possessed this incredible voice, and I was overwhelmed. I never could imagine this soft spoken man could sing as well as any professional I had ever heard.

I am always amazed at the many talents people possess that we sometimes rarely get to discover.

Once again, Mary had pointed me in the right direction, and now it was time for me to return the favor.

With permission and encouragement from the Base Commander, and with a lot of sneaking around, we found out that Mary's favorite thing in the whole world was her dog.

So, on her birthday, in the Colonel's office, Colonel Flanagan, Sgt. McMurphy and I presented Mary with a life-size oil portrait of her dog, "Skipper," who was fourteen years old.

I couldn't have painted anything that would have made Mary more happy. Seeing her blue eyes tear up as we unveiled the canvas was the best thanks an artist could receive.

Other artists always ask me why I bother painting portraits of people and animals, and it would be very easy to explain if I could have shown them a picture of Mary's face that morning.

Skipper died later that year, but Mary told me she still hears his little bark every time she looks at his painting.

I realized what a wonderful gift it was to be able to make someone else so happy and maybe why God gave some people this kind of talent to share with others.

Creativity, by its nature, is selfish, but I find it doesn't have to be. Getting back to my mural work, my next blank wall was in the base hospital, and it would be there I would be adopted into a *new* family.



"Thunderbirds" Air Force Mural



1966, age 19, Air Force Murals in hospital



THE PROFESSIONALS

I was introduced to yet another Command Chief Master Sergeant, Sergeant John Hoffer, in charge of the base hospital and the large blank wall in its cafeteria.

Sgt. Hoffer was another very tall commander, only *he* was as skinny as a rail and as nice as Sgt. McMurphy.

"What are you going to paint on my wall?" he asked me in a father-like tone to his voice.

"Whatever you want," I replied.

"Hmmm, I never thought about *me* picking out a scene for that wall. Got any ideas?" Well, I always had plenty of ideas, but I told him it should be something everyone will like.

Sgt. Hoffer smiled and made the suggestion we consult his wife, Jan, who was an ardent art lover and knew all the hospital staff. I found out later this was because, not only did she volunteer at the hospital, but she also loved inviting the staffers over to her house for dinner or weekend outings. She kind of *mothered* all of those under her husband's command and thought of everyone as her extended family.

As Sgt. Hoffer hung up the phone, he asked me if I'd be free Friday night to join him and his family for dinner, and Jan and I could kick around some ideas.

I couldn't believe my ears. As nice as everyone had been to me, no one had ever invited me over to their home.

The hospital was unlike any other facility on the base, as it was made up of 90% professionals – doctors, nurses, rehabilitation specialists and many others. I loved the atmosphere that mixed serious work with a sense of humor and the pervading feeling you were doing something important.

Sgt. Hoffer was proud of his hospital, as he should have been. It was the most pristine, efficient and cohesive hospital I've ever been in, and it was all due to his exceptional management skills.

At the end of our conversation, Sgt. Hoffer, in his deep but very soft voice, told me to bring samples of my paintings along with me Friday night because his wife, Jan, would very much like to see more of my work.

I was thrilled to think someone wanted to see *my* artwork and immediately started to collect drawings, small paintings and photocopies of everything I did in the past year. With arms full, I waited at the base entry. It was Friday night, and guess who was coming to dinner!

Jan Hoffer was the total opposite of her husband – bold, flamboyant, charismatic and completely comfortable with strangers. I liked her immediately.

After supper, where I found myself reciting my entire life story, Jan ordered John and her two children, David and Peggy, to the living room, where I would reveal the artwork I had brought. The Hoffers had another older son, Bobby, and a daughter, Laurie, but she was older and away in the Navy. Bobby was just, away.

With a captive audience I proudly displayed my work, adding little stories along with each piece and how they came about. When I was finished I almost fainted when Jan led her family in applause.

“I’m proud of you, son,” Jan replied as she stood up and walked over to me. “You’ve come a long way without any training, just a natural gift, and you’re smart enough to take advantage of it. Oh yes, we’re very proud of you.”

From that day forward I was part of the Hoffer family. Jan took me to art exhibits, introduced me to famous local professional artists and promoted my work to everyone she knew.

I practically lived over at the Hoffer’s, played with David and Peggy and went on weekend trips with the family. Jan became my second mom and as she loved art and aspired to be an artist herself, she educated and inspired me all the time.

Jan came to watch me almost every day as I worked on the hospital mural. We had selected a seascape from a photo she took off the rocky coast of Maine, and I added a sunset sky to make it more dramatic.

Everyone seemed to be pleased with our selection, especially John, who had every visiting dignitary to the hospital come by and meet me personally.

There were, of course, other perks I hadn't imagined, like permission to eat all of my meals there. That is, dining along with doctors and nurses (a lot of pretty nurses, too). And, they didn't eat Air Force food, they had dieticians preparing special meals with *meats* and *fish* ordered fresh locally.

For instance, every Thursday they had lobster. Every Tuesday was steak, and you never had to wait in a long line either. I must admit, I did stretch out the time it took to paint that mural, but who could blame me.

As I was finishing the hospital mural, several doctors and head nurses asked me to do some medical illustrations for training classes and educational seminars. I became fascinated with anatomy, not that at nineteen I wasn't already fascinated with the female anatomy, but this was from the inside out.

I gained a new respect for the individuals in the health field and how much detailed information they had to retain to do their jobs, and I loved being part of the process.

I was also gaining incredible experience, and I hadn't even been to art school yet. I knew one day all of this work would pay off, so I did everything I was requested to do and never complained. John thought his staff might be taking advantage of me, but I loved every minute of it.

Finally I returned to base headquarters and a new project, but the Hoffers would be part of my family for years to come and a constant reminder of my Air Force days in Bangor, Maine.

THE VISIT

When I found out my mom was going to come visit me at the base, my newly adopted mom, Jan Hoffer, insisted she stay with her. This was such an exciting time for me because, like most children, I wanted to impress my mom with all of my artwork throughout the air base and make her proud of me.

I was also excited because I was up for promotion, and with Sr. Master Sgt. McMurphy and Colonel Flanagan heading up the promotion board, I assumed I was a shoe-in!

About a week before my mother was to arrive, the anxiously awaited promotion list was posted all over the base.

Not only did a promotion mean *another* stripe on your uniform and recognition from your family and peers, but probably the most important thing, a raise in salary.

I was so sure my name would appear under “promoted to corporal” that when I scanned down the list to the “SA’s” I could have sworn I saw my name, then with disbelief and shock I read Samson, Samuel, Tanner, Tap . . . what?

I sprinted over to Sgt. McMurphy’s office, through the open door and hopped around the office, ranting and raving about how could they do this to me. Or rather *not* do this to me, after all I had done for them (strongly referring to the personal favors I had performed).

After several minutes of bouncing off the walls, Sgt. Major McMurphy, in his always calm and collected manner, patiently waited for my tirade to conclude before he began to speak.

In his beautiful Irish tenor voice, and in a father-like fashion, he had me sit down as he began to speak.

“Joseph!” he started out, “have you considered the enormous responsibility we have in selecting airmen for promotions?” He came from behind his desk and sat on the edge of it, directly in front of me. “Do you know how many airmen who have been in active duty *twice* as long as you and still have not been promoted?”

I started to realize how thoughtless I had been and I sat there humbled, realizing I deserved whatever he said to me.

“You have done a wonderful job for us, and you know how pleased we are, but there are many other airmen also doing exemplary work for us who don’t get near the praise and recognition you have received. Don’t they deserve to be promoted, too?”

Before I could come up with an answer, he continued, “There are only so many openings for promotions, and hundreds of qualified applicants. You’re doing your job (artwork) for the Air Force and your country the same as they are doing their jobs. Do you think your job is better or more important?”

I knew I couldn’t answer any of these questions without sounding like the selfish, vain person I had become.

I was so ashamed, I left his office without muttering another word and walked back to my barracks, embarrassed and depressed.

However, with my mom arriving in only a few days, it wasn’t long before my spirits were up and I had forgotten about the whole incident.

Jan had converted her daughter Lorie’s room into a guest bedroom for my mom. She did this by removing the large number of stuffed animals and the colorful rock-music posters that filled the room, and adding an alarm clock and some handmade candles.

After meeting my mom, Jan realized she could have left the stuffed animals.

I was thrilled to see them get along so famously, and Jan was the perfect hostess, taking my mom all over the area and showing her all of the local sites.

I was so thankful to the Hoffers for the wonderful hospitality they showed my mother that I wanted to somehow pay them back, but our friendship seemed more than sufficient.

The day before my mom was to leave I got a surprise call from my old friend, James Noland, of the base police.

"Would you like me to take your mom for a tour of the base?"

What a great gesture, and, of course, I said yes.

That morning he picked us up in a new police car and took Mom and me all over Dow Air Force Base. She was able to see my art work in areas I couldn't go alone, and I know she was impressed, riding around in that new shiny car with the bright blue flags on the front bumpers that read "VIP."

Sgt. Noland was in his dress blues and was a wonderful driver and host, giving us the history of the base, its facilities and its mission.

Just when I felt things couldn't go any better, we pulled up to the Base Commander's office, where Mary was standing. Looking right at my mother, she said, "The Base Commander is anxious to meet you!"

What a moment, watching my mom being escorted by my friend, Mary, into his office. It just didn't get any better than this!

As the Colonel rose to shake hands with my mom, I noticed another friend in his office, Sgt. Major McMurphy. Wow, he wanted to meet my little mom, too.

"Well, Mrs. Sambataro," the Colonel started out, "we are surely proud of your son and the fine art work he has done for us around the base."

Mom was so excited and shocked that I was worried she wasn't going to answer him, but, after a short pause, she did say, "I'm afraid you can't credit me with his talent. I can't draw a straight line, but I am proud of his work and determination."

"As well you should be," he answered, "and that's why we were saving *this* for your arrival."

Saving what? I thought. What was he talking about?

Then, Sgt. Major McMurphy walked over and handed a small box to the Colonel, who in turn opened it as he revealed its contents to my mother and me.

It was a brand new set of Corporal stripes, and my heart actually stopped!

“We wanted to present Joe with his new stripes while you were present and congratulate him on his excellent work.”

That was one of those times in your life you never forget, and the smile on my face, like the new stripes on my uniform, reflected an older and wiser person.

A few days later, as I returned to duty after seeing my mom off back to Pennsylvania, Sgt. Major McMurphy described to me in detail how extremely difficult it was keeping my name off the hundreds of promotion lists that went out, how he and Mary personally spent hours double-checking them so they could surprise my mom and me.

As I looked back to my behavior in his office earlier that month, I felt even worse, realizing all that was done for my benefit.

It not only taught me a major lesson in patience, but it also taught me the importance of humility, lessons I would never forget!

PREPARING FOR WAR

With my tour of duty at Dow Air Force Base almost over, it was common knowledge most of us would be assigned to overseas duty, probably Viet Nam.

As our new assignments would come directly from Washington, there wasn't much the Colonel could do for me, not that I would have asked him!

Some of my friends tried to change jobs in order to avoid duty in Nam, as certain job skills were less likely to be sent.

One friend, Airman Stanley C. (as we called him), was involuntarily assigned to the Air Police. But, unlike me, he had a skill they could use as a security dog handler. When Stanley heard that virtually all handlers with dark brown or black dogs were being sent to Viet Nam he did everything he could to get reassigned a light colored dog because now his dog was dark.

I unwillingly helped him achieve this goal when, on a sunny Saturday morning, I visited him at the kennels.

"Is this the dog you're trying to get rid of?" I asked.

The large dark brown & black German Shepherd looked up at me with its big brown eyes as he if he understood me.

"Yeah," Stanley answered, looking back down at the sitting K-9. "He may not have the choice of getting out of Viet Nam, but I do!"

The dog looked back up at Stanley with a sad face, maybe sensing his fate. I felt so sorry for the dog, thinking how not only were young men losing their lives over there, but so were innocent animals, an awareness I most assuredly got from my mother.

"I'm purposely not training well with him," Stanley admitted. "If we do poor together, they'll assign me a new dog and I'm going to go after a light-haired one."

I think at this point the German Shepherd was disappointed in Stanley, and when he turned his back on me to gather up the dog's restraining leash, the muscular animal lunged at me with its sharp teeth exposed!

The weight of the dog as its front paws hit my thin chest knocked me to the ground and prevented the animal from taking a large bite out of me. Instead, its mouth was full of the front of my blue Air Force jacket.

Stanley was in shock and pale white as he yanked his furry weapon back and restrained it with a muzzle. The entire front of my jacket was gone, but I was still intact.


"It's a good thing you're a little guy, Joe."



General Dixon has asked me to convey his thanks to you for your part in preparing the plaque which was presented to General Wade.

I was at the presentation and noted that the plaque presented by General Dixon was by far the most impressive of the lot.

Sincerely


J. L. FLANAGAN, Colonel, USAF
Commander



Certificate of Appreciation from The Citizens of Maine

JOSEPH R. SAMBATARO

On the occasion of your return from service in the Armed Forces of your country, WE the CITIZENS of the STATE of MAINE, express to you our deep sense of appreciation and our admiration of the sacrifices, courage, determination and stamina displayed during the period of your valiant service. You have contributed much to the maintenance of our American way of life and to the preservation of our ideals of PEACE and FREEDOM.

We are proud of you and we pay homage to you for your magnificent contribution to the defense of FREEDOM.

Presented this 20th day of November 1962

E. H. Hayward
Adjutant General of Maine

Samuel M. Curtis
Governor of Maine

Stanley was trying to lighten up the moment, but we both were still shaking.

His training supervisor, who witnessed the entire incident, came running over and severely reprimanded Stanley and ordered me out.

A few days later, Stanley appeared at my table in the chow hall, carrying an Air Force jacket.

"Sorry, Joe, here's a new coat. It's a small, so I hope it fits."

I thanked him, but told him I thought I'd have a fear of large dogs from now on. Stanley smiled and said he was sorry again and that it *was* his fault. The dogs were trained to attack when the handler turns his back on anyone in front of him. *Now* he remembers this!

But, Stanley was not upset at being written up for his mistake, because they determined he and his dog were not a good match and put him on a list for a new K-9 partner.

I had, indeed, unknowingly, unwittingly helped Stanley get his wish, and he did. His new dog was called "Snowball" and was pure white.

Stanley never got sent to Viet Nam, and, although his strategy worked in the short run (well, let's put it this way), his happiness was short lived when his new orders read, "K-9 Security Duty – ICELAND!"

It was hard seeing all of my friends leaving for new assignments. Even Col. Flanagan was reassigned that year. I had the unique opportunity of not only painting his portrait on a plaque as a lasting memento and thank you from all of the base personnel and (especially) his personal staff, but also the privilege of being the one chosen to present it to him at his farewell dinner.

As I waited to receive my orders, I was not so much expecting to be sent to Viet Nam, not because they didn't have graphic artists there, but (as far as I knew) they had no S.A.C. bases there, the branch of the Air Force I was now in.

Within a few weeks I finally was called to the personnel building to pick up my new assignment orders. I knew serving overseas would be much different than in the U.S.A., but I was ready.

The young personnel airman handed me the yellow carbon copy with slightly blurred lines of type, which read, "Corporal Joseph Richard Sambataro – United States Air Force, Assigned to S.A.C. Maintenance Division Headquarters, Graphic Department, Kadena Air Force Base, *Okinawa*."

I couldn't believe it – I was being sent to yet another place (like Bangor, Maine) I had never heard of nor did I have any idea where it was.

I scoured the large map of the world that hung in the Headquarters' briefing room and could not find it. Finally, I retrieved a thick magnifying glass, but still, all I could see was a tiny speck with fuzzy little lettering around it. Finally, the word Okinawa came into focus.

Okinawa was an island in the Ryukyu Island chain. Japan was to the north and Taiwan to the south. Vietnam was further south.

As I asked around, it didn't take long to find out that Kadena was the base that most of the B-52s flew out of on their bombing runs over Vietnam. It was a major support base for the war. Or should I say, "police action?"

This, as everyone knows, was not a popular conflict to be involved with, and I personally hated the idea of war, but if I wanted to get to art school, I would just have to get through this. After all, it was time for me to pay my debt, not only for school, but also to my country.

At the gung-ho age of nineteen, you didn't think much about what the bombs from a B-52 really do, and, not being trained for actual combat, your mind is occupied with a thousand other things!

It wasn't until I was out of the Air Force for several months that I witnessed the carnage and devastation (via TV

documentaries) inflicted on the Vietnamese. It was the civilians I felt sorry for.

“The faceless enemy was no more!”

(An ironic note, my current next door neighbor is Vietnamese.)

CHAPTER NINE

FAR, FAR & AWAY

After a brief two-week leave I packed my gear and boarded a chartered commercial military flight to Okinawa, with stops in Hawaii; (it was so beautiful I vowed to return one day, and I did) and Japan (the view of the Japanese islands from 10,000 feet in the rising sun was breathtaking).

The 24½-hour flight with both stops took us a total of 31½ hours before we finally set our wheels down on the runway at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa.

With more than a full day's difference in time between the U.S. and Okinawa, and after the longest flight I had ever been on, not only was I tired, I was totally discombobulated! (I don't care if it's a real word, that's what I was.)

I didn't know what day it was, what time it was, and the worst thing of all, I didn't give a damn!

All I wanted to do was sleep in a real bed. But that's when we were told that our barracks weren't ready because they were . . . blah, blah . . . I had no idea what the airman was saying, and (you guessed it) I could care less.

Finally a voice from the crowd of new arrivals shouted out, "Shut the hell up and show us where we can lay the hell down!" An enormous round of applause rose from the zombie-like gathering, and, sensing his own demise, the young airman led us over to the temporary sleeping quarters located



Me, in Okinawa, 1968



Heiwa-Dori (Peace Street) on a rainy afternoon, in Naha, the capital city of Okinawa

in a large domed Quonset hut. It was lined with rows of rollaway beds and small army-brown lockers.

We must have scared that young airman, because they let us sleep for what seemed like two days. It was the best sleep I had ever had!

With the faint sound of music floating into the small square windows from across the room, my eyes were starting to focus once again. Following the white signs with large arrows that read "Showers." A staggering line of half-awake airmen meandered across the walkway and into the steam-filled building behind ours. We looked like a group of ants trying to find the colony. Only we ants were in our underwear.

When we were all cleaned up and back in uniforms our airman host appeared once again.

"Listen up! You will be boarding the busses outside that will take you to the area of the base you are assigned. Check your '____' form. The squadron will be located on the top left."

As we dug through our pockets trying to find this whatever form he continued.

"When you arrive at your station you will be given an introductory briefing."

A resonating voice from the crowd (probably the same guy as before) said, "When do we *eat*? I'm starving!"

We were about to see our new base and new home for the first time, and all this guy could think about was food? Actually, I was getting a little hungry, too. Perhaps it was not such a bad idea after all.

"Okay, okay," the airman shouted out. "After your briefings you can hit the chow hall."

Again, a collective "Yeah!" rose from the group as we began boarding our respective busses.

As we drove out of the compound located somewhere on the outskirts of the base, we could see the ocean all around us with the plush green hills that surrounded the end of the

outer markers of the huge runway that was nestled off the coast of Kadena on Route 1.

It was 9:45AM Okinawa time, and the sunrise had a golden glow that softly lit up the unusual-shaped trees that lined the highway. From the warm ocean breeze that blew through the open-aired bus and the gorgeous scenery that was the backdrop to the vast Air Force base, with its pure white buildings and rows and rows of camouflaged B52's, you *knew* you weren't in Kansas anymore.

LAND OF OZ

With my renewed energy, I leaped down off the bus in front of the maintenance headquarters building. There were many civilian workers in this area because it was common for the Air Force to hire locals to boost their manpower when it came to many maintenance projects such as building and road repairs, motor pool and sanitary systems, etc., but this was different. I found myself in munchkin land. Every one of these people were shorter than I was!

How can this be, I thought. I was always one of the shortest guys on the entire base, and now I'm one of the tallest? I knew instantly I was going to love the Japanese, if for no other reason than the simple fact that they would be looking *up* to me!

We were told to follow (you guessed it) the yellow-striped wall to the conference room for our introductory briefing by Captain W.W.W., William Walter Wilker-r-something.

After the briefing we knew the WWW stood for "*Wicked Witch from the West*" because his job was to scare the hell out of us in the form of videos showing horrifying close-ups of every strange venereal disease known to man. We were told (and at that time I believed every word of it) that some of these diseases were so bad and so contagious that *if*

we caught one, the National Disease Control Authorities would forbid us from entering back into the United States, and we would be sent to a special hospital on a remote island. And our relatives back home would receive notification that we were M.I.A. (missing in action)! (Kind of ironic, huh?)

I was shy enough around girls as it was. And, believe me, this didn't help!

After the wicked witch left the room, it took a good ten minutes for our mouths to return to the closed position and our knees to stop shaking.

He was followed by our chaplain, Captain Tom (as we were instructed to call him). He was tall and very thin, like the scarecrow, and, though he cautioned us to take Captain W.W.W. seriously we could tell this scarecrow was extremely kind and understanding.

After answering many of our questions about language, customs, transportation and special rules, Captain Tom gave us this brief history of Okinawa.

Okinawa lies at the midpoint of the Ryukyu Island chain, located between Japan and Taiwan. A minor Japanese base during most of World War II, Okinawa became important when U.S. planners decided to seize it as a staging point for their projected invasion of Japan. The assault began on April 1, 1945. General Mitsuru Ushigima, commanding Japan's 32nd Army, allowed General Simon Bolivar Buckner's U.S. 10th Army to storm ashore virtually unopposed. Instead of trying to defend the beaches, Ushijima's troops burrowed into caves and tunnels in a succession of low ridges lying between the beaches and Shuri, the capital. Army and Marine Corps attackers eliminated the dug-in Japanese with "blowtorch" (flamethrower) and "corkscrew" (demolition charge) tactics at heavy cost to themselves.

Driven late in May from their Shuri line, the Japanese retreated to Okinawa's southern tip, where both commanders perished by the battle's end on June 21st. Ushijima died by ritual suicide (*hara-kiri*), and Buckner was killed by one of the

last artillery shells fired by the Japanese. Earlier, on the adjacent islet of Ie Shima, the famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle had been killed by a burst fired from a bypassed Japanese machine gun. Equally bitter was the fighting at sea. Japan's Air Forces hurled more than 4,000 sorties, many by kamikaze suicide planes, at U.S. and British naval forces. In vanquishing 115,000 Japanese defenders, U.S. losses totaled 38 ships of all types sunk and 368 damaged; 4,900 U.S. Navy servicemen died; and U.S. Army and U.S. Marine fatalities numbers 7,900.

Captain Tom also explained to us why our barracks weren't ready when we arrived and how lucky we were because we would be occupying the one year old, like new, large rooms and air-conditioned building that was just vacated by the *very* pampered medics, who were moving to their brand new building adjacent to ours. (Back then, many buildings on base had no air conditioning, just fans.)

As promised, we were directed to the chow hall and ate everything in sight, as we were all starving by the time this two-hour briefing finally ended.

As I stuffed my face, I heard a voice above me stutter out, "M-m-mind i-if I s-s-sit h-here?"

There was a tall, smiling airman standing in front of me holding a tray piled high with food.

"Sit right down and make yourself at home," I said and pretended not to notice his stuttering.

After placing his tray on the table, he reached out to shake my hand and said, "H-h-hi t-t-there, m-my name is K-K-Ken."

Ignoring the effort it took him to deliver his greeting; I concentrated rather on his happy nature and friendly grin, which ran from ear to ear. Ken was definitely a character, and like the Tin Man, though he squeaked a little, I knew he would be a great friend.

Totally full, Ken and I wandered over to our new barracks, and on the way, he told me he was from Houston,

Texas, where they had “tall, shiny buildings, beautiful weather, gorgeous women, the Space Center, the Gulf of Mexico and roaches as large as Volkswagens.”

Of course, it took him a few extra syllables to get this all out, but he could tell it didn’t matter a bit to me. Ken was as funny as he was smart (a fact I learned later).

Captain Tom was right, the rooms were large, which was good because there were four men to each, with four standing lockers and two bunk beds.

Most of the rooms were already spoken for as groups of four airmen formed teams and claimed their spaces.

On the top floor (across from the bathrooms and showers) there was a room with only one bunk bed, and it had a mirrored cabinet and sink. I immediately asked the barracks supervisor whose room that was, and he told me it used to belong to the Chief Medical Sergeant.

I told him I would like to take that room, and he looked at me with a puzzled look and asked, “Who are you?”

Without hesitating and with total authority, I answered, “I’m Corporal Joe Sambataro, special artist and designer to the Maintenance Commander, and since I will be doing personal art work for him and his staff, this sink will be an asset in cleaning my brushes.”

I was praying he didn’t ask me who the Maintenance Commander was, because I had absolutely no idea and even though this wasn’t total B.S., I was pushing it!

“Okay, okay. I’m not going to argue with you or the Commander.”

He paused and pushed the door completely open.

“It’s all yours. Just get yourself a roommate, fill out this sheet with the room number and return it to me.”

I did it. I just hoped Ken hadn’t signed up with another group.

“Ha ha hey, ya l-l-little g-g-guy. Wh-wh-where y-y-you go off t-t-to?”

It was Ken, still wandering around the hallways. He found me just in time and I told him the great news, that I got a room for us with only two in the room, with our own sink and mirrored cabinet, too. We could brush our teeth and shave without leaving our room.

He was totally impressed and happy that I was only too glad to take the top bunk, since his 6'2" frame would find it much too difficult climbing up and down the steel bed ladder.

The Tin Man and I neatly unpacked our duffle bags and arranged our stuff in the tall lockers that stood like sentinels at the end of the room. Ken was as organized as I was, and I knew instantly that I had made the perfect choice for a roommate.

THE HAZING

Since we were all being housed in a new building and not just a few new airmen filling in empty beds in an older established barracks, we found out not only had we missed non-air conditioned rooms, but something far worse, the hazing ritual.

The new airman would arrive on base and be assigned to a room. The airmen in that room, along with a few other friends from the barracks, would invite him out for a free dinner and free drinks all night at their favorite bar (off base).

The object was to get him as drunk as possible. Then, they could drive him to the "red light" district of town, find the oldest, ugliest, toothless hooker and pay her ten dollars for an "all-nighter!"

He would then wake up in the morning with not only the worst hangover you could ever have but also naked in a strange bed, in a broken-down hut, next to a woman old enough to be his grandmother, with a large sign lying on top of his clothes that read, "Welcome to Okinawa."

OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD

In this case, I really was off to meet a Wizard – a real wizard. My new commander, Colonel Williams, was responsible for the largest, most complex squadron on base, the maintenance wing.

As I waited in the lobby of the colonel's office, I was briefed by one of his staff assistants and learned that the maintenance wing didn't just work on keeping the B-52s flying with their top-of-the-line jet mechanics, a task full of life and death responsibilities, but also the KC-135 jet tankers that 'refueled' the B-52s and other aircraft in flight.

If that was not enough, the Colonel was also responsible for maintaining all the trucks, jeeps and busses in the motor pool – all of the heating, air conditioning, lights, elevators and miscellaneous items in all of the buildings on base – plus oversaw the road crews, water treatment plant and waste material facility. Wow, the guy was a wizard, and before I even met him I had huge respect for him.

Again, some of the most personable and nicest people I had met in the Air Force were also some of the highest ranking officers. Colonel Williams was no exception. His warm and friendly greeting made it even harder to believe this slightly gray-haired man had so many burdens.

His first words as I entered his office were, "Airman Sambataro, the artist. I've heard all about you!"

What a shock! I just stood there trying desperately to think of a witty response, but as it turned out, Colonel Williams continued before I could even open my mouth.

"Got a call from your old buddy, Colonel Flanagan."

Again, I couldn't believe it. To think my old boss would not only take the time to do this, but also as I found out shortly, to give me a glowing recommendation.

As Col. Williams related his conversation with Col. Flanagan to me, I couldn't have asked for a better start to a new job.

After what seemed to be an hour, the Colonel shook my hand and welcomed me to his command, but, as I opened the door to leave his office, he stopped me.

“Hold on.”

I froze to my spot. Was I so at ease with this officer that I forgot my position? Did I inadvertently forget something of respect, like saluting him? Immediately, I raised my arm up and pointed my fingers in a military salute befitting a king or president. Just then, the Colonel gently grabbed my wrist and lowered my arm.

“I’ve got an idea I want you to roll around in your creative mind and see what you can come up with.”

Wow, my first assignment. The Colonel went on to explain that he was trying to come up with a theme or logo or both that would help unify the wing, make everyone realize that even if their job was replacing light bulbs it was just as important as a jet engine mechanic. He offered this statement.

“We are all on the same team, and I want something that illustrates this”.

Before I had time to ask him when he wanted this break-through idea, I was back in the lobby. Knowing secretaries are all wise, I asked his when she thought I should return. Without hesitation, she answered.

“Friday, at the end of this week.”

Seeing the startled look on my face, she finished.

“That’s when the Colonel gets back from his trip.”

Great. I had until Friday to come up with the best idea he’d ever heard. The most creative logo he ever saw and totally impress him. Or be the biggest disappointment since the discovery of Tang, the orange-flavored something drink.

Well, it was only Monday, and I had all week to work on it. That’s right, *work*, and I had better get myself moving and find my new office.

As I walked the halls in this large maintenance headquarters building, I noticed that the atmosphere was much

more laid back (like Col. Williams) compared to the other headquarters.

Almost everyone was in fatigues (the Air Force's green work uniforms), and even though they were neatly pressed and well groomed, it was not the standard dress uniforms you would normally see. Also, there were boxes and small mechanical parts stacked at the end of most of the hallways, as well as in offices. This was definitely a blue collar environment, and I felt very comfortable.

You also could tell the work here was serious because there was an obvious lack of immature clowning around, which was common back in the states. That's not to say people didn't joke around a little. It's just that everyone was aware of the importance of their job.

As I approached the door that displayed large black letters that read, "Art Department" I was grateful that if I did a poorly drawn chart, it wouldn't actually cause someone's death, but I also realized by my recent conversation with Col. Williams, all skills are important.

When I was at breakfast the next morning, I mentioned to the guys my conversation with the Colonel. One guy was a mechanic and complained he had to work fourteen hours straight to finish a job on a fire truck. The other guy was a Medic and also was complaining about being stuck in ICU all night. When I raised the point that all jobs here at the base were important, another medic at the table told this story.

A heart surgeon left his \$100,000 sports car with his mechanic. When the doctor came back to pick up his automobile, the mechanic posed this question.

"I work on very valuable and sensitive machines just like you do. I have to carefully diagnose them and with years of skill and precision, fix them so they will run like new! So, tell me, Doc, why do you make all that money when I do approximately the same thing?"

A few seconds later, the heart surgeon replied, "Try fixing them while they're running!"

After that, it was clear to me that some jobs are more important, but it also occurred to me that without the doctor's car running properly, he wouldn't be able to get to the hospital. The Colonel was right. We needed a team logo.

The Art Department was a very large room that actually took up two office spaces. The other set of doors was blocked off by tall filing cabinets. There were at least four drafting/drawing tables, two light tables and two decks. Shelves and filing cabinets surrounded the rest of the room. It was extremely well lit, with large vertical windows on one wall and rows of fluorescent tube lights across the long ceiling.

This office looked like it would accommodate at least four graphic artists. So where was everybody?

The large numbered clock on the wall read 12:45.

"That's it," I thought, "they're still at lunch."

But as I began to pull up a chair to wait, a large round fuzzy object came flying towards me.

"You're here. You've made it."

The large fuzzy object was now in my face, and as I struggled to focus on it, it continued to rant on.

"Sorry I wasn't here to greet you. I was only in the bathroom for a few minutes, I was washing my hands and I . . ."

It stopped.

My eyes were now in focus on a very fat, brown bearded airman who was saluting me.

"Why are you saluting me?" I burst out. "I'm not an officer."

The airman dropped his arm, and I noticed he was a one-striper.

"Sorry, Sir," he responded. "I'm Private Selms from South Carolina. Most people call me Bubba!" He hesitated, "And, and, you're my new boss."

"Boss?" I repeated. "I'm not a boss."

"Oh yes, that's what Master Sergeant Myers said!"

Now I knew what a bowling pin must feel like just before it gets run over by the ball – shocked, confused and speechless.

After a rather lengthy back and forth conversation with Bubba I found out I was in fact his boss. We were the only two graphic artists in this huge office, and since I had one more stripe than him, by default I was in charge. But *my* boss was Master Sgt. Myers, who normally returned from lunch about 15:30 (or 3:30PM).

Most overseas airmen were at least corporals since they were stationed stateside for at least a year. I had been at Dow AFB in Maine for almost two years. Bubba was also in for two years but missed out on about six promotions. He thought it might have something to do with his weight.

“I’m really out of shape,” he confided in me.

I assured him ‘round’ was a shape.

Bubba was only going to be at Kadena for 5½ more months. He told me he was only there training, and then he would be sent to another base.

Without seeing a single chart sign or graphic executed by my new employee, Bubba, I knew I had my work cut out for me, and I knew somehow I had to help him make corporal.

After a tour of the supply cabinets and files, Master Sgt. Myers drifted in, smoking a large cigar. For a split second I thought I saw Groucho Marx!

Sgt. Myers was a poster boy for “Laid Back” and was not only a nice man, but also a great boss. And, what, may you ask, makes a great boss? Neither Bubba nor I hardly ever saw him. Of course, there were times we could have used his help, but all in all, we got to really look forward to his visits.

It didn’t take long to realize why poor Bubba wasn’t promoted, and it had nothing to do with his weight. However, like his walk, his work was very slow.

I would be finishing my *third* 24”/30” briefing chart, all of which had additional full-color illustrations of B-52s, KC-

135s or squadron insignias at the top, while Bubba was still inking in lines of his first. Of course, while stopping constantly to watch me was flattering, it didn't help Bubba to get out the large amount of work required of us daily.

Like the lion in the Wizard of Oz, Bubba was not only hairy, but had no confidence. I knew pressuring him would only make it worse, so I decided to try a team approach. I told Bubba that his line work was so superior to mine that he should render in *all* the lines on all the charts, and I would finish them out with colorful illustrations and graphics.

Knowing I couldn't finish the charts before he lined them, Bubba began to concentrate and speed up his production. He was so proud to say *he* had worked on the new colorful charts that the (maintenance) graphic art department was now known for around the base. His output tripled!

I tried to boost Bubba's self-esteem even more by making him a part of everything creative our department did, even though poor Bubba didn't have a creative bone in his large round body.

With the maintenance squadron being the biggest on base and with my experience creating Big Paul in Bangor Maine, I designed a logo that simply said, in large bold block letters, "BIG M" with the letter M as large as and centered beneath the word BIG. Our maintenance team would be known as the Big M, and with the logo was this inscription, "We make it work."

I was so busy that Friday when I presented it to Col. Williams; I didn't have time to get nervous. I told him Bubba and I worked on it (Bubba filled in the black on the word BIG), and if we hadn't been so busy this week we could have come up with more ideas. I was trying to cover my butt in case he hated it and thought I was a moron. But, to my absolute shock and surprise he loved it and had it printed on hundreds of hats and t-shirts. "*BIG M . . . We make it work*" was all over the base and just before Bubba left for his new assignment to

Clark AFB in the Philippines, we both got promoted, Bubba with his new-found courage and corporal stripes and me, Airman Joe Sambataro, Sergeant!

WHERE DID ALL THE INDIANS GO?

Newly promoted and with an arm-full of stripes, I felt like the big chief. Head honcho of a large and important art department, I was ready to continue my role as teacher and mentor. The only problem was, after Bubba left, I was the only one there.

Master Sgt. Myers knew two things for certain – one, I could do the work of three Indians (so he wasn't worried about getting me help any time soon), and two, he was leaving on his first 30-day vacation back to the states after 28 months, and *nothing* was going to prevent that!.

Well, there you have it, two chiefs (soon to be one) and no Indians. I felt this was a lonely situation and then I asked myself, "Do I really need a lot of Indians to feel like a chief?"

The answer was "no" and I enthusiastically continued my work, improving day by day on my speed and accuracy. Soon I was known as the fastest pen in the East (Far East) until the day Sgt. "Red" appeared on the scene and *unlike* the real wicked witch, throwing a bucket of water on this guy wouldn't make him melt away.

The Staff Sergeant was called "Red" because of his hair bearing the same color. He was one of those people who was never wrong and had to have the last word on everything, of which he always had an opinion.

The only thing I found pleasant about Staff Sgt. Red was as a replacement for the now sainted Master Sgt. Myers, back in the USA, he would be leaving as soon as Sgt. Myers returned.

Putting up with Sgt. Red would be the longest months of my life, and every day brought a new battle. It was hard to believe this guy was on our side!

I was producing a record amount of work that was not only finished before most of the deadlines, but was embellished with full-color illustrations.

Sgt. Red didn't grasp the concept of pleasing-to-the-eye graphics. Instead, he insisted everything remain in black and white to increase productivity.

I pointed out that I was accomplishing both, but Sgt. Red insisted that adding colorful illustrations took away from producing more charts.

I replied, "For who?"

It was the first time Sgt. Red didn't fire back with an immediate ridiculous answer. As his face turned the color of his hair, he screamed back, "What the hell are you talking about?"

It was great knowing I finally got him flustered instead of the other way around, so I calmly answered.

"If I'm finishing *all* of the work on time, all the time, then what am I supposed to do with all that time left?"

He could see he had met his match, but with one more stripe than me, he was nevertheless still my boss.

He never answered me, but stormed out of the room only to return three hours later with a "typed" department directive that read:

"All charts and graphic materials leaving this art department will be limited to black and white. There will be no added illustrations to charts or briefing slides of any kind. All department staff (meaning me) will stay on the premises until 6PM, whether all of the work for that day is finished or not."

I followed his orders, and for the duration of Sgt. Red's command, I produced the blandest graphics ever seen, and despite massive complaints, I never wavered from his directive. Of course, I made sure everyone complaining had his own copy!

It seems that what goes around comes around (a saying I strongly believe in), because a few days after Master Sgt. Myers return, I was given a new department directive that simply said, "Go back to the beautiful work you were doing before . . . Master Sgt. Myers."

(P.S. Staff Sgt. Red was demoted to Corporal Red, but you didn't hear that from me.)

THE BUGMOBILE

My new roommate, Ken, decided we needed a car to explore the island of Okinawa, so he emptied his wallet of \$300 and bought "the Bugmobile."

I endearingly named it that because it was scarcely larger than the roaches Ken described from Houston. In fact, I'm not sure it was even a car. It had no back window, no bumpers, no grill, and the sun roof leaked so badly we called it the "rain roof."

A question, why do tall people buy tiny cars?

When Ken was driving, his seat was pushed back so far, the back seat literally disappeared!

But, the good news was it ran like crazy, and no matter what the weather, its little engine never quit.

Thanks to Ken, we now had wheels (although they were very small ones), and each weekend we headed in a different direction to explore this plush island.

Our first discoveries were several different beaches, though by the multitudes of service men and their topless local girlfriends, we were definitely not the first.

Ken didn't mind because, as he put it, "What more could you ask for – white sand, aqua blue waves and bouncing boobs?" For Ken, it didn't get much better than this!

He used to apologize to me constantly about his obsession with women, but I had no problem with that. 80% of the base was obsessed with females, and I realized poor

Ken was not very popular in high school because of his stuttering and his intelligence. He was, in fact, one of the first original nerds, and girls didn't come flocking to his door.

No, I didn't blame Ken for his eccentricities, though it was embarrassing at times to pick him up early in the morning at an obscure village off base, only to see him paying off his all night escort as she stood on a small patio rinsing down her naked body with a garden hose and soap.

"Aren't you afraid you'll catch something?" I would ask him.

"N-n-no," he'd reply. "Didn't you see the *soap*?"

Ken's sense of humor was endearing, and I'd never forget the many nights he would quietly stagger in, noticing I was awake, lean against the top bunk and whisper in my ear, "Joe, would you please remind me in the morning what a great time I had tonight?"

Though Ken was happily familiar with most of the girls and bars just outside the base, we both loved meeting the "real" people of Okinawa who lived in the towns and villages on the hillsides and in the valleys.

Ken picked up the Japanese language very quickly (as he did most things). As for myself, I only mastered a few words, but by the time I left Okinawa, boy did I know when and how to use them.

One day, as we drove into the hills, we noticed many oval shaped stone structures embedded into the side of the grassy slopes. We found out later that they were tombs shaped in the image of a woman's womb. It was like returning home when you died, and we both found this fascinating.

We also found the Japanese people kind and friendly, though, because of their lifestyle and customs, many Americans thought the opposite and treated them like a lesser race. We hated this and took every opportunity we could to change both perceptions. We tried to show the Okinawans that most Americans are good, caring people and tried to enlighten our fellow airmen that these hard working and

humble human beings were entitled to the same treatment and respect as any American.

Even though Okinawa was under U.S. control at the time, we still felt that this beautiful island belonged to the people who lived there, we were their guests and that's how Ken and I acted.

Of course, looks can be deceiving. One Saturday, I got lost trying to find a restaurant off base that had been recommended to me by friends. I took the wrong bus back to base and ended up on a corner next to a rice patty with a large wildebeest staring at me intensely. Either he was thrilled to finally have some company, or he was totally pissed off that I was now in *his* space!

As the rather large horned creature started to slowly move in my direction, I decided it was *his* space he was concerned with, and I quietly drifted down the road until I came to a small village.

The first Japanese man I saw was about my age, so speaking in my best broken-Japanese and using all the words I knew, I tried to explain my dilemma and get directions back to the base.

After fifteen minutes of this and noticing the extremely blank look on this poor fellow's face, I almost dropped over when he said in perfect English, "What the hell are you trying to say?"

I found out the Japanese man was from San Francisco and in the Army, and not only was he not from Okinawa, but he spoke less Japanese than I did.

However, he did know the right bus to take back to the base and walked me to the pickup location.

"You really thought I was a local?" he asked me as I stepped onto the bus. He walked away shaking his head.

Like they say, "You can't recognize a book by its cover." Or did I say that?!

Another common sight was "Banjul ditches," that ran alongside of almost all of the roads, on and off base. These

stone-sided grooves carried water from the hill tops down to the sea and acted like overflow drains during the rainy season.

In the old days they also had another purpose, roadside outhouses. I couldn't believe it myself until one day when driving up in the hill villages I saw several men, women and children squatting down over one, in broad daylight, doing their thing. It was a shock at first, but after awhile I got used to it and hardly noticed.

Some of those remote villages still had no running water, no electricity and obviously no toilets. It was like going back in time a hundred years, and it was hard to imagine living as these people did. I realized how lucky I was to live in the good ole U.S. of A.

One day, as the Bugmobile made its way back down the steep and narrow dirt road from the village, it began to rain and rain and rain and rain, until the road became a slip-n-slide mud ramp, and we became soaking wet and panicked.

It was like Indiana Jones on a ride at Water World, sliding down the side of a volcanic mud flow in the worst nightmare rain Noah and his ark might ever have seen.

The only thing that kept us from plummeting over the edge and down the ravine to our deaths was the deep, water-filled grooves in the road.

Finally, toward the bottom, when we thought God had heard our prayers and screams, we went sideways. There were no more tracks in the road to guide us. We were like the man in the barrel going over Niagara Falls. All we could do was brace for impact.

When we opened our eyes, we looked at each other, startled we were still alive. Our faces and bodies were soaking wet, which was, in itself a blessing since we couldn't tell if the other person had been crying or had wet his pants.

As we exited the Bug, we happily realized we were in one piece and concluded that our vehicle had the same missing parts as we started out with, only we'd added a large dent on the back passenger's side trunk.

The rain was actually slowing down as we pushed our ride to the concrete road just ahead. We kicked off the mounds of packed mud from around the wheels and were elated to be back on solid ground once again.

Just before we drove off, we both looked back at the bottom of the hill where we finally stopped and looked back at the object that kept us from flipping over. Neither one of us could believe our eyes. It was the side of one of those womb-shaped tombs!

Help from the Spirit world was our unanimous decision, and we raised a mythical glass of champagne to thank them as we drove off.

It's thought provoking to think how close we came to death on a daily basis and barely realized it.

Maybe the trip down the side of the hill in that rain storm wasn't as dangerous as I perceived it to be, but I can tell you this – my wet pants were *not* caused by the rain!

JOIN THE CLUB

The one really nice thing about the Armed Forces back then was that most bases had many clubs and organizations you could participate in, that not only provided activities to keep you busy and entertained, but also bought a little of home to this new, foreign environment.

I had painted some small murals in the Officer's Club back at Dow Air Force Base to help beautify the interiors, but to my surprise, the NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer's) Club here on Okinawa was more plush than that. They had beautiful wall-relief sculptures in gold on red velvet covered walls with spotlights to enhance the dramatic effect.

The food was also excellent, and even though you had to pay real money to eat at the club, it was really cheap! My quick-meal standby was always a shrimp cocktail (twelve large prawns), a side of mashed potatoes with gravy, and a large ice

tea, for the exorbitant price of \$1.25. Yes, I know this was a strange combination, but one must consider I was young and had no idea what the word “cuisine” meant!

I did a brief stint in the “United Christians for a Better World”. It sure sounded good and I did want a better world.

We met on Sundays and our group leader was Chaplain Crawford, who lead us in short prayers and motivated us to promote good will by helping those less fortunate than ourselves. I really liked this guy, less prayer and *more* action. On Okinawa, there was no shortage of less fortunate children and entire families. Just simple things like helping to repair a leaking roof or delivering food or fresh water was so appreciated by these dirt-poor civilians that the look on their faces was payment enough for volunteering one day a week. For me, this was truly what America stood for, sharing its riches and freedoms with others, and I loved it. That is until Chaplain Crawford left and was replaced with Chaplain (let’s just call him) “Apostle!”

I will nickname him this because Chaplain Apostle’s mission for this organization was not so much helping others in need, as it was converting others to Christianity. By unselfishly helping those in desperate situations, doesn’t one by example, promote Christianity?

This was my big question to Chaplain Apostle, but I never got a direct answer. His approach was to grab your bible, spot a non-Christian looking person, stalk them and then at their most vulnerable moment, pounce on them with pages of scripture that will make them instantly repentant for their lifelong succession of sins!

After just a couple of these “pouncings”, I realized the look on these people’s faces were vastly different than the ones we had previously provided food and medicine for, and I preferred the former!

From time to time I would see Chaplain Apostle or one of his disciples around the base cornering some unsuspecting sinner and think to myself how much better their

time could have been spent. I also realized how important a good leader is to any church. Whether Jewish, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist or whatever, it's the Rabbi, Priest or Minister that makes the church what it is. And Chaplain Crawford was my proof!

SUNDAY MORNING SURPRISE

It was early on a Sunday morning about 6AM. I was sound asleep on my top bunk when I woke to the sound of a loud, deep rumbling. As my eyes cleared, I saw that the ceiling was moving and it was like being in the Twilight Zone. Maybe I was still asleep, but as I heard Ken (on the bottom bunk) yell out "Ho-Ho-Holy Sh-shit," I knew I really was awake.

We both lay there in shock as we felt our bunk bed move across the room as objects from the top of our lockers and over the sink fell to the floor. We both clung to the bed until finally the room stopped moving.

With the added endorphins that come from shock and fear, we both started laughing as Ken helped me off the top bunk. By then everyone on our floor was out in the hallway trying to figure out what happened.

The word "earthquake" echoed throughout the building as we made our way to the outside stairways still in our underwear. As we filed along, it became apparent that safety was no longer an issue because if the building had fallen apart in the quake, we obviously would be *under* the stairway, not *on* it!!

Observing the rest of the base from outside, we could only see minor damage such as small trees on the ground, a couple of light polls bent over, and a few broken windows.

"Good thing is Air Force builds quake-proof buildings on these islands," Ken said loud enough for our whole group to hear.

“Not like in the old days,” said another airman behind us, finishing Ken’s sentence.

We had survived a 7.3 earthquake, a tribute to the Air Force Architects and Builders, but the poor people off base didn’t fare as well.

When we were finally allowed to leave the base, we couldn’t believe our eyes. It looked like a scene from World War II. Four story buildings downtown were leveled, debris was everywhere, and homeless families were roaming around aimlessly.

In all this chaos and destruction, through the rising clouds of dust, appeared hope. It was a large, bold red cross on a white background that covered the sides of trucks, buses, jeeps and tents.

Again I was proud to be an American and witness the lifesaving work this group was doing. Of course, when they asked for volunteers, I was only one of hundreds of Airmen from my base and other military bases from all branches of the Armed Forces on the island that helped in the Red Cross recovery efforts.

I wondered if Chaplain “Apostle” and his group was helping out too and maybe starting to realize that practicing the bible is probably more important than preaching it!!

I left my name on the Red Cross volunteer list for future projects, but never dreamed that they would have a need for my Art Skills!

EARNING MY WINGS

I had the opportunity to display my artwork and teach at the base activity center. I hadn’t been to art school but someone felt I was good enough to teach kids 10-16 years old. Of course, these were children from the many Air Force families that were stationed there. It took six months to a year to get housing in order to send for your family, so you must be

assigned to the base for at least eighteen months, more likely 24 months or more. For many of these career Airmen's families, the children were the most displaced in a foreign country. Although they had American schools on base, the local culture offered very little for some of these youth to do. Again, I loved teaching, and most of my students were creative and enthusiastic. But there were challenges!

It became apparent that in a military family, the entire clan automatically assumes the parent's rank. I had kids bossing other kids around because their father was a Captain and the other parent was only a Sergeant. It didn't take me long to issue this statement to all my students.

"In my class, I'm the Commander, a four-star General, and you are all private one-strippers, which means, no one pulls rank in my class but me!"

I have to admit they responded pretty well to my dictatorship, a concept that they were familiar with. I learned that if you teach (especially children) you must take charge of your class.

One day after class, a courier handed me a typed letter from the Red Cross Headquarters that read, "Sergeant Sambataro, we have an urgent need for your art talents. Please contact us immediately".

When I arrived at the Red Cross HQ building, I was actually directed to the USO offices (another wonderful organization that does fabulous work for the military servicemen and women).

I was enthusiastically informed by a tall, red-haired girl, that the USO had scheduled a coveted Bob Hope Variety Show at our base and they wanted me to paint a 12-foot character-portrait of him to display at the top-center of the stage, to complete the design they were working on.

I was thrilled but that wasn't the best news. I would be allowed to see the show from special seats set aside for V.I.P.'s working for the USO at our base, and if that weren't enough, a chance to meet Mr. Hope after the show.

Wow, I was so excited but also anxious because a lot of people would be seeing my rendition of this icon, and suppose my character-portrait turned out to look more like Jimmy Durante than Bob Hope?

My trusty roommate Ken, convinced me to stop worrying and get to work, which was great advice, so I immediately started doing sketches on large sheets of brown paper.

From the photos provided to me by the USO I decided to take a chance and do a dramatic profile character sketch. While it was obvious this was one of Bob Hope's most recognizable features, if not painted correctly, it could also be very offensive. After completing the painting on constructed sheets of "plywood that had a heavy coat of white primer, several airmen, including myself, raised the finished artwork up straight and leaned it against the wall of the aircraft hanger I had been working in.

I got very nervous when everyone within eyesight came over to view my newest commission, and it got very quiet. Oh no, I thought, it looks like Jimmy Durante to them and I've blown my big opportunity. Then out of nowhere, a thundering round of applause broke out from the crowd of workers who were building the stage and the rest of the set designs to be used in the show.

"Looks just like him," was the project manager's comment to me and everyone seemed to agree.

With renewed confidence, I couldn't wait for the day of the show. I loved Bob Hope and what he was doing for our troops, and the thought of actually meeting him would be a monumental memory. With only four days left, I could hardly concentrate on my daily work, drawing charts and graphs, which seemed mundane after being asked to paint Bob Hope, but I was still a Sergeant in the United States Air Force and was reminded of that when I received a T.D.Y. order. T.D.Y. meaning "Temporary Duty Assignment," meaning, when do I have to leave and will I miss the show?

Panic stricken, I ran to the duty assignment office in the hope of changing the departure date from immediately to maybe soon! As I pleaded my case, it became apparent the Air Force had never *heard of* nor *used* the word “soon!” I was to take a C-130 (a cargo plane used like a truck to transport supplies and materials from base to base) and fly to Taiwan in order to set up a new graphic art department.

How could I do this with only three days left to my big chance?

Seeing this question written all over my face, the Duty Sergeant offered me this brilliant advice.

“The sooner you get there, the quicker you can return”!

Actually, he was on to something, since there was *no* actual “date of return” on my orders, which meant I still had a chance of getting back in time.

I grabbed my gear and left first thing the next morning for Taiwan. My goal was like that of a Navy Seal, get in and get out.

Never having flown on a C-130 Turbo-Prop, I had no idea that “amenities” was another word missing from the military dictionary. As I walked out to the flight line and approached the large, camouflaged, potbelly-shaped plane, I immediately noticed there was no way to board it. No portable staircase, no ladders, no nothing I could see; only the large flat ramp at the back of the aircraft that was being loaded with all kinds of boxes, crates and what I’m guessing were airplane parts.

I stood there staring at my ride to Taiwan, not knowing what to do next, when I felt someone grab my arm from behind.

“Whatcha waitin’ for?” the large bearded Tech Sergeant said. “Let’s get the hell outa here”.

I followed him as he grumbled, “Can’t believe I got stuck taking this flyin’ piece of crap,” and other encouraging

sentences, like, “I’ll betcha a hundred bucks this broken down bucket of bolts has problems before we get there!”

What made it worse, I discovered, was that this was not just your run-of-the-mill Tech Sergeant, he was a Crew Chief, which meant he was responsible for his own aircraft and every aspect of its mechanical and safety functions to keep it flying, so he knew what he was talking about! Crew Chiefs were highly regarded because of the huge responsibility they carried, and the pilots treated them like gold because their lives depended on them keeping their aircraft in the air!

I followed my new Tech Sergeant friend up the ramp into the belly of the C-130, like the rest of the “cargo” on board. As we squeezed past the boxes and crates, a voice from somewhere in the over-packed aircraft yelled out “keep moving forward,” and as we did, the walkway got even smaller. It was like trying to find your way through a Walmart warehouse located in the belly of a killer whale. The poor Tech Sergeant was bumping up against everything we passed with his large framed body.

“They got too much junk on the plane,” he muttered out as he continued to scrape by the large wooden containers.

I asked, “If this aircraft is so bad, why are you on it?”

As we shuffled forward, he told me he had to take this cargo flight out because he was trying to make a connecting flight in Taiwan to Tokyo, Japan where his wife was waiting for him. He also informed me in his minute to minute observations, that if this wasn’t the last flight out, he *would never have taken it!*

Just when I felt I couldn’t be more apprehensive, I saw it! Smack dab in the middle of the cargo bay was a huge B-52 jet engine.

At the side of this alien-like engine, with its hundreds of tubes, pipes, bolts, wires and “things” sticking out all over, there was about five feet or less between it and the right side of the airplane. There also was nowhere for the Sergeant and I to go. We were now at the front wall of the airplane!

I stood with my friend, staring at the million-ton object between me and the side of this thin-metal-skinned C-130 that had no insulation and no seats.

“Will we have to stand the whole way to Taiwan?” I blurted out.

The Tech Sergeant turned and smiled at me (actually the first time I saw him without a frown).

“No problem” he said. “The Air Force provides everything”.

He bent over and pulled down a rail that was attached to the wall of the aircraft and formed a sideways seat that resembled a lawn chair with inter-woven straps wrapped around it. They looked like the same straps that were holding down the monstrous engine which we were now facing as we sat down.

As the turbo-prop engines on the plane started up and we taxied down the long runway, the Tech Sergeant uttered another word of encouragement.

“It’ll be a miracle if this thing gets off the ground!”

With my eyes as wide as saucers, I stared out the small porthole type window between me and the Sarge and, for a few minutes or so, I thought he might be right. It seemed like only a split second from when I felt the wheels leave the runway until we were over the water and rising slowly (and I mean slowly).

When we reached cruising altitude, which didn’t seem that high, I could still see some boats in the ocean below me and they weren’t that small. The Tech Sergeant got up and squeezed past me and the engine. He never said where he was going but I assumed it was to find more things wrong with the plane, since he seemed to love negativity. On the other hand, I was still scared to death on this very cold, very loud, and very rattly plane, clinging to the slim hope that since the Sergeant was wrong about getting off the ground he might also be wrong about the other stuff!

As I sat there vibrating in my seat, staring at the complicated sculpture-like metal work on the side of the engine, I felt the C-130 drop its right wing.

"Oh my God, we've lost power and we're going down" I thought.

Then I realized we were only making a right turn. But then, just as my heart started to bet once again, I saw the impossible. As the turn pushed me up against the webbed seat I was strapped into, I saw the million-ton engine in front of me *move*! I was screaming inside my head, "Hey, straighten this plane out!" But even though my mouth was open, nothing came out.

Then I heard a low creaking sound as the C-130 dipped to the right even further. The engine moved again!

I closed my eyes and could see the clear vision of that engine breaking loose of its restraints and crashing through the side of the airplane with me still in my seat, arms wrapped around the irregular shaped pipes and tubes on that machine as we both plummeted to the ocean below.

"Ah!"

I felt something hit me. This was it. I had actually seen my fate. But then I opened my eyes to see the Tech Sergeant, hand on my shoulder, saying "Hey kid, want somethin' to eat?"

With my stomach still in my throat, it took me a few minutes to realize I was still alive and yes, hungry. It's funny how, at that age, terror has very little to do with your appetite. Maybe this flight isn't so bad after all, I thought, as the Sergeant handed me a strange looking box. I was once again overly optimistic.

As I looked for a way to open it, I heard the Sarge say, "K-Rations" and watched him pull out even more strange looking objects from his box. As he described the contents in each can, I noticed the packaging date on the side of the box - 1947. What?! That was when I was born, twenty years ago.

I didn't realize I had made this comment out loud until the Sergeant said "Yep, it's amazing being able to keep food good for that long". Then he looked over as he held up what looked like a piece of dried beef jerky and waved it at me and said "Saved a lot of our boys during the big war".

Like most of his statements, I was starting to doubt some of his wisdom when that voice we kept hearing announced, "strap in, we're going to have to shut down one of our engines!"

Just when I was convinced the Sergeant had been exaggerating, I saw him shaking his head in an "I told you so" manner as he ignored the order and walked toward the cockpit.

A few minutes later he returned to braggingly inform me we had an oil pressure problem and were flying in this overloaded C-130 with not only one engine down but bad weather ahead!

I watched the "Sarge" eat all the unrecognizable contents in his K-Rations and then eat mine too as we bounced, shook and rattled through the storm.

Finally, when the sun once again appeared through the small window between us, I could see we were flying even lower than when we had taken off, but my attitude had changed. If we crashed into the ocean, so what! If it didn't bother the Sergeant, I wasn't going to let it bother me. It's not that I had become brave. It's just that I didn't give a damn any more. I was tired of worrying so I thought to myself, "Whatever happens, happens!"

It seems I must have adopted this attitude from my new friend and it worked. We landed in Taiwan without further incident. The last words I heard from the Tech Sergeant as we went our separate ways was, "Son, now don't you ever be afraid to fly on those C-130's, they're one hell of an airplane!"

Now why couldn't he have told me this in the first place!

I would be flying on many more C-130's before I left the Far East. They were definitely the work horse of the Air Force and the Sergeant was right, one hell of a dependable aircraft.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Taiwan was a very unique island. On my short time off, I remember thinking how almost everyone I saw wore some kind of uniform, whether a factory worker, student, store clerk, bus driver, or street cleaner. It also seemed much more crowded than Okinawa. I saw a young man on a bicycle get sideswiped by a car that flung him to the pavement and no one stopped to help him. Finally, a man came out of the store he was laying in front of and waved down a police officer for assistance, but everyone else passed him by like he wasn't even there.

I'm sure there were many caring people in Taiwan but with my long hours working on the base, I had little time to see very much. I was a man on a mission, and that was to set up their graphic art department as fast as I possibly could and get back! I was determined not to miss my chance to meet Bob Hope.

As you may now be aware, after 37 years, it's hard to remember many of the names of the officers, airmen and brief friends I encountered during my tour of duty, but I do remember many of the people by the nicknames I gave them. Captain "Smiley" is just one of those people.

He was the Art Department Supervisor on Taiwan and all he seemed to do was walk by the graphic department room, look in at me setting up drafting tables, chairs, filing cabinets and wall chart samples, smile at me and then leave. He never said a word until the last day I was finishing up and ready to head back to Okinawa, in time to meet Bob. I was summoned to his office via a small note taped on my desk.

Still smiling, he motioned me to sit down as I heard him speak for the first time.

"What a great job you are doing Sergeant Sambataro. I have been in charge of Graphic Art Departments for eight years now and you're the best and fastest I've ever seen." When I attempted to explain the reason for my speedy enthusiasm, he cut me off with, "How can I get you assigned here?"

My mouth dropped.

"Assigned here?" I repeated in disbelief.

"Yes, I've got to have you on my staff."

I just stared at his permanent smile as my mind reeled. This was definitely a super compliment but, not only did I *not* want to be relocated; I wanted to get back to Kadena as soon as possible!

Again, before I could form words to somehow gracefully bow out, he stood up, still smiling, and declared "I'll call your Commander immediately and convince him to let me have you!"

I felt like a prize fish being caught by Captain Smiley, with no hope of getting off the hook. And even though I was considered a prize, I was still a fish not wanting to change ponds.

With the Graphic Department finished and my job done, I had time to inquire about my dilemma. I raced to the personnel department and showed my orders to the supervisor. Shaking his head, he handed them back to me saying, "According to this, you have an open return date". He paused and looked up at me with a grin. "There's nothing keeping you here."

I thanked him profusely and bolted out the door. I was going to say I packed my gear, but it was more like stuffed my clothes into my nap sack and ran to the airport. Unclutching my now totally wrinkled orders, I presented them to the airman behind the desk. He took my escape papers and disappeared into the back room.

Finally, after about twenty minutes or so, he came back out shaking his head and said "I don't get it!"

"Get what? I fired back.

He said, "Your orders give you permission to leave any time you want, but I've got your name on a 'holding list' forbidding you to depart."

I realized Captain Smiley had something to do with this, so I told it must be a clerical error and that I must be on a plane back to Okinawa today!

With his Flight Officer out to lunch, he told me I would have to wait. I was determined to get back to my base and meet Bob Hope but how could I get out when I had been blacklisted by Captain Smiley. He didn't seem so nice anymore.

As I pondered what I would say to the Flight Officer when he returned, two Navy men who were waiting for flights also, approached me.

"Hey, if you're trying to get back to Okinawa, you might try the Naval Air Station," the tall sailor whispered. "Any military orders from any branch can get you on a flight out."

I thanked them with a covert handshake while peering back at the Airman behind the desk. I slowly made my way to the door, when the shorter Navy man ran over to me and whispered in my ear, "There's a shuttle that leaves for the Naval Air Station every two hours from the Base Operations Building".

With a quick salute of thanks, I was out the door and headed for the Operations Building. Within the hour I was on the shuttle to the Naval Air Base.

The Navy guys were right. I had no trouble with my orders there and could get on any flight out I wanted. The only problem was there were no flights to Okinawa until late the next day, unless I wanted to take a flight to Thailand and catch a connecting flight from there to Okinawa that day. I was not

in a waiting mood so I jumped on the plane to Thailand and got out.

As I looked out the window at the tiny island of Taiwan below, I wondered what Captain Smiley was thinking when he realized I was gone. I never heard from him again, so I'll never know. Perhaps that's a good thing!

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FOURTH KIND

Taking military aircraft from base to base is not exactly like scheduling a civilian flight. Although they do post departure times, it didn't seem to matter if they actually take off at that time. When I finally arrived in Thailand (a beautiful country) and caught my connecting flight out to Okinawa, it took all day and night before I was on my way.

I landed at Kadena late the next day after several stops to drop off cargo and personnel. The Bob Hope Show was over. I had missed the whole thing!

That evening I walked up on the empty stage that was not yet disassembled and stood in the center. Now there are encounters of the "First Kind," actually meeting the celebrity; encounters of the "Second Kind," shaking a celebrities hand; encounters of the "Third Kind," being in the presence of, and seeing the celebrity; and then there are encounters of the "Fourth Kind." That was my encounter, which was standing on the exact spot a celebrity once stood! It was a close as I ever got to Bob Hope, but I wasn't bitter. The next day I received a phone call from that red-haired girl at the USO who told me "Bob Hope really liked your character painting of him!"

And that was reward enough for me.

J.S., PHONE HOME

I felt very fortunate that during the Vietnam War I was not in combat; however that didn't mean one was totally out of harm's way. Most people don't realize how many military non-combatants are killed during a war by mishaps and accidents. With so many young personnel so close to, and handling, explosives and munitions, it's a wonder casualties were not higher.

I did witness several grizzly incidents which I chose not to reiterate in this book, including a trip I made to see my old friend from back in Chester whose family had the funeral home down the block from us. He was now an undertaker in the Army and, let's just say that after visiting him, I saw the war in a whole new light.

On the lighter side, I had the distinct honor (and for \$20) of creating and drawing many "short time calendars" for my fellow airmen. These were large color renderings of bikini clad girls with thirty strategically placed squares running all over their body.

"Short Timers," as depicted by my calendars, had only thirty days left in the Air Force, or thirty days before they went back to the States. Large Xs filled in the squares, leaving the empty ones that proudly displayed how many days the airman had left.

One such calendar I drew was for Staff Sergeant Neal, not just another "Short Timer" but also supervisor at the Main Communications Headquarters Building. (That's the little white building at every base that has hundreds of multicolored antennas sticking up from the roof).

When Sergeant Neal told me he could get me free phone calls back to the U.S., I immediately dropped my \$20 fee. With the time difference, I had to show up at the Communications Center at 3AM in order to get an area code operator in the U.S. to dial my phone number, which was afternoon back home.

One night, as I was sitting at the switchboard waiting for the U.S. operator to dial my home phone number, I heard a huge explosion and the entire building shook. Then, a split second later, even a louder explosion, and this time even the floor shook.

My first thought was that we were being bombed, but, *by whom!* The Vietnamese had no Air Force, let alone bombers so what the . . .

Before I knew it, Sergeant Neal hand yanked off my ear phones, grabbed the back of my chair, and pushed me across the room away from the switchboard, which was now lit up like a Christmas tree.

I just sat there in amazement as Sergeant Neal fielded hundreds of emergency calls, pulling wires in and out and flipping switches on and off. Finally, as the incoming calls slowed down, Sergeant Neal turned to me and said, "You will have to leave now. No more calls tonight!"

As I got up and opened the door to leave, Sergeant Neal once again turned to me and said, "We had a crash. A B-52 just exploded while landing and . . ." He never finished as the switchboard began to light up once again.

When I walked out of the building, I could smell smoke and jet fuel directly across from me and all down the runway were small fires and debris. At the far end of the runway was a huge fire.

The next day I found out that indeed, a B-52 bomber crashed on landing and exploded. The crew was killed except for the tail gunner who was saved when the back of the plane broke off on impact.

Even the guards at the far end of the runway were killed, along with several maintenance men in vehicles just off the flight line.

I didn't know any of the crewmen or airmen that lost their lives that night but felt very depressed for several days as I viewed the crash site and the huge black hole at the end of the runway. But it wasn't until I was flying out on one of my

TDY assignments and saw the area from above that my heart stopped for a second. Directly beneath me, only a few yards across from a large black hole where the B-52 first crashed, was a familiar site – the small white Communications building where I was sitting only a few nights ago!

I asked Sergeant Neal if he felt lucky, considering how close we were to the crash. He told me he never thought about it one way or the other, but one night I saw him standing on a pile of debris not yet hauled away, looking back at the Communications Center (only a few yards away) and I knew, he felt lucky too!

ZODIACS & XYLOPHONES

Being a man of music, Ken and I agreed that “musical expression” was the one thing missing from our room. We had almost everything else, including a house boy. This was a young Okinawan boy who, for \$5 a month, would clean your room, do your laundry (including ironing your uniforms), polish your shoes, and run errands. Now, before you feel sorry for this young chap, you must realize that he serviced an entire floor, which was about eighty airmen or so, for about \$400 a month total. Most families in Okinawa at that time made about \$55 a month, so being a houseboy was a coveted job.

One evening at the NCO Club, I noticed an electric vibraphone (or xylophone) up against the hallway wall. With no one around, I plugged it in and started to plunk out some melodies on it. It had a great sound, and the keys were the same as on a piano, so I knew several tunes.

The more I remembered, the louder I played until finally, the restaurant manager unplugged me.

“Sorry” I said.

He smiled and asked, “Looking for a musical gig?”

“No,” I answered immediately, “Just playing around.”

The manager told me I didn’t sound half-bad, but he was looking for someone to either play this thing or take it off

his hands. Apparently some group owed the club money when they didn't show up to play several nights, and to make good on their debt, they left a guitar and vibraphone as payment.

"How much you want for it?" I asked, thinking it was probably worth at least \$900.

"I'd take \$75 just to get it out of my hallway!"

"Sold!" I shouted out and handed him three twenties, a ten and my last five dollars.

With Ken on the bongos (a gift from one of his overnight girlfriends), and me on the vibes, we bought music to our room. Not everyone on our floor agreed that Ken and I actually made music, but after a few beers, no one seemed to care. One night as I was searching for the melody to "Catch a Falling Star," several of my friends broke into my music studio and insisted I stop the noise and accompany them to the A&W off base.

Now, where most of them lived in the U.S. they had an A&W Root Beer stand in their neighborhood. I didn't, so I had no idea what it was all about.

As you probably know, A&W was simply a hamburger joint and hangout, so to shut down my musical rehearsals, they treated me to dinner. A&W was at the top of a hill overlooking the base. It was a beautiful location, especially at night, with all the colored lights from the airport runways.

As I sat there slurping on my root beer soda, I saw it!

"Hey guys, do you see it?"

They looked at me as though I were on drugs.

"Hey look."

It was definitely a UFO and it was coming right over our heads with strange flashing lights and a weird shaped black body. When I looked back at the guys, they were on the ground laughing.

"What?" I shrugged.

"That's not a UFO, you idiot," one of them said. "It's the SR-71."

"But they're top secret and not supposed to be here," I said.

"We know," the other one answered, "but someone forgot to tell the Air Force."

I couldn't believe it, this was a secret spy plane that was reported not in use in the Far East, yet all you had to do was drive down Highway 1 to the end of the runway and watch them fly in and out of Kadena. They said you could throw change on the runway and from thousands of feet up they could photograph it and tell the difference between quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies. The SR-71 was definitely cool, but if anyone asks, it wasn't at *my* base!

After my failed UFO experience, one of the waitresses at the A&W said she believed in UFO's and not to feel bad, I would probably eventually see one. I'm not sure if that made me feel better or worse!

She went on to point out my zodiac sign from by birth date, Pisces (March 15th) and predicted a really good thing would happen in my near future.

Well, maybe something positive would come out of this A&W / UFO evening after all, but I was pretty sure it wouldn't be a career playing the xylophone!

THE BIG BROWN BOX

I was now working on my own short-time calendar as my tour of duty in the Far East was coming to an end. I had three months left on Okinawa and a total of nine months left on active duty, which meant I would be reassigned to another S.A.C. Air Force Base stateside for the remaining six months.

This time I was not very concerned where they would send me because after eighteen months at Kadena, my time left to serve seemed very, very short!

My squadron commander Colonel Williams was also being reassigned, but he knew where his new job would be,

the Pentagon in Washington D.C., and a promotion in rank to Brigadier General (one star).

It also seemed fitting that I was asked to do a portrait of him as a thank you from all the airmen that served under his command and loved him.

By the end of the month, I had Colonel Williams' portrait finished and was not only proud at how well it turned out, but also at having served for such a nice human being. My feelings were not alone, as the Colonel's farewell party boasted the largest turnout that anyone could remember.

I also felt proud that my painting went over so well, especially with the Colonel's wife, who leaned over to me during the ceremony and whispered in my ear, "It's the best portrait I've ever seen!"

Considering that I had never been to an art school, I was thrilled.

With about sixty days left, I turned my attention to the "big brown box" that occupied the small rusty metal table that sat at the end of the hallway by my office. On the front side of it was a large white, crooked label that read, "Uncle Sam Wants Your Ideas!"

I never did take the time to figure out what ideas Uncle Sam could possibly want from me, so I decided to read the small print below which said, "Any idea that can save the Air Force money, you will be rewarded for."

A *reward* I thought. Now that's something I could waste my time on.

I know your thinking, there's nothing in this book so far that indicates that I like to waste time. And you would be right, but, since my replacement had already arrived, and the new Commander was just getting started, there wasn't much work.

I love problem solving, which I guess if you think about it, is exactly what artists do. You start out with a blank canvas and spend hours trying to create an image, and during this process, you are constantly problem solving.

During my career in the Air Force, I had come up with several ways of doing something better and more efficient, but what idea would actually save the military *lots* of money?

It didn't take me long once I put my attention to it, to identify an ongoing problem in the Graphic Art Department literally right under our noses!

In those days, briefing slides were about 8x10 inches. The original graphics were drawn out on sheets of vellum paper in black. By placing the vellum on coated acetate (clear plastic) film, you could transfer the image to the film by placing it in a special processing, developing machine that used ammonia fumes to etch the image onto the acetate. There were a few acetates that came in some basic colors like yellow, red, blue, green, orange and a very odd shade of purple, so the graphic artist could add some color to the slide.

Along with black, each color used would be sandwiched together to create a multicolored chart or map. This process actually worked pretty well, except on Okinawa, and that was because of the extremely high humidity which left fungus growth between the layers after only a few uses. So, they would all have to be torn apart and re-burned.

Since the Commanders insisted on colorful graphics (to impress the visiting brass) it seemed this system couldn't be changed. Now, see if you can guess what I came up with?

I often tell young artists not to limit themselves to their favorite medium or specialty. Just because they like oil painting doesn't mean they should avoid trying watercolor or even designing a graphic logo in ink. It has always been clear to me that all areas of creativity and techniques overlap and can enhance the other.

Thus was the answer in this case. By loving to paint, I was able to apply "color mixing" techniques and realized by combining knowledge of specific color acetates, I could create the same colors that were being "added" to the slide. For instance, instead of adding green, I would design the blue and yellow to overlap in those areas we need green, and eliminate

one whole complete 8x10 acetate. Since this technique also worked for other combinations such as orange (red and yellow) and purple (blue and red), I could do a “full color” slide by using a maximum of one black and three color acetates (red, yellow and blue).

This saved an average of at least three acetates per slide, not counting the man hours to produce and develop each one.

It took several weeks to record and provide samples to submit, but once I was finished, I was amazed to learn from the bookkeeping department that my idea would save the Air Force over \$100,000 a year on average just on our base alone.

Wow, I couldn't wait to find out how much money *my* reward would be! Sergeant Segar told me it may take awhile to find out. Despite the fact that I was saving the Air Force lots of money, nothing in the military, paper-wise, went fast.

He was right. I received my “reward” in the form of a letter of accommodation, promoting me to Staff Sergeant, to be effective in ninety days. This meant I would be Staff Sergeant for a whopping three months before my active duty release! Sergeant Segar said I should feel proud, but all I could think of was, “Where's the Cash?” or as Tom Cruise would say, “Show me the Money!”

You'd think if I saved the Air Force that much money, they would share a little bit with me, but in the service, it didn't work that way, so, I would just have to look forward to becoming a four-striper (Staff Sergeant) at my new base. Little did I know I wouldn't get either!

GOING HOME

With only two weeks left on Okinawa, and with the clout of my pending promotion, I was informed by the personnel office that I had a choice of base assignments – S.A.C.

Headquarters, Offutt, Nebraska, or Sacramento, California. Now let me think, the frozen tundra or sunny California!

The next day, as I was packing my sunglasses, the duty clerk told me I had a long distance phone call, and I couldn't believe who it was. Colonel Williams's wife, (now Brigadier General) called to tell me how much she appreciated my work on her husband's portrait and if there was anything she could do for me?

I went blank. Now what could a Brigadier General's wife, whose husband was head of personnel at the Pentagon, possibly do for me?

Two days later I got called back to the personnel office and was informed I had received a special "Early Out" and was released from active duty immediately, and was to begin final processing!

I couldn't believe it! She had gotten me an early release from the Air Force in just two days after our phone conversation. Again, it was amazing what rank and contacts could do in the military.

Many of my friends promised to stay in touch and we would get together back in the States, but the only one who kept that promise was (you guessed it) Ken Weese, the best roommate ever.

As my plane landed back in the United States, I realized that I would miss Ken and miss the Air Force. I would never get to Sacramento and never sew on my Staff Sergeant stripes, but it all seemed worth it now that I had earned by tuition to art school, and I was anxious to start my new journey.

But *where* to start? Most of my family had moved out of the poorer areas of Philadelphia to much nicer homes in New Jersey and Delaware. I decided to unpack my sunglasses and return to Maine where I remembered an advertising art agency that might hire me until I could find an art school.

As much as I disliked winter, I couldn't believe I was heading back to Bangor, Maine. But something inside told me

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS 4252D STRATEGIC WING (SAC)
APO SAN F ANCSO 96239

30 October 1969

Letter of Reference (Sgt Joseph R. Sambataro)

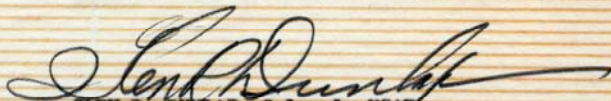
TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Sergeant Joseph R. Sambataro is a young, gregarious and energetic individual. His imagination, coupled with his artistic talent, produces outstanding results.

He participates actively in Zero Defects, Awards and Cost Reduction programs. Sgt Sambataro recently submitted a Cost Reduction suggestion to save the Air Force \$9,000 annually in the manufacture of view slides used daily at Maintenance meetings. Hampered by equipment shortages and a reduction in manning only acted as an incentive to devise new and ingenious methods of production. The improved techniques developed by Sgt Sambataro have added significantly to the quality and quantity of the end product.

Sgt Sambataro taught basic art at the Kadena Youth Center once a week and gave lectures at the Catholic Christian School to groups of young people, covering such subjects as art, marriage and problems facing the youth of today. He takes an active interest in his church and devotes much of his free time to church activities.

Sgt Sambataro will be leaving the Air Force upon his return to the CONUS and his departure, not only from this Wing but from the Air Force, will be our loss. Sergeant Sambataro will be a credit to any organization he may become associated with.



GLEN R. DUNLAP, Colonel, USAF
Deputy Commander for Maintenance



Insignia design

it was the right choice, even if I would have to defrost my art brushes in order to paint!

CHAPTER TEN

ART

AND THE REAL WORLD

I sent for applications to a couple of art schools I knew were very good – Philadelphia School of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, and the New York School of the Arts. I wanted to get a job doing some kind of art until I decided on a school and the new academic year didn't start for another ten months.

I put on my best suit coat and slacks and on an early Monday morning, headed out to the Tom Kane Advertising Agency, only a few blocks from my tiny apartment in Bangor. As I walked up the steps and through large leaded glass doors, I was awestruck by the beautiful and striking artwork that covered the walls, everything from full color illustrations to brilliantly designed posters. These guys were good!

Now, you might think I would be totally intimidated, but for some reason, all I could think of was how much I wanted to be a part of this high class agency and be around all this talent. I felt at home.

I took a seat in the small, empty waiting room. There was no receptionist in sight and I wasn't about to wander around on my own. I was glad I was the only one waiting because it made me feel there was no competition, and then I realized, competition for *what*! It's not like they had a "Help

Wanted” sign in the window, or even an ad in the newspaper asking for new young artists. But it felt like the thing to do, so there I was, with my portfolio on my lap, patiently waiting for an interview *I didn't even have!*

A tall, good looking man in a neatly pressed three-piece suit came out of one of the offices and in midstride, stopped and leaned back as he saw me.

“Can I help you?” he asked in a friendly voice.

“Are you Mr. Tom Kane” I asked.

“He’s been dead for years,” he replied. “I’m Norman Martin and I own this crazy place.”

I said immediately, “I’m Joe Sambataro and I would love to work at this ‘crazy place!’”

He smiled and motioned me into his office. I leaped up with my portfolio in hand and sprinted into his office.

“Take a seat young man and show me what you got.”

I nervously unzipped my case only to see all my drawings and assorted artwork fall out all over the floor. I frantically bent down to gather them up when I heard, “leave them there”. Oh no, he thinks they’re trash and belong on the floor.

Mr. Martin stood up and pulled aside one of the chairs. “Good view from here,” he went on. “Best to look at art from a short distance.” With that, I got down on the floor and moved each piece around for him to see clearly. When he was finished, he helped me put my art back into my case and sat down.

“You’re very good,” he said, but just as I was starting to feel good about myself, he continued, “Haven’t had any formal art training, have you?”

My heart dropped.

“No,” I replied, and sank back into my chair.

Mr. Martin went on to tell me that art school, and even a degree, was a minimal requirement for any professional artist position and Tom Kane Advertising was no exception.

As he continued to talk, my blood left my body and I felt totally empty inside as I realized not only the importance of school, but how far I had to go to be a professional like him. He led me around the agency and introduced me to the two artists that were in his employment. One was about twenty years older than me, Chuck Cronin, the other about ten years older, Wilbur Bullock. I saw a beautiful illustration of a new car that was going to be used as a focal point in a full-color ad for a local automobile dealership. The younger artist, Wilbur, had just finished it and I was impressed by the details, and especially the surface reflections he was able to capture.

I heard a little voice in the back of my head that said, "You could do that, (with a bit of practice), you could do it!" A glimpse of hope and self confidence crept back into me and I asked how long it took him to paint that, pointing to the car.

He smiled and answered, "I started it yesterday. It was due for ad-copy today."

My breathing stopped and I realized for the first time in my young life the difference between "having talent" and being a professional artist. I knew even if I could simulate his car illustration, it would have taken me at least a week to get it right!

Like a child who has been told to leave the grownups and go to his room, I slowly meandered my way back to Mr. Martin's office. I was amazed at how much time he was taking with me and I felt he liked me, but I also knew I had nowhere near the training needed to ask for a job as an artist. Then it hit me – what about an assistant, like an "apprentice."

I boldly suggested this new scenario, my hopes once again renewed. He smiled warmly at me and shook his head.

"Joe," he started out, "there are three major art colleges within two and a half hours of here. I get a minimum of twenty calls a day from art students during the months following graduation." Norman stood up and sat next to me on the desk. "I have two staff artists who, as you can see, are excellent, but at a small agency like mine, it's all I can do to

keep them busy.” He rose and folded his arms while smiling at me once again. “I would love to have the clientele and volume of work to hire you, even as an apprentice. Someone with the raw talent and enthusiasm as yourself, but, (he sits back down) I just don’t have the money!”

It’s funny, of all the things that Mr. Martin just said, the one thing that rang out in my brain was the word “money!” I heard myself yell out, “I’ll work for *free*!” Did I just say free? Was I out of my mind!

All I knew was that I had to work in a creative/art environment, even if I was sharpening pencils or emptying trash baskets.

I repeated myself. “I’ll work for free.” I caught my breath and said, “I’ll do whatever you need, all the little things your artists won’t have to waste their valuable time on.”

Mr. Martin seemed stunned, then asked, “Why would you work for nothing?”

I immediately answered in the most desperate voice, “Because I spent almost four years of my life in the Air Force just waiting for a chance like this.” Before he could respond, I went on, “I know I need to go to art school, but I can’t start for another eight or nine months and this experience will give me a chance to see what it is really like being a professional on a day to day basis.” Not taking another breath, I continued, “It would be nice to know what it’s like in the real ‘art world’ before I spend another four years in school!”

Mr. Martin stared at me for at least three minutes before he answered, “You’re the most impressive young man I’ve ever met, but . . .”

When I heard the word “but,” I started to get up to leave. After all, it wasn’t fair of me to keep rattling on about my ambitions and not realize he had limitations and commitments too. After all, he couldn’t have been nicer or more honest with me and I had already taken up almost two hours of his precious time.

“Wait, where are you going?” Mr. Martin leaped from his chair and said, “I’m not finished yet. I will hire you starting on a part-time basis, (I couldn’t believe my ears), “but,” (there was that word again) “I *will* be paying you. No artist of *mine* works for free!!”

Mr. Norman Martin turned out to be one of the most talented and remarkable men I have ever met in my entire life. He told me he couldn’t believe I would work for free just to be in an art environment, and was so impressed he just had to squeeze me into the agency somehow. I have been eternally grateful to him all these years because not only did he give me my first chance, he opened the door to the realities as a professional, its high standards, and its self disciplines. He was a mentor, and a father figure, and I loved him.

For the first three months I was, in fact, a gofer, but as luck would have it, the older artist, Chuck Cronin, left his employment to move to Portland where he was going to head-up a commercial art department at a large advertising agency.

Norman hated to see him leave, but was a little relieved at the same time, because business was slow and his lead artist commanded a hefty salary. I was also worried about my minor position being eliminated, when Mr. Martin called me into his office the following week. I was braced for the worst!

In his most presidential voice, Mr. Martin informed me that he was not replacing his artist, even though with only him and one full time illustrator, there probably would be a small amount of work overflow. He decided to put me on full time and give me simple art projects he felt I could handle.

Was I hearing him right? Did I just get hired as a staff artist? I was taken into an empty office.

“You can set up your stuff in here,” Norman said as he pointed around the room. “Get some art supplies and clean off that drawing table, and be ready to work tomorrow.”

Wow, my own art room! I couldn’t believe it. I would still be doing my old job, but I also would have a chance to be

a real artist. I couldn't wait to get my first art assignment, but meanwhile I set up my office with the enthusiasm I had in the Air Force, only this time it was for *me*!

DON'T LOOK DOWN

I felt like the luckiest man alive as I anxiously awaited my first art assignment with the enthusiasm of a child getting his first ice cream cone.

I was given a poster design, and when I think back to all the help I received from Norman and Wilbur, I'm not sure how much of me actually showed up in the final art, but it didn't seem to matter. Their guidance and encouragement fed my confidence and I soaked up their art knowledge.

Most of the small art projects I was given were posters and flyers, with maybe a simple line art drawing for a newspaper ad, but I didn't care. To me, they were as important as if I were creating art for the White House!

Back in those days, most of the lettering was done by hand, and if you were good, you could also work as a sign painter, which paid very well. It also was a skill that was in demand, so you could always get work. Lou was the sign painter we used at the agency and he was one of the best. I would sit and watch him work for hours on a Saturday, hand lettering a large sign for one of our clients. His accuracy and precision were as amazing as the speed to which he finished the large detailed signs.

My job was to fill-in the scroll-designed border at the corners. Even though all I had to do was paint in the color between the lines (like a paint-by-number kit), Lou could complete an entire sign before I could finish just three corners!

But, by now, I was used to being around experienced professionals and didn't get as intimidated, though taking criticism on a daily basis did get me down at times until I saw a

brightly colored sign that Lou had hung permanently in his shop. It read,

“TO AVOID CRITICISM
DO NOTHING
SAY NOTHING AND
BE NOTHING!”

Another light bulb went on in my head, and I never took criticism personally again. I was so impressed by the wisdom of that sign that Lou hand lettered a small reproduction of it and gave it to me. I still have it hanging in my studio today!

Lou told me that he was a twenty year old man trapped in a seventy year old body. I never forgot that either because, as I grow older, I’m realizing exactly what he meant!

Norman took me to Squaw Mountain (in Maine) to ski for the first time. At that tender age, and after almost four years in the military, I had no fear of skiing. I was always agile and had excellent balance, so how hard could it be?

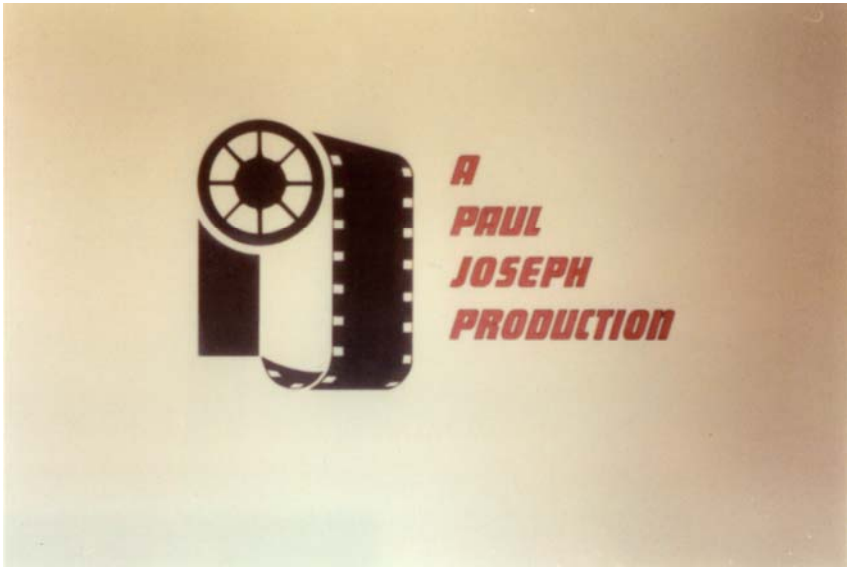
Being a terrific skier, Norman gave me some basic lessons as I tried out my borrowed equipment at the bottom of the mountain, the most important lesson being the “snow plow.” This is when you point the tips of your skis inward (like a snow plow) to slow yourself down or to stop. As I dangled my legs over the ski lift, Norman assured me I’d do well.

The view from the top was spectacular, that is, until I looked down. The slopes at the bottom of the mountain were not nearly as steep as up here, nor did they have so many trees.

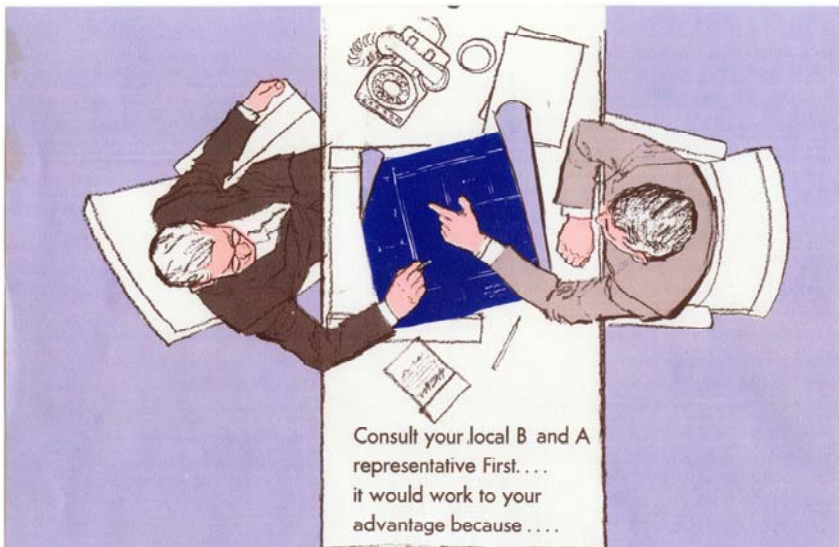
Norman told me to zigzag down the ski trail until I got the hang of it. At first, this really worked. I could control my speed and I only fell down once or twice. But as I gained my balance and more confidence, I began skiing faster.



Here I am with J. Normand Martin in 1993
(President of Tom Kane Advertising)
Even after 24 years I am still indebted to him for
his guidance and giving me my first real job in art.



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“Snow plow!” Norman shouted out, and I was able to slow myself down. That is until I was about halfway down the mountain.

I was flying down the trail like I had been skiing all my life, and was really getting the feel of it, but the better I balanced myself on the skis, the faster I was going and not noticing it. Finally, when I looked back over my shoulder and saw I was way ahead of Norman, I knew I was in trouble (like when the chain broke on my blue-lightning bicycle), only, the thing that would break now was *me*!

I was starting to panic as the trees looked like green fence posts zipping by me, then I remembered, “snow plow” to stop. Ok, I thought, I’ve done that. I slowly pointed the front of my skis inward and noticed a slight decline in my acceleration that is until I hit a patch of ice. Then I immediately sped up and was traveling faster than before. With my skis still in the “snow plow” position, I continued down the mountain in a state of suspended animation, like the coyote in a Road Runner cartoon.

Just when I thought Norman might be wrong about the emergency snow plow position, I hit soft snow and found out he *was* right, because I not only stopped skiing, I stopped all bodily functions. It must have also sounded like the cartoon “crunch, bank, crack, and thump” as I flipped over and over in the snow. They told me later that if I had borrowed the correct size skis they would have released on impact and my leg wouldn’t have been so badly bent-up!

I’m not sure what was worse, the pain in my leg, or the embarrassment of having Norman carrying me on his back down the mountain.

Unlike the chain on my bike, nothing was broken, but I was told the torn ligaments in my leg would probably take longer to heal, and after several months on crutches, they proved to be right.

Norman told me I was the funniest person he had ever seen on skis, right up until the point where I got hurt!

Eventually, I got over the injury but the embarrassment has never gone away, probably because Norman has delighted in telling that story for the last 30-some years.

RESERVE AN EASEL FOR ME!

My final art school application was to Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I found out about this school from Wilbur, who graduated from there and had a sister who was still living in Milwaukee.

Wilbur was a great artist so I was already impressed by the school, and when I researched Layton further, I also found out that it was ranked in the top five art schools in the country.

Layton also had its own, in-house scholarship program and none of the other art colleges offered this. I became very excited at a chance for a scholarship. Since it was the last school I had applied for, deadlines were becoming an issue, so I overnighted my application papers and waited anxiously.

I stared at the gold foil logo atop the crisp envelope that read Layton School of Art and Design for what seemed like hours, too nervous to open it. I had been accepted to four of the five art schools in which I applied for, but Layton felt special and I knew if they rejected me I would feel 100 times worse than the one school that did.

Norman told me most of the professional artists he knew had only been accepted to one from the dozen of art schools they applied for, and I should feel really happy, but for some reason I knew I wouldn't if the answer in this envelope was "no." Rejection is definitely one of the disciplines artists must conquer because you get a lot of it, but not in this case.

I had not only been accepted, but offered a chance for a scholarship if I could submit to their committee eighteen pieces of art, specified in the attached application. These were to be specific images that I would have to create in different mediums, such as pen and ink, watercolor, and oil. In their

words, "If the artwork you submit for our scholarship program is as good as your application art, we feel confident our committee will award you a scholarship."

I had less than thirty days to meet their deadline!!

This also meant that I would not only have to execute a total of eighteen pieces of art, but they would also have to be the *best* I've ever done!

The great thing about working with professionals was that they were used to working under pressure and deadlines, and I witnessed them produce some of their finest works of art under these very same conditions. Wilbur and Norman were tremendously encouraging and allowed me to stay late and work weekends in my studio at the agency. Since they knew what the artists on the scholarship board were looking for, their guidance and critique's were invaluable!

When I was finished, I amazed even myself at the quality and quantity of the artwork I was about to send out, and I accomplished all of this in just two weeks. Not only had I beat the deadline, it also gave me time to submit additional paintings.

I never received another one of those gold-crested envelopes again. Instead, I received a phone call from the school's Dean himself, Edward Lewandowski.

As he spoke, my mind heard another voice, like a faint whisper above his that sounded familiar. It was replaying lines I remembered from long past, "Can't see anything wrong about drawing in my catechism book! . . . How can you fail me in art when I've just won two high school state competitions! . . . But I have to be accepted into the Air Force; it's my only hope!"

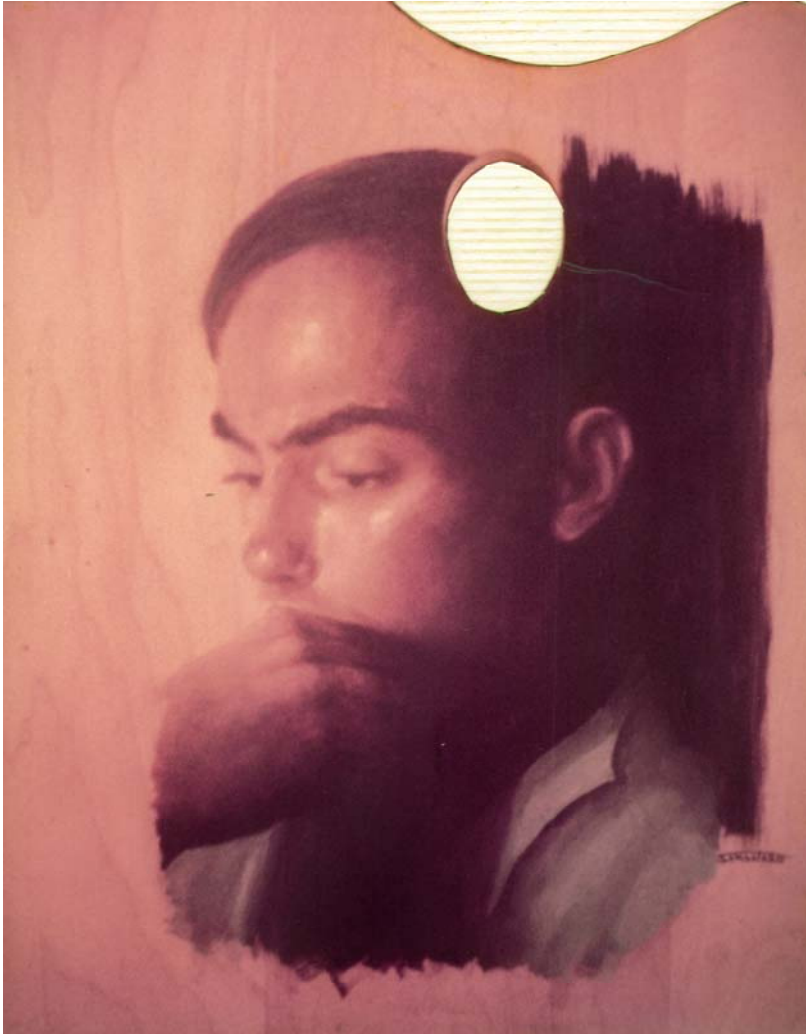
Until finally I heard, "Mr. Sambataro, Joe, did you hear me? Layton has awarded you a full four year scholarship. Congratulations!"

Of all the wonderful things that had happened to me, this was the best! All the years of hard work and struggling,

and in a split second, I finally realized I had fulfilled a dream and a goal.

And by the way, my Senior Year at Layton, I was commissioned by that very same scholarship committee to do a farewell portrait of the school's most popular President, Mr. Edward Lewandowski!

Layton School of Art (1969-1970)
Art work submitted for scholarship
The application called for art work in a variety of
media and subject matter



Self-portrait on palette



Colored Pencil



Abstract



Oil, landscape



Pen and Ink



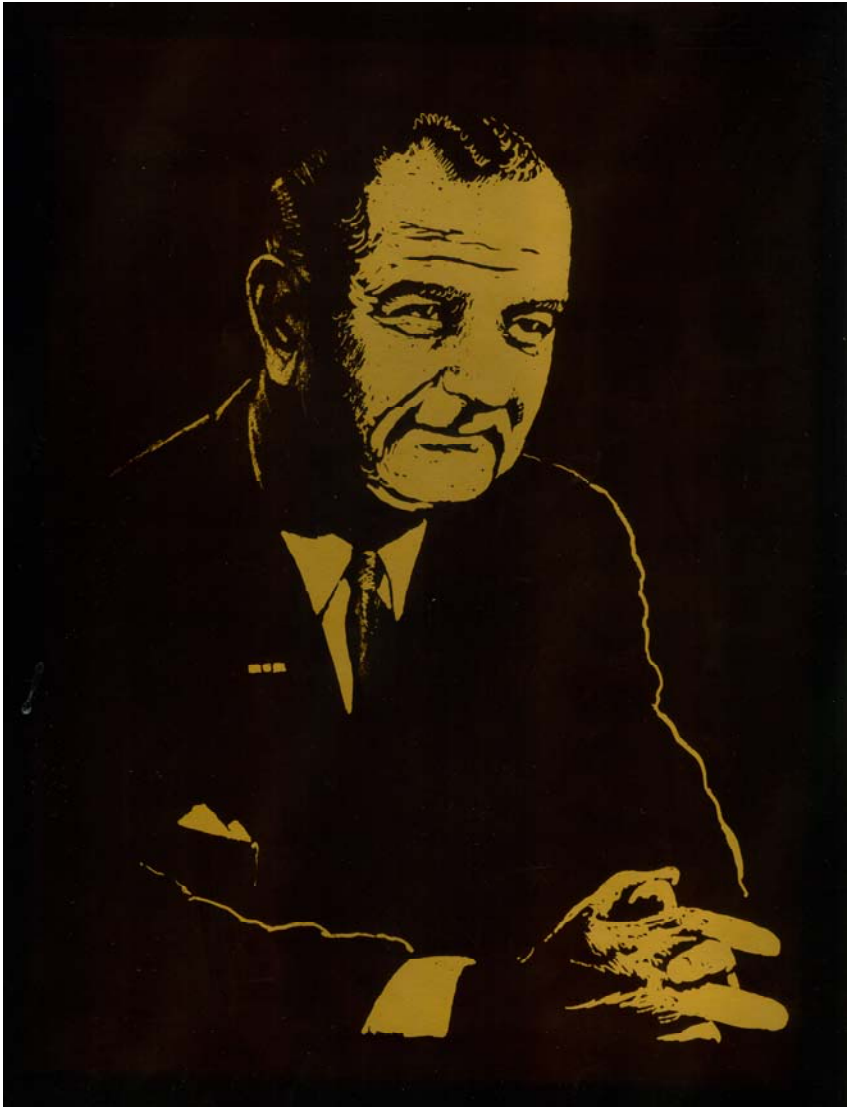
Oil, wildlife painting



Water color, Maine



Fashion drawing



Block print, LBJ

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WE'VE SAVED THE BEST TIL LAST!

It was difficult to say goodbye to Norman Martin and the Tom Kane Advertising Agency. Wilbur was also a great mentor and I learned so much, that not only did the senior commercial art graduates come to see me for tips on how to prepare their portfolios for the job market. It also allowed me to major in Fine Arts (my first love) as opposed to Commercial Art.

In those months at Tom Kane and in the Air Force, I had developed so many graphic skills I realized unless I wanted to be a Commercial Artist fulltime, I would do better taking the Fine Art Program, where I would be getting four years of intense drawing and painting.

I also was surprised to learn that my scholarship was for a BFA degree and since Layton was a private art school, my academic accreditations would be through the prestigious Marquette University, which graduated doctors from their medical program. Most creative artists don't think of themselves as academic candidates and neither did I, but as intimidated as I was I realized this was yet another opportunity and I was determined to give it my best shot!

As it turned out, the teachers at Marquette were wonderful and allowed us art students to submit drawings and paintings for extra credit. I also took elective subjects at

M.A.T.C. (Milwaukee Area Technical College) and U.W.M. (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee). I can tell you unequivocally, any student can do well with good teachers, and I'm living proof. The lowest grade I remembered in my four years of college was a B-.

My advantage was that I was a little older than the rest of my fellow students, most of which came directly from high school, not to mention the fact that I had been working for almost five years to get here! So, I was very serious and very dedicated, as opposed to many of the other students who partied almost every night and weekends.

Losing my scholarship opportunity back in high school turned out to be a blessing because of the maturity and experiences I gained. Who could have guessed at the time that Mrs. M was actually doing me a favor!

I arrived in Milwaukee like I arrived into the world, tired and wet! After driving for hours in the pouring down rain and getting quite lost, at 3AM I finally spotted the large campus sign that read "Layton School of Art and Design." It took me at least another hour to find a motel for the night. (I was so lost, it took me two years to find that motel again!)

Layton was everything I had hoped for and I am grateful for the excellent education I received there, which made it ever sadder when it closed its doors in 1974. I was in the last graduating class. Our senior motto and graduation poster read, "WE'VE SAVED THE BEST TIL LAST." But I can assure you, over the years, Layton School of Art graduated many fine artists.

Finally making it to art college, while it did close the book on the first chapter of my life, was only the beginning of a new life struggle to actually make a living as a fine artist.

Although I was well on my way, I would find many more obstacles to overcome, and discover situations art school never prepared me for – but that's another story!! (Or should I say book?)

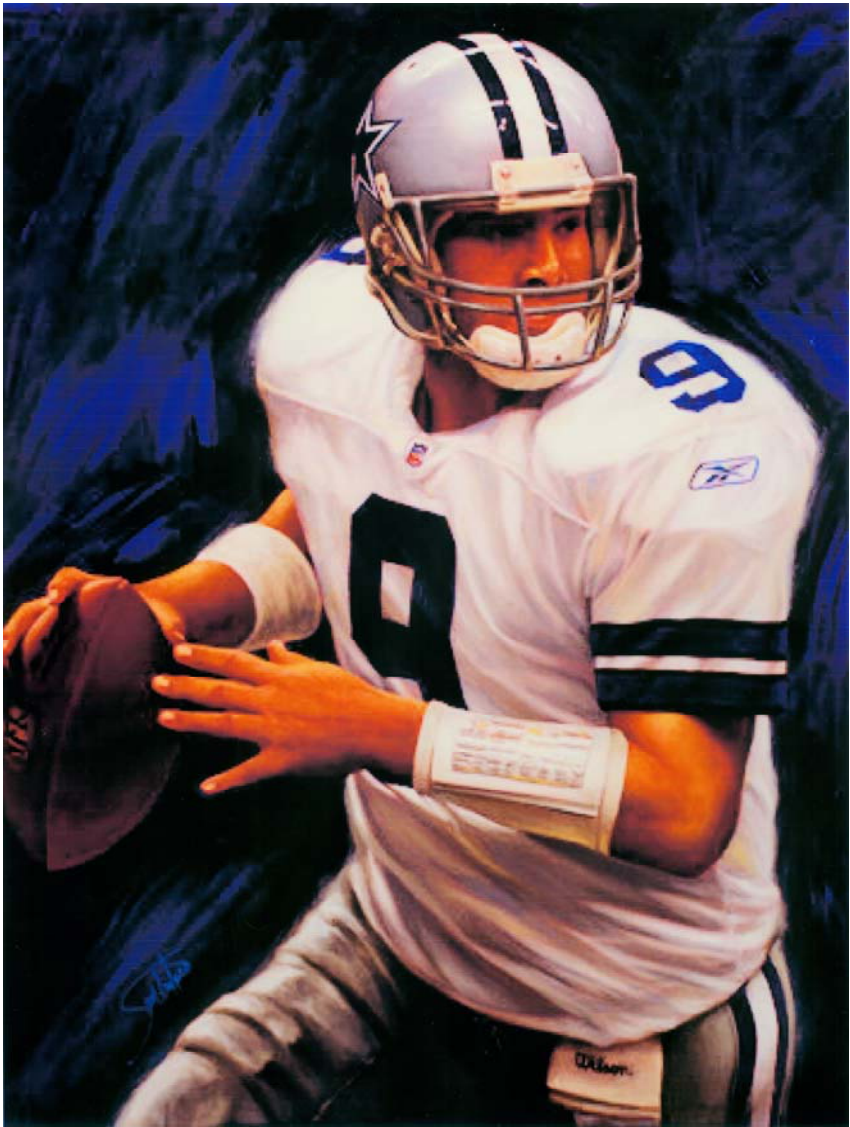
CURRENT ART WORK
By Master Artist Joe Sambataro



Shandar
Oil on canvas, 30 X 40



Portrait of wife, Karen Sambataro
Oil on canvas, 24 X 34



Tony Romo, Dallas Cowboys
Oil on canvas, 24 X 30



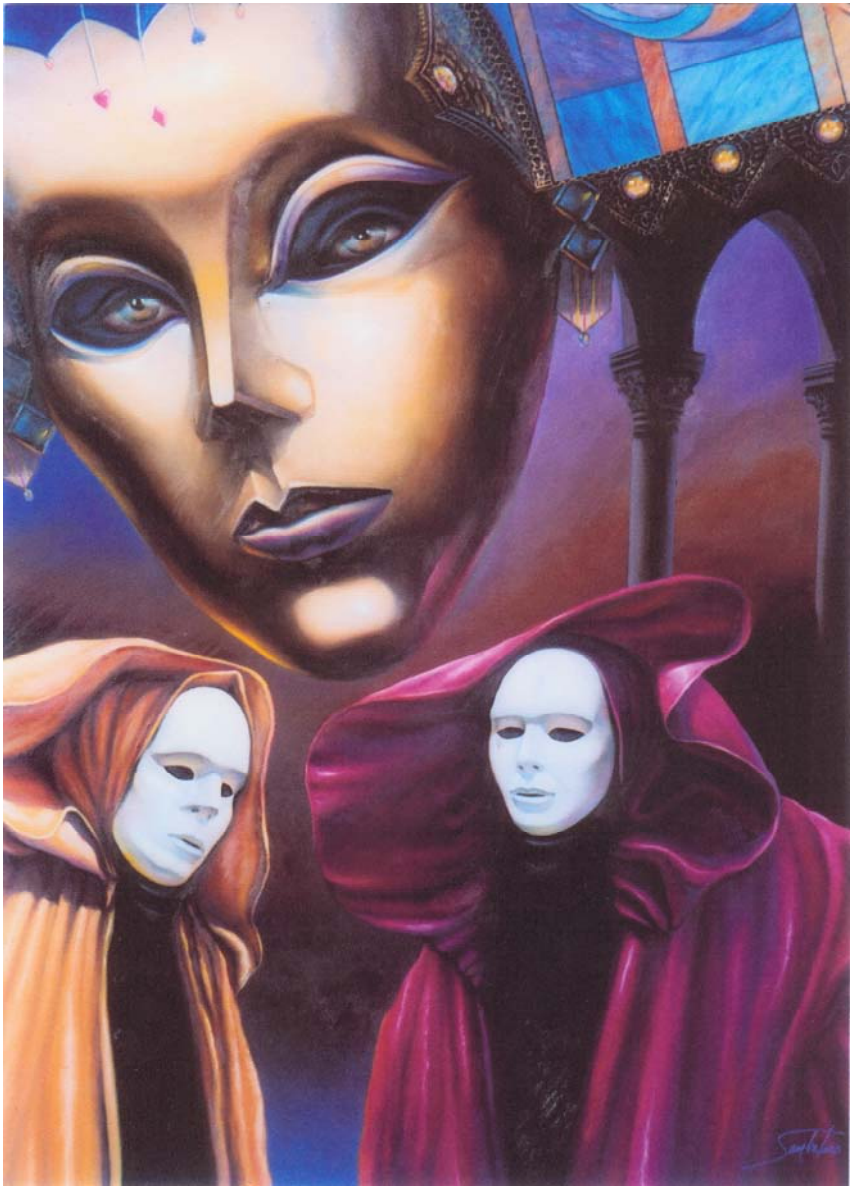
Wild Horn Ranch – Colorado
Oil on canvas, 24X36



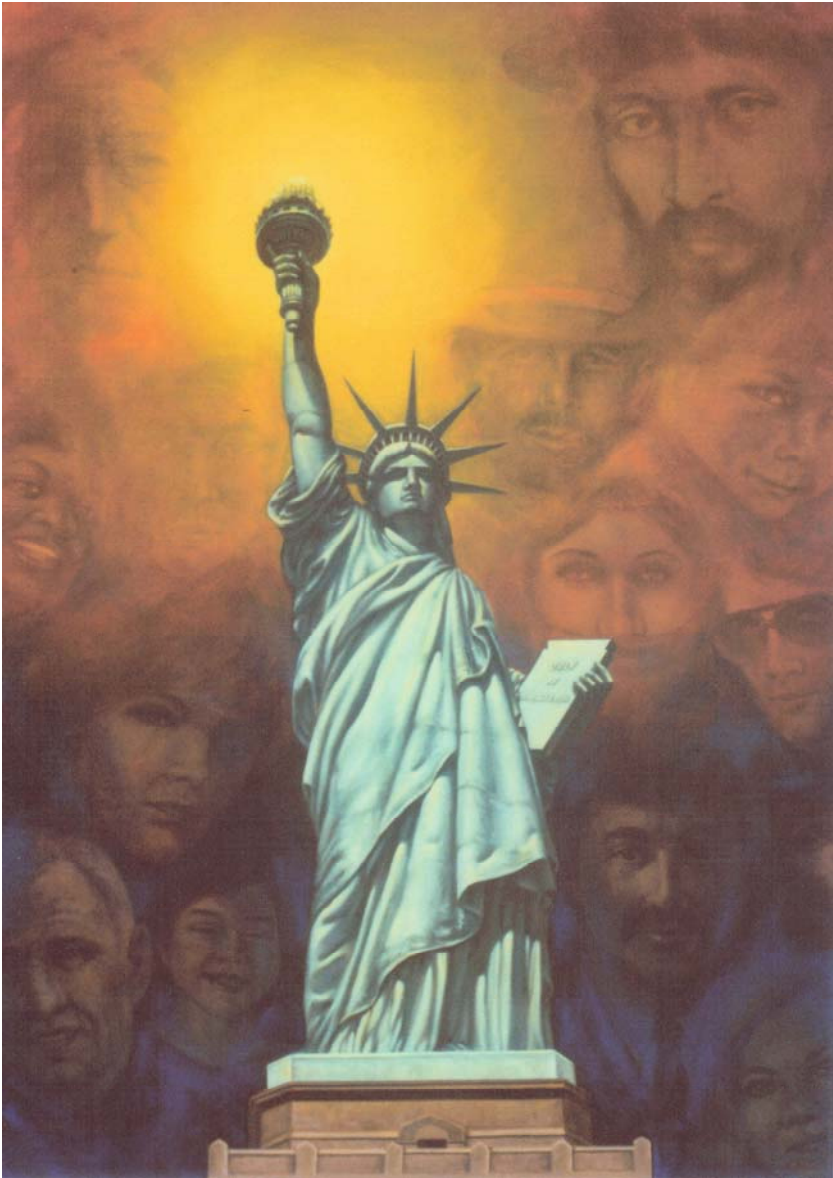
Evening Carriage Ride
Oil on canvas, 30 X 40



Doorway in France
Oil on canvas, 24 X 36



Carnival – Venice, Italy
Oil on canvas, 36 X 48



Liberty
Oil on canvas, 36 X 48
PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN



Front Row Joe
Created for Cinemark Theaters



Artist Sambataro with Restaurant Mural

Sambataro is currently living in his studio-home in
Carrollton, Texas with his wife Karen and his cat
Shandar

Please visit my website

www.sambatarostudios.com