

# **A Life in His Own Damn Words**

**Lou Christine (the Hat)**



*Snitched from Lou's Facebook posts by Jen Butz*

It was the news we expected but never wanted to hear. Lou's gone. It was 5 September 2024. He'd been fighting asymptomatic cancer for two years, and the shit had spread throughout his body. He called time.

But Lou left us with so many stories, and I scooped up as many as I could, along with the photos he added to his FB feed.

These are just some of the stories he posted in the last couple of years, but they sweep up so much of his crazy life. He cracked wise, but we all knew that his was a heart of gold.

We lost a good one.

San Miguel de Allende  
6 September 2024



Lou always said this image made his calves look too "girly." He always ordered *Breakfast Frank Sinatra – My Way*. Amen, Lou.

July 13, 2024

Many long time Face Book friends have been hip that it was, I, Lou Christine, who founded and began the VIP Club Card (Very Informed People) of San Miguel back in May of 2000. The Club's initial approach was to enable locals to get a financial break at local restaurants that perhaps would help make locals steady customers of such businesses rather than offering deals to people they might see once in a lifetime.

As years passed many other businesses desired to align with the Club since it cost them no cash out of pocket and the only time they had to pony up is when they had a spending money cardholders in their joints rather than those establishments spending big money for advertising and perhaps nobody came.

In the past couple of years some perspective buyers have come to me, some of them slick Willies, looking to perhaps buy the Club. I rejected most because, frankly I didn't feel their amable feelings or aloha spirit or the ideas they wished to become like us, sanmiguelenses, but more so I saw them as opportunists. Some explained their concepts and those concepts were polar regions away from how I saw the Club continuing.

Many know I have been dealing with health issues and I say, lucky for me, almost 30 year friend Anthony Dwyer and his wife Laura approached me in December asking if somehow they could be involved. Their three boys, now with two attending college and another in high school they too as successful business people were looking at the future.

We struck a deal!

I don't think I could have handed my baby off to better people! Since taking over in January they have brought so much to the club considering bringing in a slew of new members and an array of other new businesses that have aligned themselves the Club. They are both totally bi-lingual, dual citizens, computer savvy, have vehicles, with a diverse collection of friends and associates. Plus they are both way smarter than me.

Most realize the Club is and always has been a win-win-win sychiation! The restaurants and other businesses get a chance to develop new clients, the cardholder can employ the card as much as they desire for a full year for up to four people in their party at restaurants and get a substantial amounts of money off their bills. The Club makes money by selling the membership. <https://www.vipsanmiguel.com> (Our up to date line up with a slew of new restaurants coming in this week yet to be included on the website)

Over the years I have gained fame and a modest fortune pitching the card, very low key, and some who got wind of the deal have said to me, " well they ain't you."

I can tell you, there is no doubt in my military mind that Laura and Anthony will take the Club to new heights and make the already best discount card in the entire world mo'bettah! They are driving the bus these days with my full blessing and more and more local businesses are calling the Club realizing its



value understand the new competition and realizing our membership is the exact clientele they desire who are here most of the year and not somebody who might visit their establishment once in a lifetime.

I say to the old timers, including some who've been members for 24 years, that if you thought I did an OK job wait until you having great dealings and service with the Dwyers! They're community oriented, same as the Club and true sanmiguelenses rather than far from being house flipping carpet baggers as one can imagine. Cards are guaranteed to provide members a minimum of a full year's membership regardless when they buy.

A sincere thank you to all members, past and present. It's been a great ride and so glad I made a go of it!

Aloha

Lou

**June 19, 2024**

Saying goodbye to the greatest baseball player of all time. Aloha, Willie R.I.P.

After my morning tribute to Willie Mays on here, the greatest baseball player who ever lived, it got me a thinking. I resided just 3 blocks from Connie Mack Stadium, then the home of the Phillies. In the summer, during night games, you could stand in the street and see the lights of the stadium and often could even hear the roar of the crowd.

Other than the 1950 Pennant, for the rest of the decade the Phillies seemed mired in last place. Yet in those days, bleacher seats were just 25 cents, even then I often sneaked in.

I had the pleasure of watching Willie his entire career and thinking of the other National League stars I got to see Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Sandy Koufax, Gil Hodges and Duke Snyder. Then to see the Pirate's Roberto Clemente with his rocket arm along with another Dodger Carl Furillo throw players out at the plate from far off right field. The Pirates also featured Bill Mazeroski Dick Groat and Smokey Burgess. The Braves had Warren Spahn, Eddie Mathews, Hank Aaron and Joe Adcock as the Reds had muscle bound Ted Kluzewski and Johnny Temple while Cubs fielded "let's play two" Ernie Banks and Billy Williams.

Elroy Face was the first relief pitching star along with the Phillies Jim Konstanty the National League's MVP 1950. Stan the Man Musial of the Cards and Bob Gibson were something to behold.



Little did I know at the time I was seeing live and in person a golden age of ball players. I am so thankful for growing up in a Major League town and seeing future Hall of Fame stars.

Willie wore #24 and he was the godfather of Ken Griffey Jr. One day while in New York I decided to take in a game at Yankee Stadium. The Yanks were playing the Mariners with Ken Griffey Jr. playing center field like his god father and he also sported #24. Just like Willie, Ken would sprint out the the dug out to his center field post the same way as Willie.

I've been such a lucky baseball fan.

May 24, 2024



May 19, 2024

I have expressed in the past that I never made any serious money writing. That never stopped me. I have experienced some high water marks like being a collaborator with NBC's and the late Tim Russert in his book "Wisdom of Our Fathers," that was #1 on the New York Times best sellers two years in a row.

I won a couple of first place prizes in some writing contests but I really don't believe in competition between writers. It's the loneliest profession and I have the utmost respect for anyone who gathers thoughts and put them down on paper.

Yet I have enjoyed praise that comes my way like my friends here on Facebook who recognize some of my essays with "likes" or even commenting on my compositions.

Below I will post, in my view the highest praise I can recall ever coming my way which is also in my memoir

"Inspirations an Humiliations."

"Praise that has meant the most" ((1997)

By Lou Christine

Writers often live, or could I say, drool, for feedback in the form of praise. When someone recalls a passage and it comes the author;s way it's like praise from Caesar. Writers hope that some of their compositions might be construed as thought provoking, planting images in the mind's eye, or at least to be noticed by the reading public.

When a writer hears praise he or she is more likely to extend their chests knowing that they're the "parent" of a verse, passage or premise. I've been privileged to be on praise's receiving end yet there is one particular instant that gives me the most satisfaction. To me it's the top accolade about my writing I ever received.

While residing on the Island of Maui for a time I owned a sandwich shop.

Philadelphia Lou's sold Philadelphia style "Hoagies and Cheese Steak" sandwiches. My place became popular with the locals, number one; being off the beaten path when it came to attracting the tourist crowd and number two; we made kick ass, authentic-style, Philadelphia products.

This dude, an island boy, we'll call him Ronnie was a steady customer. Ronnie, a handsome, dashing, gregarious type whose smile replaced the sun at sunset, was hapa, meaning a mix of Japanese, Hawaiian, Portuguese and who knows what else? He drove a spiffy, white Porsche convertible.

Rather than placing his Porsche in the outside parking lot stalls he would park half way up on the sidewalk outside my shopping center enclave.

Ronnie was often, if not always, book ended by two, like-wow hunnies with them show casing their 20-something cleavages in Bikini, halter-tops while sarongs wrapped their shapely bottoms. Often one was beach party bingo blonde while the other looked more like some goddess out of a South Seas adventure whose white teeth contrasted against her smooth-as-butter, bronze skin.

Despite the two beauties when Ronnie's bopped into my sandwich joint with his arms wrapped around them both, it was Ronnie's smile that out shined the fluorescents'. I couldn't help but be somewhat envious, consider, Ronnie had great looks, seemingly lots of cash, drove a super-cool car and had the like-wow chicks! He always appeared to be in a great mood, popular, shaking hands like a stomping politician just before Election Day and show cased an easygoing attitude.

Soon enough it became apparent that Ronnie was in the glamour profession. I'm not talking about him owning a model agency. Ronnie dealt drugs. Back in the early '80s cocaine was the rage and became the in-vogue, mood-altering drug of choice, that's if one could afford it. Coke had yet to seep into the fabric of America to become the insidious Devil's tool that it is.

Often when out and about in some of the boom-boom joints I would run into Ronnie, as usual, flanked by two foxes and him doing the hand shaking routine with just about anybody within arm's reach. He usually sent me a drink, including a wink, that subtle man-to-man signal that he was going to have a special time that very night that probably included the two goddesses de jour.

Now and then I would catch Ronnie at the beach, playing volleyball, and glad handling it with one and all. As always, he was surrounded by hangers-on including the dames. By then I had sold my restaurants and dedicated myself full time to writing. In 1994 I published my first novel "Kill 'em With Kindness." I had a book signing at a local art gallery. I was flattered about all those who attended and low-and-behold coming storming through the doors of the gallery, draped by a thick, golden necklace, bracelet and Rolex, dressed like the prince in came Ronnie with two knock outs on each arm. With true Ronnie panache, Ronnie didn't want just one autographed copy he bought ten.

By 1995 I relocated to Mexico. I heard through friends that Ronnie had taken a bust. Yet since his family was well connected, as was Ronnie who everybody loved he just got six months and was enabled to serve his sentence on Maui rather than having to serve his time in the meaner State of Hawaii penitentiary over on Oahu.

I returned to Maui for Christmas of 1996. When attending a party to my surprise and delight there was Ronnie, big smiles, looking as fit and handsome as ever and with the appropriate twin company one was accustomed to see him with. When he noticed me he almost sprinted to me with the bimbettes trying to catch up. "Lou, Lou!" he yelled, bear hugged me then giving me a brother handshake then hugging me again. Ronnie spoke much of his dialogue with a pidgin accent.

"Ho, Brah, I wen read your book! You see, Brah, da-night before I need "for go" to the joint, Brah, I wen have dis list of what I can or not take inside the can. You know, like two pair socks, three t-shirts, stuff like dat. It wen say I can take one book. I no read da bible or noting like dat. So I look up and I wen see the ten books I wen buy from you.

"I got to tell you, Brah, it was the greatest book I even wen read in my life. Ho, Brah, the bulls let us out in the yard an hour a day, dats it. I got to tell you, Brah, I stay out for like ten minutes, Brah, then I wen ask the bull to let me back into my cell, Brah. 'cause I was into that book, Brah."

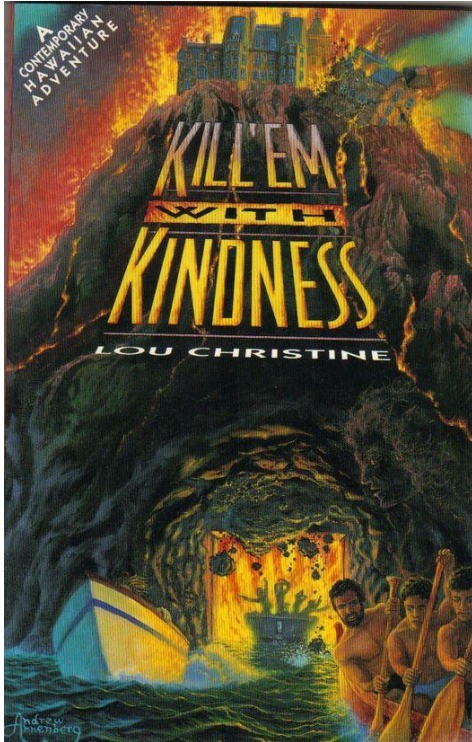
I was so stunned and very-very flattered at the idea of Ronnie giving up time in the yard to get back to my book. I responded, "Ronnie, thank you so much and I am so glad you read it, not that I was happy you got such a chance being in the slammer and all, but you've made my day. Are you a big reader?"

“Ho, Brah!” Ronnie responded to my question, “I nevvah read notin’ . . . your book is the first I read in my friggen’ life, Brah!”

My response was that, “So now you are reading more?”

“No ways, Brah, afters reading your book, Brah, no need for me to read anything else, I wen figure you book had it all!”

Well, that’s it. My man, Ronnie, drug dealer, lover of life, lover of too many women to mention had bestowed on me the highest of praises I can come to recollect and it was as good as that praise from Caesar.



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**May 9, 2024**

Below is an excerpt from my memoir, "Inspirations and Humiliations" with this piece being penned in 1999.

“The First Time I Saw Elvis” (1999)

By Lou Christine

It’s said music is one of the three great pleasures. At age nine, back in 1956, you couldn’t have sold me. I hated music. To me, it was a mush of blaring horns and boring singers. Yet Grandmom listened to Arthur Godfrey on the radio every morning. How many times does a kid want to hear Eddie Fisher sing “Oh, My Papa?” or listen to an insipid line-up of Perry Comos or Julius La Rosas?

So it was summertime and Saturday night. The weekly Jackie Gleason Show was on vacation. Tommy Dorsey and his band subbed for Gleason with a variety show.



Grandmom tuned into Tommy Dorsey. I wasn't so enthused about a trombonefest but television was television.

Without any fanfare, Dorsey introduced a new entertainer. When Tommy Dorsey announced the name Elvis, well that got my attention! Up 'til then I had never heard of anyone named Elvis. (The Ed Sullivan appearances wouldn't come until the following winter. This was Elvis' national TV debut.)

The moment came. The curtain rose. There's still an indelible image planted in my brain. He was something the likes I had never seen: A guitar player, with a high-and-mighty pompadour, cheek-hugging sideburns, dressed in pegged-pants showing himself as an eclectic mix of hill-Billy hip and street-corner slick.

That was nothing, 'cause when Elvis began moaning out that riveting voice' a voice that would become one of the most distinct and shameless of voices of all time; the shakin' Cajun turned up the heat with a stage presence more apt for a voodoo ritual than TV!

I became absolutely mesmerized. I shelved my Tastykake!

Elvis yelped, "You Ain't Nothing But A Hound Dog," his feet pulling off a white-boy, slide-shoe shuffle that was knocked out, him having his feet going in every direction at once at what seemed like warped speed! (James Brown and Michael Jackson have had nothing on the guy).

Up to that point I had never seen or heard anything like Elvis. He was primal, an unleashed talent wielding sudden impact.

Elvis' second song, "Don't Be Cruel" sounded serene yet substantiated Elvis' range. Even so Elvis punctuated his style with seductive vocals and some kiss-me-baby quivering of the upper-lip as if shivering-from-denial as his shoulders shimmied at the same time. Smart money could sense the dude was a full package and far from a one-trick pony.

Soon enough with hordes of gah-gah, screaming girls at his every live appearance Elvis took the rest of the world by storm. Within a year's time, Elvis Presley was crowned, canonized and anointed as the undisputed "King of Rock and Roll."

Since that moment almost every other rocker has stood on Elvis' shoulders.

Near the end of the show, Tommy Dorsey announced that Elvis would make an encore performance the following Saturday. Like some converting evangelist, I must have called every one of my 36 cousins. I harped on them that Elvis was a "must-see" the upcoming Saturday.

That very week with my paper-route money and savings purchased my first 45-rpm record player along with a copy of "Hound Dog" with "Don't Be Cruel" on the flip side. I snatched up Elvis' then newest release, "I'm All Shook Up."

I was hooked. I wanted to hear more of Elvis, see more Elvis, look like Elvis, act like Elvis! With broomstick in hand and alone in front of Grandmom's full-length, bedroom mirror I mimicked those patented yet kinetic moves.

Elvis alone jump-started my love for modern music. From that moment I followed the Doo-Wop recording artists ala Frankie Lyman and a host of others, yet there was just one Elvis. Motown came

along and the Beatles further upped the rage, yet no one could deny Elvis' perpetual place in the annals of Rock. The man set the stage.

We all know the rest of the story as Elvis' popularity wilted with the influx of hippies and with the King himself losing focus by going from a hip-shaking cool guy to a tawdry, rhinestone-laden, Vegas showboat, donned in goofy white-bellbottoms. Elvis' on-stage karate kicks came up empty compared to what was once fresh and exhilarating. Who would have predicted? At 42, while bloated and weighing in excess of 250 pounds, the King of Rock and Roll died on the throne, a porcelain throne that wasn't bejeweled, a sad lullaby proving that idols do have clay feet.

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With the state of today's music, one might ask: What happened to modern music? Remember when there was at least one snappy tune seemingly coming off everybody's lips? Remember when the hits kept on coming? Remember when music painted vivid pictures that were both compelling and inspiring? There seemed to be an infinite songfest that had us snapping our fingers or tapping our feet.

Sorry to say, it ain't no more! So much of our pasts are attached to certain tunes, to where we were and what we were doing! So what the hell happened?

I've been doing some polling amongst peers and even with younger people. Hardly anyone can remember what was the last big hit.

Going as far back as World War II an assortment of bands, along with lyricists, were cranking out popular tunes. Things were swell. The jitterbug generation followed, and then came Elvis, to be followed by group-after-group and star-after-star. Fabulous musicianship and burgeoning technology had popular music rising to high-water marks of epic proportions and popularity. Who would have guessed that in a span of 50 years most have been reduced to Oldies but Goodies?

During popular music's heyday in the mid-70s, I was listening to a progressive radio station. A fabulous tune had just ended and the D.J. voiced in typical deadpan, FM-DJ fashion . . . at the same time warned . . . we were living in a golden age but the DJ then had the audacity to predict that one day it would come to an end!

"Bull!" I thought, "The Who" was coming out with a new album, as was "Steely Dan," as was "Boston" and a myriad of others. Rock & Roll would never die. Little did I know?

Well, sad to say, popular music has bit the dust. There are pockets very much alive on college campuses or by listening to NPR or on the Internet but they are no longer on the popular scene.

Music motivated me, took me to certain highs, having me envision my own illusions of grandeur. Even when one's heart had been stabbed by mean ole Mr. Heartbreak, those cry-in-your-beer tunes offered a certain soothing, or worse, doses of torture in concert tearing down, hand-in-hand, with waning love sounding more like a melancholy serenade of "wouldas" "couldas" and "shouldas."

When I dissect modern music's demise in a forensic sort of way there seem to be distinct culprits who have conspired to assassinate it. Suspects are apparent. One anonymous witness testified, in song that, "Video Killed The Radio Star." How ironic! Elvis became an unknowing conspirator credited as the feature

back in Rock's first video "Jail House Rock." Yet modern music's cutthroats didn't just knock-off music with videos.

Other forces chomped at the bit to do Rock in. The CD and DVD ganged up and aced the LP! Then "the suites" muscled in for-profit over quality. It was and is a crime!

During its eulogy, it could have been said that modern music was the delicious combination of "the beat" teamed up with untamed melodies and fabulous orchestrations, a magical ensemble that created sumptuous scenes that also lent visual interpretations. Once the video hit the screen, with a distorted slant, perhaps provided by some maniacal Hollywood director, the deal was down. Rock had been hijacked. Our play land of imagination was kidnapped. Our own innocent and original interpretations then lay dead.

Then came the dizzying camera work with a pedal-to-the-metal focus, not permitting viewers time enough to train eyes on anything for more than a few seconds, a lame method custom made for weak attention spans. Without consideration, rock videos have become nothing more than cheap vignettes, consisting of cut-to, and cut-to, and cut-to . . . "Forget about it!"

Greed too was one of the perpetrators: LPs were selling for \$4.99, \$5.99 or \$6.99 maybe a sawbuck for a double LP. CD costs soared to the teens, a rip off and bunk. The fidelity was no better and ya had to buy a CD player. There were no more album covers to scan over. Cheap, flimsy jackets broke and made for a plastic mess. CD's are daintier than Christmas ornaments and they also skip. Music lovers weren't given a choice. LPs and turntables were on the hit list, a list neither wanted to be on, a hit list that may as well been filled out by Chicago mobsters.



Then the "suites" got into the act, acting more like ghouls, more interested in a bottom line than love for music. Less-and-less groups were afforded exposure. Radio station program directors crammed in shorter tunes with more commercials, while playing less compelling music while shoving the dreck down our throats.

Incredible, Rock mainstays such as Eric Clapton's "Layla" or Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" or even The Beatles, "Hey Jude," in today's listening world would never be allotted that sort of air time. Patience is no longer viable.

Consider what we now have, "Rap!"

I hate sounding like an old fogey but Rap mostly sucks. It's got bad attitude. It's redundant. It's a one-beat behemoth. It's demeaning, with continuous and pulsating vile lyrics, lyrics that should only be voiced in public when the hometown quarterback throws an interception or while whispering erotic passages toward a like-minded lover while in between the sheets.

Looking back I'm fortunate, man! I am way luckier than the kids of today. I witnessed a defining moment during that Saturday night long-long ago. In a world of copy-cats, there's no one near like Elvis, there was no one like him before and the likelihood of an Elvis-alike seems highly unlikely. He was genuine. After God made him he or she, lol, broke the mold at least for a millennium.

So, the world may be waiting for a new messiah . . . who has a vision that may render us all awestruck, whether it be in music, education or world affairs? LOL, looking around, I'm not counting on it. Shoots! Why should I even bother?

Hey, Baby, I saw Elvis the first time he was on national TV. What more could an aging rockster want? So as the song goes: "Rock and Roll with never die I'll dig it 'til the end." After seeing Elvis, at such a tender age, how would I have known? Music-wise my life was already complete!

Long Live Rock and Roll!

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**April 8, 2024**

"William Spratling—father of Mexico's silver jewelry industry" (2001)

By Lou Christine

Same as its northern neighbor various people have migrated to this nation since Hernan Cortez and his conquistadors first set foot on Mexican shores. The human influx continues. Some came for adventure and riches, others in search of a new beginning, or to pursue a dream, while some felt compelled to spread what they thought to be the Lord's will. Yet few have left a lasting imprint. William Spratling was such a man and his legacy lives on.

Today, Spratling designs, either those employed for practical purposes or his stunning examples of stylized jewelry, are appreciated, while holding onto to their original luster. Spratling's aboriginal and pre-Columbian copied creations are recognized and admired worldwide. On top of that, he single-handedly forged an industry by transforming a dusty Guerro village into a hotbed of commercial success! He's basically responsible for what has evolved into a couple of generations of schooled and successful silversmiths! William Spratling is rightly referred to as the father of Mexico's sterling-silver-jewelry industry!

His communication skills had him motivating peasants, that in reality, had him rescuing them from the drudgery of the mines! Bottom line, Spratling offered indigenous people opportunities to attain wealth and fame beyond their wildest dreams!

Original Spratling show-pieces, like his famous Jaguar tea sets, are stunning examples of the man's imaginative mind. Fantastic representations are on hand inside museums, private collections and proudly displayed upscale galleries around the globe. Voicing, "it's a 'Spratling' are buzzwords indicating exquisite quality.

Born in 1900, in New York State, Spratling was raised in Auburn, Alabama becoming a trained architect and draftsman at Auburn University. During the mid-nineteen-twenties he taught at Tulane, in New Orleans. There he shared a home with William Faulkner who would go on to become Nobel-Prize-winning author. He lent his illustrations to Faulkner's books and they both collaborated and co-published "Sherwood Anderson And Other Famous Creoles" during the same time period. With a thirst for the bohemian-lifestyle Spratling drifted down to Mexico from time-to-time but then emigrated permanently in 1929.

He set up his base of operation in the midst of silver mine country, in Taxco, in the State of Guerro, where the raw product was vastly mined but shipped out to someplace else as fast as the mineral came out of the earth.

The young illustrator became enchanted with Mesa-American motifs. With vast resources close-by, Spratling began drafting and arranging patterns creating necklaces, bracelets and other sterling-laden jewelry. Whether it be depictions of ancient masks to belt buckles he flashed diversity proving he was far from a one-trick pony as he further went on to fashion practical items also such as coffee-and-tea sets, salt-and-pepper shakers, hair-braids, flatware and a plethora of other beautiful and useful items. The Art-deco designs stemming from, that-then age and aboriginal lines, enhanced one another.

He quickly aligned himself with the likes of hallmark Mexican painters Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and David Siqueiros. He socialized and broke bread with the intellectuals of the day. When certain political forces had the Communist, David Siqueiros, on the run for his political affiliations, the muralist hid out at Spratling's Rancho, El Viejo just outside Taxco. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein was a pal.

His legacy was growing in various areas north and south of the border. Spratling, through his U.S. Government connections, was personally responsible for the very first Mexican art exhibit entering the United States.

In no time his small tienda in Taxco was flourishing and chock with young Mexican students eager to learn skills and hone their craft in silversmithing. From almost scratch the artist, architect, dreamer, shrewd businessman and good neighbor created a burgeoning industry.

With the support and curiosity of the ever-so hip and wealthy north of the border his strikingly clean designs enchanted a trendy clientele. With a lower-cost-than gold that too gleamed the preciseness attached to Spratling's designs stood out!

Spratling's silversmiths went through rigorous apprenticeships. No detail was overlooked. The famous too were flocking to Taxco to buy and admire, as the old town evolved into some silver-jewelry Mecca and then gained the nickname the Florence of Mexico. Today it is said there might be as many as 10,000 silver outlets, with just about everyone of them stemming from the man who spoke slowly with a southerner's drawl.

Eccentric and somewhat of an enigma Spratling set up a utopia at his ranch. Overtly generous, he entertained the likes of Georgia O'Keefe, Errol Flynn, Lyndon Johnson, Betty Davis, Marilyn Monroe, Orson Wells, Cantinflas and even Ethiopian emperor, Haile Sallase. Many became collectors.

Yet with brilliance, as it may, it's been written Spratling at times became extremely odious with both guests and associates alike. Without warning, streeting a ranch guest, who may have over extended their stay or made some gauche faux pas, doing so without south of the border resources, was not uncommon at Rancho El Viejo. He often acted mercurial for no apparent reason.

Despite those shortcomings, today, many Mexican families reap the benefits primarily because they were handed down the craft, from Spratling, due to the man's personal instructions and sharing nature. Icons of the Mexican silver industry like the Castillo Brothers, Mondragon, Bustamante and Pyneda owe their continued success to Spratling.

What Stirling Dickinson was to San Miguel, William Spratling was to Taxco and maybe more so. Both San Miguel and Taxco are the only two towns in the country deemed by the Mexican government as National Treasures.

Yet despite the glory and appeal, personally, for Spratling, it was a roller coaster ride. In some circles he was admired and affectionately referred to as Don Guillermo but keeping as many as 700 silversmiths at one time happy under one roof proved difficult. As rapid as his stock rose, jealousy and underhandedness crept in. Some were out to get him. There were strong accusations about him being a pedophile. Others pegged him as an outrageous opportunist and being overtly flamboyant. Books were written, some full of accolades, others noted how he could be cranky didactic and pedantic.

He spread his creative wings by further employing goldsmiths from Iguala, just south of Taxco, to produce pieces made of gold. His sketches for wood and masonry products are rich in authentic pre-Columbian detail. He unearthed ancient artifacts from archeological "tells," more for the joy of discovery and inspiration than reproduction. Spratling was one of the largest donators, after personally unearthing ancient leftovers from past Mesa-American cultures, then handing them over to museums as guardians for Mexico's past.

Violante Ulrich, today's co-owner of the old Spratling ranch south of Taxco, speaks of stories heard from her father, Alberto Ulrich, Spratling's friend who in his later years would regale about Spratling. "We'd be having coffee out at the ranch. Dump trucks would pull up full of loose dirt, then dumping their loads to the side of the house. Spratling seemed to forget everything and would sprint toward the piles that just returned from the "tells" and start digging ferociously with his bare hands to perhaps unearth idols that often were buried inside those piles."

Spratling ventured off to Alaska in 1951, taking advantage of a program in conjunction with the U.S. Government, bringing a number of native Alaskans to Taxco to align and incorporate their Aleut designs with those of central Mexico's aborigines. The ambitious plan that included importing additional native Alaskans, never really panned out. Yet some of those Alaskan designers remained in Taxco and they too left their mark.

Spratling went from millionaire to bust-out more times than you can yell "ay carumba." One affliction, he could never quite get over once being a millionaire. Too often, flushed with false pride, he'd felt obliged

to pick up tabs, or accommodate guests, for even those wealthy, the famous and none-famous all became part of those who sponged off him even when he was down and out.

In Spratling's view perception was everything. He became a vivacious and virtual front man with almost empty pockets, yet down deep, Spratling was an eternal optimist. Each time he was counted out, somehow he would rebound.

There is said to be 520 original designs. He was often and is still, knocked off, as frauds have showed up stamped the Spratling trademark. When discovering his designs were being pirated . . . that quick, he'd change his company's logo having to stay one step ahead of the counterfeiters.

In August '67, as he had for almost 40 years, Spratling motored at high speeds through the Guerrero countryside in his sleek Ford Mustang convertible. Spratling drove like he lived. He hadn't inkling, that just around the hairpin curve, a large tree had fallen across the road. He was killed instantly. Ironically, once again he was on the precipice of bankruptcy but just happened to have a bailout check in his wallet he had recently received from a new investor and was on his way to the bank to settle outstanding accounts.

His friend Alberto Ulrich, who in his own right was a German-Italian industrialist, more of a fan and friend than a silver enthusiast, came to the rescue. He bought the Spratling ranch and acquired his designs. Today Ulrich's daughters live at the ranch and continue the legacy including a restaurant. One left over living relic is Don Tomas Vega; one of the few Spratling trained silversmiths who still is employed at the ranch works.

Today in places like Santa Fe, San Francisco, New York and Texas, silver collectors and jewelry enthusiasts alike revere Spratling silver.

At the Yam Gallery exhibit in San Miguel de Allende personal items and keepsakes that Spratling himself utilized are on display. Items such as his personal phone book having the home phone numbers of Orson



Wells and Marilyn Monroe can be read. Ironically, the number for David Siqueiros is still current posted in Spratling's personal phone book. If you were to call it today, the Siqueiros Museum would answer.

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April 24, 2024

My biggest challenge residing in Mexico has been mastering Spanish. I call it "mi cruz," my cross. Sure, I can order food and ask where the bathroom is and be functional. but fluent? Forget about it. I am baffled to this day why I have never gained a firm grip on this nation's tongue.

I even resided in Spain for seven months back in 1992 but not much of the Spanish there stuck. Upon my return to Hawaii in 1993 I enrolled in Spanish 101 when attending college and earned an "A". I have watched sports, TV novellas, taken additional courses.

I have never considered myself a brain to any degree yet still, after 29 years . . .

I recognized the problem back in 1998 when I published the article below and have made it part of my memoir.

"Speaking the Spanish" (1998)

By Lou Christine

It's no secret that there are people living in San Miguel who hardly speak Spanish. Some have resided here for as long as 20 years. It's easy enough to do. Since San Miguel has gained worldwide notoriety this pretty Mexican mountain town has attracted a larger number of foreigners, especially Americans. and Canadians. To make it easier these days, there are also a slew of business-oriented, bilingual Mexicans who provide year-round goods and services to those non-Spanish speakers.

Despite San Miguel having renowned Spanish learning schools, many newcomers don't bother attending—and for those who do, the drop out rate is high. Yet Spanish isn't totally shunned. Basics like "gracias" and "buenos dias" are often lipped, yet those niceties are the very extent of some peoples' Spanish vocabularies. Recently a friend of mine told me her well-meaning husband bid a nighttime farewell to their taxi driver with a hardy, "Buenos Aires!"

I'm not a guy qualified to toss any disparaging stones when comparing my own Spanish. I'm serving what's likely to turn out to be my own life sentence, with me locked in the "present tense."

My vocabulary's so-so, repetitive and infantile, perhaps better described as a Spanish "Goo-Goo! Gah-Gah!" There are panic-strewn instances when I am not sure what the hell I'm saying. Still, Spanish is this nation's official language and that alone mandates respect and attention, so I do my best to wing it.

If you're like me, there's a likelihood you have a sense of guilt and even shame. Still, bare in mind, when it comes to learning, enthusiasm is a major ingredient.

I have my excuses. I'm too old, too stupid or too lazy. I hardly speak Spanish in front of bilingual Mexican acquaintances because of personal embarrassment, and they often politely wonder aloud, "How come, Lou . . .?" When feeling cavalier I'll valiantly toss in words I am sure of: "Entiendes?" I take bolder risks inside tiendas. Yet I usually lead off my spiel with a humble sounding, "Lo siento, mi español es no bueno!"

On top of that, Spanish comprehension is my weakest suit and has been so since day one. When first arriving in Mexico, Spanish sounded to me more like ice in a blender (hielo en la licuidora). Mexican friends who don't speak English, say English to them sounds more like "washawashawasha!" Until this



day, when rapid-fire Spanish is directed toward me, I appear more like the proverbial deer frozen in headlights.

In my case, when it comes to learning a new language, total immersion—or the sink or swim adage—holds little water. I've been there done that, drowning in Andalusia, Spain, where hardly any English was spoken.

I've attended Spanish courses, read self-help books, watched cartoons, viewed TV novelas, and even had a non-English-speaking girlfriend. (We didn't talk much). Even though the action is happening right there on the screen, I have no idea what the TV announcers are saying during sporting events.

Then there's verb conjugation that creates a never-ending thought process in one's mind that's exhausting. An additional hurdle: Dealing with syntax while fixing adjectives directly after the nouns. I mean, "the man, big" or "el hombre grande" doesn't always compute.

There is a sense of adventure living amongst a people while having no idea what most of them are saying. For the tenderfoot, speaking Spanish offers intrigue, even a tinge of danger, and also offers up some genuine comical moments.

If one drives the wilds of Mexico it doesn't take long to figure out what "Curva Peligrosa" stands for. A slip of the tongue can get one in trouble. I never ask my Mexican friends how their mothers are doing. As a matter of fact, I never use the word "madre" or "mama." Any reference to mother said the wrong way can get one punched in the nose. And I know by now that one never, ever enters a tienda and says, "Tienes huevos?"

Worse perhaps, a friend's daughter one day asked me to pick her up a lollypop at the tienda. On the way I kept asking myself, "What's the word for, lollypop?" At the checkout counter I brazenly spit out, "Tienes alguna cosa, esta dulce, para chupar?" The fool that I was had my head bobbing as I orchestrated in-and-out hand motions near my mouth. The shopkeeper appeared shocked. All of a sudden I sensed what I had just said. In a panic I screamed out, "LOLLYPOP!"

Changing his expression and with a quick sense of relief the merchant echoed, "Oh, lollypop!" We both had a good laugh. By the way, the word for lollypop is "paleta." Don't forget it!

During the early days, while overhearing street talk, I thought everything took place on Mondays. Seemed everybody was saying "Monday." In actuality, those people were saying "mande," which translates to, "What did you say?" I used to think, when I phoned people and they weren't home, that "no fifty," was some sort of code lipped by locals. In actuality the term is "no se encuentra."

I had to leave San Miguel, a matter of economics and return to the States in 1997. My boyhood friend is a general contractor, He offered me a buddy job and to hangout with him while constructing a shopping center. We had a fleet of vehicles and I didn't have much to do so I would take the vehicles a couple of times a week to a gas station across from the construction site and fill them with gas to relieve boredom.

This was in New Jersey where they still have gas attendants. Assuming the attendants were Mexican I would spit out to them "ellénelo, revise el aceite, revise los neumáticos" etc. Such occurred for about three months.

So one day while the fellas were servicing one of our vehicles I told one of the fellas I resided in Mexico. "Yo viva en estado Guanajuato, ustedes?" I got no response and the attendant looked at me in a strange way. I repeated.

Finally the attendant figuring out perhaps what language I was murdering evenly said. "We are from Pakistan." Sheesh! Soy un tonto!"

While in my apartment, I have also wondered about vehicles outside on the street with loudspeakers. I usually assumed the racket was an announcement about the circus coming to town or something, but what if it was a warning? "Evacuate the neighborhood immediately! There's a poison gas cloud on its way . . .!"

Sometimes we have to shed logic. Realize that in Spanish "things" don't work; only people work (están trabajan). Instead say 'for "things': "Están funciona." And around here one doesn't "pay attention." In English you pay with blood or money. Here, "Usted pones atención—with the word "pones" translating to the word "put."

Frank Sinatra wouldn't have sung, "Mi Camino," pero, "Mi Manera!" There's "the way" (via) and "the 'way' to do things." Tell a Spanish-speaking person you're "mixta arriba," they will have no idea what the hell you're talking about.

In Mexico we Americans exist in a foreign nation whose culture we hopefully respect, desiring that our hosts see us as fertile-minded, eloquent representatives of our own upbringing and here we, the collective we, just might too often flicker ignorance and perhaps arrogance, while vomiting out gibberish.

Yet, as they say around here, it's poco o poco. Most survive, function not being bilingual. Nevertheless, I do live with some apprehension, and there are "what ifs": What if one day my ears hear the sound, but I don't understand, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

Como Taco.

**April 18, 2024**

The first time I went broke in San Miguel was 1997. My last valid credit card was declined at Mama Mia's. My checking account was out of gas. No mommy, no daddy, no nothing.

I had to swallow my pride and call my best boyhood friend, a shopping center developer in Philadelphia and ask for a job. "No problem," he said, "you can be my driver" which turned out to be a glorified go-for. All was a piece of cake. I was overpaid but back on the East Coast where I had not resided since 1979. my buddy said I could bunk at Gus' another boyhood friend and also my bookie when I had coin.

For the past two years my OP columns were published in Atencion where I was given carte blanche to write whatever I desired, thanks to then editor Sareda Milocz. I wrote a Man-on-the street column in those days, working on the trash trucks or with the cobble stone crews repairing the calles and writing about it. I even spent a full 24 hours in the jardin and reported how the then atmosphere changed morning, noon and night. The assignments were fun.

One of my biggest fears was that if I left I might not make it back. Yet I then needed to pen a goodbye for now column for my audience in Atencion.

## "Goodbye for Now" (1997)

by Lou Christine

I gotta go north. It means leaving San Miguel. I certainly don't wish to. No one in their right mind does, do they? For now, it's one of those trips which deems itself essential. It's a money thing. Gotta go up take care of business and sword fight in the land of barbarians.

Over a time, with my contributions to this publication, hopefully, I've properly graced these pages. Some of you may have actually paid attention to the Lou Christine byline. I'm pleased both "The Atencion" and "El Independiente" had offered a venue for me to express myself. I've had my fun and perhaps now-and-then I've stirred readers' interest.

All this reminds me of a story.

Back on Maui, in Hawaii, the local newspaper, "The Maui News" employed a fabulous columnist who twice a week sprinkled his readership with wisdom and wit. His name: Tom Stevens. Same as me right now, he was about to depart. Tom had to get off Maui for a spell.

Tom published an "aloha column." In his swan-song piece he reflected back to another departing time, when he hosted a weekly jazz radio program sometime in the '70s, smack in the middle of Iowa.

Tom hosted a radio show, a Jazz program deal with the local radio station through a butcher friend who operated a butcher shop just beneath the radio station. Some time back Tom's butcher-buddy mentioned the radio station above his shop. That association left open an opportunity for Tom to come up with a deal.

Despite the butcher despising jazz yet he would see what he could do. Monday through Friday, the short wattage station transmitted Country and Western, in between quotes for pork bellies and grain shipments, broadcasting primarily to farmers and herdsman. The station normally closed down its transmitter at 6:00 p.m.

Tom wrote. in his swan-song column, he lived about 60 miles from the Iowa town where he broadcasted his program. Every Tuesday Tom picked-out and packed-up recorded records, gems from a vast LP collection to go and spin those tunes from 7:00 til 10:00 pm. Tom did this thing.

Tom wrote how the station was Spartan, crammed, with a pay phone. He spent no time in the town other than doing the show, got no feedback, and actually knew of no one from those parts.

Tom never missed a Tuesday evening in two years. He drove through snow and whatever. He wrote that he so enjoyed spinning the vinyl discs. At times he was so taken by the compositions they brought him to tears. Tom stated in his column how he hoped he was inspiring his listeners while mixing in his favorites with tunes strung and linked together with dynamic sedge ways that he arranged sensing thought-provoking segments.

In addition, he narrated jazzy tidbits about the history of some of those compositions. He described, in that column, he envisioned those times as shinning moments highlighting the more obscure masterpieces orchestrated by the very likes of Theonios Monk, Cannonball Adderly, Myles Davis and Charlie Parker.

Tom was so proud and expressed how he shared his vast knowledge of Jazz. The one-man show became more of a labor of love.

As the world turns time came when Tom had to depart Iowa. There would be a final Tuesday evening in store. He presented a promotion to the butcher shop below that they might give away some door prizes, sort of a good-bye salute to Tom and his show.

The butcher even permitted the radio system to use his shop's telephone so Tom could pull off the promotion, perhaps offering some of Tom's steady listeners a chance to call in to say goodbye. Nobody knew the pay phone's number.

During the course of the program Tom would give away butchered meat to callers, first prize; a \$100 worth, then \$50, and then \$25 worth of meat.

All the callers had to do was call. There would be no games, nor would be a need for correct answers. The listenership wouldn't have to rush to the phone. The lucky winners' calls would be chosen at random, in no particular order, same as the show, loose knit, like jazz, cool and easy going.

Tom waited until about halfway through his final show to begin the give away. Of course he talked the promotion up during station breaks, emphasizing on the graciousness of the butcher and imploring listeners to consider shopping at the location.

Tom wrote how he went so far as to touch the audience with his voice and reflected upon the past two years how grateful he was to have the opportunity to enrich their-listening pleasure. Tom spoke to the listeners from his heart and soul.

The time came for the give away. Tom announced such. After five minutes the phone did not ring. He rechecked that he gave out the correct number? He made another announcement, told the audience if they were having trouble getting through to be patient, the lines were busy.

He even went so far as to call the telephone company, to see if the lines were OK... Still, no calls.

An uneasy hour went by. He stared at the phone, took a deep breath and then played his all-time favorites, and spoke to his audience tenderly. With no calls he pleaded for anyone to phone in and about how he had all that tasty meat to give away.

Nothing!

Tom typed out within his farewell column in the Maui News how that night it was an extra-extra long 60-mile drive back to his house despite having a car trunk full of free meat.

He reflected, that maybe... well just maybe, for two-full years perhaps his music-playing effort had been in vain. He wondered and wondered perhaps the same as a jilted lover reflects, how they may have given their best?

Tom wrote how emotions came a flooding. Was he a fool? Had he been playing those records solely for somebody out on the interstate, a pure coincidence on the radio dial while they were heading towards Nebraska or Illinois? Or worse, had he been giving his precious time and talent solely towards an audience of one.

Don't feel bad. You have to know Tom. He's resilient. Rather than envisioning himself as no more than a hardly listened to nobody; an eye-opening face-saving silver lining emerged.

Tom hammered home it became apparent that artists, regardless if they're a painter, musician, someone who sculpts or a poet, that the only real audience which really counts is the audience consisting of the first person.

Thinking more clearly he put together those stunning record concerts for himself more so than somebody else. Tom summed, he sat in that small studio for two years and his own ears thoroughly enjoyed every whack of the snare drum, and each compelling rift delivered by a distorted guitar.

Tom Stevens made it back to Maui. And if you're in the Hawaiian Islands and pick up a Maui News, on either a Tuesday or a Thursday, I'm sure your innards will be tickled by this excellent writer.

So, with the story unfolded it's my turn to depart and I've used Tom's story as my story. And somehow by repeating it, perhaps the net results will rub off on my forthcoming karma and help propel me back to this special place of San Miguel.

With good fortune, soon enough I'll return and share some of my zanier thoughts with you. For now though it's Hasta luego y vayan con dios and aloha.

Say! Ah, Hello! Hello is a...ah, is anybody out there?

You can figure by now, I did make it back and it took three more years for me to go broke all-over again.

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**April 14, 2024**

"Mr. Acapulco" (2005)

By Lou Christine

Much like the United States, Mexico has lured its share of people from afar with those who've left indelible marks on this nation. From Spain came the Aztec Empire's conquer, Cortes, Taxco witnessed the arrival of the founder Mexico's silver-jewelry industry, William Spratling, San Miguel gives reverence to Stirling Dickinson. Their groundbreaking actions influence and foresight were building blocks that remain in tack today. One Teddy Stauffer comes to mind as another trailblazer who almost single-handily parlayed a one-time, sleepy, fishing village on Mexico's Pacific coast into a jet-age resort.

His hosts would eventually label Stauffer, or Mr. Teddy, if you will, as "Mr. Acapulco" crediting Stauffer for placing the seaside town and its picturesque bay on the map. The Swiss born saxophone player, band-leader, hotel operator, notorious womanizer, author, tennis champion, good-will ambassador and visionary was beyond question a driving force during his time, a man who rubbed more than elbows with the rich, famous and beautiful.

Despite the fact that he and his band, "The Fabulous Teddies," enjoyed commercial success in the Mid-Thirties while being the rave in Berlin rathskellers, the new radical regime formed by the Third Reich pointed accusing fingers, black-listing Stauffer's wind driven swing, as perverse tagging his music as negro-sounding mishmash stemming from Jewish composers.

The U.S. seemed like a safe haven and a place to continue his musical career but because his passport was stamped with a swastika he was barred from residing north of the border. Next thing you know Stauffer was on a bus to Mexico City. To his delight on his first day in this nation's capital, while passing a record store, he spotted his band's album featured in the store's window. As fast as you can say, "que padre," Mexico absorbed the vivacious Stauffer the way a tortilla sucks up anything tasty. In no time he was operating his own Jazz club, "The Casanova" in Mexico City. Yet upon his first visit to Acapulco Stauffer realized his calling and vast potential.

The bandleader previously worked in hotels as a youth from dishwasher to headliner. With deep-pocketed backers he opened "The Casa Blanca Hotel" over Christmas in the seaside, soon-to-be resort town. Soon thereafter came Acapulco's first nightclub "La Perla." The post WWII crowd was ready to party. With Stateside contacts and Mexican amigos he imported other music stars, along with the famous, whose appetite for good times matched their stardom. Stauffer's good looks and irresistible charm mesmerized most comers. The Guerrero Governor knighted Stauffer as the town's good-will ambassador while coining him as Mr. Acapulco as the seaside portion of the town went from rags to riches.

Some circles credit Stauffer as the inventor of the Margarita. You see Teddy love hosting parties but he couldn't always afford the better spirits and wines so they said he took cheap white and bitter tequila, added some lemon juice and the drink went far at parties.

Stauffer became famous for being the first hotel operator to install a swimming pool within the grounds of a seaside hotel. Many scoffed, said he was crazy, and asked, who wanted a pool when there was an ocean a stone's throw away? Mr. Teddy wouldn't permit detractors to sway him. He was hell-bent on making Acapulco a place that would be a spectacular gem second to none. His poolside parties outdid any beach party bingo.



Women: Stauffer was more than connected to beautiful women all his life. Married five times, with the longest coupling lasting just about five years, Stauffer played heavy-weight, huggy-face, kissy-bear and lots more with the likes of Barbara Hutton, Katy Jurado, Rita Hayworth, Gene Tierney with him marrying the sultry Hedy Lamar in 1951. He palled around with the infamous Errol Flynn and as a philandering duo both took great pleasure at stealing each others gals. Like Flynn, with an immense ego, a sense of panache and a lusty, shameless selfishness easily trumped any sense of humility. The fruits were for his picking.

Stauffer was the first to organize the young guys who fearlessly dove off of cliffs nearby. Thus began an entire industry and tourist attraction that he organized. One of the first performances at the cliffs was for President Eisenhower orchestrated by Stauffer.

Stauffer hosted grand tennis tournaments. World ranked tennis players flocked to Mr. Acapulco's town for game and fun. In the 50s Liz Taylor and Mike Todd got married at his hotel and there was always a star-studded line up on hand. He opened Acapulco's first disco "The Tequila a Go-Go." He penned a well-received autobiography "Forever is a Hell of a Long Time." Even in the '80s, while getting up in age, the 70-something entrepreneur opened El Patio, Acapulco's first shopping mall.

Stauffer, Mr. Teddy or Mr. Acapulco, was one of those delicious rogues who lived his dream and parlayed his ambitions parlaying Acapulco into a world-class resort. The music finally stopped in 1991 when Mr. Acapulco passed away at 81.

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**March 10, 2024**

My memoir is titled "Inspirations and Humiliations." There are stories in it I'd rather not print here on Facebook.

I make no apologies for what I write and fortunately never have felt compelled to. Yet often I am brazen with my language and when I come to such a crossroads I prefer telling it as it is and not to sugar coat anything.

The below story has graphic language and the last thing I ever want to do is embarrass anyone including myself.

"A Day at the Museum" (1994)

During the late '80s, I used to run with this Kim. She's a major character in my novel "Throw Caution to the Wind . . . almost a true story." To protect the innocent, lol, in the novel, I referred to her as Mik, Kim spelled backward. Here's an excerpt.

"On my days off, I rented a spiffy-red convertible, and we took day trips to Philadelphia. We'd stroll the Benjamin Franklin Parkway's tree-lined boulevard. We gazed at the white-stoned columns in front of the buildings.

Further along the parkway, I introduced Mik to the works of Auguste Rodin. Representations of his art were housed in the Rodin Museum flanking the parkway. I spoke of the man's legacy. She seemed impressed.

Hand-in-hand we passed the water fountains. Their mist suppressed the heat of the dog days of summer sun. We enjoyed the lazy day.

Adrenaline pumped through our veins as we sprinted in front of oncoming traffic as zooming cars blitzed around the round-a-bout. We broke our hand holding. It was each person for themselves. Once across and while breathing heavy we laughed about surviving and making it to the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. The museum's the one with the long flight of steps, the stairs of Rocky fame.

Inside the museum, I directed her attention towards the paintings and works of the masters. I turned her on to, Monet, Renoir and Cezanne.

She was aware of my background, at least part of it. My buddy must have revealed I was an author, yet she saw me strictly as a city slicker, a hustler, and she never expressed any curiosity about my writing aspirations.

I've always been aware of my blue-collar upbringing. I shelved that aspect when in the museum. There had always been a sense rumbling within me, something that defied definition, the way I felt and thought, when I placed myself in front of those masterpieces. They let loose a calming effect on my psyche.

While trying not to sound full of myself, I expressed those mostly hidden emotions, hopefully in the sincerest of terms.

Then and now, when my eyes have gazed at those impressions, I've tried to place myself back to the moment at the artist's studio as to capture the essence.

I expressed the same toward, Mik, how I've envisioned my very self as stark naked, being immersed and mixed in the swirl of pastel-colored paints. It would take a mush of words to paint the picture. Yet I said that I saw myself as miniature, wet, a mere swirl on the painter's pallet. I spoke in such a way that I could almost see myself being soaked up by the painter's brush and then dabbled-on the canvas, as a sticky base, or to be expanded as a glob of gooey paint, or how perhaps I'd be melded behind the painted values. Maybe I'd eventually evolve as a chalky figure, tucked in the shadows of a drawing, depending on the cadence and will of the creator. It would be similar to an acid trip I suppose being brushed-and-smearred smearred-and-brushed and smartly blended atop. Wow! all those colors!

I placed into words for the sake of the story my impressions of those artists, and about how I suspected they might orchestrate the process during the height of their creativity, and how they integrated those unbridled emotions as they arranged spectacular landscapes.

I spoke about the tips of the brushes, the bristles on the canvas and how they spread or fanned out on paint already applied. I did so in such a way and I wasn't even stoned.

For Mik's sake, I mimicked how I perceived the method and tight-quartered-control wheeled by the maestros, and did so in an animated manner, as if I was applying the applications myself. My moves became animated and abbreviated and supposedly precise as I took a shot at demonstrating the technique used for cubism while referring to Picasso and Duchamp.

My words highlighted my perception of perfection and I expressed not as eloquently as I may have preferred how the finished product depended on the steady hand of the master. While feasting my eyes and talking my spiel I did my best to bring the moment back for Mik as I saw it.

Then I grew quiet. She did too.

The notion of it all!

And with us standing there, with me right next to her, and with her next to me, I could feel the static electricity amongst the splendor . . . We were spellbound. I strongly suspected that thoughts of eroticism were running concurrently throughout our libidos. I sensed such by the sounds of brief breaths being let-



out, as we breathed through our mouths-and there's no doubt in my mind, that somehow, right then, we were on the very verge of fucking, well at least fucking each other inside the boundaries of our minds'.

My hunch, right on the money . . . She 'fessed up later (an intimate private moment between us) those were her exact sentiments! And she bravely said how her pussy twitched and she was wet with wonder when we were both planted in front of Claude Monet. . . .

Said, she too felt the tension, the amount essential to ignite the spark of romance. She confessed further her insides were on absolute fire. In so-many words she admitted that she would have just loved it, and may have squealed with delight, if I would have taken the initiative and just thrown her right-the-fuck down on that dusty, marble floor and done the deed--fucked her brains out and done so without inhibitions in front of the "oh, my goodness," geriatric, tea-toddler crowd--done so ferociously, in front of the Negro, uniformed guards, who would have said, 'shame-on-you, boy,' and done it all fully clothed, only after exposing the essentials, and done it directly in front of the priceless and oh-so colorful images left behind by those sexy Frenchmen.

After learning about those particular painters passions and zest for life, I believe they may have created such scenes to perhaps entice perspective lovers, to stir the juices, to spark, to prompt, to incite the action and to welcome such impromptu moments of ecstasy.

The left-behind artwork perhaps became the long-ago artists eternal price-of-admission as reflections of their spirits to be perpetually savored as paintings that might entice incidents in front of them brought on by the fruits of their labor. The ghosts of the messieurs would have had front-row seats, a special viewpoint, so to dabble and amuse themselves while they were in the beyond.

Hopefully, they would have desired to capture our scene and interpret such by their own means, while wildly aroused themselves, taking quick glances, while oscillating back and forth between our erotic happening and the accepting canvas. Hopefully, they would have attested that we would have really been something!



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**Marach 3, 2024**

“Second Chances” (2019)

I do business with a local transportation company here in San Miguel. I stopped at BajioGo’s office a couple of weeks ago and Luis, the owner and friend of mine, greeted me. He seemed eager to share with me how his shuttle service was going to transport Academy Award-winning actor, Nicholas Cage plucking him from the airport in Leon transporting him to here in San Miguel, about 60 miles.

Luis wondered, if I might be interested about me replacing one of his drivers, figuring, maybe it might be a thrill for me and I might get a kick out of doing so. He sensed I might make Cage feel more relaxed, with him being with a fellow gringo, with loquacious me, being familiar with the turf, to chat a bit during the hour-and-twenty minute drive.

As a one-time aspiring screenwriter, of which BajioGo’s Luis has no idea, I thought how it would be cool to pick up Cage and perhaps get the latest skinny about Hollywood and all. Then the worst part dawned on me that I would not be able to discipline myself. Rather than showing him the lay of the land and offering some San Miguel lore, I’d go and get weak and giddy. Sadly, somewhere along the line the gushing fool in me would yodel out, “You know, Nick, I write screenplays too.”

The vision of such, seeing me sell out my own dignity, for likely nothing, sobered me up. I told Luis I was flattered and passed on the deal.

Don’t you know, Cage was a no show, so that saved from further embarrassment how I may have spilled out to my buddies how it was “me” picking up my poison, Nick.

So I guess it was sometime early this Century and I was in Austin, Texas. Before ipads and iphones and ieverything, I often checked my emails, etc, while on the road at pre-Starbuck, Schlotzsky’s Deli, their 6th and Congress location, doing so on their courtesy computers.

At the time I still aspired to have one of my scripts produced in Hollywood. I had my Academy Award-winning speech already written. Consider, residing in Mexico isn’t the best staging area if you have no connections in the biz. I continued to mail off scripts to the so-called agents and studios. I was lucky enough to sometime get rejection letters that spelled my name right or at least say, “we’re sorry but at this time we have no enthusiasm for your project but best of . . . blah, blah, blah.”

So I was in downtown, mid-day, with a herd of fast walking folks all corralled within the crosswalk crossing, 6th, and don’t you know, right in the midst of the other herd, coming my way was none other than, Quentin Tarantino!

Goodness! In about 4 seconds I’m coming face to face with the likes of my Mickey Mantle when I was nine or Elvis when I was 14, Muhammad Ali at 18 or Hugh Hefner when I was 22. HOLY SHIT, IT’S FUCKING QUENTEN TARANTINO!

The ticket to Hollywood is just twenty feet away, coming my way. I got a split second. What’s a guy to do? There was no time to prepare. How was I to make a connection, in the middle of the crosswalk?

I have no idea what jejune mumbling came out of my mouth while falling over myself. He held up his gate, acknowledging me for a brief moment, more on instinct, and then said something like he was in a

hurry, while scooting away plus the light was turning red. The sinking feeling sunk in five seconds later realizing that there's no second chance to make a first impression, Brah

That was it, my shot, my chance, my chance to become asshole buddies with Tarantino. Christ he would have loved me, loved my stuff for sure but circumstance didn't let it happen.

But hold on. In zombie fashion I moseyed into Schlotzsky's ordered a bagel something and got a tall coffee, then fixed myself on a stool in front of one of the available computers mounted on shelf fronting the huge plate glass window that looked out onto Congress. I was still beating myself up for what I don't know. Was I supposed to body slam the guy down? That stuff only happens in the movies, lol.

So as I was checking my stuff on the courtesy computer don't you know!!!!

Right on the other side of the plate glass window, now coming from the other direction, it's HIM and we looked at each other at the same time.

Again, it's fucking Tarantino, Round Two!

We both seemed to startle each other with the corresponding glances.

I darted off the stool and sprinted for the exit, deserting the bagel, coffee and fantasy football stats. Once out the door, Tarantino was about 50 yards ahead of me. I grabbed onto a business card and caught up with him. Again, but this time stronger, "Hey, Quentin, please, wait up! I wrote this boxing movie. I know you'd love it! Really, no shit! It's a fucking Academy Award winner. I am no groupie. I'm the real deal. I'm a screenwriter. Take my card. Please! Please call me, you'll see."

Christ, to think back, to have a chance to pitch Tarantino, I could have been asking for the last seat on a lifeboat on the Titanic, sounding desperate, spewing crazy talk from a desperate man.

Tarantino looked as if he just couldn't wait to get the fuck away from me, lipping the same, that he was late for an appointment.

Later on, in the throes of rejection, I came to grips with how many times does a guy like him hear that line? He faded away, on Congress. I went back to my bagel and football stats. The coffee had chilled.

Second chances are all that we can ask for. And by my sound of things, with Tarantino, I got mine. Second chances are rare. Second chances only seem to manifest with any sort of regularity is when it comes to romance yet, lol, time spans of their time frames can vary. After all, in the Book of Love, Chapter Four says, "You make up and never, never, never gonna part."

We've all been there and begrudgingly looked back only to wish we'd have that moment back again. Like that time at bat with the winning run on second in the bottom of the ninth and to have that look at the ball and swing all over again. Or when I anticipated the play, or from my linebacker position as my hand tipped the Quarterback's toss. If only I would have gained my wherewithal just a bit faster and sprinted just a little bit more to have caught up to that tipped ball that was all mine and then scampered in for a touchdown and win that playoff game!

Or the tongue-tied moments when we just couldn't say the right thing in front of someone we wanted to impress, then boot ourselves in the ass all the way home for perhaps not speaking up or us painting the right picture, flubbing our words or failing to tattoo our target with heart-piercing terms, instead, coming

up empty and finding ourselves not only holding the bag but all that's left is us wishing we might be provided the long-shot second chance.

To have the moment back again when at first, perhaps caught off guard and unable to parry an insult with us wishing to have the moment back to volley or earn a touché or to have delivered a stinging retort. Yet too often we have no chance to take that test all over or pitch a business deal or even ask her again for that dance.

I've learned my lesson. I'm ready for second chances these days. Well, I recently got married, so there's a good second chance. And wait, I had open-heart surgery some years ago, that for sure was a second chance. And what about winding up here in San Miguel almost 25 years ago, that was a second chance too.

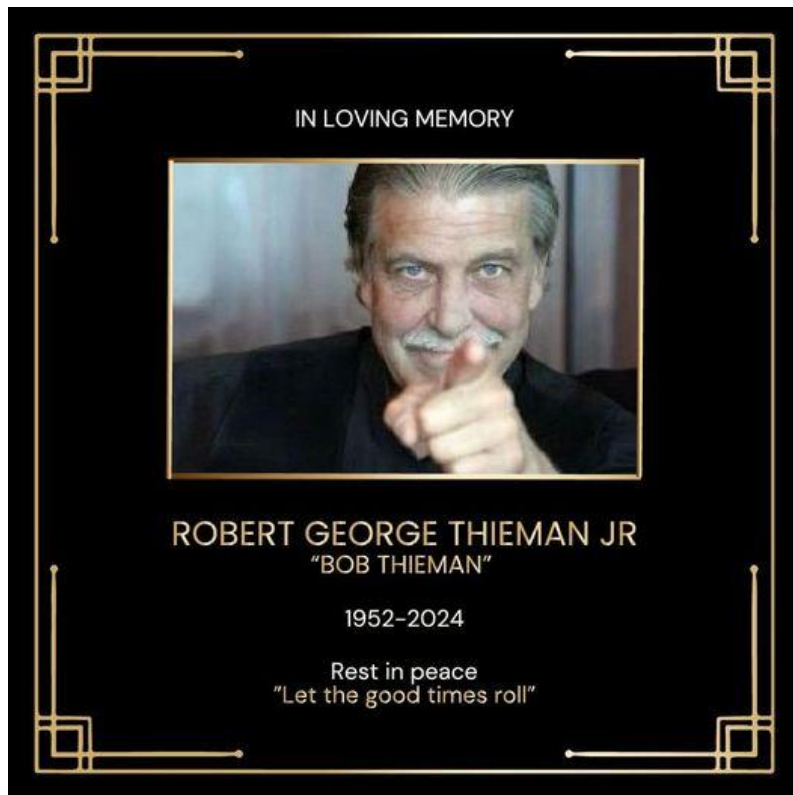
The lesson is, that second chances don't come often but we should be both ready and prepared for them. The next time I run into Tarantino, he ain't getting away.

**February 29, 2024**

(February 29th, LAST DAY TO VOTE)

Thank you to those who tell us they have voted. Please spread the word and win this for Bob. Voting takes place up until the 29th of the month.)

As a tribute to Bob Thieman, please consider sending an email to [dondayinsma@yahoo.com](mailto:dondayinsma@yahoo.com) and vote Hank's as the best restaurant in SMA this year.



In actuality, voting for restaurants is a popularity contest understanding votes are subjective.

I'm asking more for a vote for the man, a champion of the underdog, a man who in 20 years I never witnessed rejecting a person asking for comp dinners or a donation for a worthwhile endeavor, a man who lifted the spirit of this town, who made things happen, who learned Spanish, a generous man who some people may not have understood because of his bubbling confidence. Nobody ever gave away more than Bob, picking up tabs, often springing for a round of drinks for the entire restaurant, He was a man respected by his employees (they got paid during the COVID shutdown) and on

countless occasions a man who came to their aid emotionally and financially. A man you would want in your lifeboat or foxhole.

Again, we have many great restaurants in San Miguel and many great operators. In reality who is really to say which one is better over the other since there are so many moving parts and price points etc.? Please, again, vote for Hank's to give tribute to a man that many of us loved.

Please spread the word and give this man and his restaurant their due.

Hank's

Extensive menu

Consistent performance

Good crowd

Great Saloon

**February 25, 2024**

It was only 25 years ago when I composed this story.

"Spring is in the air" (1999)

By Lou Christine

It was a typical beautiful San Miguel day. A friend of mine who operates an upscale San Miguel Hotel invited me to take cafe and to talk story. Earlier mi amigo said he wanted to tap me for some information regarding Chinese Astrology, a subject I dabble in.

Sitting with my busy friend sometimes presents gaps in buddy talk because he's often summoned away or pestered with telephone calls.

My buddy more or less carried the conversation. In lieu of Chinese Astrology he wanted to speak about women, primarily his. Despite how he worships her everything and described that soft voice, the sheen of her hair and that effervescent smile... his pleasant features soured somewhat when he complained how conflict now-and-then comes storming into their lovey-dovey bliss with everything turning topsy-turvy.

He lamented, "Just in the last few days, it's as if she's turned crazy or something!"

Before my friend could utter more he was whisked away via telephone. For the time I was deserted. It wasn't so boring. I had my tasty cafe Frank Sinatra, cappuccino sin espuma, done "my way," and the well-kept grounds of the hotel are pleasant to the eye.

I kicked back and enjoyed the ambience.

I noticed . . . Why the bees were a-buzzing and crickets a-scooting and butterflies fluttered, some actually giving others piggyback rides. And while my buddy spoke Spanish in machine-gun fashion over

the phone and waved his hands in exasperation, I gazed over at the line-up of standing birdcages that amply grace the one-time home of a famous Mexican opera singer who turned movie star.

Staring through the bars of the birdcages I observed how the vibrant blue budgie was chasing the yellow one round-and-round the rim of the cage and doing so with bird-dogged determination. Low-and-behold, when my eyes panned the gardens, and up toward the trees, and further, the whole place was rocking-and-rolling, bugs were a-hopping, stunning white egrets cruised the sky like crown princes of fertility. All on the ground and up in the trees and the sky teamed with life!

By Jove, despite what the weather might be up North in Paducah, Poukeepsie or Portland, right here in Central Mexico, Spring is in the air.

It got me a-thinking since my buddy was still engrossed in his telephone call, providing me an opportunity to reflect some about Spring and what my friend and I were discussing.

Spring is in the air!

Ah, a time for romance, a season perhaps where even an old man such as myself can dig a little deeper and a ferret out a romantic tingle from within his own cynical heart.

Oh, I'm far from jaded. I'm an eternal optimist, actually a sentimental fool, (cross my heart) who similar to you-and-you-and-you, who has harbored a love boat's worth of craven desire for that special sweetheart.

Spring is but a moment.

While my buddy spoke low into the receiver I thought how recently, while driving around San Miguel in the evenings, especially in places that aren't illuminated like up near the mirador or down the darker calles, how I've spotted young couples romantically embraced. I can only imagine those young guys whispering sweet-Espanol nothings into those señoritas ears, saying stuff like "mi-amor-mi-amor" or "baby-baby," over and over. And with such tantalizing dilly dangling occupying my mind-set, a smile probably formed a wide seam across my face and rekindled how this boy's libido used to beat a similar drum and further, how I relished speaking on such terms toward the girly items of my interest.

I became stirred then lost myself for the time being with lingering thoughts of such silliness.

Think of the excitement to meet somebody new and the spending titillating moments sharing common pasts. There's the cavalcade of leisurely lunches along with the romantic candle-lit dinners and ah, the day trips, and ooh, the steamy overnights! While drifting in gah-gah land we go ahead and send the flowers then call on the phone if it's only to say "Hi." There's that warm cozy sensation that's bubbling within, feeling so right for the moment and so sooooo good.

Yet we have to be somewhat cautious and take heed because there's a chance of us possibly getting in over our heads and hoodwinked with us believing perhaps there's a new reason to live.

Yowza! Hope Springs Eternal. As we become more vulnerable we're ever-so willing and ready to share more. Ah, Spring, it's a lovely time laddies and lassies.

As I lounged within the splendor of the hotel's grounds I took a deep breath but became distracted as I turned my attention toward a dark cloud forming in the distant sky.

A cold chill ran through my many-Springtime innards, considering the recent past, and then how quickly the screws can turn. And buddy boy, just when you think you might be onto something, something so nice, something so real and something perhaps so worthwhile... out of the blue your whatever she's turning out-to-be might toss that debilitating bolt of lightning your way and then rock the shaky foundation stiling your flimsy fantasy world. She does so without quarter. She'll all of a sudden lets out something mind-boggling and acerbic having the punch to knock you down a rung or two with phrases that in all actuality are the "kisses of death."

With the precise calculating coldness of a surgeon's blade, they're able to say, "You're a very nice man but... You must understand, I don't wish to get involved... Further sex is absolutely out of the question..." And then there's that dreadful ultimate hammering of the final nail sealing romance's coffin, "Can't we just be friends?"

It's enough to make a guy want to vomit.

With grim reminders of the past, my boyish grin was all but wiped out. My cappuccino chilled (Christ it iced.). The sky darkened. The buzzing and chirping ceased. I saw myself in a light that was foolish and silly letting myself become a syrupy chump while being bullied and nudged by ole Mother Nature. Nah, not this old salt, I won't get fooled again, not me, I'm too smart for that mushy kid's stuff.

My buddy finally disconnected. He appeared to stand taller, chest extended outward, more handsome and seemingly more relaxed. He gave me a wink and stated with exuberance, "That was my baby on the phone. Oh, I love that girl. She's coming up from Mexico City this weekend. I just can't wait. Love is beautiful my friend! You should try it sometime. She's bringing along a girl friend, a real guapa. Would you like an introduction?"

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**February 18, 2024**

As far as the photos, long time buddy Dan Rueffert created the caricature of me.

Then, you might notice the nudee, a unique opportunity cropped up. A local art magazine did profiles on painters, photographers, writers etc. The only caveat was I had to be in the nude and wear the hat. I was 58 and up to that time nobody ever asked me to pose in the buff. They even produced a video. Check out what's printed on the fat of the bat.

"The Hat" (2009)

Over a lifetime many take on an appearance that becomes a signature look, a trademark so to speak, flashing a particular panache that defines people, like that mustache sported since college or by accessorizing themselves in such a way that sets people apart. Mine, I guess, is the hat.

I didn't embrace hats early on. Mostly old men wore them. Besides, the home front, from tyke to manhood, I was constantly harped on—to wear a hat. Aunt Dinny was always concerned I was going to catch a death of a cold. No matter if it was sunshine, blue sky or well into spring, she had me looking more like Nanook of the North than the smooth, young sharpie that I was, with the perfectly formed pompadour. Around the age of nine Aunt Dinny bought me a spiffy Halloween Superman outfit. It was

state of the art, not one of those cheapo plastic ones sold at discount stores. The cape was woven together with a sturdy material; on the front, the chest was embossed "S," while the Superman boots were sewed right onto the bottom of the pant legs.

I arranged the locks of my hair into a super curly cue with the help of "Olivo." With candy bag in hand, I was ready to hit the block and load up on goodies. "Not so fast," barked Aunt Dinny, her charging me armed with some dorky leather hat with earmuffs attached.

She capped me, then double-checked that the earmuffs functioned, flipping them up and down a few times just in case there was a sudden blizzard, in October no less. I may as well have been going out to trick or treat as "Louie Stupid Hat," with earmuffs.

"That hat" was kryptonite.

"Superman don't wear no hat!" I yelled, "Clark Kent might, but not Superman!" My argument wasn't so super.

I went out appearing like a dork but before you could say, Lois Lane, I stuffed the hat inside a bush on the front lawn. After "tricker-treating," I retrieved it from the bushes and plopped it back on before Superman reentered his Chamber of Solitude.

It was a hatless time. JFK was to become the first hatless president. Elvis or James Dean didn't cover their hair dos. Hats were for yucks, unless worn by The Lone Ranger, Hop-a-Long Cassidy, Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays, yet for the rest of my youth, to appease my aunt's mother-Henning, and to satisfy my sense of vanity I possessed one of those wool roll-up caps that I usually stuffed into my jacket's pocket.

"Don't forget your hat!" was the usual send-off until I was of draft age. The Army had me fitted into a selection of head gear from fatigue-type baseball caps, to helmets, to the infamous overseas caps that most GIs' had an unprintable name for, and those Army dress hats that made us look more like a Ralph Cramden type bus drivers or Pepsi Cola cops.

Civilian life offered me another chance to go hatless and to let my hair grow long.

Little did I know that a new shtick of hat identification would plop onto my noggin' at another juncture. I was 26 and had just bought my first new car. It was a beauty, a 1973 Gran Prix, specially ordered, chocolate brown, a coup, with a tan vinyl roof and tan leather upholstery, candle opera rear windows, AM-FM, air-co and mag wheels. Right away the queen wanted to take a road trip as to celebrate,

"Let's go to Cape Cod!"

We took another couple along and headed from Pennsylvania up the Eastern seaboard. There was the new car smell and the accolades from our friends and with the queen proudly perched in shotgun, I sensed something just wasn't right. The Grand Prix seemed to be running hot and there was something in the feel of the engine that didn't mesh.

We stopped at a Pontiac agency in Connecticut. They performed some type of inspection and sent us on my way. The problem persisted when we limped into Falmouth, Mass., and I dropped it off at another dealership. After two days they handed it back over with Mr. Goodwrench's stamp of approval. While driving out to Provincetown, for what was supposed to be a splendid dinner and some sight seeing, the Grand Prix's engine blew up just outside Hyannis. There was my beauty, helpless, hood up, smoking,



mouth wide open with fluids pouring out! I went so whacko I would have kicked in its grill if it weren't so pretty.

What's to do? Call a tow truck; send it off to the nearest Dealership. But we were miles from our hotel. So I rented a clunker from the nearby gas station, a bland American Motors, Matador, white, four doors, no radio, no pick-up, with me no longer feeling like the king but more like a dweeb. How many people aspire to drive a Matador?

Two hours later we are in some swank seaside bistro in Providence. I wasn't very good dinner company but the queen and our friends were trying to make the best of it with upbeat dinner conversation. I sulked, toyed with my twenty-dollar fish, worried about the car; would the warranty hold up, us being stuck a couple of hundred miles from home, with shrinking funds to be spent on extra food and lodging and I was chock with worrisome thoughts me being absent from my business.

After dinner, we strolled along the promenade. I still wore a pissy face. By then the queen probably had had it and in a sweeping move, she plucked one of those Greek sailor hats off a hat-rack display stand outside a clothing store and planted that hat on my head! Her queen like wisdom mandated, "Here's a hat! Get out of your mood. Be somebody different. You're boring me and ruining my holiday."

Unbeknown to me, that wool, black Greek sailor's cap became my signature hat for almost twenty years. For practical reasons and with the winters getting colder and longer, and as the hair thinned, the hat gained a purpose. I either grew into it or it grew into me and I wore it regardless if it were with suit and tie or at a family barbeque.

For me, arriving in San Miguel was like a new dawn. I shed much of my past, including the signature hat with me bestowing it atop a pretty face in Mama Mia's one night, her earlier voicing she liked the hat. Of course, by then I had a few tequilas. She got the car story and the hat but not what I really wanted her to have later on.

On another Halloween, I decided to dress as one half of The Blue Brothers, doing so in a tux with the sunglasses. The words "love" and "hate" I inked onto the back of my fingers the way the character Elwood did in the buffoon epic.

Still, I needed that tight-fitting black fedora. I remembered a friend who owned such a hat. He gladly lent it to me. It was a memorable Halloween.

Before I had a chance to return the hat my friend departed San Miguel for almost a year. I never sported the lent-to-me hat, but one night, just before going out, the hat sort of beckoned me from the nightstand. Its brim boasted a smirk that said, "Hey, why not take me with you? Remember the fun we had last Halloween?" So I plopped it on my head.

Don't ya just know it? It was the very night my hat-lending friend returned to San Miguel. So he catches me red-handed, wearing the very sky I borrowed from him. After shaking hands and giving each other buddy hugs I was quick to eke out, blah, blah, blah, that I hadn't worn the hat since the past Halloween.

The mensch that he is says, "You know, that hat fits you better than me. I think it enhances your demeanor." He flashed a buddy wink. "Why don't you keep it?" Such compliments have a way of boosting a guy's confidence and they don't occur that often. He not only left me off the hook but also gifted me. The hat and I then became a steady fixture.



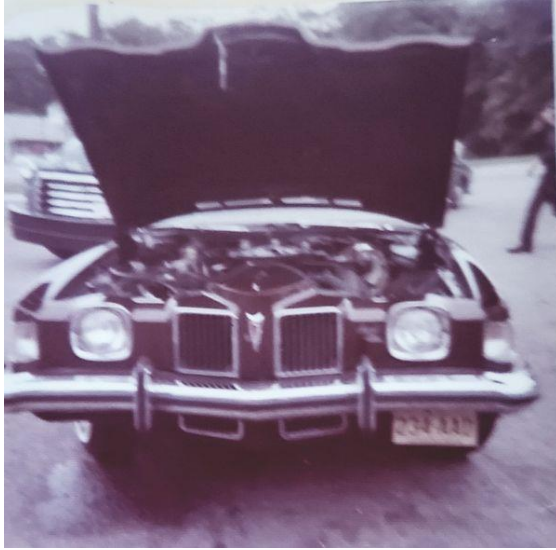
A few years back I was invited to pose nude in the premier edition of *Petite Journal*, a San Miguel magazine dedicated to the local art scene. One caveat, at the publisher's request, it was mandated that the fedora had to be included in the photo. I came to figure the hat was the star and a shameless naked me was merely a prop. The nude pose brought notoriety yet coupled me with the fedora. So these days it's the hat and me.

I own a number of fedoras. I still have the black gabber dean jump starter, along with a couple of natural fiber jobbies, and my prized felt Stetson, marked with a striking feather that I wear for special occasions, one I picked up at a flea market.

The fedora came into vogue during a stage play somewhere around the turn of the Twentieth Century. Famed actress Sarah Bernhardt had the starring role. The costume designer created a special hat for her to wear during the performance. Her name in the play was Fedora. So the yet to be labeled hat took on the name of the play's main character

The same way there is a lid for almost every pot, I suppose there is a hat for every man. In my view baseball hats only look good on youths, cowboy hats are for cowboys and silly hats are just that. Seems a fedora parallels with my image or perhaps accents the image I might be trying to project. After all, I smoked like Bogart, 250,000 or so and I am somewhat of a barfly. I've come to admire Sinatra and I suppose my aging face has evolved into being, fedora fitting. Maybe Aunt Dinny was onto something?

I wish she were still around.



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**February 11, 2024**

“Super Bowl Woes” (2005)

The publisher called and asked if I would be willing to write a story about my trip to Super Bowl XXXIX.

I barked into the phone, “Eagles lost to the Pats, 24-21.”

“Yeah, I know that Lou, I watched the game too, but how about a piece, you know, paint the picture for our readers what it is like going to a Super Bowl. I mean, how many people are lucky enough to attend a Super Bowl?”

“OK! OK!” I thought. So ya want a Super Bowl story?

Here goes: Gus, Babe and I attend Super Bowls. So it was pretty much a gimmee that we attended this year’s since our hometown team The Eagles were playing in the game. The three of us grew up in an industrial, blue-collar neighborhood in North Philadelphia.

From Pop Warner Football, through the rites of passage, the service, marriages, kids, divorce, fortunes made and fortunes lost, throughout it all, the three of us have remained solid. We’re not much on happy birthdays and stuff like that, but when football season comes around and the super bowl we gear-up.

During past bowls, we’d rev ourselves up for the game in the host cities as we pranced New Orleans’ Bourbon Street, or we checked out the “like wow” chicks on Miami’s South Beach and us Three Amigos, have staggered over the border in San Diego to raise hell in Tijuana

This past trip to the Super Bowl turned out much different. You, know, we all get signals, that at first might be subtle, but nevertheless, they’re warnings so to speak.

When speaking with Babe, the week before, he growled over the phone, “There’s no space in Jacksonville. We’re staying in Orlando. It’s about 140 miles south. It’s you, me, and Gus, plus I’m bringing my daughter and my sister, Chrissie, and her daughter, Jennifer. We’re staying at the Polynesian in Disney World. See ya on Thursday.”

I thought about the situation with us staying at Disney, him bringing the family, I thought about all that while on Orlando's airport's shuttle bus. Taking the shuttle was the thriftier \$17 option over a 50 dollar, twenty-minute, cab-ride to Disney World. Yet the shuttle made multiple stops, pick-ups at all the terminals taking almost an hour. Worse, the Polynesian Hotel would be at the end of the run.

The night before had been my birthday, a celebration, that was a whoopity doo and I left San Miguel around 4 am., drunker than drunk. Besides, it was colder than a witch's elbow in Orlando. I had a killer headache.

I mean, what were ten tequilas and no sleep the night before? Those were some of my summations on this packed shuttle bus from hell surrounded by snot-nosed, noisy tots and their parents.

"Where's Mickey! Where's Mickey?" the little monsters shouted for two-and-a-half friggin' hours on the shuttle ride that would never end.

Figuring, the kids were all revved up themselves, them too just flying in from somewhere.

Finally, "The Polynesian." Yet when it is in the low 40s. All that running water in fake waterfalls at the hotel and the whole Pacific scene seemed off. The hotel didn't appear like my type of place. Top that off with an aggressive team of hotel greeters, all with Stepford wives smiles saying, "Aloha! Aloha! Aloha!" over and over so syrupy it could make a guy want to puke. I lived for sixteen years in Hawaii. Me for one knows that in actuality, "Aloha," means, "Fuck You," in Hawaiian.

I tried to get my bearings in the hotel lobby and, turned down opportunities to have a tawdry paper lei draped over my shoulders. I needed to find the gang who had checked in the night before. I didn't pick the place. My buddy Babe thought the location would be perfect for his daughter and other family members and he desired a fun-filled trip for them.

I found Babe's daughter, Gabriel and his sister, Crissy, in our suites. Gus and Babe were out the airport to pick up their game tickets from some guy flying in from New England. Seems Babe's niece had paid for four tickets upfront, to the tune of 12K. Seems it was turning into an E-Bay scam. Seems my buddy was onto the possible scam beforehand and found out through his street smarts by calling airlines that the suspected bunko artist was going to be in Orlando two hours before he said he was supposed to be and Babe and Gus wanted to catch up with him in case there was any funny stuff. Seems things got funny, no consequence to me but I hated to see Babe's niece, Jennifer, getting ripped, she's a nice girl, a devoted Eagle fan and she saved her hard-earned money for such a trip.

I was beat. I still had a headache. The venture hadn't created an auspicious start. I needed a smoke. Smoking has become more difficult in the States. The suite was no smoking. The whole area was no-smoking. I felt like a common criminal sneaking a butt under a tree, next to a man-made lake on Disney property, which is about umpteen something square miles and as far as the eye can see. The Magic Kingdom was in view just across the cold waters of a Disney-made lake. I had my smoke and watched bundled up Disney goers board the ferry. I could hear the loud speakers giving instructions to those boarding the ferry, a ferry without a pilot which had me thinking further how everything ran either on automatic or by robotic acting drones that have been conditioned so. Hitler would have relished such an operation. He could have really racked up some serious numbers because of Disney's people moving skills.

Gus and Babe showed back at the suite. We did the hugs and lied about how good the other looked. The bad ticket guy was in jail. Still, there was no refund or tickets. All, except Gus, had to procure new tickets. Gus has had his ticket for every Super Bowl since its inception. In the past, we had paid between \$1200 and \$1500 for decent seats. Face value of every Super Bowl ticket from the front row to the nosebleed sections is one price. Up to this year that was \$400. This year it was bumped up to \$600. The disturbing news was that the few available tickets were being scalped for 3 to 4 thousand. Figure there was a pair of big, East-Coast metropolitan areas that had teams in the Super Bowl, a game being played on the East Coast. It was a supply and demand thing. Word was that every working-class hero from Philadelphia was going to make it to North Florida “no-madder-what!”

The status of such had me counting my money. I needed sleep but more so I needed stiff tequila. I had a few belts from the bottle of Jose Cuervo’s Traditional reposado I brought in from Mexico.

The gang wanted to eat. Rather than sampling the mouth-watering local fair that we were used to in fabulous cities that the bowls take place in, our options were reduced, due to only two institutional joints at the Polynesian. No taco carts in Disney, brah.

They offered the buffet for \$25 or the buffet for the \$25. Oh, it was another sickening round of “alohas” from every passing of the shit-eatin’ grinning staff. I did wolf down a lot of pork and poi and pineapple. I kept away from beans as not to have Hawaiian music later in the close quarters of our dual suite, with respect to my buddies and all. But I did pack it in.

I think I had a few more tequilas back in the room. By then I’d been up a day and a half, two days, who knows? The rumbling occurred around 3 a.m. I must have caught a chill. But there was a further rumbling coming from below in my innards. As I scooted to the bathroom with fever and chills, the thought came back to me, like on the bus, like a bad feeling, about those kids blabbering, “Where’s Mickey?”

I’ll tell you where Mickey was while unmentionables were pouring out of me in the most disgusting manner. Images of too many to mention Mickey Mouses were staring at me while I was in agony, him, with that smart-ass Mickey smirk on his punk face. His embossed image was on the water glasses, soap dish, soap, shampoo, towels, wallpaper, everywhere, with no escape other than closing my eyes and his image even began to show up in the confines of my mind.

It was almost enough to drive a guy insane. And I would have gotten off for temporary insanity in a court of law when I testified the reason I gave Mickey such a vicious, awful, non-forgiving, ass-kicking all over the grounds of the Magic Kingdom if I caught his punk ass the next day. I just know I would have gotten off.

It was beginning to occur to me this whole family-style trip didn’t fit our normal criteria. I figured this bowl would be different when my buddy mentioned bringing family.

Well you know us guys are getting up in age, and Gus quit drinking because being a bookie has a way of giving the poor guy ulcers. And Babe, who’s in construction, does have a great relationship with his daughter and she’s a big Eagle fan, ‘cause he made her one, and these days I have a girlfriend, so I guess our yearly jaunt didn’t have to be a four-day orgy of opulence and overindulgence. The interest of the game in itself piqued my interest with the Eagles being in it. There’s a lot more to a Super Bowl than just attending the game. There’s a feeling of the big-time.

The next day I stayed in bed knocked down by whatever I picked up. The gang went and did the Magic Kingdom routine. It was just as well I didn't go in case I ran into Mickey.

As a matter of fact, all day Friday and all day Saturday, your reporter did not leave the room, other than trying not to be a total party pooper (excuse the pun) as I attended a group dinner at none other than Mickey's Café at what was called the Contemporary Center. It was still cold. We took the monorail, all automated with recorded voices saying the same monotone messages over and over before each monotone stop. The monorail was packed with strollers and kids. The kids were still braying for Mickey.

I never want to see another pacifier in my life. At the restaurant, I just ordered a coffee but quickly had to excuse myself because there was no escape. Everywhere I looked, there he was, on the menu, table cloth, etched into the architecture of the building, decals pasted to cash registers, everywhere was Mickey. Hiding my eyes as not to get dizzy, I escaped back to my room. The only solace was that early in the morning we were escaping creepy Disney World and all of its trappings going off to the game.

It was going to take two-and-half to three-hours in the Buick rental to get up to Jacksonville. Babe had been on the phone with trusty scalpers of the past and paid through the nose for four tickets to the tune of 3K apiece. I was still ticketless. I had some anxiety since our sources were saying that loose tickets barely existed.

Heading north began to become somewhat exhilarating. Fifty miles south of Jacksonville one could have sensed they were involved in charge and invasion of Iraq during Desert Storm. Seemed every other car storming towards Jacksonville had Philadelphia Eagle flags blowing in the wind. Occupants of cars, vans-and-buses were uniformed in green football jerseys with names embossed on their backs, names like McNabb, Westbrook and Owens, all Eagle stars.

Even down in Orlando, we heard that Philadelphia fans were making a strong showing. The Eagles had only made one other appearance in The Bowl when they were whooped and embarrassed by the Oakland Raiders and that had been 24 years ago and you got to know that Philadelphia is a football town. By the time we got to Jacksonville, it was still a full six hours before kick-off. I would have to wait until the last minute if I were to be able to catch a scalper doing a liquidation sale and then I would have to have my skills sharp to Christian the sucker down. Yet everybody wanted a ticket. The streets were strewn with Eagles fans with signs reading, "I need a ticket!"

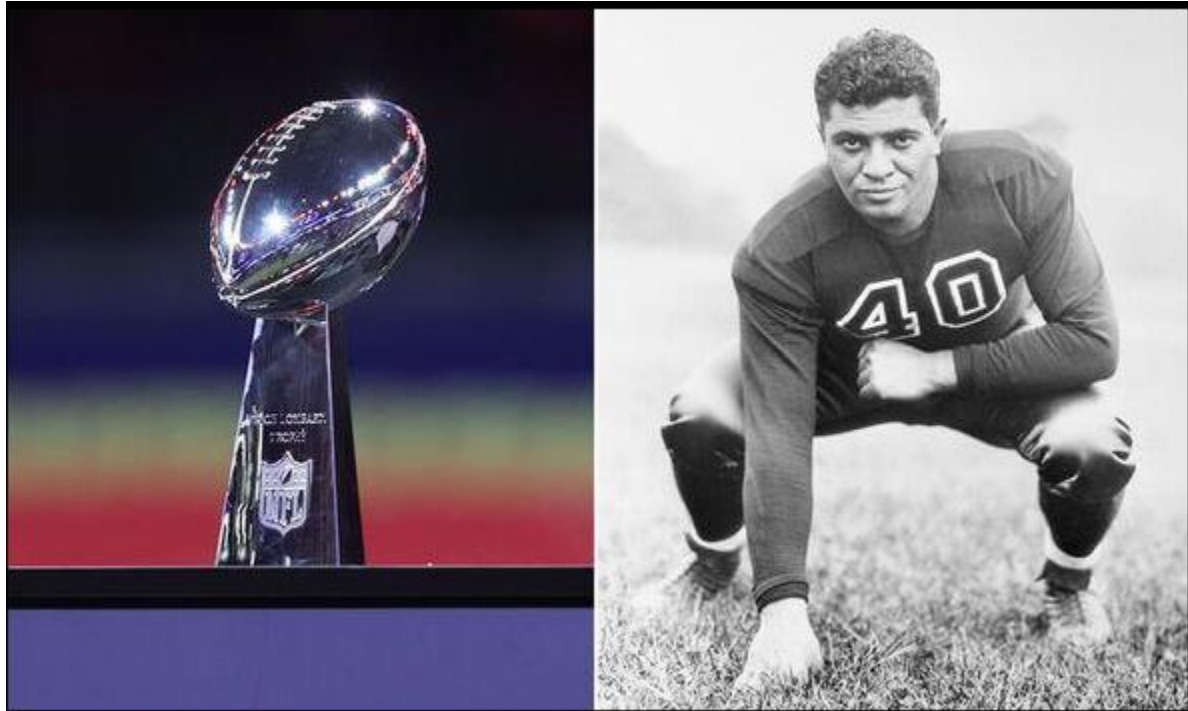
We opted to go to the NFL Experience for \$15, a sort of an NFL exhibit with memorabilia, films, gear, football-related games for kids, lots of corporate sponsors and stuff like that. It wasn't as if there weren't any Patriot fans, but they seemed fewer and further apart and Eagle fans were boisterous.

The time was nearing and we had to make our way to the stadium. There were shuttle buses; this time not packed with snot noses, but with rough and tumble NFL football fans. The city of Jacksonville kept regular traffic off all roads leading to the stadium. There were special shuttle buses and another-type of a monorail. After getting off the bus we merged into a green stream heading towards the game. Just before the security checkpoint, where you have to show your ticket and become humiliated and searched just like at airports, I had to leave my gang and begin my pursuit for a ticket.

In past Super Bowls, by this time, there would be lots of scalpers roaming within the crowd asking, "Who needs tickets?" It wasn't happening. There were hordes of people with little signs or big signs asking for tickets and much more roaming outside the security zone. I was getting edgy and had yet to hold up my

hand like others looking to get in. I decided to make some allies of people with signs saying to them, if they ran across anyone with more than one ticket or if they weren't willing to pay what someone might be asking, to turn them over to me. And that is how it went down about fifteen minutes before kickoff, having me miss Alicia Keys entertainment beforehand. Yet, I don't go to Bowls, to see no Alicia Keys.

Just so happened one kid couldn't afford the ticket and the seller was waiting for the last minute that his buddy could make it up from Daytona Beach. He asked \$1200, I held out a G-note and we made the deal.



So I sat in the best seats I have ever had for the bowl, Eagles side, 45-yard-line, row N. It's all history now, the Eagles lost.

To tell you the truth I can hardly remember halftime and Paul McCarthy. I didn't go to see Paul McCarthy either. I was focused on football and my emotions oscillated from sure-fire jubilant, when the Eagles went ahead or tied, to coming to grips with defeat as time began to run out with the sinking feeling they were going to lose the game. Tell you the truth most memory of the game is a blur now. From the get-go, I never hit a comfort zone, with the shuttle buses, Disney crap and that punk Mickey, with my illness, the ticket fiascos and not really staying in the host city. Plus I had to constantly watch my language. Talk about not having any fun.

Afterward another agonizing loss (what else is new?) I bolted out of the stadium on that cold, dark, sad, Sunday night. Mi Amigos got waylaid on a bus that got lost and didn't make it back to the car somewhere around 1:30 a.m. as I waited and shivered in a then empty spooky parking lot. Making it back to Orlando we hit a terrible traffic jam of fans heading south that had us bumper to bumper for fifty miles. I had the worse headache in the world, my team has lost and all I wanted to do was get out of icebox Florida, get to the airport and get home. I surmised the time, effort, spending of money and anxieties, and for the first time ever at a Super Bowl I had a shitty time.

So there's the report. Sorry I am not reporting about the skills of the players, the strategies employed by coaching staffs, the pageantry of the event, the laughs, the camaraderie or anything relevant to the game. Yet I guess in all honesty, in a heartbeat, if the Eagles make it to the Super Bowl next year, I'll do it all over again, in Detroit of all places, since I am a die-hard Eagle fan. Go Eagles in 2005.

**February 4, 2024**

The bar, Cucaracha was a different place 24 years ago. Today they close around 1:00 am. and the town has changed. COVID has had much to do with the change in atmosphere. Below is a picture of it that I wrote back then and now part of my memoir.

“Tales from San Miguel—Critters that Come Out in the Night” (2000)

By Lou Christine

The dingy bar, Cucaracha, doesn't exude glamour. An exception might be the “hubba-hubba” pin-up of a sultry Marilyn hanging off the bar's crumbling plaster. Marylyn's naked, posed in a provocative position. To define San Miguel's Cucaracha: It's late-night personified situated on Calle Zacateros, a stone's throw away from San Miguel's spruced up jardin.

The word Jardin, means “garden” in Spanish. The actual jardin is San Miguel's town-square showcasing smartly trimmed laurel trees and green-painted, cast-iron benches similar in color to the leaves on the trees. The square is situated across from the town's landmark a gothic, pink-stoned cathedral referred to as “The Parroquia.”

A possible welcome mat at the Cuc, as it is often nicknamed by locals— a bombed-out campesino, down for the count, head-plopped, mouth open with the upper half of his torso sprawled atop a messy table. More than likely not much attention is paid to the unconscious one.

The cantina's torn leather furniture appears more ready for the woodpile than drunken asses. The stark concrete floor's usually littered with an always-burgeoning field of crushed cigarette butts. Cucaracha could be described as a concrete bunker with some wooden trim, funky, a common-man's watering hole that continues to pour 'til the wee hours, but there's so much more!

Going to the restroom is a slippery slope, a murky adventure within a dank darkness. The floor's a slosh as if earlier hosed down but we know better. A guy never knows who he's elbow-to-elbow with while doing his business over the trough-type urinal. It's best to stare straight ahead and maybe try to make out the scrolled graffiti written mostly in Spanish. “Put a su Madre,” is a hard-edge connotation demeaning one's mother. “Todos hombres de Queretaro estan jotos!” a cruddy slur indicating all males from a nearby city are that of a different persuasion. There are even signs of aliens, “Philly guys rule!” Praise the Lord males don't hafta sit down. Toilet seats are a luxury in public bathrooms in much of the country. Females! I don't know what they do.

Forget the foo-foo crowd. It's a far cry from a Mecca flashing designer wear. The hang out's patrons don faded jeans and droopy tank tops. Head wear varies Stetson-Cowboy to New York-Fedora along with an assortment of caps with sports' teams' logos embossed on them, to do-rags, to commando-type caps worn by the likes of Che Guevara, to no hat at all. Those in muscle shirts don't always live up to their name. Yet despite a seedy impression, there's something intriguing taking place.



“Shaky Jakey,” nick named for obvious reasons, he suffering from Parkinson’s, a one time product of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is capped by a faded, corduroy football-Steelers-baseball-cap and is likely to show a shit-eating grin, him almost toothless, while doing his shimmy in the midst of lifting and drinking his beer.

Jakey is likely to be reminiscing with Billy Blue, mid-50s, a strong-featured Mexican, with café ole features who’s also a Blues guitar player, somewhat burnt out and hasn’t had a paid gig in years. They hobnob.

Jakey talks “inside baseball” while Billy feints air guitar. Neither really listens the other out, but it doesn’t matter. They’re long-time friends and act that way all the time. Jakey lips to no one in particular, “Clemente probably had the best arm from right field,” while Billy nods and says, “Joe Pas said you could go anywhere you want as long as you could make it back.”

Local painter Johnny “the lover” Kilroy, after a number of vodkas slurs a distorted gringo-sounding Spanish describing while also boring a half-his-age Mexican goddess just what hippie life was like up the Hudson during the Woodstock era.

Johnny’s animated and can’t wipe the seductive smile off his wrinkled face. He keeps repeating a redundant English within his bastardized Spanish, “You know,” and “Like I say,” and “The point is,” were a mix attached to the “you-woulda, you-shoulda and you-coulda.” The wide-eyed goddess with Grand Canyon cleavage appears glassy-eyed and lost in translation.

On the most part, women aren’t permitted in cantinas but Cucaracha made the exception way back. Back when ladies of the night . . . well, some facts are better left unsaid.

There’s a distinct aura in the air. Why else would the joint be so popular? Cucaracha holds fast to its two-fisted, hard-drinking reputation.

Originally the cantina was located a couple of blocks over where the Banamex Bank sits today, where it’s said San Miguel crazies were knocking down booze almost ‘round the clock with the Cucaracha acting as their temple. Urban legend swears notables Kueroac, Burroughs, the infamous Cassidy, Ken Kesey and the likes of Allen Ginsburg all hung out. Urban legend further says the all-star line up of Beats frequented the joint while residing part-time in town. Stories of the past swear marathon card games lasted more than a week and one arguable tale tells of a naked female hitchhiker brazenly exiting the backseat of a dusty Caddy that just made its way down from north of the border, she doing so in broad daylight as she strolled into the Cuc. Are they true? Who really cares but they’re fun to listen to.

Way-way back in the 1700s Cucaracha’s old location served as the home for the town’s wealthiest Spanish colonists, the De La Canal family. At one time in the early ‘60s the bar was internationally renowned, it being described in a chic, north-of-the-border bellwether monthly rating it as one of the top bars on planet Earth.

In the not-so-long-ago past actors, Mickey Rourke and Willem DeFoe made a cameo appearance, way after midnight. The twosome were in town shooting “Once Upon a Time in Mexico,” a lame film, easily forgotten except by those who keep track and list the worst films of all time. As the lost-in-space actors acted as if they were welcomed they were mostly ignored, other than curious gapes and some idle

finger-pointing. Sensing the uneasy vibe the acting duo quickly downed their club sodas and performed a “stage outta-here!”

These days Cucaracha’s stands as a last-chance bastion for stay outs. When supper clubs and other boom-boom joints shut down the Cuc is an alternative. One shouldn’t object to second-hand smoke. There’s at least a pack of burning tobacco wafting through in the air at any given moment. One can fulfill cravings for nicotine without flicking a Bic.

A contrast to the din . . . there’s a spiffy perpetual-playing jukebox spinning out diverse tunes of CDs with songs running the gamut. Mexican Folk plays compositions by the iconic and long-dead David Alfredo Jimenez. Even those who don’t understand a lick of Spanish can sense the anguish of a broken heart. His laments of lost love are familiar to every cry-in-your-beer Mexican.

Nationwide, jilted lovers in cantinas sing along in a “misery loves company” environment. The mood can suddenly shift. Then it’s the eternal voice of Jim Morrison belting out, “I woke up this morning and had myself a beer . . .” half the place gets down and sings into their beer bottles using them as microphones.

Billy Blue gyrates, by swinging his arm and doing windmills on his imaginary guitar. Jakey looks away, shakes his head while staring into space perhaps embarrassed for Billy’s antics. Johnny the lover inches closer to the young Mexican goddess careful not to singe her dangling curls with his lit and fast-moving cigarette. Throw-caution-to-the-wind couples dance in front of the jukebox, or on tables, or on top the bar itself.

The staff’s laid back, basically disinterested, mostly oblivious, going about their business in zombie-like fashion in between backgammon or domino moves. Robotish-like, taking time from their games, they pop beers caps serving strictly on a COD basis.

The younger set nurse their Stolis with Sprite and their Bacardi and Cokes, while old timers puff on their Marlboros and sip straight pours of reposado tequilas like old time cowboys. Many just lean on the bar keeping to themselves them alone within their thoughts. As does Mysterious Mike, a probable American, heavy set, middle-aged, a solitary man, who wears sunglasses ‘round the clock, always dressed in a black T-shirt, black jeans and black, Durango, swirl-patterned, cowboy boots with silver tips. His tasseled, curly grey flops on his oversized head as does his full maim, a matching ensemble complimenting the grey straggles belonging to his eyebrows and mustache. Some insist he’s an ex-cop, undercover or CIA or something of sorts; some saying he’s on the lam while others profess, he’s in the “witness protective program.” He says nothing, asks for nothing and the staff’s aware of his drink. He communicates with nods or hand motions yet it’s apparent he doesn’t miss a trick.

I think if one of those T-shirted bartenders suddenly discovered a sparkling diamond stuck inside a bottle cap inside one of those going-out Negro Modelos, their blank expressions wouldn’t change an iota. As long as things remain copacetic, everything’s cool.

Around 2:00 a.m. San Miguel’s off-duty wait-help begin to storm through the dilapidated doors, mixing in their semi-formal work attire with those wearing denim, and wrinkled cotton. Waving peso bills at the staff eager to catch up with the other drinkers who got a head start.

Things get cooking.

The rest of the clientele's a potpourri. They're the new-aged and the disheveled, the tattooed and snaggle-toothed, in all shapes and forms, mostly local yet always hip. There are dread locks and super-gelled and spiked dos some dyed in shades normally reserved for parrots. There are a number of skinheads, some by choice, others due to the aging process. Having pierced body parts isn't a prerequisite. There are the freshly scrubbed and seamless faces belonging to first time away from home art-students, fresas, who might be filled with exuberance while chatting away with wrinkled-faced maestros.

There are the like-wow chicas with hourglass figures pretending to let themselves be seduced by burnt-out writers who by all means have bad intentions. World travelers wash in, in search of good or bad company just for the sake of talking story. And there are the forever hand-shaking wanna-bes willing to speak with anyone, "Wanna buy me a drink, amigo?" With town's international flavor, French might be being spoken in one corner while East-Coast big-city cackles from another.

Exquisite bouquets of vacationing Chilean gals often become all the buzz, attracting a hornet's nest worth of barflies, who if given a choice, might try and out marathon the Monarch butterflies winging it to the foothills of the Andes. Those South American señoritas enjoy the ambiance. Some want to further perfect their Spanish accented English while far away from home while flirting with smiling and blue-eyed guapos from places like North Carolina while others hold true to their native Spanish tongues flirting with newfound Mexican, brown-eyed caballeros.

By 2:30 the joint's a-jumping, chocked with foxes and coyotes, Romeos and Juliets, in-laws and outlaws, a hybrid, grooving to the blaring tunes. The pulsating beat from the jukebox along with the nudging of alcohol helps erase the disappointment or the lingering mundane from the previous day. By the-then-early-hour yesterday is no more than a mundane memory. Earlier proclaimed "one for the road Joes," should be sued for false advertising, who still may be tasting away come the crack of dawn. After a certain hour, a "no-seeing-character" affectionately known as Blind George gains visual parity. Decibels rise.



A young Mexican hombre elbows and bullies his way toward the fellas at the bar. “What’s “shaken,” Jakey?”

Jakey continues to flash symptoms of a man tormented by Parkinson’s disease. Jakey rips off his baseball cap and whacks the wisenheimer over the head but then lips to the bartender, “Give this asshole a beer! My treat!” Billy Blue overhearing the crack, brakes from his guitar solo and chastises the wise-guy, doing so in machine-gun Spanish, saying how the-youngster shouldn’t make fun of a man struck with such a malady. The pendejo shirks and says, “Jakey don’t mind none. Gringos are good sports, No?”

Jakey smiles. Shrugs his shoulders. Somewhat amused he calms Billy indicating he hasn’t lost his sense of humor and that he likes this kid. Jakey voices he thinks the kid’s wise-guy line is funny as he repeats the line and laughs to himself, “What’s “shaken,” Jakey?”

Mysterious Mike almost cracks half-a-smile. Johnny, who by now is so close to the goddess, there’s no room for their guardian angels as Johnny the lover quizzes her if she knows what they’re talking about when it comes to Jakey. “No se,” voices the girl along with an I-don’t-know-look. Johnny spouts it doesn’t matter.

Now and then some brothers go over the top but there’s usually enough level headed types willing to step forward. There is that distinct air of tension. A pragmatic mind might ask, “What the hell am I doing here?” But ya gotta figure, “My, man, it’s the middle of the night and you’re boozing in a place where the name speaks for itself!”

Frequenting the Cucaracha is no Boy Scout outing nor will it be penciled in on the local Biblioteca’s House and Garden tour. A tour each Sunday that has San Miguel tourists visiting palatial mansions belonging to the gringo rich.

Perhaps hanging at the Cucaracha is “right of passage” for young sanmigueleneses. It boasts aspects one doesn’t discuss with dear ole mom or the parish priest except when whispering away inside the confessional. Yet for the most part Cucaracha’s a mellow place. One is likely to shake a thousand more hands before they would ever have to swing a fist.

After a time, while immersed with the hoi polloi there’s a euphoric marination taking-place. The body warms, the mind bends, yet it could be the tequila. The standard pour is a fat mother, equaling, forefinger to pinky, belonging to the meaty mitts of a stevedore. After a number of sure-fire belts, a pug face like me might see himself as more handsome, taller, thinner, wittier with more hair, a sexy dancer, a grinning fool who’s about to become bullet-proof . . . as so it might be for Jakey, and it might be for Billy, as well as Johnny and the newbie smart-ass kid and all the rest of the brethren as they slug down their booze.

By golly, it seems by 3:30 that that steamy photo of Marilyn all of a sudden has come alive! The provocative-posed diva beckons. There’s no doubt to the observer that her forever young-and-frozen, a sardonic smile is meant exclusively for them.

Other pictures hang. Operating far beyond the borders of Gringolanderia, a poster of a scowling, Uncle Sam takes a shot at recruiting guys with its: “I want you!” the vintage poster is still as intimidating as it has been for almost a hundred years yet the yellowed and faded paper recruiting poster is no more than

history. There's a full-scale mural of what else? a wild cantina scene. There's a terrific cityscape showcasing ole San Miguel.

Each picture has particular significance I suppose. Somehow the management doesn't give one the impression they've taken an art appreciation class. Yet somebody's probably around, in charge, to make decisions.

There's a standout painting above the bar that depicts a group of merry-making cockroaches raising hell on bar stools while toasting each other inside a surreal, roach-infested bar; it's a weird scene created from the humorous confines of an artist's imagination perhaps after they spent a sordid night inside the Cucaracha. By witching hour some goofy goings-on takes place; the rathskeller reminds one of that far-out alien bar in the film "Star Wars." Or one might wonder, as a goof on mankind that the Almighty may have gathered the world's whackos, misfits and loose-cannons and crammed them all into one dump.

Then figure, when whooping it up at the Cucaracha to a certain extent, including yours truly, we stay-outs become very much like those merry-making, antenna-laden critters in that painting. When you drink at the Cucaracha there's a healthy vermin spirit.

Jakey and Billy click their bottles, then pouring down their gullets the last as they crush their smokes and decide to walk each other home. On the way out, while passing Johnny-the-lover, then entwined and slow dancing with the goddess. Jakey quips, "Ah, love! Will Kilroy get there?" Johnny winks.

Mysterious Mike lifts a finger indicating he's ordering a nightcap rotating his index finger down toward his pesos for his bill but still, staring straight ahead paying no mind. At dawn, he'll return to his small casita where Mysterious Mike will continue to fine-tune and edit what will become one of the most critically acclaimed, historic novels ever penned in English about Mexico!

For many of San Miguel's young, and for those young at heart, the Cucaracha is a special gathering place, perhaps a not-so-appropriate or a fashionable conclusion to another dynamite day in Paradise, but what the heck... whatta ya think they're doing at 4 am up in Paducah?

With wife, Donna



With Sister, Toni, who passed December 2023



January 28, 2024

"The Day John Lennon Saved My Life" (1989)

An excerpt from "Inspirations & Humiliations"

John Lennon once saved my life! After reading this piece you can determine if John Lennon literally or figuratively saved my life. As far as I'm concerned John saved my life on October 8, 1984, his 44rd birthday, almost 4 years after his untimely death.

You see when the Beatles first made it on the scene back in 1964 I pretty much didn't care for them. Well, first of all, my girlfriend was gah-gah about them. She annoyingly squealed in front of the TV and even in front of me like when they appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. The idea she could be so bonkers over four, long-haired, Lymie nobodies who couldn't, in my short-sighted view, hold a note to the rock-and-rollers of the day.

Yet, while in the Army I too eventually came around especially when the Rubber Soul and Revolver albums hit the charts and I too became a devoted fan. If you've ever read any of my short stories or rock and roll columns you know music has been a major in my life since Elvis hit the scene back in 1956.

By 1980 I owned every Beatles' album, plus each of John's, Paul's, George's and Ringo's solos. By 1980 I was married to Lauri, lived on Maui and possessed a good-sized record collection. My collection was my prized possession as I cranked out tunes on my digital turntables, with a center console mixer, and Sony's

best reel to reel tape machine, clear as a bell speakers, power amps, with other boosters and receivers up the ying-yang. I was, by all means, an audiophile.

Sometime around 7 pm. on December 8, 1980, the awful news jolted my senses while visiting a friend's house in Kula, Hawaii. John was dead! Shot by some whacko carrying a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. Shot dead outside the Dakota, his Manhattan apartment house. It was a bummer. I was devastated, as was my wife, Lauri and son, Rob. We all loved John and loved the Beatles and their music was a constant in our household.

Also by 1980, after ten years of marriage, there was some trouble in paradise. The queen and I weren't getting along. We had a slew of pressures since storming the shores of Maui the year before. Maui can be difficult, not always so new-people friendly, with only the then few established human resources and high cost of living etc. We were in business and those pressures too were taking their toll on our marriage.

Up to that time, Lauri had pretty much given me the reins when it came to the music being played in our household. She went along with most of what I bought and as stated, music was a constant. Yet for some reason, the recent John Lennon album "Double Fantasy" had a profound effect on Lauri. She both pleased and surprised me by acting on her own and buying the album to add to my collection.

There was a poster-size keepsake photo that came with the album taken by famous New York photographer, Annie Leibowitz. Don't you know, and surprisingly for Lauri she pasted the photo up in our walk-in closet. There was a naked John, atop a clothed Yoko, he curled up, hugging his Yoko,

So the tragic news hit home and hit hard. I don't think I ever cried over anyone's death, not any family member or a fallen one while in the Army or even President Kennedy but I recall my eyes welling up in tears for a number of days when struck with John's loss.

Lauri and I owned and operated a couple of Philadelphia style sandwich shops on Maui. From that moment on, on John's birthday, October 8th, we would run an ad in the local paper with John's photo on it adding the heading, "Give Peace a Chance." It was our small way to pay tribute to the music icon.

In addition, we heard that Yoko was planning a special place in Central Park, in Manhattan, right across the street from the Dakota, just a patch to be named Strawberry Field. She asked people worldwide to bring or send in the form of a stone or rock from where they resided to be placed there in honor of the rocker John.

Upon a trip, in 1982 to the East Coast, Lauri, Rob and I gathered a rock from Maui to be added as a contribution and planned our own trip to the Dakota as we wanted to personally give our offering to Yoko. Unfortunately, Yoko was not at the Dakota that day but we left it with the doorman with a note explaining our devotion to John and how we were from Maui and were chipping in a small piece of Maui.

Soon thereafter, Lauri received a heartfelt note from Yoko and the two would write back and forth, and when Yoko came to Maui some years later, showcasing some of John's sketches at a local gallery she made sure Lauri was invited to a special luncheon.



So, there it was October 8, 1984. An ole buddy, Texan, Alf Taylor and I were cruising Maui on our way someplace in the midst of buddyville. I stopped my Mazda 626 at a stop sign at a busy but rural intersection. I began to ease across the road when all of a sudden I heard, "LOOK OUT!"

Holy-moly! Unbeknownst to me, a giant truck hauling pineapple was rumbling through the intersection at that very moment. I always considered myself an extra alert driver and can't recall how I missed the huge yellow monster barreling down the hi-way and coming right toward us. I jammed the brakes!

The truck, with right of way, roared past our point of view. It startled me! I gathered my

composure and I continued to drive across the hi-way, turning left heading towards Lahaina. I shouted out, "HOLY SHIT! I didn't see that friggin' truck! I can't believe it, Alf! Thank God you saw it and warned me!"

Alf, who too was panic-stricken by the almost catastrophic event but at the same time evenly said, how it was a close one yet added, "Lou, I didn't say, 'LOOK OUT,' but I heard it!"

Wait a minute I thought as we continued down the road, we both heard "Look Out!" but it was just us two with the windows up, no people were around the rural intersection, plus the air-conditioning was blowing and the stereo was on full blast.

The Stereo!

The "Double Fantasy" tape was playing in the Mazda's tape playing console. The track playing was "Starting Over."

Alf said nothing further as I pressed the rewind button. Don't you know, on the recording, in between, choruses, John, just extemporaneously shouted, "Look Out!" the way rockers do!

Still, on the road, Alf and I looked at each other and there was no doubt in our military minds' that John's voice had saved the day.



To think it was John's birthday. To think my family and I had ventured to NYC. to deliver the token rock and to further substantiate what could have been some Divine intervention. Then to think the photo of John and "Give Peace a Chance" message was published in the Maui News that very day.

Who could have predicted at the precise two-minute and forty-second mark of "Starting Over" that Alf Taylor and myself would have been entering the crossroads with a two-ton pineapple truck speeding down the hi-way with us in its path that would have likely smashed my Mazda to smithereens?

As far as Alf Taylor and myself are concerned John's voice saved our asses. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

**January 23, 2024**

Most 100, 25 years later are chirping in on Lupita. What a legacy that doggie left! The comments sent in are amazing like Donna Meyer writing how when she as late as 2:00 pm edition Atencion, Lupita might be waiting outside the Biblioteca for her to walk her home. And our Gabriel feeling so proud she decided to bunk just two nights in his house and then *vamos*. Or the photo of Liz Precoma giving her a bath. So many memories.

How one pooch influenced this town before influencers. i am so thrilled and proud to have the wherewithal to bring her back to life. Thank you for your attention. Lou



**January 14, 2024**

"Leap of Faith" (1998)

By Lou Christine

This is a love story. A story of brotherly love and unbending faith that's true and a joy to share, a story that transcends the international politics and the turmoil of war. It's a story where a friend wasn't going to abandon the other under any circumstance, and a friendship that was further fortified and galvanized, all because of a leap of faith.

Mexico has beckoned many a man from across the ocean's blue. From Cortes to Maximilian, to William Spratling to Teddy Stauffer, adventurous men have thrown caution to the wind to seek fame and fortune in this country, while creating their own unique notoriety. Yet ordinary men have also found their way to Mexico, on a smaller scale perhaps, and they too have settled in this enchanted land.

Some have shown up without resources and have had to carve out a new life. Yet this country is known for its incomparable hospitality.

Many a friendship between newly arrived foreigners and Mexicans endure a lifetime. Two such men's paths crossed here in the early-thirties. Ernest Sanders hailed from Germany. He was an engineer desiring a fresh start in the new world. Calixto Corro was a young Mexican attorney. The two men quickly formed a friendship.

For Sanders, Mexico was a newfound utopia—with its climate, beauty, romance and way of life. Sanders settled in Cuernavaca, while Corro resided in the nation's capital.

Later in the decade, war erupted back in Sanders' left-behind homeland. Hitler began his madman quest to dominate Europe and points beyond. Still, those catastrophic events had a minimum effect on the two young men whose interests had nothing to do with ideology or something as warped as world domination.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, nations in the Western Hemisphere were drawn into the war. On May 22, 1942, Mexico declared war on Germany, so as to join other allied nations to begin a noble quest. That's when the rush of events changed their lives, especially that of Sanders.

The aggressive acts of Germany never became a wedge between the two men's friendship, nor did unraveling events interfere in their business dealings. Yet soon enough the state of the world would shake the foundation of Sanders' existence in Mexico.

The Mexican government issued a directive that German citizens who belonged to the Nazi Party had to leave Mexico. Sanders, never politically affiliated, but when leaving Germany a new Nazi law mandated all passports be stamped with a Swastika. Affiliated or not the stigma indiscriminately was attached to his documents.

The chief of police, in Cuernavaca, was to seek-out a basically disinterested Sanders and mandated that he board an ocean liner in Veracruz by a certain date that would return him to his one-time homeland. Sanders, perplexed, had then lived in Mexico for almost ten years. He had a livelihood. Events thousands of miles away were of no concern to him. Mexican bureaucracy didn't see it that way.

Sanders tapped influential resources for support to no avail. His friend Corro also intervened, eventually approaching the Cuernavaca police chief, peppering him with persuasion, emphatically stating his friend had no allegiance to Germany, to any political party or its quest. A bribe was not out of the question. Nevertheless, the chief told Corro he had specific orders to escort Sanders and to insure he'd board that ocean liner. Orders were orders. The chief stated that Sanders' name and the names of other German nationals who were on his list and all were to be handed over and checked off a manifest that had to match with photos and documents.

Corro further queried, "You're saying as far as you're concerned, if Sanders boards that boat your responsibility in the matter is over?" The chief concurred.

Corro approached his friend with the bad news, telling him he would have to board that ship. Corro was not about to let his friend be shipped off that easy. He told Sanders to accompany the police chief on the appointed date and board the ship. Then he said, "Exactly 45 minutes after that ocean liner leaves the dock, I want you to jump off the back of the ship. I will be there!"

Naturally, Sanders cringed at the idea, but both men, together, had been through some scrapes inside some seedy cantinas. Sanders always had Corro's back, as Corro had Sanders'—an impervious bond had been formed not shared by most men.

The day of reckoning arrived. Sanders bid a tearful good-bye to his girlfriend and associates. The men had not disclosed their plan, so as to not raise false hopes or to be snitched on.

The chief escorted Sanders to the dock, handed him over and watched him march up the gangplank. As schedules went in 1942 Mexico, the ship sat for more than a week, its set departure delayed, waiting for latecomers slated for deportation. Sanders, then aboard ship was then left alone solely with thoughts of gloom and doom.

Without advance notice on a moonless night, somewhere around midnight the ocean liner came to life and began to move out of Veracruz's harbor.

What had to be going through Sanders' mind? He hadn't had any contact with Corro, since he departed Cuernavaca. With the delay, was Corro even in the vicinity? More so: Would he be there? What was Sanders' fate, to jump into a dark ocean and become nothing more than a memory or fish bait? Yet his friend specifically told him that he'd be there.

Sanders eluded guards and snaked his way to the ship's stern. Exactly 45 minutes after the departure he stood on the precipice. All his scared-shitless eyes could make out was a black sheet of eerie darkness, with no sign of lights in the offing, no sign of movement, no glint of anything visible. He gulped, embraced some blind faith and then tossed himself into the abyss. He hit the water's surface. He gained his composure, having no idea about his fate and bobbing on the ocean's surface. He soberly watched the lights and safer confines of the ocean-liner moving east towards Europe.

Out of nowhere came a sports-fishing yacht. Suddenly, a strong hand yanked the German from what had to be a sure death. It was Corro! They both took swigs from a bottle of tequila and then returned clandestinely to the shores of Mexico.

Once back in Cuernavaca, as far as the police chief was concerned, he'd done his duty delivering Sanders to Immigration for deportation. He could wash his hands of the matter. The chief knew Sanders and had no personal beef with him. Besides, Sanders employed people, gave to charity and was a plus to the community.

Sanders was given a second chance and was unmolested by immigration officials for the rest of the war. He married a Mexican woman, had children, accumulated a massive fortune building railroad bridges and continued his life in his adopted homeland.

Sanders and Corro shared Christmases, birthdays, vacations and life with their families up to Corro's sudden and tragic death while in an automobile accident. Today, they are both buried in Mexico.



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**December 31, 2024**

Below is an article published in *Atencion* in 2005. The following year, Susan Page was about to launch her first San Miguel Writers Conference. Taking notice Page reached out to me..

Page asked if she could reprint the article, as the "Forward" for a forthcoming book "Solamente en San Miguel," a composite containing essays written by fellow sanmiguelenses to be on hand for the upcoming writers conference..

“San Miguel Writers: Diverse and Notorious” (2005)

By Lou Christine

San Miguel de Allende, in the State of Guanajuato, Mexico has attracted various artists since the mid-1930s. Painters and photographers praise the light. Jewelers, especially those working in silver, have easy access to raw material. San Miguel’s 17th Century European architecture inspires.

San Miguel is also a writers’ town, although the thought of writers residing in the mountain town is less apparent than that of visual artists. Figure: When it comes to showing off artwork visual artists have an advantage. If your neighbors are painters they can just lean out their windows, show you their latest works and ask, “Whatcha think?”

A novelist might have to ask someone to spare a mere 17 hours? Here's a rundown about what makes San Miguel a writer's town. Part of San Miguel's lore is that icons of the Beat Generation hung their berets here in the '50s and '60s.

Urban legend swears accompanying Kerouac from time to time were novelist Ken Kesey, poet-guru Allen Ginsberg, junky philosopher William S. Burroughs, and Gonzo-journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Old-timers will tell you the lot raised hell in the original Cucaracha when the bar was located where Banamex stands today, under the portals on one corner of San Miguel's central Jardin.

Color in Neal Cassady as part of the literary lore. He wasn't a writer, even though he typed an autobiography, but Cassady blossomed to be the inspiration behind the "Boss of Beat," as a major figure in Kerouac's novels being identified as the irreverent Dean Moriarty. The Moriarty character appeared in a number of Kerouac's novels mostly as an outrageous rogue.

Cassady died in San Miguel. It was no death of a distinction. The then 41-year-old burnout died in a drunken stupor on the railroad tracks at the edge of town. Over time Cassady has been elevated to cult hero. Some of this rascal's shenanigans were chronicled in San Miguel resident, Wayne Greenhaw's memoir "My Heart is in the Earth." (More about Greenhaw's connection to San Miguel later.)

Speaking of the notorious, novelist Clifford Irving made San Miguel his base for a number of years on more than a few occasions. Unfortunately, Irving is often remembered for being more than hyperbolic but for his fake biography about recluse billionaire Howard Hughes. He claimed he interviewed Hughes extensively but unfortunately for Irving, Hughes wasn't quite as reclusive as Irving initially thought.

Hughes issued a denunciation from his Las Vegas penthouse. In 1972 Irving was convicted of fraud, sentenced to prison, and compelled to reimburse his publisher \$765,000. After paying his debt to society, Irving, a fine writer, and thought of by most including myself as an overall nice guy, penned a number of successful novels here.

Vance Packard first burst upon the scene as far back as 1957. San Miguel was his base for over 20 years. He's mostly known for the best-selling "The Hidden Persuaders" a non-fiction ground-breaker that revealed psychological manipulations used by advertisers.

"The Hidden Persuaders" sold over a million copies. Those were mighty gaudy numbers considering the time considering the book's subject matter. Packard was known for his tongue-in-cheek slant on pop sociology. "The Hidden Persuaders" revealed how advertising marketers dished out dazzling subterfuges in order to hoodwink consumers. Packard, a witty writer, remained admired by peers for being innovative with homespun perspectives regarding human nature.

Gary Jennings, wrote portions of his bestseller "Aztec" in San Miguel. Many wrongly thought Jennings was just a wanna-be-writer. Late nights, after a number of tastes in local cantinas, Jennings sometimes slurred, that in the light of day, he was researching and composing a historical piece about Mexico. Some scoffed.

Today, Jennings' historical-fiction novel "Aztec," is regarded by Meso-American historians as one of the most significant books ever written in English about the conquest of Mexico. Jennings' novels were fat, often consisting of more than 500,000 words. Historians and literary critics have praised Jennings' research and attention to detail. His curious nature prompted him to learn and then interpret ancient

drawings. He taught himself to read Nahuatl. He's lauded for having an authentic written voice, while Jennings' portrayals of violence and sex are graphically vivid. The author's bias, sided with accusations substantiating injustice towards indigenous people, made for solid arguments. Jennings spent twelve years in Mexico and went on to write other popular novels about the Aztec peoples during times following the Conquest.

Short-story teller and novelist Hal Bennet lived and wrote here until close to the time of his death, just before the beginning of the 21st century. He voiced the black man's perspective. At first Bennet composed poignant milk-and-honey tributes about one-time rural life in the segregated American South.

Later he wrote "mean-street" brays. "Lord of Dark Places" written in 1970 was Bennet's most acclaimed novel. The piece is perverse yet brutally honest, illuminating the black stereotype drenched with "anything-goes" sexual encounters, as well as hisses of "Shame on you, Whitey!" The novel revealed the seedier side of ebony life in New York City's tenements during the 1950s.

A cult-following resurrected Bennet's writings. Like Lou Reed voiced, Taking walks on the wild side was more of his day-to-day life. Bennet, spoke of his struggles and wasn't shy about claiming he rubbed-more-than elbows with Truman Capote inside dingy, Times Square, movie houses.

Ohio State professor, Walter Tevis, often summered here penning portions of his novel "The Hustler," later to be adapted into the film classic starring Paul Newman and Jackie Gleason. Tevis was also the author of Netflix's "Queen's Gambit".

Acclaimed screen-writer Bill Wittliff can be spotted from time to time futzing with his old box camera up on the jardin taking photos of his favorite landmark, our Parroquia, the pink-stone gothic-inspired church that dominates town's skyline. Wittliff's writings are impressive as he adapted Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize winning "Lonesome Dove" for a television mini-series and wrote screenplays: "Barbarosa," "Legends of the Fall," "Black Stallion" and "The Perfect Storm." His latest screenplay is for the film "A Night in Mexico" currently under production.

In the recent past, writer Joy Nicholson made San Miguel her home. Nicholson hit pay dirt with her first novel "The Tribes of Palos Verde" a female surfing saga set in California, also about growing-up in a dysfunctional family. Nicholson optioned the novel to a movie studio. Last I heard she was somewhere around Cancun wrapping up her second novel "The Road to Esmeralda."

Yet when interviewing Nicholson about her initial success she confessed she wasn't that enthused about writing but was thinking of becoming a veterinarian.

Australian-born and award-winning sports journalist, George McCann, graced the pages of local English language newspaper *Atencion* with his personal slant on the sports world, along with other tidbits about notable people he'd interviewed over his career up to the time of his death.

The lure of San Miguel continues to draw writers. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet for "Heart's Needle," 1960, W. D. Snodgrass makes San Miguel home half the year.

Non-fiction best-selling author Joseph Persico spends part of his winters in San Miguel. The acclaimed writer has published an impressive line up of biographies: "My Enemy, My Brother," and "Men and Days of Gettysburg," speak about first-hand accounts from the memories of fellow Americans who killed each other during the tumultuous Civil War. "Piercing the Reich," white knuckle accounts of American secret agents who went behind the lines to secure vital information for the Allies. *A Biography of Nelson A. Rockefeller*," "Murrow: An American Original," "Nuremberg: Infamy on Trial," "Roosevelt's Secret War" and "11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour: Armistice Day, 1918."

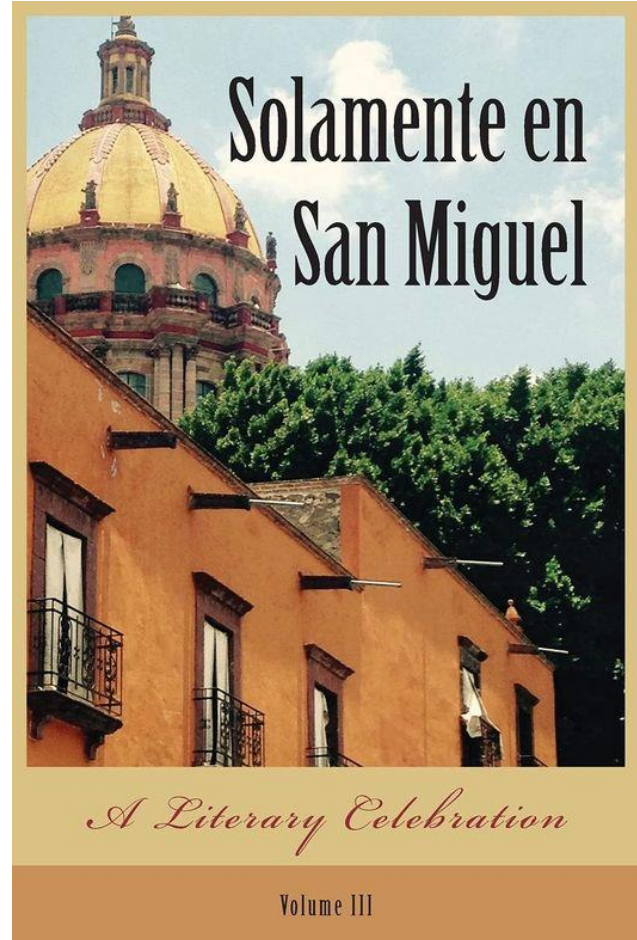
Persico also filled the role as "the with" in the autobiography of former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Powell did the talking and Persico did the writing.

Novelist, the journalist and playwright Wayne Greenhaw, a one-time Neiman Fellow at Harvard, is another part-time sanmiguelense. Harper Lee, author of "To Kill a Mockingbird" said Greenhaw is one of the South's finest living narrative fiction writers when she awarded him the Harper Lee Award.

Greenhaw's non-fiction books have gained attention with in-depth works such as "Montgomery-The River City" an unflattering expose undressing George Wallace former segregationist governor of the State of Alabama. Greenhaw followed up and then delivered an eye-opening literary body shot in his "The Making of a Hero," the saga of Lt. William Calley held responsible for the massacre at Mai Lai during the Vietnam War.

In the late '50s, right after high school graduation, Greenhaw took a train from Alabama to San Miguel traveling alone. Greenhaw's desire was to become a travel writer and to attend Instituto Allende to take initial instructions from wordsmith Ashmead Scott.

German-born, Swiss-Turk, Soledad Santiago, who immigrated to the U.S. at age 12, spent considerable time in San Miguel. The activist/writer's prose zeroed in on everyday life in American society, first with



immigrating Puerto Ricans and then with New York City's Hispanic community. Santiago's heart-wrenching work "Streets on Fire" mirrored much of her own life and family. Her descriptions were ever-so-vivid like the way she described her mother burying her face into the living room lace curtains as they got word of her father's sudden death! The "Streets on Fire" novel was acclaimed as a crossover expose well worth reading.

One downside: living and writing in San Miguel has become too pricey for mostly impoverished writers. When I first arrived, a blast of repasado tequila ran 15 pesos, now it's up to 90 and more. The time has passed when an upstart writer can eke out an existence and create a masterpiece on a couple of hundred bucks a month.

Tony Cohan has highlighted San Miguel in his best-selling memoir "On Mexican Time," a thoughtfully written depiction shimmering with eye-candy images, offering an inside look of San Miguel de Allende, sauced up with servings of Mexican culture. These days Cohan resides in Guanajuato, an hour and one-half drive to the north, yet he often adds muscle to the San Miguel writing community.

Beverly Donofrio is a townie and the author of "Riding in Cars With Boys." The title alone may have said it all, yet Donofrio's memoir about growing up Italian-American and early motherhood and marriage was sassy enough to have Donofrio's story made into a film starring Drew Barrymore.

Canadian based film writer Karl Schiffman hangs out here. His film credits include "Riddlers Moon" "Dead End," "Back in Action" and the soon to be released sci-fi "2Human." Recently his latest script "The Murderer Down the Road" was read aloud by some of San Miguel's most noted actors.

San Miguel hosts scores of other good writers, and there are too many to mention, plus I wouldn't want to leave anyone out since I still have to drink in this town. Some San Miguel writers are overtly visible while others choose to remain obscure. Who knows? Maybe a soon-to-be best seller is being pumped out this very minute behind the walls of a San Miguel casa.

Writers continue to arrive in San Miguel. They formulate their thoughts, chronicle events and develop plots in stories that, who knows? After all—stories and tales that just might live forever all composed here within the boundaries of our fine town.

## December 10, 2023

"Taking A Walk Out By The Lake" (2000)

Picturesque San Miguel wasn't agreeing with me. I was feeling blue. I wasn't into people. I needed to escape, not for long, not even the weekend, but perhaps for a few hours.

I suppose I'm like most people. From time-to-time I too have to face bumps in the road. Last week was my turn.

Oh, it was the usual . . . me feeling sorry for myself. Hardly anything had been falling into place. My so-called projects were launching themselves sideways. The New York agent dropped off the face of the planet. Some significant relationships were rapidly sliding Southward.

Piling on: My eyes itched. My throat was bone dry and my nose seemed forever clogged, perhaps brought on by the combination of the bone-dry windy weather and swirling street dust.



So in the late afternoon, I hopped into Chanticleer.

Chanticleer's my trusty Ford Escort, a sturdy red rooster of a car, forever faithful. I wasn't so sure where I was driving.

We negotiated over the chaise-torturing topes on Salida a Celaya. Just outside town, on the right, I steered Chanticleer into Los Frailes, San Miguel's residential subdivision. We lumbered down to shore of Lake Allende.

Lake Allende's the body of water we're able to view from the higher elevations of this town. The lake varies in size throughout the course of the year. With Summertime rains, its volume increases. The lake fans out from left to right. In the Winter it shrivels more to the left affording its wildlife less of a watery space to reign.

While at the lake and while getting out of the car my focus remained fractured. I had yet to take in my surroundings. I began to walk with no specific direction in mind other than to skirt the edge of the lake.

The sky showed itself as cloudless, crystal-blue, picture-perfect. To the West the sun seemed suspended fixed as a snap shot, just hanging there before sinking behind the silent mountains. The fire in the sky had less searing power that afternoon. It soothed the skin rather than burned. The steady wind coming off the lake felt good, perhaps ironing out some of the wrinkles on my brow.

I nudged forward and dug my lowly heels into soft mounds of freshly worked soil. My sneakers crushed short and brittle stalks left behind from a past harvest.

The normally still waters, driven by the wind, created an echelon of waves, one after the other while licking their way at the shore line. Out on the lake three-stately white herons with contrasting orange beaks cawed to one another, cruising just above the water's surface.

Other fowl, smaller than the herons, black in color, balanced themselves upon the choppy waters.

Washed up debris gave proof of civilization. I've seen worse. The debris was a potpourri made up of crumpled plastic containers and cigarette packs, with flipped-open tops looking more like open mouths, laying about, like battlefield casualties. There was a headless baby doll, various chunks of foam, an errant shoe, and countless pieces of shredded paper bleached by the sun and mixed in with the lake's silt perimeter.

I wondered about that discarded shoe. I tried to envision the moment-and-reason, when-and-why those lost-and-tossed possessions departed from their rightful owners.

Something propelled me! I searched for the right-sized stones, amply shaped and flat enough, so to skip over the lake's waters. The stone picking was slim due to the lack of rocky properties in the soft-turfed neighborhood. A few stones barely passed for the real deal and when it came to the test, and after a yeomanly toss they miserably skimmed the surface and went ka-plunk. I skipped the skipping and marched along further.

Checked out on the dried-out lake's bed sat remnants of a deteriorating infrastructure made up of what were once bridges and some sort of man-made water conduits. Those crumbling abutments looked downtrodden. Perhaps they matched my mood. If they could they too might complain about feeling useless while stranded and stuck as relics mired in a state of funk. I meandered across a small peninsula,

a finger of land extending toward the lake's center. My moping avoided prickly bushes appearing as if they were dying to stab somebody. They leaned out looking like scary-looking characters parched and desperate whose boots or roots you wouldn't want to be in, sapped of moisture and barely surviving in a sparse existence.

I came upon disinterested cattle, chaperoned by a shabby herdsman, seemingly oblivious to all, including my oncoming. I moseyed pass his point of view. He stayed squatted, staring straight ahead, within his own thoughts perhaps, and for the sake of silence's gold. We hardly acknowledged one another. His forlorn cows and one scraggly bull foraged atop the nothingness to munch on the scraps provided by nature.

Once again I was at the water's edge. With the sun waning additional birds returned to roost.

I decided to give the rock skipping another try. To my advantage, the stone pickings were better. With renewed enthusiasm, I snatched some rounded beauties and further tested my arm's strength and eyes' aim. Working on my side arm I got off some good ones! I was getting action! . . . Skip! Skip! Skip! . . . Skip! Skip! Skip! Skip! Skip! . . . I found myself almost sprinting about, and bending over to replenish my ammunition.

I was thrust back in time recharged with memories belonging to my sweet bird of youth. I thought back to the long-ago idea how kids often envision the future and think they're surely guaranteed a happy life and rosy existence. Taking away the backdrop of the Mexican mountains it was as if I was back on the banks of the Delaware.

I had walked some ways. I peered back to find my spot and check on Chanticleer who then was a mere red dot, parked alone, somewhere down the shoreline.

The squeals of children echoed from a nearby village had me envisioning kids with their cheeks turning red while playing their hearts out before a Mexican supper.

Out by the lake, all was at peace and granted my woes a needed intermission while existing in in my own theater of life, by providing this star a life's break, as if having me munching on goodies and buttered popcorn.

The facts presented themselves. As corny as it sounds the facts were: In the scope of things I was no worse or better off than those taking off herons or the drifting birds balancing their fragile lives atop that lake. And I wasn't washed up like the junk on the shoreline, nor was I stuck in the mud like those dried-out bushes. I was no richer or poorer than that lone disheveled herdsman, nor was I hungrier than his emaciated stock.

Thoughts: While clutching those prized skipping stones I realized our methods aren't always at first shaped to skip over life's problems with just one or two heartless flings. Unlike inanimate objects, like the concrete ones stuck out in the middle of the lake, we possess the abilities to contour life's path and have the wherewithal to balance things out as not to sink and drown with the weight of life's turmoil.

Those sounds of glee in the offing insured happiness was somewhere. By the sounds of the children, happiness was alive and well.

I stopped and placed my hands on my hips and did a complete 360. Behind me, the jewel of San Miguel glistened in the distance. The lake's wildlife scurried home settling in for another starry night. The herdsman slowly came to life, mustered his flock then scooted them back to somewhere behind the tree line. The sinking sun's rays stretched my likeness in its shadow. Time had come to move on, to go back to San Miguel and deal with the deal.

It was simple, refreshing! My innards had been ridded of exaggerated woes. I merged with nature, a selfless encounter, offering nothing more than the miracle of life, proving that the very best things in life are absolutely free. Who was I to complain? Who was I to take myself so seriously?

My step livened and my lips formed and began to whistle a sweet tune. Back in the car while scooting home Chanticleer took on a peppier nature too, as if he had caught the spirit.

So there you have it. I went for a ride and I took a walk around the lake not the most exciting of endeavors, yet far-far from the worst that can happen. Why not try it sometime.



**December 3, 2023**

"Being with Selma" (1994)

When I was five years old I had yet to see my first motion picture. I had no idea the art form of film even existed. By 1952 our family had yet to buy a television, that would come later, in 1953, so we could watch the coronation of England's Queen Elizabeth. My aunt and grandmother were rearing me in a row home inside a deteriorating North Philadelphia neighborhood. By then the neighborhood was beyond checkered with just three white families remaining on the 2300 block of North Gratz.

One Saturday morning there was a sudden knock on the front door. We had few visitors. Grandmom tossed the dishrag into the sink and went to answer the knock with me dragging along hanging onto her apron strings.

A serious-looking tall and lean black girl stood on the marble stoop. There was no smile. This was no girl scout run.

She began, "I'ze takin' the kids to the movies. My momma sez I should invite your youngin'."

She spoke in an almost defiant manner as if she didn't want to be on our doorstep in the first place. "If he wanna go? You don't hafta worry about nothin'."

Some older girls and other tykes meandered by the curbside. The girl glanced back as if she had been challenged to knock on the white folks' door.

Grandmom's Irish, pale-blue eyes remained fixed on the girl as if she wanted to hear more. Grandmom asked questions like what was playing.

The black girl continued, "It twenty-five-cent for the matinee, ten-cent for goodies, and ten cent for me . . . I'ze make sure I'ze take decent care of him."

Grandmom's poker face gave away nothing. Her exchange with the girl offered no clues, but Grandmom's forehead wasn't wrinkled, a clear sign of her not being perplexed. Evidently with the Q & A the black girl and Grandmom had established a connection despite the girl sounding terse.

Grandmom Mickles was renowned for possessing communication skills. As the neighborhood changed from working-class white to working-class black, rather than shunning newcomers she sparked numerous conversations when out front Ajaxing the marble stoop.

She turned and asked a wide-eyed me; "You wanna go to the movies with these kids?"

Shoots, for the sense of adventure, I would have run off with Charles Manson if he had been around. I eagerly nodded my head up and down.

Aunt Dinny and Grandmom had been very protective. I rarely stepped out the front door since the area changed. There was good reason. There had been a shoot-out at some dope-selling joint on the corner. A deranged neighbor went berserk with a hatchet down in the coal bin and chopped his wife into bits then deposited body parts down sewers on both ends of the block. My uncles' shook their heads at what the neighborhood had become, calling it a jungle, begging Grandmom to move, referring to its newer residents as jungle bunnies.

I wondered about this place called the movies and why Grandmom was permitting me to go. Maybe Grandmom desired some private time or thought I was ready for my first adventure with other kids. She roughed-up my face with a damp stale-smelling washrag. I always hated that part. Then she let two quarters escape from her souse's-ear purse and handed them and me over to the girl.

As if I was captured and cuffed the girl latched onto my hand. In safari fashion, as our troupe headed down the block. The sky was sunny. Gratz Street's residents were out and about. Fast-moving black men soaped up cars. There was that distinct sound of tin buckets scraping the cement sidewalk. Honky-tonk music blared from an open window. A mean-sounding dog threw itself up against a screen door. The curious checked us out.

There seemed to be a sense of pride imbuing from the girl as if she had been the chosen one, entrusted with that rarely seen little white jewel who lived at 2356 in the middle of the block. I remained silent and obedient as did the other boys and girls. We sensed no real tenderness, figuring the big girl was in it strictly for the dime.

It would be the first time I'd be seeing just what was around that particular corner. You see, Gratz Street was one-way. We were going against the grain. Beforehand I had traveled off the block only inside machines, that's what Grandmom called them, and they always headed off in the opposite direction.

Selma and the other girls ordered that we stay close as we turned the corner. I waded into the unknown. Now we were on a much wider and busier avenue. There were tarp-covered stands. The avenue was active. My little boy's nose inhaled unusual aromas. A big man in a grisly looking bloodstained apron scared the Dickens out of me. I still hadn't forgotten the chopped-up woman down the block. It wasn't just his frightful appearance; he startled me when he came to life with a booming voice, "Hog mogs! . . . Chitlins! . . . Hog mogs! . . . Chitlins! . . . Three for 50 cent! Three for 50 cent!"

There were no other white people on the avenue.

We passed stripped-down cars, charred after being put to the torch. There was strewn trash and broken glass. A swaying and disturbed wino blocked the middle of an intersection. A half-filled, label-less bottle with pink fluid swung from his arm. He took dramatic swigs then shouted curses to no one in particular. Motorists shouted, "Get out the way, fool!" A red police car screeched its brakes. Two overweight white cops confronted the drunk.

"Pay no attention to them," warned the girl, "The poh-leece is dangerous. Just keep moving."

Our small group moved mostly unnoticed up Susquehanna Avenue. Each vignette unfolded new slices of inner-city life. It was far out like that alien bar in the Star Wars saga. Right then I was years away from knowing about Star Wars. We came to a larger boulevard called Broad Street. I knew it was Broad Street because I recognized the steeple atop of Our Lady of Mercy.

Black teenagers in crisp-white tee shirts leaned up against what were once stately, three-storied brownstones. The teenagers clowned with toothpicks protruding off their full and liver-colored lips. The waistlines of their trousers were tugged almost chest high, tugged way higher than Grandmom ever fitted me. Felt fedoras capped them off with each plopped a certain way depending on the wearer's fashion statement.

They were jiving, acting like Cock Robins, waving just-lit cigarettes, focusing unsolicited attention upon themselves. Choosing marks, the boys sprung from house fronts with palms extended engaging targets from the never-ceasing parade of bent-over old ladies and old men in suit and tie.

"Loan me dime, motherfucker! Loan me dime!"

The thugs' shakedown had a blatant hiss with the punks hip to their own shakedown power, a deviousness that struck fear.

They continued to motherfuck "this" and motherfuck "that" during their continuous quest for ten cents. We sheepishly passed, perhaps skipped over for fatter targets, yet they remained in my vision and my eyes stayed with them as we moved onward and as long as they could.

Seemed all their mean-sounding sentences began and ended with that combination of bad words . . . Whispering into my ear, after sensing how the thugs commanded my attention my chaperone cautioned, "You pay no attention to them either, ya hear? They're bad and stupid."

Our group merged with a larger movie-going hoard made up of teenage girls and drag-along kids. I had yet to see a white face other than the two pissed-off cops. Boys 10, 11 and 12 sprinted and zigzagged through the crowd of kids while playing grab-ass.

Despite the fact I was going to the movies, no one had yet to fill me in on precisely what a “movie” was. I got somewhat of a clue when I saw the gigantic, cardboard cutout perched on the theater’s marquee . . . The word, “Kong” had been mentioned along the way but

I paid no mind. Heck, I was checking out the world. But right then I couldn’t keep my eyes off that colossal cutout and my little boy’s neck craned as far as it could to stay with the cut out until we were well under the marquee of the theater.

Selma sliced a convincing path through the sea of unruly kids delivering our lot in front of the ticket booth. Only then did she release my hand, but only after ordering me to hold onto her white cotton skirt. She counted heads. Like a bank teller she tallied the coins she laid out atop the counter. I sensed her mind tallying. The pile of change stayed put, as did the fat lady in the ticket booth’s collecting hand until the girl signaled it was OK.

Once inside, next came the candy counter. There was pushing. I continued to hold tight to her skirt. Penny-pinching skills had Selma scoring the most-est for the least-est. Nobody had a choice. Not so tenderly she slammed into my hands a box of gumdrops.

We entered a carpeted tunnel of darkness. The big girl rushed us down a carpeted aisle. Ushers, merely older kids in oversized maroon-colored tunics with gold-trimmed epaulets, brandished flashlights threatening kids to cool it or they’d be thrown out. The only seats available for our gang were in the front row.

The screen was still covered by large curtains. The action was behind us. The movie house was gigantic, maybe bigger than Our Lady of Mercy. The Uptown was built during the golden age of film and boasted a balcony. Behind me, I could only make out moving popcorn boxes with them appearing as luminous, dancing blockheads in front of where little kids’ faces should have been. Rat-like the kids ferreted into popcorn boxes, slurped straws and tore open candy wrappers with chewing and slurping that sounded like a rhapsody in nosh.

A huge curtain was drawn back and music began. The screen lit up and the movie rolled. At first it was boring, idle talk by adults. Most of the kids hardly paid attention. The real action was in the seats.

Events became interesting when the film’s players entered the deepest, darkest Africa and a time-forgotten-terrain. The film’s eerie score indicated something dramatic was about to occur. The peanut gallery piped down. All eyes I slowly plopped gumdrops into my mouth.

In the film, scary-looking African natives kidnapped a blonde lady with milky-white skin from the white men’s camp swooping her off to their village, a village showcasing a huge, imposing wall, made from timber that loomed over the place. The wall had doors just as foreboding, reinforced with heavy chains, like those used to hoist anchors on ocean liners. The tribesmen, acting in a frenzy, forced the girl behind the doors and dragged her deeper into the jungle. Then they strung her up by the wrists to some pole atop a giant rock. A large brass cymbal swung from ropes. A native with a big hammer pounded out a series of ominous bongs. The woman remained frantic with the movie’s speakers amplifying her ear-

shattering screams. With her tied up the natives, scared themselves, deserted the girl leaving her to the elements

Then there was a thunderous shaking. A drooling “ookie-looking” dinosaur came monsterring in. Kids screamed and jumped out of their seats. Others hid their eyes.

Then came a thumping, a deafening roar, that gave notice that the film’s headliner was going to front the silver screen in dramatic fashion.

King Kong was absolutely magnificent. He thumped his chest and roared to the heavens, a roar so ferocious it sounded worse than Mrs. Keanen’s next door when she hollered at Mr. Keanen for coming home drunk. That commotion set off another round of kiddy screams. Kong’s overwhelming girth seeped into every corner of the screen. Kong and the slimy dinosaur-sized each other up.

There was no doubt in this little kid’s mind that Kong and the creepy dinosaur were sworn enemies. The script called for them to settle with one another before dealing with the girl. Kong punctuated events when he separated the jaws belonging to that done-for lizard, securing his reputation and remaining the undisputed “King of Beasts.” Kong flaunted his win, pounded his chest and roared again, reminding all of the law of that jungle and setting it straight about just who was the boss.

White men attempted to rescue the girl. Kong wouldn’t have it and made quick work of them. After killing many he focused on his prize. The big ape appeared gah-gah by the dainty, porcelain-skinned beauty. He removed her restraints and gently placed her in his huge gorilla hand. Traumatized, the actress never stopped screaming. The shrieks of the kids then equaled those of the actress.

Then, Kong, while carrying the girl, attacked those huge wooden doors that used to hold him at bay. His gorilla fury turned the timber into splinters. There seemed to be a price to pay as King unleashed his revenge for years of captivity. Those who hemmed him in would be dealt with. Kong crushed straw huts with foot and fist. Native women, with eyes bugging out, ran for their lives after swooping up errant children. The surviving men stood helpless as Kong carried the girl away.

Meanwhile, I was becoming disoriented. My mind started to figure that maybe, well just maybe, when I entered the carpeted tunnel I could have actually entered deepest-darkest Africa! Well, that’s what five-year-old little Louie began to assume.

It was as if, if adults outside, had asked for directions from the butcher who sold the hog-mogs, he may have told ‘em: “Africa? Yeah, why it’s right off Broad Street, go right through the Uptown’s lobby and take that dark tunnel and keep going.”

This kid was swept away in the not so real. Besides me, the only other white people in the scenario were the cast of characters in the film. Evidently, I could no longer differentiate what was projected on the screen and what was going on around me.

The screams coming from the kiddy audience matched the chaos on the screen. From my viewpoint the village natives and those hysterical kids jumping up and down in their seats merged into one hybrid of humanity, consisting of both petrified natives and a scared out of their wits peanut gallery.

King Kong was going to step from the village and plant one of those big-hairy feet into the front row of that theater! Petrified natives up on the screen were storming toward me. Soon enough I'd be engulfed in a vortex of native destruction!

I conjured that more than likely Kong would ransack the movie house, leaving a wake of twisted bodies and discarded popcorn boxes. Once out front, he'd create major havoc. He'd just go ahead and rip off the steeple of Our Lady of Mercy with one mighty swipe, giving Broad Street the gorilla show of its life! Let's see if the thugs on the corner would hit up Kong for a motherfucking dime? He'd move down the avenue, growling and pummeling. He'd swoop up the big black man in the bloodstained apron and gobble him up along with all of his chitlins. He'd be impervious to the bullets shot off by the fat white cops but for some reason, he'd probably let the wino slide.

Soapy Buicks wouldn't get hosed down cause the "hoser-downers" would toss their buckets and be running for their lives.

I had had enough. I dropped my gumdrops and bolted towards the back of the theater running as fast as my little legs could take me. It wasn't until I hit the lit lobby at a super sonic speed when I felt a strong tug on the back of my striped-polo shirt. Oh Lord, it had to be King Kong!

"Whatchu doing, Silly? Where you running off to, you little fool? It only a movie!"

After some tears, my chaperone, Selma, showed the first hint of compassion. She promised to protect me, said I could sit on her lap, "No giant gorilla goin' to get ya'll if I've got anything to do with it!"

I reasoned, other than from the screams coming from inside the theater, the atmosphere within the lobby was calm, and I figured if anybody, Selma flashed certain grit that could stave off that Kong. I gained a shaky confidence.

I watched the rest of the movie plopped in the center of Selma's lap, with a new box of gumdrops.

My little boy's noggin rested against Selma's chest. I took sniffs from the recently washed cotton of her dress as the white men gassed Kong capturing him. I marveled how the ape was brought across the Atlantic to America inside a big ship. My innards discovered yet hatched kernels of lust emulating from the sultry actress whose name was Faye Wray. And my little boy's mind mustered compassion for the lovesick monkey. I applauded his escape after bad men provoked him and I was intrigued how he sought out the blonde girl. I became awestruck taking in my first dose of special effects marveling how a five-story high gorilla was contrasted against a fragile and unprotected cityscape. On a tear, Kong tore up Manhattan, derailed the elevated train and showed no quarter, the same way I envisioned him ripping up Broad Street. He was "The King of Beasts!"

"New York, New York, it's a wonderful town . . ." But then, it was getting busted up. Oh, how Kong shimmied up the Empire State Building, effortless and undaunted, all the while holding on dearly to the absolute love of his monkey life.

I measured the will of man. Even back then I could have predicted that Kong would be done for, despite his strength, despite his dexterity and despite what would become unquestionable chivalry, chivalry that showed its selfless self when Kong placed the girl safely on the building's ledge just before going up against with menacing aircraft. A volley of machine-gun bullets penetrated Kong's pelt and sent him toppling to his end.



The great one lay in a heap with peons of men standing over him like conquering heroes, along with news photographers flashing their bulbs. All that remained to do was to back up the truck and lug the ape off to a Kong-sized mortuary.

Unbeknown to me at the time Kong became my very first role model. As years have passed I've realized that Saturday afternoon had a profound effect on me. Since then I have been in awe with the art of filmmaking and in my view and up to now, no filmmaker has recreated a character with the notoriety of Kong. Kong and his legacy will live way beyond me. King Kong deserves to be immortalized, as all greatness should be.

Once safe and back on Gratz Street while munching on a cupcake there was an obvious twinkle in Grandmom's mischievous Irish eyes, a certain tell that perhaps had her insides chuckling at the scenario, her responsible for me being in a white knuckle situation while the midst of all those black kids. Perhaps grandmom's wise foresight envisioned my outing as a memorable experience or maybe she saw my excursion as a youth's first rite of passage as to test my little boy's mettle.

Grandmom gave me a look and said, "Whatchathink?"

While nibbling on the chocolate chips atop the cupcake I voiced with newfound confidence, "I was brave, Grandmom.

Selma and the other kids were scared but I wasn't."



November 22, 2023

"Friday, November 22, 1963" (2013)

By [Lou Christine](#)

It was 60 years ago today and the article was published 10 years ago,

November 22, 1963, began as a run-of-the-mill, mid-autumn Friday. That Friday certainly was a welcoming prelude to the upcoming weekend chock with football fun and more football. I was a 16-year-old running back, playing for the Venango Bears, and at the same time a junior at Northeast Catholic High School for Boys, in Philadelphia. At 12:30 Eastern Standard Time the bell sounded ending the class period. Storming out of classrooms, an exuberant 3,000, anticipating Friday night's lights or Saturday night dances.

My fifth period was first-year "Bookkeeping" with Mr. Fitzsimmons. Right then, I had no clue the forthcoming bookkeeping class would evolve as "no other," with me never suspecting for a moment I'd be writing about that fateful day some 50-years later. I trudged up the three-flights of stairs merging with the herd of mostly pimple-faces, them noisy, them sporting '60ish style sport coats-and-tie, yakking about a twisting Chubby Checker, or the silky softness of Natalie Wood or predicting the touch downs scored by the Cleveland Browns with the then unstoppable Jim Brown

Mr. Fitzsimmons was a no-nonsense teacher, always in the present and very much a Catholic layman. He may have mentioned he was married with a couple of children. Thinking back 50 years and guessing, maybe he was about 30, an ex-Marine, crew cut, built like a pro linebacker. When it came to class behavior while enrolled in Bookkeeping, the smartest ass had better tow the line. Those, the disrespectful, while testing the patience of the other priests and brothers, soon enough came to realize Mr. Fitz was not to be toyed with. There was order. There was decorum, no instances of grab ass, not even a whisper, while in Mr. Fitz's class and no sleepy heads would ever be seen atop their forearms. The man remained frightfully alert and intense.

The Kennedy presidency, along with the Camelot atmosphere, had brought Catholics into the mainstream. Laymen like Robert Fitzsimmons looked to fashion and fasten themselves to the likeness of JFK, perhaps emulating his modern-day, button-down-ness. Like Kennedy, other men were going without hats. Square jawed men, who openly worshipped Christ, who defeated Hitler and Tojo were elected and led the free world. Mr. Fitz and JFK were the same generation, young men, like millions of other fellow citizens, with beautiful wives, and beautiful children with hopefully a beautiful American future. That dream was thought as attainable by millions of Americans during the early hours of November 22, 1963.

\* \* \*

Sometime around 1 p.m. just when the differences between assets and liabilities were being pointed out on the blackboard, I raised my hand asking permission to use the bathroom. Mr. Fitzsimmons, annoyed, made a condescending face and perhaps spit, "Why didn't you go during lunch?" Begrudgingly he granted permission with a "get going," sharply angling his head backward and then to the side.

The washroom was in the school's basement, next to the bookstore. On my way back to class upon exiting the boys' room and passing the bookstore I noticed students and some faculty huddled around

the radio with ominous looks on their faces. A kid turns to me and says, "Kennedy's been shot! Looks like he's dying or already dead!"

By the way, it just so happened that the president of our student body at North Catholic was named Kennedy. He was Jimmy Kennedy.

I said, "Jimmy!"

"No! The President! . . . President Kennedy has been shot and killed in Dallas!" the kid re-hammered home, totally exasperated with a dotted line of perspiration appearing on his upper lip.

"Oh, my God!" I thought! Class!

I bolted up the three flights of stairs with the most shocking news I had ever heard or ever had to deliver up to that point of my life. I double stepped those three flights like my life depended on it. I ran down that hallway and stormed into the classroom!

I can still see the moment as if frozen in time. Mr. Fitzsimmons, chalk and pointer in-hands, diagramming ledgers in front of about 40-something, 15-and-16-year-olds. There's still the image of this Italian kid, with great hair with his chin propped up by fist and elbow, him sitting right in front appearing totally disinterested.

Breathless! "PRESIDENT KENNEDY HAS BEEN SHOT AND KILLED IN DALLAS!"

Scores of eyes immediately honed in on me yet there was no immediate reaction. I decided to cry out a second time. Before I could finish the second shout out, out of nowhere I was clocked smack on the chin! It was a Joe Frazier type of roundhouse, coming from my right, off a fist from Mr. Fitzsimmons! The wallop propelled me backward and slamming me up against the blackboard simultaneously bumping my head on chalky slate somewhere in the liability column of Mr. Fitzsimmons' bookkeeping diagram.

The way I began to see it, the second phase of his attack was on his dance card. Mr. Fitz leaped to it, snarling, all over me, with an "I'll kill you," expression on his face! He bared his teeth while only inches from my face. He hissed. His muscular forearm pressed hard against my windpipe!

"That's not funny, Mister! You some sort of clown?"

Oh, I knew I was in real trouble while coming to grips and Mr. Fitzsimmons hadn't grasped that I was that guy they talk about, the guy who bears bad the news.

I assumed, that he assumed I was pulling off some sort of sophomoric tomfoolery. I sensed I could have been in store for a real ass whooping! Back then, strict discipline and corporal punishment in parochial schools were the norm.

Talk about being saved by the bell. Miraculously, the school's intercom came to life, with the principal, Father Whatshisname, announcing the tragic news to the entire student body.

As events unfolded and as the truth sunk in, even in the early stages of the catastrophe we all somehow realized that moment would stay with us for the rest of our lives. Fitzsimmons' girth continued to press on my throat, yet with each woeful word streaming out of the intercom, his rage against me depleted.

The entire classroom went from stone-cold silence, and shock, to total mayhem. Emotions erupted from many in the room, "Fuck Texas!"

"Kill everybody in Dallas!" and other cries for revenge erupted and streamed out into the hallway from bookkeeping's Room 307. Similar shouts rang out into the hallways from other open door classrooms.

With eyes welled up and by the froggy sounding voice coming from the man he slowly pulled back and sort of whispered, "I'm sorry! Go back to your desk."

I gathered my own wherewithal, summed up, "what a bummer!" So I got roughed up a little. So what? For almost 11 school years I had been pummeled by ruler and yardstick and on the wrong end of smack-downs provided by some pent up fury stemming from priests and rosary-bead clad nuns. My jaw hurt, it was sort of numb. Surely there was a bump forming on the back of my head.

I looked back at Mr. Fitzsimmons. There was a certain calm between Mr. Fitzsimmons and myself. Before I moved to take my seat I mumbled, "That's all right."

The prez took a way-harder hit than me. He was dead! Who could tell what major havoc may have been taking place nationwide at that very moment? What else was going on?

Even as a punk kid I sensed Mr. Fitz's shock and pain. Mr. Fitzsimmons regained his composure and took control calming the class.

Shortly thereafter, school was dismissed.

Everybody was screaming along with the sounds of locker doors being smashed closed and even punched by youthful rage and calls for retribution continued throughout the locker room. Students scampered down Torresdale Avenue to take the elevated trains, buses and trolleys all wanting to get home with family and friends.

The next three days most of the cognizant would be riveted to what would turn out to be indelible black and white images on TV. The suspension of regular programming across the board; the various news bulletins, Walter Cronkite, the capture of Lee Harvey Oswald and murder of officer Tibbets, the book depository, Parkland hospital, LBJ being sworn in, the site of Jackie, still in her blood-stained ensemble accompanying the casket off the plane at Andrews, AFB, Dallas city cops in ten-gallon cowboy hats, then Jack Ruby guns down Oswald on live TV inside a Dallas police station, the rotunda, the casket, the vigils and streams of visiting of dignitaries including France's President de Gaulle, the caisson with that riderless, rambunctious horse in tow, the honor guards, the cold wind, the persistent drumbeats that hammered inside my head for days hammering home the reality and consciousness of a shocked nation and then there's little John's poignant, good-bye salute.

It's all still with me, crammed up there in my own store bank. The world stood still.

Some of you elders recall exactly where you were and what you were doing when hearing Pearl Harbor was attacked or when President Roosevelt died, or of more recent vintage when Neal Armstrong walked on the moon, the white Bronco chase and sadly, most remember their whereabouts on 9/11.

And as the years have passed, 50 of them now, with me in my 66th year for some time now I am aware that it was I who broke the news to my classmates and Mr. Fitzsimmons.

Funny, I can't remember one member of that class other than Mr. Fitz. A slew of memory lane moments will occur nationwide on the 50th anniversary, done so by millions of Americans and perhaps millions of others around the world. They'll regale to their children and even grand children or whoever will listen about their very moment.

In my case, or my ex-class mates cases, for those who were present in Mr. Fitzsimmons' "Bookkeeping I" class, those still breathing air, if asked or volunteering about such on this November 22, 2013, they might be heard saying, "That Louie Christine kid came running into class and shouted out that Kennedy was killed!"

When it comes to the JFK assassination I'm part of those folks' memory.

I wonder sometime. Thinking, it was just November. Mr. Fitzsimmons was my bookkeeping teacher for the rest of the school year and also my senior year for Bookkeeping II.

Age serves up the past. I believe there's validity harboring the vivid memories linked to that heart-wrenching event that took place 50 years ago. Mr. Fitzsimmons never talked to me or recalled our moment, as far as I remember nor did I ever see or hear of the man after graduation.

50 years . . .



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November 11, 2023

"Person of the Century, 20th Century" (1999)

By Lou Christine

Remember that Twentieth Century? It produced some notables.

Who was the "Person of that Century?" Think of the choices. Why it's mind-boggling. A shortlist is a contradiction. Scratch the surface: Roosevelt, Einstein, Salk, Churchill, Gandhi, Gates, Jobs, Mandela, Susan B. Anthony... even Hitler. There are scores of other worthwhile and notorious candidates.

For me, cutting to the chase, it boils down to "GI Joe." Das right, I'm taking Joe hands down.

I realize Joe's a composite, an iconic faceless symbol. Yet GI Joe was unique to the era, diverse, armed with an uncompromising spirit forged by righteous values that galvanized an unwavering will to win. Those attributes etched into eternal's history catapults GI Joe over all other candidates.

The Axis powers claimed themselves as a master race, and as invincible while eating up entire peoples' raping, robbing and pillaging . . . stamping out cultures at an alarming rate.

Then storming out of the land of the rising sun came an equally radical fanaticism that honed itself for conquest and war. Oppression nodded its ugly head. They brought the world to its knees. Evil was winning out! Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo were gobbling up the world's real estate.

They whacked Pearl Harbor. With many sunk and others charred the Pacific fleet laid in ruin. Shattered ally armies surrendered, or scattered in a retreat, with no longer a toehold on mainland Europe. Axis Power forces and tools of war seemed superior. Blitzkriegs seemed unstoppable. Torpedo laden U-boats terrorized the seven seas. Nothing we flew could out-maneuver the Zeros. The future appeared bleak.

For years to come, if there wasn't a quick reversal of fortune, today's world could be speaking in German and serving rice with each meal as a staple.

There was a call to arms. Yet on the home front, people were struggling, still trying to pull themselves off the canvas from the wallop they absorbed during the Great Depression. For too many Americans, "Grapes of Wrath" was no fiction novel.

But yet, pumping within the veins of a culture was a rich ethnicity, a hodgepodge of customs that varied in tongue and prayer united by the idea of freedom. What was chipped into the mix stemmed from every creek and cranny while calling a nation's citizens to arms.

They came from all walks of life, races and creeds, farmers, city boys, fatsoes or skin-and-bone, with many withered down from the nothingness of the dust bowls. They brought to the cause a generation's worth of traditions, purpose and devotion, Ivy League and West Point, armed with street-smarts, mixed in with a pioneer spirit and log-cabin logic, cowboy and Indian, an indelible that would evolve in tight spots giving credits to win as American grit and know-how.

In late 1941 when a jolted nation and frazzled government were given no choice but to reach out to its most precious treasure, its youth, GI Joe hop-scotched in from schoolyards while enlisting as rubes, slicks, hicks and immigrants. There came an eclectic gathering, if not the greatest coming together of all time and thus was born: "GI Joe."

America had yet to become homogenized as a one-size-fits all society populated by what's become a herd of trendy sheep. Gap jeans, network-and-cable TV, places like McDonalds and computer-linked "dot.coms" were but years away.

Back then it was strictly colloquial. A few blocks over, everybody spoke Lithuanian or Brooklynese, some had never laid eyes on a Catholic or a Jew. In certain towns or counties no less, hardly anybody wore shoes or everybody wore a hat. Hairdos varied from place-to-place as did dress. Common threads were a mixed bag.

Back in 1941 the accumulated knowledge shared by most Americans were from a cluster of newspaper-and-magazine articles, Twainish literature, music, film with most of the majority then being influenced by radio. Yet etched into each and every American brain was that what we all had was a fought-for U.S. constitution that guaranteed freedom.

Once equipped and trained GI Joe faced the awesome responsibility that was his and hers alone. They were the only force standing in the way of a tidal wave's worth of tyranny.

GI Joe became an in sync legion that spoke "brogues and twangs." GI Joe stemmed from lineages with surnames such as Kozlowski, Smith, Whitecloud, Johnson, Schultz, Rizzo, Rodriguez, Miyasato and Goldberg. Even those who appeared as the more "genteel" or the geez-wiz, by-golly, college-Joes, with Peter-Lawford-like mannerisms, got into lockstep with ordinary Joes, from elm-treed streets. Josephs and Joses, Josefinas and Gesepies along with "Here's-to-you-kid," Pal Joeys, with Bogart persuasion. kept their chins up while measuring up to last century's luminary: GI Joe.

I don't have the talent to place into words nor can I begin to form the proper accolades to describe the grit it must have taken to storm fortified beaches, to climb treacherous mountains, to fly flimsy tin cans with wings filled to the brim with combustible fuels and bombs, or to define the courage it took to have gone down underneath the icy seas in submarines whose air supply was rapidly being poisoned by stale air and carbon monoxide.

GI Joe suffered enormous casualties and hardships. They faced obstacles that few ever fathom let alone consider. They froze and shivered, sweated, bled and died. They sacrificed life and limb for loved ones and the idea of a free world. I believe they were armed with more than lethal weapons. GI Joe was fortified with a fundamental decency and maintained a disciplined loathing to stop a warped philosophy that was attempting to suppress people by diabolical means. On the most part, they were good boys and girls who soberly realized that in order to defeat evil . . . that what has to happen . . . is that "Good" has to become "Eviler-than-Evil" . . . and do so relentlessly without quarter, stomping down on the oppressor's neck until that particular evil eventually screams, "Uncle!"

Just read the wartime accounts of Hawaii's 442nd. It's enough to give ya what Hawaiian call "chicken skin." They were a combat unit made up of American born Hawaiian and Japanese boys who themselves and their families suffered prejudice from their own countrymen. Regardless, they were hell-bent to get at the core of what was causing them problems. They had no choice but to fight in the European theater for obvious reasons. Their motto, "Go For Broke" The unit accumulated more casualties and battle ribbons than any other outfit.

When a Texas Division was surrounded by the Gerries, it was the small-in-stature Asian and Polynesian Americans of the 442nd who broke the enemy's grip by throwing themselves against a curtain of flying

steel with a ferocity hardly ever witnessed on battlefields, not just to rescue the Lone Star Boys, but to prove they had the right stuff to galvanize in the minds of others that they too were worthwhile all-Americans. Yet in actuality, it wasn't Hawaiians, mostly of Japanese descent rescuing Texans, but GI Joes coming to the aid of other GI Joes.

There's no doubt about it in my mind the choice of Person of the Century is a hands-down no-brainer . . . GI Joe saved the world in the middle of the last tumultuous century. Today's creed of "What's in it for me?" wouldn't have sounded so swell to their ears. They were paid peanuts for Christ's sake. The mantra of "Hell no, we won't go," would have been enough to make a pug face scream, "For crying out loud!" If one didn't have the righteous gumption or desire to kill the enemy they could become conscientious objectors. GI Joe was no saint and no sinner, not black or white, or Chicano, not rich, or poor, nor brilliant, or moron, not handsome or hound-doggish, but just a faceless patriot, molded and fire tested as one into a fighting force, a force that staunchly stood on the side of good at any cost.

When people fell, regardless of the above descriptions, GI Joe didn't ask "what if?" or "who says?" nor did they read Gallop polls. GI Joe didn't splinter himself into special-interest groups or backbiting PAC Committees. GI Joe was pro-life but that depended on whose side you were on? GI Joe didn't have an agent and more than likely sued nobody. GI Joe went into action and did what had to be done.



What GI Joe did do, was hold the line. They bled in jungles, fought like hell along flowered trails and died in bombed-out streets. When mortally wounded they cried alright, perhaps not for themselves or because of excruciating pain, but for their mamas' broken hearts for the horror of it all aware about the forthcoming bad news that would eventually be sent back home.

But with it all, for GI Joe, no matter how much he shook in his combat boots—whatever that awful monster was out there breathing in the night's bushes or what was laying in wait just over the hill and no matter how awesome and bloodthirsty it was, there was no way on Earth that GI Joe was going to permit



a single one of them to penetrate American shores nor hurt or enslave their loved ones. So GI Joe joined the cause, showed absolute resolve and won.

As corny, and Frank Capra-ish, as this all sounds. When it comes down to Person of the Century?" I gotta go with GI Joe!

As stated, GI Joe on the side of Good had to become Eviler-than-Evil for a defining moment, and "Good" had no choice but to go against his nature and drop the big one, and then my friends the evil manifested by GI Joe had to . . . for the sake of the common good and that of mankind, stop the killing and revert back to Good.

With due respect when it comes to who really deserves to be lionized as the Person of the Century, for now I'll shelve the inventors, statesmen, entrepreneurs, athletes and philanthropists.

Twenty-First Century folks, look around at what you have in your life, the faces in your family, or all that materialistic stuff but do take account and count Your Blessings. If it weren't for GI Joe you may not have any of it.

**November 9, 2023**

"The General and the Sergeant Major" (2002)

By Lou Christine

This is a story about two patriot warriors, about Major-General Keith L. Ware and Sergeant-Major Joseph A Venable. Both became mentors of mine back at Fort Hood, Texas in 1967. Despite their common cause both men's professional and personal demeanors couldn't have been more different.

General Ware came across more like a college professor in rimless glasses or a CEO for a Fortune 500 company. His uniform's fatigues were soft rather than starched. He looked dour rather than dashing. He loped rather than marched; he was an unmilitary looking as a General could get. On the other hand Sergeant Major Venable was a soldier's soldier, ruggedly handsome, ramrod straight, lean, swagger stick in hand whose language was tough and often vulgar while chock with snippets of Army jargon.

Ware spoke eloquently in soft tone like a refined New Englander. As for Venable he was all about giving and taking orders as he barked with a no-nonsense, Cajun, Leesiana drawl.

General Ware was drafted in 1938. He became the first Officer Candidate School graduate to reach the rank of General and the last Mustang General, meaning he went from a measly private to become one of the nation's most decorated and diverse, high-ranking officers. Sergeant Major Venable stemmed from the bayou country of Louisiana, drawn into the Army during WWII. Both served in the South of France during the big war.

Ware distinguished himself on the battlefield in France. For a defining heroic effort Ware won the Congressional Medal of Honor, his nation's highest military decoration. Here is the official account of that action:

"Commanding the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry, attacking a strongly held enemy position on a hill near Sigolsheim, France, on 26 December 1944, found that one of his assault companies had been stopped

and forced to dig in by a concentration of enemy artillery, mortar, and machinegun fire. The company suffered casualties in attempting to take the hill. Realizing his men must be inspired Lt. Col. Ware went forward 150 yards beyond the most forward elements of his command, and for two hours reconnoitered the enemy positions, deliberately drawing fire that caused the enemy to disclose their fortifications. Returning to his company, he armed himself with an automatic rifle and boldly advanced upon the enemy, followed by two officers, nine enlisted men, and a tank.

Approaching an enemy machinegun, Lt. Col. Ware shot two German riflemen and fired tracers into the emplacement, indicating its position to his tank, which promptly knocked the gun out of action. Lt. Col. Ware turned his attention to a second machinegun, killing two of its supporting riflemen and forcing the others to surrender. The tank destroyed the gun. Having expended the ammunition for the automatic rifle, Lt. Col. Ware took up an M1 rifle, killed a German rifleman, and fired upon a third machinegun 50 yards away. His tank silenced the gun. Upon his approach to a fourth machine gun, its supporting riflemen surrendered and his tank disposed of the gun. During this action Lt. Col. Ware's small assault group was fully engaged in attacking enemy positions that were not receiving his direct attention. Lt. Col. Ware was wounded three times but refused medical attention until this important hill position was cleared of the enemy and securely occupied by his command."

Earlier in the war Keith Ware commanded the famous Audie Murphy. Within the pages of Murphy's best-selling memoir, "To Hell and Back," Murphy recounted how he tagged along as Ware led a patrol behind enemy lines. In that action Murphy saved Ware's life by knocking off an enemy who had Ware in his sights. That action bonded the two men over a lifetime and earned Murphy his first Silver Star. Murphy went on to become a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient too then a celebrity and movie star. Unassumingly Ware continued his military career.

Ware again served with honor in Korea earning additional citations for his valor and leadership. Ware continued the academic portion of his career while still in uniform. He attended and later taught at the Army's War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He became the Army's liaison to the United States Congress. He wrote manuals on tactical nuclear warfare respected on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He became the Army's Chief in Public Affairs and today; the Keith L. Ware Award is annually bestowed on the Army's top journalist. Back in 1966, as a draftee, I lucked out and was assigned to 3rd Corps Headquarters as the custodian of classified documents for the Corps' Command Section.

On my first day of a new assignment, I was to report to Fort Hood's Sergeant Major the top kick of all top kicks on post. Sergeant Major Joseph Venable snarled at me. His tone wasn't that flattering toward a then lowly private.

"Boy!" he yelled, "I work for one man, the Commanding General of the 3rd Corps, and you now work for me! Captains, Majors and Colonels around here are a dime a dozen, and on the most part, they mean nothing to me other than the military courtesy they are due. Now you work for me. From now on you are ED, exempt from roll calls, KP, guard duty, CQ, inspections and all the other duties taking place around the barracks. You'll get a fresh haircut every week and break starched fatigues daily. You show your respect to all ranked above you, but if one swinging dick gives you any crap you tell me and I'll take care of it. For that: 'Me and the General' expect your total devotion to duty. You have your sorry butt in this office 7 a.m. sharp and make fresh coffee or you can go back to where you came from as a sorry-assed recon scout like you was in the First Armor Cav. Understand that, Private?"

With gusto I, “Yes Sergeanted!”

The tough talking Sergeant Major kept his word. From then on, and without doubt, I was his boy. I had it made. The duty was choice. I learned firsthand about how the upper echelons of the military function. My company commander and first-sergeant never leaned on me because of my high-flatulent status at HHQ. I had unearned clout. Besides, everybody on post was scared of the Sergeant Major’s power and wrath.

During my stay at Fort Hood the Army decided to create a new position, The Sergeant Major of the entire Army. Venable became runner up for the position, only to be nosed out by a Sergeant Major Woodward, who already served in Vietnam, an assignment Venable had yet to achieve.

Venable was something to behold. He loved the Army. He even savored the panther-piss tasting coffee served in mess halls, him mmmmming, how it was so robust. His uniform was immaculate. He adored a beautiful, full-of-life wife with a couple of pretty daughters. If out the window he’d see an overweight sergeant he’d storm out of headquarters, approach the sergeant, lock the fatso’s heels and threaten him to lose weight or he’d have ‘em busted down a rank or maybe even thrown out of the Army.

Over time, with me, his tone softened. We had great laughs. When I would interject or give an opinion about the Army he’d rile me and say, “Christine, you’re nothing but Christmas help in this man’s Army, just do your job and then you can go back to your candy-ass civilian life and be somebody with all your ideas back on the block!” Venable was instrumental at having me attain my sergeant’s stripes. He pinned them on my sleeves himself on the day of my promotion, rubbing my head like you do a toddler’s, telling me I was then a full-fledged sergeant like himself.

One highlight of our service together took place when President Johnson visited Fort Hood. In a small conference room Sergeant Major and myself along with eleven General Officers braced at full attention as the Commander in Chief entered the room to be briefed on the readiness of Fort Hood troops slated for Vietnam. Rather than hobnobbing with the generals LBJ turned his attention to the Sergeant Major and myself offering astonishing small talk.

It was a few months later when then Brigadier General Ware came on the scene to become Deputy Commander of 3rd Corps. Part of my job was to go to the Adjutants General’s Office to pick up documents addressed to the Command Section. I entered the inner sanctum with a TWIX for General Ware. His Aide-de-Camp was not at his desk just outside the General’s office. I noticed Sergeant Major sitting with the General in a casual manner with his leg crossed. The General and Sergeant Major had struck up a friendship and spent much time together discussing training and other aspects of military life. Sergeant Major, noticing me, signaled me to come into the General’s office.

I handed over the dispatch to the General. I remained at attention and had yet to be dismissed. General Ware put on his glasses and opened the dispatch. While reading it aloud he stood up. He had been promoted to Major General and was to report to Vietnam for temporary duty at first, and then take over the command of the 1st Infantry Division that was the Army’s buffer Division up on the DMZ separating North and South Vietnam, which was then one of the hottest combat spots on earth.

In those days to achieve higher rank it was essential to command a combat arms unit. Ware had yet to serve in Vietnam. There was a glow about the General. Right then, Sergeant Major exploded out of his chair. “Sir, nothing would make me prouder than to serve with you as your Division’s Sergeant Major

while in harm's way!" It was both a magnanimous and poignant moment. At the time I had about 54 days to go in the Army. As a 20 year-old, all I looked forward to, despite my good fortune was to get out, make some money, buy a nice car and date beautiful women, yet something stirred inside me to volunteer also, but soon enough I came to my senses and stifled any thoughts about asking to accompany the dynamic duo.

I was discharged on January 12, 1968. Some months later while watching the news Walter Cronkite reported that the command helicopter of the Big Red One was shot out of the sky and all aboard killed including its commander, Major General Keith L. Ware. Ware was just one of four American Generals killed in Vietnam. The news gave me a heavy heart but many of my friends, classmates and fellow soldiers also lost their lives.

Years later I visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. I possessed my own list of those I knew who perished. General Ware was on my list. I found the ebony, marble slab where Ware's name was etched in along with the other 58,000 plus on the wall. I scanned the marble slab and suddenly was shaken and taken to my knees to see the name of Sergeant Major Joseph A. Venable posted directly next to Ware's. I could hardly breath and was lost for words. He perished with his General, with him to the end!



All I could think to do was get back up on my feet, close my eyes and place my hand over both those names and pay homage. Two men, two patriots, two warriors whose loyal combined duty spanned almost 60 years were wasted in one horrific moment!

I discovered some of the details how the General, his aides, the Sergeant Major and even the division mascot,

a German Sheppard named King, all went down in a fiery crash near the Cambodian border on September 13th, 1968.

Like many who've served I've asked why? Why was I plucked out of the First Armored Cav., as a scout with the Americal Division that served in Pleiku, at Camp Holloway? Why did I get that choice job with the Army's elite? What if I would have asked to go with those two warriors? The what-ifs and how-comes are part of life's mysteries and maybe the gist of it all is, is that I'd be able to share their honorable story with you.

November 25, 2023



Lou Christine

November 5, 2023 · 2 people



THE COWBOYS ARE IN TOWN!

IT'S TIME TO MUSCLE UP!



November 3, 2023

Speaking of Hawaii!

“Haleakala” (1989)

The Hawaiian island of Maui was my adopted home for 16 years. I think of that magic place from time to time. When living on Maui I'd be in awe of balm, the aromas and exquisite panorama especially the distinction of west Maui's terrain versus the damper east Maui's.

Mt. Haleakala dominates the east side of the Valley Isle. The mountain's face is a mighty wall looming over the valley.

Haleakala's summit is 10,000 feet with a width that spans 20-miles, ocean-to-ocean, splitting Maui in two.

Hawaii is known for perfect weather, pristine beaches, the roar of the ocean and stunning sunsets. Then there are perceptions that bring on visions of outlandishly dressed tourists aimlessly wandering around Honolulu's Waikiki, draped in conflicting attire, who are more like affluent refugees with fish-belly white feet strapped into cheap sandals, a mush of mixed-flowered, polyester they appear, gawking and appearing bewildered while lost on the promenade an awful long way from Bumfuck USA.

There are the syrupy-sounds of Hawaiian music with the tinny strumming of the ukulele, and the sight of hula girls in flowered leis. Don Ho's singing his famous rendition of Tiny Bubbles. I don't mean to single out, Don, now passed away, who served up much that's sumptuous about Hawaii. Don's was a heavy cat and there was considerable substance to the man. Yet Upcountry Maui is not where one finds Do Ho or those saps roaming the concrete jungle of gaudy Waikiki.

\* \* \*

Maui leases space to Mt. Haleakala. From down in the valley it's impossible to measure the mountain's magnitude. It's only when one begins to make their way up the mountain's spine on a stretch of tar known as the Haleakala Hi-way that's when one can begin to measure the mountain's diversity.

At first, both sides of the hi-way are lined with sugarcane. The fields sprout millions of thin, long, green leaves that identify the hardy crop. Strong trade winds are steady forces breezing in non-stop from as far away as the Arctic vibrating the cane's leaves to their own tune.

Further up cane gives way to pineapple. A snapshot view has acre-after-acre dotting the landscape for as far as the eye can see. At a thousand feet above sea-level civilization comes back into play as one enters a new world.

Upcountry Maui's peppered with small towns, landscapes, and ranch lands Turning back one's eyes are soothed by the blue Pacific fanning out in every direction. The back end of Molokai, a neighbor island is visible with its dramatic cliffs. That back end of Molokai is the last land visible for thousands of miles in what seems like an eternal offing. In another direction sits the island of Lanai, often topped off with a silvery hat made up of lingering clouds.

In the yonder is the island of Kaahooawe, remaining silent, perhaps healing, while no longer absorbing military bombardments, when the small-island was ground zero for ordinance flung by allied battle ships.

Mt. Haleakala is home to cloisters of housing developments, robust farms that form a lively zone situated between the 1,000' and 3,500' level, spanning across the mountain's face.

There's hardly anything-indigenous living in Hawaii. Not the palms or other trees growing out of the moist floors of forests, nor the blades of grass; nor the unique vegetation. All arrived as one-time stowaways from someplace else. Before they arrived the girth of the mountain was beneath the sea. The lava finally broke the surface. In geologic terms it was just a short time ago if one measures time of evolution in the scheme of things.

There's an array of micro climates with good-sized patches of bamboo jungle on the windward side. Climates vary only meters apart going from tropical to bone dry. The arid areas sport hardy cacti and other succulents. If those variations aren't enough, higher above, at the 4000 and 5000 foot level rests damp cool redwood forests.

Across the valley are other island sharing mountains jutting to the sky. They're a stunning sight, with plush-emerald peaks as if upholstered by some synthetic material. There are crevices and openings here-and-there, permitting one to sneak peeks into the lush, mysterious valleys.

All while moving up Haleakala one passes purple-blooming jacaranda in picturesque settings. Some include dairy cows casually grazing or shading themselves under the drooping-branches of monkey pod and banyan. Jabbered and Cardinal, Mynah and Egret cruise the sky. Rooster, peacock, mongoose run wild, poking, foraging, drilling with their beaks and noses for their next meal, to devour the too-many-to-mention species of insects, that make Mt. Haleakala their home.

As one drives further, one comes upon a place called Ulupalakua, a magical place, so different than anything imagined or advertised about Hawaii, where herds of sheep with no set itinerary lumber down long slopes of close cropped range. One might forget they are in Hawaii and place themselves in the yonder of New Zealand or Scotland — yet it's Maui.

There are vineyards with a winery that bottles a local wine and credible champagne. The old winery's perched on a bluff, a place where Jack London, Mark Twain and Michener have come and gone; so to hang out, so to talk story, so to become inspired.

In addition, because of past volcanic activity, there are vast barren fields covered over by the hardened crust of lava, punctuating the mountain's character, a face seared, etched and aged from renegade lava flows leaving incredible ravines once excavated by fast-flowing molten lava.

A few thousand feet below, the earlier passed-by sugar-cane fields appear as if they are the mountain's well-mowed, grass green lawn.

Waddle trees with their yellow-berried flowers sprinkle the mountainside. Eucalyptus and pine huddle. And there is an abundance of others; avocado, guava, mango and cherimoya. Passion fruit or what is called lilikoi amply exists.

Residents on Haleakala are permitted to hold claim to exquisite lawns and gardens, cornucopias of botanical finery that include unsurpassed orchards, jammed-packed with exotic orchids. Wild bushes seem bigger than life with super-sized poinsettias, exquisite feather-like protea, along with a plethora of deep-shaded ginger and colorful bougainvillea.

Tuberose and gardenia send off an alluring aroma. Morning glories and wild-mountain flowers need no special care. They checker the mountain's face like providence-placed ornaments on God's Christmas tree. The century plant in Hawaii never takes that long to bloom; their huge white blossoms open fully and gloriously in the moonlight.

Further up, past the tree line, turning and turning, via a dizzy switchback road, purple-and-yellow wild flowers flourish high above the clouds.

With the change in elevation, a different climate gives way, clumps of fern, ohia and lapa-lapa bushes rule. Fog can envelope the upper ranges, providing a damp moist curtain over those who have ventured that far.

And there's even more folks; 'cause if you're ever fortunate enough to get that far you'll be in for an epicurean treat, to view first-hand the famous Hawaiian Silversword plants, plants that merely thrive in a few choice spots on Earth.

From the very top, almost all the other Hawaiian Islands can be seen on a clear day. If it's wintertime, the Big Island's snow-capped peaks are quite a contrast.

What might be more magnificent and significant, depending on the viewer is a grand scale crater rests inside of Haleakala's crater, a crater unpopulated and not visible while driving up the mountain.

The crater's a sudden inversion with a floor that's a sea of red cinder, fined and colored by sun, wind and time. Its day-in and day-out occupants are but few like Hawaiian Ne-ne birds, and wild-goat, primarily because there's not much to eat. It's immense, with towering walls, large enough to fit the entire island of Manhattan inside of it, skyscrapers and all.

Spaced apart, dormant cinder cones are visible from the summit and appear like large-scale anthills. The moon-like surface, the cinder-cones, the shadows all conspire to hide entrances leading towards bottomless lava tubes. They too hold onto secrets about the island, about Pele, about Hawaii, and about the Earth, and what happened there long ago, but that's another story.





November 2, 2023

It was about 40 years ago while residing on Maui a friend called and said he all-of-a-sudden had to fly to the mainland, only thing he had a friend flying in the next day he was supposed to show around the island.

He asked for a favor, for me to pick up his friend at the airport and show him around the island a bit. At the time, the guy who had to fly off, asked me to pinch hit for him. It was no big deal 'cause we were tight and it was always fun reacquainting myself with some of my favorite island spots and showing aloha towards a stranger.

I picked the him up and we had about a 10 hour day, starting off with a hearty breakfast at Longhi's famous eatery then some hiking in the Lao Valley, taking dips in waterfalls, sharing some doobie and topping it off with me taking him to a party at what's called upcountry on the slopes of Mount Haleakala. We hung out on the fringes of the hippie party at the ranch.

He wasn't that interested at socializing so we mostly talked, mostly about baseball and women.

After sunset I drove him back to the airport. He said it was a perfect day, just what he was looking for and provided sincere thanks.

I found out from my friend when he got back from the Mainland that the dude was famous especially within certain esoteric circles. Even when he told me his friend's name it didn't whoa me. Like, "Who was he?" may have been my response.

I found the dude engaging and down to earth pegging him as a very friendly and easy going dude.

Here's the deal. Let's have some fun. Can you guess who he is?

A clue, he told me his name was Richard.

1 November 2023

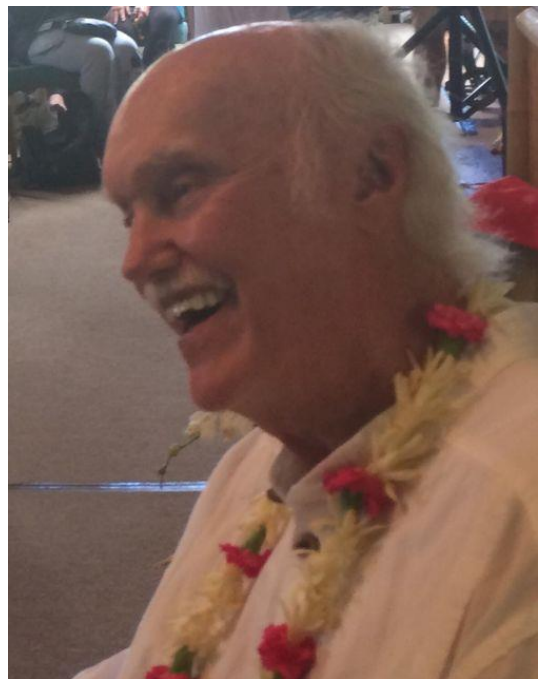
I first published the below article the first year I resided in San Miguel in 1995. I knew nothing beforehand of the Day of the Dead.

Those who know me well, know that this year has been a shit sandwich for me but still I am buying green bananas and no complaints.

I have not written anything worthwhile in a year yet this Day of the Dead season has inspired me to share this piece with you.

I have updated it somewhat!

"Reflections on Day of the Dead"



Breathe easy. It's likely you've made it and likely you lived through another Day of the Dead. Actually, there are two Days of the Dead, they are today and tomorrow that provided as much as 48 hours to reflect somewhat and peer back in the rear-view mirror of life.

At least some of us can congratulate ourselves for stamina after the self-abuse we put ourselves through, we might feel as good as dead after ingesting a freight train's worth of junk food over a lifetime, washing it down copious amounts of alcohol and sugar and while puffing on couple-of-hundred-thousand cigarettes etc.

Considering: It's ironic, then maybe not, the way Mexico pays homage to its dead. Perhaps it's one of those subtle yet glaring differences that surfaces between two distinct cultures.

In the States, death is often treated like a taboo, something that only occurs to other people. People north of the border tend to exclude themselves from the notion. In the U.S. they do honor Memorial Day, Martin Luther King's birthday, to name a few. Too bad the combined celebration of Washington and Lincoln's birthdays has degenerated into a schlock, sales-promotion—Madison Avenue's reasoning to liquidate Wall Mart's or Home Deposit's post-holiday inventory.

If you've traveled Mexico during the first days of November you may have witnessed the tributes. Nationwide, dried flowers, seeds and prayer stones are respectfully placed on makeshift, candle-lit altars, livening up "Day of the Dead" living rooms, revered events taking place inside both exquisite haciendas and modest, dirt-floored homes. No matter. The sentiment's the same. The installations are thumb sketches showcasing individuals' lifetimes of the past further decorated with photos and cherished keepsakes. Tender reminders are showcased. Maybe it's a bottle of tequila, a sports team's jersey, or the passed-away one's favorite snack.

Same as me, while witnessing such, you may have been stirred because of a bittersweet familiarity that honors someone admired by those left behind. Which brings me to a point: We're as good as dead. Death is more inevitable than the bill coming at the end of a meal. I guess we've all wondered about death. I suppose, at one time or another most of us have been terrorized by the fact.

Yet in Mexico, there's a breath of fresh air. It's up-tempo.

Ancestral memories come to peoples' minds. Every soul is collectively remembered. All souls are mindfully assembled and bunched into a refined centerpiece of the past, symbolically portrayed as a bouquet in a non-elitist manner. Those honored need not to have been president or an explorer or national hero, or some big deal.

Placing myself in the lethal-spirit of things as I normally do, I've got my own short list to reflect on.

I'll reflect back on the images I can remember. Within the silence of my mind, first I'll say, "hi" to grandmom and Aunt Dinny, women who once beamed unconditional smiles down toward a little boy, smiles that so warmed the heart.

I'll utter "hola," "aloha" and some, "hey, mans" and Philly-sounding "Yos," to guys off the block like Joey Alfano, Stevie Kelso and names that might mean little to you, but nevertheless, they mean something to me. The list seems to get longer each year.

I figure you got your own list. And if you're into it, or if I've become a friendly reminder you'll attempt bring back memories. You might take a moment and recall a pair of once-shimmering, root-beer eyes, just the way you remember them.

Perhaps you'll dig a little deeper and rehear a cozy voice of a dad, sensing how it resonated or you'll rekindle another voice's velvety texture that's of a mom or special lady friend while being enveloped by their warmth, if just for a moment. The distinct aroma of an aunt's perfume or an uncle's smoldering pipe tobacco can ease into the senses along with other good stuff packed into a lifetimes' worth of recollections making Memory's Lane a popular destination during Days of the Dead.

There are past people to see in our mind's eye; one-time coworkers who doubled us over with whacky



humor, or sensational friends who were solid soundboards or partners of the past who shared concurrent passions during those precious intimate moments.

No matter! Reel back time, say, "Hi, dad" or whisper, "Love, ya baby! You were the best!" Countless ears belonging to eternal souls, out there in the wherever, hafta perk up during Days of the Dead.

Maybe you're like

me and you quiz yourself from time to time and wonder, "Why on Earth am I, here, in Mexico?" And maybe like me, your answer isn't all that obscure when you go figure . . . It's special here. It's healthy. I like the taste it leaves in my mouth. The keen thing seems to be that nobody gets left out in Mexico.

Later on, when it's our turn, those gone before us could offer a helping hand or provide welcome mat to us new kids on here-after's block and they just might soften up those who might sit in final judgment.

Disculpe, I don't know a better way to say it, "Happy Day of the Dead!"

June 18, 2023

“Lou Christine’s Uncle Lou” (2003)

Published in Tim Russert's New York Times #1 best seller.

The estrangement between my father and me took place eight days after I was born. My Mother suddenly passed away while recovering from the blessed event. Unbeknownst to the hospital staff (or anyone for that matter, other than God) dear ole mom had developed a blood clot in her leg. While leaving the hospital bed to visit another woman sharing her maternity ward, the clot ran amuck. Before she could take three steps the clot bullied its way through her veins and attacked mom’s 26-year-old heart, killing her instantly.

Obviously, my status instantly changed. Lifetime handicappers, if there were such seers, might have posted sinking odds predicting a normal childhood for me. Other complications surfaced. Naturally, I was unaware of the goings-on as a helpless infant, with no confidants or sense of clarity, my future was being decided. Soon enough I’d be branded with a litany of not-so-flattering adjectives. From the get-go, “bastard” had already been established. The pegging of “motherless” then could be added to the list.

When I reached the age of comprehension I began to hear how “poor-little” was placed in front of my first name. Thus, I entered the world social workers coin as dysfunctional. At the first stages of reasoning, sad explanations filled in some of the blanks. My mother was dead! My father was nowhere to be found.

Most kids, I suppose, are subject to a bonding and sense of familial assemblage—at least before the old folks split up or a parent dies. Such comfort wasn’t readily available in my case. I realize certain scars linger, yet I believe they’ve been far from debilitating; other than a constant paranoia, that significant women in my life might suddenly desert me.

As for the idea of such parental comfort: I once heard children might perceive parents as an impervious barrier, a buttress standing between eternity and them. Once their tour of duty expires, survivors are abruptly bumped up to the front ranks, then on their own and then standing on the very edge of the abyss and ever after only to face on their own the dark spookiness of eternal order.

So, there I was, just out of diapers lacking joined parents, stung with sobering knowledge and struck with the advent of inevitable mortality. But let’s get back to dad—he’s the real star here. You see, I was a love child and dad was burdened with other commitments, like raising his own family, with a wife and a couple of kids. For my father, with events rapidly coming to a head, things surely needed to be sorted out. As far as I’ve been able to determine and from what I’ve figured out myself, it wasn’t even a gimmie, dad would leave wife #1, get divorced, and then marry who would become wife #2, my mom. With the essence of new life unfolding before him, and while dealing with the pangs of lost love, the big boy was forced to make some moves. Who knows?

Any foundation being formed between us was at best, “iffy.”

I’ve harbored questions. Did he beam with a “that’s my-boy” pride up to the catastrophe? Or did he decide to just wash his hands of the matter? Was he paralyzed by heartache, or succumbing to guilt and fear? Frankly, knowing the facts as I think I do, and after having my own falls from grace, I’ve never envied the man.

Adding to the mix: Dad was Jewish, Mom was Irish Catholic. I also had a half-sister named Toni, who was nine when I was born. As a little girl, she had to deal with her own sadness over mom's death. Toni settled in with her natural father. Grandmom Mickles and Aunt Dinny stepped forward for me. Grandmom had a lot of grit. She bore 14 children, and then raised six more of her grandchildren and always proclaimed herself as Irish and Catholic as Paddy's pig, proud of a lineage stemming from County Armagh in Ireland.

Beforehand, there weren't any Jewish fellows involved with the seven Mickles girls. Mom's first husband was Italian! There was plenty of disparaging talk around the kitchen table about that one. My uncles did a lot of verbal finger-pointing while flicking their cigarette ashes on the linoleum floor. For the most part the seven Mickles boys were a clan of uneducated, beer-swilling factory workers, who often got in-peoples-faces arguing, race, religion, and politics—subjects within their realm yet their spin on them were out of this world. They held fast to ignorance, myth and prejudice.

So Grandmom and Aunt Dinny raised me. They were good women, damn good women. I didn't lack love and care, but it was evident when comparing myself with other kids and other families, elements of the norm were nowhere to be found. There was a natural yearning to link with my father. Father-son days during scout outings weren't my favorite venues. Kids ask intruding questions, and there seemed to be a particular stigma attached.

I knew something of my father's legacy. But how much is explained to a toddler? Because dad was Jewish, Grandmom and the Church took action, fearing I could be indoctrinated into Judaism. Gradually, it was explained how Lou Christine, Sr., already had another wife and kids. They said the man was crazy about my mom. And to save him some additional face perhaps, I was told he went berserk and had to be restrained from attacking the doctors when first learning of the awful news.

I was told my father was an independent taxicab owner, and operated under the banner of United Cab of Philadelphia, with identity number #425. Starting around the age of six, when one of those red-and-beige cabs came into view, I zeroed in on the decals pasted on their front-quarter panels. As often as my eyes searched there was never a trace of cab #425.

On my birthday, at the age of seven, I was informed my father was going to visit. The day passed slowly. I unnerved the household moving like a caged tiger while pacing in front of the living room's window. Grandmom said, "Will you settle down or go out and play, we'll call you out the back door." It was a cold, cold day. Yet the oncoming visit gave me an opportunity to brag to my play friends "my dad's coming!" a boasting that might legitimize me in front of my peers.

The magic moment came. A big man stared down at me. He smiled, said something non-profound, and then took notice how my little boy's hands had turned a ruddy red from the cold. A nervous-looking woman wearing a black overcoat sat close by. She sized me up. The big deal that he was fished into his pants pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He handed me a note, along with advice to buy myself a pair of gloves. The rest of the visit melded into a bunch of boring grown-up talk. As fast as mom left this earth, so went dad's visit, and he faded into the winter's day. The magic moment left. Latched onto him was the small-nervous lady, draped in a black coat, who didn't say much.

You see, right away mom went and signed my birth certificate Louis Christine, Jr., to legitimize me. During those days hospitals stamped the word “illegitimate” on one’s birth certificate if the parents weren’t married.

Out of curiosity, often I opened the white pages to view my father’s West Philadelphia address and phone number. The listing was published under the name Rose Christine. I would touch the print and ponder the “what ifs,” wondering how it would have been if things would have panned out. There was a certain thrill for me to see my surname in print. Take into consideration Grandmom’s last name was “Mickles,” my sister’s “laquinto,” and my Aunt Dinny’s, “Altieri,” due to a previous marriage. I was the sole Christine I knew of.

Another birthday came. I received a card addressed to Master Louis Christine. Inside, along with a five-dollar bill, were signatures: “Uncle Lou and Aunt Rose.” Grandmom snatched the greeting, read the signatures and became livid. In a rage, she insisted I dial a sequence of telephone numbers, my first call ever. I was to ask why the card was signed “Uncle Lou.”

A man’s voice answered. Shaking with doubt, I eked out Grandmom’s request. First, there was a dead silence, and then nothing more than the click of disconnect. From that day on my father never made another attempt to contact me.

But that’s not the end of the story. There were a few crossroads where dear ole dad and my path have crossed. Permit me to share them with you.

Years pass, I’m 19, in the Army, home on leave with orders for Vietnam. The thought naturally manifested how I could be killed. As an adult, I maintained a curious desire to look into my dad’s eyes.

On a whim, I drove out to West Philadelphia and walked up to an apartment house. Unsure, I stood at the entrance, where I could see a row of rusty mailboxes just inside the building’s vestibule. The place wasn’t that spiffy. There was an assortment of faded names pasted next to the bank doorbells, names mostly yellowed and bent with time. In scrawny writing, I spotted “Christine–Apartment 204.” I rang. The main entrance was set free with a let-me-in buzz. I headed up stairs and moved down a creaky, wooden-floored hallway leading to apt. 204 as to get a grown-up look at my dad. The door had yet to open.

When the door opened the man appeared, cigar in mouth, fingering the end, wearing glasses, somewhere in his sixties. To me, he looked more like LBJ. He said nothing and offered less, except for a cigar-chomping scowl. I gathered my voice and asked, “Are you, Lou Christine?” He released his lip lock on the cigar and spoke in salty Edward G. Robinsonese, “Who wants to know?”

“Me, Lou Christine!” I said evenly.

He was ice water, expressionless and without so much as a blink as he slowly turned, reentering the apartment, leaving the door ajar, as if for me to follow. He just mumbled in the same wise-guy manner,

“C’mon in. Ya wanna a drink or something?”

He pulled down from a cluttered mantle a bottle of VSQ brandy and poured two glasses. I fitted myself into a worn club chair, and he did the same while he confidently puffed on his stogie. He placed his legs and bedroom-slippered feet on a tattered vinyl hassock. I told him how I was in the Army with orders to be shipped out.

I stayed for about two hours. He spoke fondly about my mother. He professed in a tender sort of way how she was a wonderful girl, a “real sweetheart.” He asked some about my sister, my aunts and Grandmom. Yet “Mock the Louie” as my uncles had often referred to him, couldn’t help but flout, speaking mostly about himself, how he was a big deal at one time, how he once owned a fleet of cabs, but then he said he owned just one. Said he was semi-retired, and he said how my uncles were bums and how he helped them out of jams, lent them money and got ’em jobs.

The guy never bothered to ask if I had a girlfriend, or if I’d ever been laid, or if I ever hit a home run or scored a touchdown. He seemed to have no interest about what I thought or who I was. He never referred to me as “son”. The experience was surreal. He truncated the mostly one-sided conversation when he announced he had to break it off and run to the bank before it closed.

On that note, we rose from our chairs. Again he fished into his pocket, duplicating the same body language I remembered from the past, as he yanked out some bills. The wad didn’t look as large as it had 13 years before. He plucked a twenty, handed it over and said in a disconcerting tone, “Go buy yourself a meal. Good luck over there. Better watch yourself.”

I made a weak attempt to give it back. Said, I wasn’t there for a handout. “Whattaya crazy? Go ahead. Don’t insult me, and don’t be a putz.” I suppose he possessed some power of persuasion, or maybe I came to my senses, son-like, I pocketed the Jackson.

There was a sense of disappointment. The man was self-centered, boring, ugly, with oversized features; big-eared with curly-cue gray hairs sprouting out of them. You’d only want a nose like that if it were plumb full of nickels. He was bald the way I’ve become. And despite being a big man, well-over six foot, a sagging belly screened any sign of a belt buckle. He wasn’t dressed all that sharp either with out-of-date trousers wrinkling down to his blue-veined, swollen feet that were stuffed into cracked-leather slippers.

On my way back to the car I tortured myself for not asking the “how comes.” Yet the dufus that he was never took the time to offer me an opening to speak my mind. Before turning on the ignition, I took a moment, lit a smoke and I stared hard into the rear-view mirror: “What if I make it to his age and turn out to be as unsightly?” But it was more than the aging process and winding up with hangdog looks that I had seen: the man was ugly to the bone.

More years pass and I led my own life relatively happy with a wife. I was helping raise her boy, who I first encountered when he was ten months old, a kid with no visible father, same as me. Part of the lure, toward he and his mother, was that I didn’t want that boy to live a fatherless existence. One day out of the blue, with my-then adopted three-year-old Robby tagging along, while cruising West Philadelphia; I decided to make another cold call to dear old Dad. I suppose something inside me desired to show the old bugger that I had the right stuff to raise a boy, any boy, regardless of the circumstances.

His wife answered the door. Without me uttering a word, she knew precisely who I was. Her first words at the door, “My! My! You’re all grown up.” The visit was uneventful with predictable awkward moments. Rose showed a cheery, nice side. She whipped up some refreshments, asked no intrusive questions and treated my son and me with dignity and kindness. The old man didn’t say much, other than asking if I was making a decent living. He seemed more interested in the newspaper folded on his lap as if he couldn’t wait for us to get out of there so he could get back to it.

On the way out, even Robby might have sensed we'd never return. No big deal, I'd grown accustomed to that particular emptiness. I no longer thirsted. If for some reason, after we departed if my old man would have peered through the dusty Venetian blinds and watched us disappear into the darkness, he would have never caught so much as a glimpse of us looking back. We wuz free!

But wait! Some years later, despite being on the road to material success, I created some of my own headaches with unpaid traffic tickets. I received threatening letters. Scofflaw officers rapped on our door, warning my wife of serious implications. My wife harped on me to take care of issues. I obtained a hearing date to wipe the slate clean. In those days Philadelphia's traffic court was located in a bad neighborhood with nonexistent parking. It was a catch-22 situation. More than likely one received a parking citation while inside court.

I showed at the designated courtroom packed with about 100-waiting defendants. A bailiff barked, "Louis Christine!" I began to approach the bench. The bailiff ignored my advance, and further barked louder, "Louis, A. Christine." "That's me!" I said. Then, just behind me, a third voice piped in. My ears picked up that wise-guy spit, "That's me!"

There stood my father. The packed courtroom let out a chuckle, so did the judge. I looked back toward my father. "Hey! What are you doing here?" Lou Christine, Sr. volleyed and echoed, "What are you doing here?" Our tit-for-tat Abbot and Costello routine set off another round of laughs even louder than before. Perhaps people thought that earlier, that very morning, we had sat around a cozy family breakfast table and pretended to go our separate ways. The judge shook his head and smiled down toward his paperwork. He grabbed onto his gavel and announced a hardy, "Dismissed, bailiff call the next case."

With the court session over and the fading sounds of a beckoning bailiff calling out another sequence of docket numbers, both found ourselves standing next to one another just outside the courtroom. I asked, "How, ya, doing?" He mumbled, "Fair to middling." I gulped for a deeper breath and took a further step, "Wanna get a cup of coffee or something?" All I got was a "Nah, busy . . . Gotta, go."

It was cold, man. On top of that, don't ya know, I was in traffic court on the wrong date. Don't know to this day if my showing was a form of destiny attached to my mistake, with me being in court a day early. So I get another parking ticket, and there's no way I'm going to wade down into the vice of the city to face the music all over again. I was in more trouble, yet an annoying thought lingered: dickhead Lou Christine, Sr. got out of his ticket at my expense without having to give the judge an explanation.

More years pass. My Aunt Dinny suffered from cancer. She was treated each Thursday. I'd chauffeur her to a huge medical center. I was about 30. I normally would escort her up to a top floor then go back downstairs because who wants to wait around a doctor's office? It was wintertime. I sported a Greek sailor's hat and a black leather jacket. I would mope outside; smoke cigarettes and eyeball passing chicks. I normally planted myself in the middle of a busy plaza's landing, near the entrance of an active pharmacy. The pharmacy boasted tracked-glass doors that ran the entire width of its front entrance. During business hours, because of the heavy traffic, the doors remained wide open. A heating system shot a curtain of hot air downward as a buttress against the cold. I stood close enough to feel the heat while panning the action. I just happened to notice, down by the curbside, a Taxi parked in a "No-parking zone." It was a United Cab. Low and behold, #425 was embossed along with the name, Lou Christine!



Now the pharmacy had a pay phone just inside, to my right only a few feet away and there he was, cigar in mouth, mumbling into the phone's receiver. I probably looked away at first, not sure if I was displaying any sort of ultra-kinetic, body language. Then I grabbed onto my senses and peered toward that once illusive cab. The joyful anticipation of such a find had by then long faded. I gathered myself, a defining moment, dictating that during this encounter I'd be the one who wouldn't show a glint of emotion.

A "whatayaknow" smirk may have formed on my young man's face, with me maintaining my cools, one hand in pocket, collar up. Surely a machismo surfaced in the form of a deserted son's demeanor hardened by time, which by then was accustomed to paternal disappointment. I chose to flash a street kid's bravado; now-and-then taking deep drags off my smoke and maybe spitting hockers toward the curbside. Trying to appear inscrutable as my stare was as hard as Pennsylvania coal peering right through the man, same as I'd be if facing a nameless pug on a crowded subway. On the surface my shit looked together, my insides were in turmoil and my mind was spinning.

The conversation on the phone didn't seem that affable. He too stared through me, seemingly sensing nothing. He continued a mostly one-sided conversation. My ears were privy to a series of grunts and wise-guy sounding "yeahs."

A rush came over me during the bizarre encounter "Wow!" I thought, "Imagine, after all these years, standing just a few feet away is the very man, and he has no idea!"

A question came center stage inside the theater of my mind: How many other sons have ever experienced such? As weird as it sounds is as weird as it was. Seems his phone conversation was lasting long enough for me to finish my smoke, offering me an opportunity to go ahead and flick the butt in the direction his cab, maybe to see if it would raise an eyebrow or perhaps initiate provocation. It didn't. He remained engrossed in his phone call, yet he stared directly at me, seeing my image as no more than wallpaper while continuing to issue into the phone the series of grunts and "yeahs."

Passively he placed the receiver back on the hook, let out a sigh, and headed right toward me. My eyes tracked his oncoming presence. Sounds emanating from the busy plaza muted. A pulsating drumbeat played in my mind. All actions shifted to slow motion. He loped toward me. He appeared deep in thought. The intensity of the moment hit a crescendo as he coasted in near my personal air space. I could taste the smelly cigar and sensed an empty soul—with him never paying me the slightest of mind. The thumping sounds in my brain finally subsided as he moved on.

Funny, there was one positive impression as he floated on by; you know a trite thing, perhaps a futuristic silver lining. I admired the spunky moves springing from the old fart, how he gambled down the steps of the plaza, doing so in an athletic manner. Then I watched him duck out of sight as he entered the cab. Like that, he was gone.

One of the pharmacy's clerks dashed from behind the counter. Mouth agape, the clerk held up in front of the payphone. He glared down at strewn cigar ashes about the Astro-turfed carpet and then his eyes angrily darted towards where the old man's cab had been parked. The clerk shifted his glare and gave me an inquisitive look as if to share with me his indignation. "Did ya see that fucking asshole? He comes in here every day, asks for change, never so much as thank you, only a grunt, and he drops his stinking ashes all over the floor. Who do you think has to clean them up? I hate that creep!"

It was as if the clerk was looking for some sort of reaction. I shrugged my shoulders and offered, "Takes all kinds, I guess." I never saw dear-old dad again. I did come to learn that over the course of a distorted lifetime he pandered his life away and burnt every bridge extended toward him. He died penniless of a heart attack at 73, wallowing in the crummy bed of a 23-year-old woman who was a heroin addict.

I've wondered a plenty about the man, his demise, and if his fatherly sins would trickle down to the son. In many ways, they have. Because of other fundamentals, certainly not provided by him, I've had opportunities and chose a higher road, not that I'm beyond sin. Surely I've sensed a void, that perhaps I missed out on something of value over my lifetime, but now, when it comes down to it, I'm convinced that in the long run, it was dear old dad who was the poor guy who missed out on me.

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**May 27, 2023**

"The Wall" (1987)

by Lou Christine

This year will mark another anniversary of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. Unfortunately the United States is bogged down other messy conflicts. Despite politics, despite variable ideals and special interests, despite being right or possibly being wrong, young men and women in uniform refrain from asking the reasons why; they just honor their sworn oath and do their duty.

That's the way it has been for all front-line troopers throughout the ages, rather if in the ranks of Patton's divisions, Bonaparte's Calvary or Caesar's Legions. That's the way it was for kids back in Vietnam.

I'd presume most people reading this remember the time but I can't estimate how many of you have seen The Wall and have come to appreciate its significance and have come to grips with the sacrifice made mostly by draftees, primarily thought of by many historians as cannon fodder making up the lower ranks consisting of the poor and downtrodden, college and high school drop outs, dead enders, farm boys, rubes, blacks, Latinos, Hawaiians, and even none-citizens from foreign countries, caught in the draft's net and who were yanked off the street by Uncle Sam.

Charlie Sheen's character, Taylor, in Oliver Stone's Platoon, may have best described the disheveled lot when within the film he narrated a letter he was about to send off to his grandmother. Nevertheless, those sorry asses became heroes despite their social and economic back grounds. Sad facts are, too many nice kids died.

After a first-time walk-by of the Vietnam War Memorial aka: "The Wall," emotions might vary, depending on one's association with the Vietnam Generation and the era. Yet too many of our fellow citizens were absolutely oblivious to the conflict like the nation's politicians' sons or spoon-fed Ivy League types, Senators sons or those who could afford to dodge the draft via deferments. Some have remained oblivious, to this day still clueless about how the war impacted and rattled individual lives and families.

Yet, if one gives the Wall a second gander the enormity of the conflict and the Memorial itself kicks-in. If compared: The Wall's design parallels the very pace and escalation of the war itself.

The Wall's length and stature are laid out in such a way. When one first approaches the memorial, from either end, the Memorial appears somewhat inconsequential, perhaps not as grandiose as might be expected. The initial black marble slabs are about knee high with a few names etched on them.

Yet with each step, the height of the Wall inches upward, one slab next to another, and then another, and another, chock with more names. That aspect in design is an intricate and well-thought-out part of the Memorial—the Wall's gradual escalation—a sobering reminder of how the body count rose along with the war's escalation. After about 25 yards the Wall looms large. Onlookers then have to lift their heads to read the names, dwarfed by the Wall of doom.

Vietnam escalated from a small flammable skirmish that erupted into an out-of-control inferno. The firestorm gained an appetite and was fueled by body count and with our boys and girls who may have survived crippled by additional psychological and physical residue permeating for decades in the form being disabled or while wrestling with hideous nightmares.

On the most part, those whose names are on the Wall were given little thought back then. While GIs were mired up in knee-deep mud, with danger lurking behind every bamboo shoot providing a mean case of the Willies, most of them could not understand why they were there in the first place.

Back in the good ole USA the masses were screeching for the Beatles while latching onto whimsical fads, admiring, Twiggy, and speeding toward upper mobility. The nation basically ignored the bumpy ride until the wheels began to come off. It was only when too many working-class families became blood-splattered and when college students and citizens took to the streets, well, that's when the brass and government begrudgingly chose to back away from the war, a stinking war its leaders never intended to win. It wasn't until the cries to stop reached a fever pitch that that particular war began to deescalate.

Before society took stock too many thousands of death certificates had already been signed.

\* \* \*

Those now marbleized on that Wall are sentenced. They're all brothers and sisters, for all eternity a family fostered by circumstance, sentenced to never again ride a wave or yelp a Merry Christmas or a happy birthday, or take a lover in their arms, or give a hardy, "Morning, Mom!" never again to do anything but perhaps be remembered.

That's all we can do for them now.

Pre-Vietnam War memorials honored those from past eras. If alive, most of the names on the Vietnam Wall would have been entering their prime when the memorial was unveiled back in 1982.

The Wall is a sea of etched letters compiling of 58,000 plus names. At the mid-point, the Wall reaches its pinnacle as the war did. Then the Wall takes a 90-degree turn, as one heads away from its center. The Wall begins to slope downward. Each slab now descending rather than the ascending that took place on the other side, deescalating in precise scale, the same way the war did.

The brilliance of the monument, designed by Chinese American architect, Maya Lin, holds up as a simple artistic emulation in sync with the time frame of the war. The Wall just dwindles down and ends, the same way it began.

Today the dead are still on duty. They're there day and night and night and day as eternal sentries where the rain will fall and the sun will shine and snow will stick, but perhaps more so, as fateful reminders to us all.



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**May 22, 2023**

We could have been, maybe inside our own hearts, the Titans of the town or just three diverse buddies.

We just lost Den Nelson on my right and our Tommie Frazee on the other side of me who left us two years ago. They both breathed fabulous life into this community.

I think we added to the esoteric and some of the eclectic flavor, and the atmosphere that's changed into a completely different town now with different people.

Those were the days my friends of expression and brotherhood.

You guys have left me to carry on.



**March 8, 2023**

It's hard to believe 57 years ago today I got drafted. During those two years I experienced both the saddest and fulfilling times of my life all part of the rite of passage.

Off the streets of Philly I met guys from all over the country before the country became so homogenized. I earned rank and privilege. I ridded myself of abject racism. I experienced a miracle, being transferred out of an armored recon unit that took a heavy hit in country when it came to casualties and somehow I lucked-out and got a cushy job working directly for a 3-star.

I came out of it ready for action with a sense of accomplishment, taking on the challenges that go along with everyday life. All I wanted to do at the time of discharge was be free, make some coin, buy a convertible and take out beautiful girls.

It's hard to believe!



December 3, 2022



Call me #25 'cause that's the way it's always been. A long time ago I got used to it, and being viewed as #25 has always been invigorating.

November 11, 2022

A hearty salute to all my fellow sisters and brothers who have served their various nations in uniform, thank you for your courage and support.



Neel Ackerman (USAF), Sonny Alba (USN), Joe Alfano (USA), John Alfano (USCG), Bob Allen (USAF), Frank Altieri (USN), Roberto Alvarado (USA), Franco Alvarez (MEX), Miguel Amici (USN), John Robert Andren (USA), Russ Archibald (USA), Dick Avery (USAF) Roger Bailey (USAF), Joe Baldwin (USA), Robert Bates (USN), Charles Barker (USA), Gail Marie Barros USA, Lynn Bear (USA), Huckle Berger (USA), Heidi Davis Bernard (USA), Barry Berk (USA), E. C. Bell (USA), Zadoc Brown Jr. (USA), David Burden (RCF), Pete Campbell (UK), Daniel (Tio) Carlson (USMC), Michael Caputo (USA), Lou Christine (USA), Rob Christine (USA), Don Clay (USN/USMC), Albert Coffee (USMC), Fred Collins (USMC), David Connelly (USA), Joe Contino (USCG), Kenny Crusberg (USAF), Jim (Jimerino) Curran (USA), Ricardo Davidson (USN), Monty Dennison (USA), Patrick von Drashek (USAF), Steven Dewing (USN), Benjamin Diamond (USA), Stirling Dickinson (USN), Paul Dickson (AUS), Peter Dierauf (USN), Pat Donnelly (USA), John (JD) Dougherty (USA), Mort Erlich (USA), William

Fairer (USAF), Pee-Wee Fetzner (USMC), Clai Fields III (USA), George Fields (USA), Dennis Finch (USN), Jack Fisher (USAF/USN), Frank Fortis (USA), Tony Frasco (USMC), Rebecca Frey (USA), Larry Gassler (USAF), Jack Glynn (USA), George Greaves (USAF), Alan Gross (USN), Paul Gross (USAF) Paul Guerin (USAF), Victor

Guzman (USN), Tony Habib (USAF), Jack Hannula (USA), Bekka Harrand (USA), Rebecca Hartman (USA), Stewart Haverlack (USAF), Doug Henning (USMC), Bob Hernandez (USMC), Walter Hodges (USA), Chris Holmes (USA), Pat Hornberger (USA), John Horton (USA), Jim Iaquinto (USA), Jack Jacobson (US), Barry Jacknow (USA), Gordon Jett (US), Jack Jennings (USMC), Bobby Jones (USA), Ed Jordan (USA), Detlev Kapstein (GER), Jack Kazsinski (USA), Bill Kennedy (USA), Joe Kennedy (USA), Jim Kerns (USA), Ronnie Kirby (USA), Marty Kilmer (USA), Mike Kinney (US), Jim Knoch (USAF), Mike Kosmalski (US), Pete Kosmalski (USA), Babe Kozlowski (USA), Patty Kozlowski (USA), John Kupervich (USMC), Ronnie Kwasiborski (U.S.), Jim Lobo Labenz (USA), Norman La Peters (USA), Russ Lehr (USN), George Lewis (USAF), Wolfgang Lichter (Ger), Bill Lieberman (USA), Bob Longhi (USA), Jason Longoria (USA), Lalo Lopez (MEX-USN), Georgie Madden (USA), Ken Makowski Sr. (USA), Thomas McCollum (USN), Wayne McCoy (USA), Donald McDonald (USA), Mike McFadden (USA), Larry McGearity (USMC), Anado McLaughlin (USN), Hal Memmler (USA), Danny Merkal (IDF), Kenneth Mickles (USA), Kim Mickles (USA), Lovell Mickles (USA), Tom Mickles (USN), David Miller (USA/USAF), Joe Minter (USMC), John Morrow (USA), Den Nelson (USA), Jim Newel (USA), Otto Nuesser (USA), Gregory Nye (USN), J.K. O'Donnell (USA), Charles Oldfather (USAF), Peter Olwyler (USA), Myles Osterneck (USMC), Vlad Palma (RUS), Eddie Pekala (USA), Louis Potemka (USA), Junior Perry (USA), Gary Peterson (US), Derick Phillips (USMC), Brian Porter (US), James Potemkin (US), Joey Potts (USA), Jorge Prieta (MEX), Karl Rembre (USMC), Bob Risner (USA), Mike Romer (USA), Mike Romer Jr. (USA), Slim Romer (USA), Herbie Rosenberg (USA), Steve Rozansky (USA), Dan Rueffert (USA), Mark Schaff (USA), Joe Schultz (USA), Jack Schanz (USA), Bob Scott (USN), Bobby Short (USMC), Arthur Silvers (USA), Richard Simeoni (USA), Ralph Simmons (USAF), Daniel Sirvey (FR), Monty Skidmore (USA), Charles Smart (USA), Shang-Hi Smith (USAAC), Stephanie Smith (USA), Artie Solomon (USA), Jay Somski (USA), Jimi Strang (USAF), JOHN STREATHER (UK), Tim Souder (USN), Clark Spicer (USA), Jack Sullivan (USN), Jack Sullivan (GB), Bernie Swederek (USA), Don Tanner (USN), Mark Taylor (USA), Gerry Telden (USA), Jennifer Risner Trapeno (USA), Gilles Vachon (USN), Joseph Venable (USA), Henry Vermillion (USA), Eduardo Walls (Chilean Navy), Keith Ware (USA), Harry Warner (USAF), Dick Weber (USA), John Weldon (USMC), Jeff Werniek (USA), Bill Whidham (USA), Horace Whittlesey (USA), Bobby Wieticha (USCG), Dickey Wieticha (USCG), Ben Wikera (USA), Bill Wilborn (USMC), Pat Wilds (USAF), Sam Williams (USAF), Bill Wilson (USAF), Herb Wilson (USA), Sunday Marie Witte (USAF), Steve Woods (UK), James Wyngaarden (USN), Warren Young (AUS), Bobby Z. (USA), Louie Zerillo (USA), Dave Zolnowski (USA), Paul Zukowski (USA)

## September 17, 2022

As stated in the essay printed below my formative years were spent in an industrial hard scrabble part of Philadelphia that was always and frightfully rough and ready.

To prevail in the old neighborhood as a young man one had to be tough, fast or funny. The toughness was an essential yet speed was a barometer one was measured. Every guy knew where he stood in that category and as you know, speed never has a slump. Of course having humor was a major because bigger guys were unlikely to punch you out if you had them laughing.

In many ways they were the richest time of my life. Most of us yearned to live in sunny California, or some other what we thought were more glamorous places we saw on TV. We only had abandoned factories and warehouses or to hop the freight trains that travels through the neighborhood, or play down at the docks along the river. to explore.



Yet the glue that held us together was mostly sport and the Venango Bears were a large part of that.

Who says you can never go back home?

I was flattered by the get together as my old boyhood friend and teammate, Harry Warner, made the call on Friday that Louie Gunk was back in town.

It was beautiful!

Once a Bear Always a Bear (2020)

I spent my formative years growing up in a blue-collar, inner-city neighborhood identified on the map as, Port Richmond, an industrial mix of factories, trucking concerns and row homes that skirted the Delaware River in North Philadelphia. Half of the peoples in the neighborhood last names ended in the letters like "ski" or "wicz."

It was a Polish/Lithuanian enclave, basically working-class, factory workers and truck drivers, whose earnings were not that far above the poverty line, but nobody really thought of themselves as poor. There was also a mix of Italians, Irish and Germans. Almost everybody was Catholic.

Most families owned an automobile and resided in modest row homes. Some parents could afford a two-week vacation down the Jersey shore but nobody was talking about going to the Eiffel Tower, Ibiza or Disneyland. Those landmarks were situated in different worlds.

The idea of affording college was but for a few. Most of us got drafted within a year out of North Catholic. Many had already dropped out of high school to work in mundane, get-nowhere sweatshops like Alden Rubber Company or Spruance Paints.

Yet there was a strong sense of community pride.

There was "The Venango Bears!"

The Bears were named after Venango Street, a thoroughfare that ran through the heart of Port Richmond going from the river all the way across the city, but our section was referred to as "Venango," which ended a few blocks after crossing Aramingo Avenue, at the railroad bridge.. Philadelphia is tagged a city of neighborhoods.

When you identified yourself to outsiders, you said you were from "Venango."

If you were a young ball player you could have played for the Venango Bears. The Venango Bears held onto a strong, rich and storied past, stemming back to late Teens. They were pretty much a loose-knit group, a club, made up of neighborhood guys who loved sport. Most knew each other since birth.

Figure there were high-school teams a young athlete might join and excel in, but there was nothing like being a Bear, especially when it came to football! Besides, the local high-school teams didn't always do so hot and the swaggering Bears had a reputation for winning.

Now the neighborhood kids normally recruited a former Bear to coach. Venango forwent an athletic director, or school principal or parent of some parent organization appointing a coach. Once we got a little older it was the team representatives who asked an elder to coach. It wasn't like some Vince

Lombardi came storming in to give orders. We, the team, were always the boss! We had great coaches, neighborhood men who we trusted.

The Venango Bears players and coaches stemmed from Pee-Wee teams to their Semi-Pro teams who always financed themselves mostly through the sales of raffle tickets.

For slackers like myself, having top school grades wasn't part of the process; we smoked cigarettes during practice and games. You could have your arm around your sweetheart on the sidelines even during games and later, as older teens, fellow players could be seen taking swigs of Thunderbird, not such a strange occurrence when victory was assured.

There was an era in the 50s & the 60s the Bears during a golden age, might field a number of teams since we had a lot of kids. The younger teams were tagged as Venango, Pee-Wees, and then the Cubs. Earning a Bear title didn't come until one was about 15. Bears fielded 85-pounders in Pop Warner, and then 105s and 125s and 150s and then unlimited weight teams with ages ranging from the neighborhood kids going from ten-years-old to in their late 20s.

The Bears had, same reputation as the NFL's Chicago Bears, a reputation as Monsters of the Midway. Visiting teams dreaded coming to the neighborhood as our sidelines were packed with generations of past and future Bears, along with rabid neighborhood characters. An intimidating bruising and boisterous bunch served up hair-on-fire radical support, even those other teams' biggest guys, weren't so thrilled about being the first to get off the bus. The greeting was far from aloha.

On the road our following was huge. You can picture carloads of Bowery Boys or Dead-End Kids, maybe a couple of hundred, storming a field recklessly driving right up to the other teams' sidelines. Their roar was a signal, Venango and their backers had arrived! Instantly there was major havoc in the burbs, the ghetto or across the bridge in Joysee. Our fans for some onlookers were a shocking sight with some waving half-filled wine-bottles, yet the team was ready for action and ready to hit somebody, anybody.

We, in turn, were in awe. Not in awe of facing those kids or being on the road, but those rich kids had modern stands for fans, electronic scoreboards, announcers on loud speakers, locker rooms with showers and spiffy uniforms, modern lights, refreshment stands and even cheerleaders with chalked-off, closed cropped, green-grass fields.

Figure, Venango's home field was a barren bed of cinders, like hardened lava, coal cinders from the coal yards along the river, windblown as they accumulated the turf on a lumpy and uneven and sloped field coated from huge stacks of coal, four or five stories high situated in storage yards across the way where giant cranes filled ocean going tankers. Our locker room was a poorly lit as a dank men's room.

No matter the spiffy surrounding, the lights, the cheerleaders etc. we were going to ruin the home team's festivities by delivering a crushing defeat.

The Bears exhibited an earned reputation for flashing a mean streak. Rather than immediately tackling the other team's star running back, our defensive guys would first slow down and hold the other team's star running back up, rather than tackling him right away, so others could take shots at him while they were still upright, hoping to make them fumble or maybe knock them out of the game.

We flirted with the rules and were crafty, running "Fumble Elliots" and "Tackles Around", We were mouthy too, by describing the other team's family members in not such a flattering way. We got penalty

flags for cursing and piling on. But when the final whistle blew, Venango Bears were always the first to extend hands in a good sportsmanship manner.

But we were good. We ran the same plays with precision for generations. Six-year-olds in the neighborhood were running those plays in the street years before they joined Venango. By the time those kids hit Pee-Wee they could already run the 24-Crossbuck or Spinner-8 in their sleep. Where other teams placed their skilled players at star positions, lots of athletic Bears relished playing the none-glamour positions. Where other teams might place some tubby at tackle thinking he might be good our tackles were playing that position because liked and knew how to block as they were good. Some of the best Bears played Center, Guard and Tackle. They didn't need or want to score a touchdown to impress some girl or be a football hero but rather to relish the idea of knocking somebody's block off.

Everybody played defense. We relished the contact.

Our edge? We had a chip on our shoulder. We assumed all other teams stemmed from privilege with new uniforms and fancy logos. It was an us, against them mentality. We were going to demonstrate to all comers how we took no prisoners. We heard the groans of shocked parents on the other team's sidelines as they stage whispered, "Our poor kids don't deserve this!" or "God, Herb, they're animals." Hearing those detractors moan and groan provided us joy!

Before high fiving was in vogue, like it is today, our defense would do so, hoot and holler when a teammate made a bone-crushing hit.

We were ultra cavalier and swaggered into the most feared black neighborhoods. For those jaunts, we'd rent buses. They knew us and we knew them. "Venango, "theys" dangerous!" At 15 I had hairy legs and even a mustache. I remember hearing one mother on the sidelines complaining "He ain't no, 15. Them white folks are putting 20-year olds up against our youngins!" We were old alright, "Old School!" Made no difference to us, we blew them up too. Often after the game those busses dropped us off back in the safe confines of Venango with broken windows.

Even though our neighborhood was a white enclave for years, we also fielded a sprinkling of black players. The Downs' Family from Victoria Street, the only street for blocks around that housed black families must have provided the Bears with one of their own as a Venango wingback for over 20 years. There was Junior, Lacy, Snowball, Timmie and David Downs, among others like Little Billy, Duck, Tyrone and Richie Wright other black kids who gained tremendous respect from us as solid ballplayers. Despite a sometime prejudice on the field, and if you were a Bear, it didn't matter what color you were.

As youngsters in a Pop Warner League we played The Philadelphia School of the Deaf, a strange experience, like silent movies as the deaf team actually hiked the ball on the count, from the vibration of a drum on the sidelines. I remember them as being hard hitters.

When most of us had just gotten out of the service during Vietnam we were itching to get back into action and had to join a semi-pro league. There was an actual prison team in the league. The prison team played no away-games. It was a daunting moment passing through the prison walls. The prison guards on the sidelines with Billy clubs rooted strongly for their home team. I remember rolling into the sidelines and both guards and prisoners were harassing us.

Still, by being mouthy, it was unnerving thinking a shiv could wind up in your gut, while some of our guys were tormenting a prisoner wearing #87, asking what his wife might be doing that night? Sheesh! Did our guys have to say such things?

We lost one game to the prison team on forfeit, when some of our fans were sharing joints with inmates. We were shown the gate.

I think it was Oscar Vogelman, Mister Venango himself, a long time ago player, coach and eventually the respected president of the organization who coined the term, "Once a Bear Always a Bear!"

I didn't at first realize how much that meant to me, as a kid while being referred to as a Bear. As a neighborhood kid (Pacific Street) being called a Bear did give one a sense of pride to perhaps even the glory wearing a VB Jacket. Being a Bear offered status. I often heard concerned neighborhood mothers say, "He's OK.; he's a Bear!"

Our neighborhood presented our own legends and role models. We weren't about to witness the great Phillie, Richie Ashburn, or Eagles, Steve Van Buren walking down the street, but there was Beebo and Gary Carr, Reds and Eddie McGovern who we looked up to and those neighborhood men served as our real heroes. They were the glue that made up Venango and we desire to emulate and be like them.

Being a Bear was a belonging, meaning when being from Venango you took no shit. We mostly won! Even if you beat us, you took a beating!

I began to realize what it was like being a Bear, when I eventually went out in the world. Like many of you, I've met some great people and I have met and dealt with a lot of shits.

Through a lifetime I've owned profitable businesses, and even been on other teams. Life has been interesting and even have made some bucks and got some honors on my own. BUT NOTHING! Nothing has topped driving back to the old neighborhood, riding back to Venango packed in cars, still with our football equipment on, helmets still on, with the car horns beeping, us, at ages 10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17 years old, hanging out the windows like victorious legions returning to Rome, banging on the sides of the cars as if our shields, letting all of Venango know, we're home and WE WON!

In my mind, to witness the togetherness and feelings of neighborhood pride while savoring the taste of victory, drinking sodas at Fatty Getz's candy store, with sodas bought and paid for by the coaches, were instances one could never buy a ticket for, even if you had as much money as What's-his-face.

When in my 30s and living the suburban married life outside Philadelphia some of my then upscale friends and I might talk about youth sports around Philadelphia. When I





mentioned where I was from and who I played for I got a lot of, "Oh, yeah, I remember them," and I'd hear nothing else

I would simply smile.

With being so far away for such a long time, and with many of us dropping off, and the sadness of about past teammate, Jimmy Byrant's passing, along with others has served up a chance to write about the Bears.

Bears have drifted apart, and today are spread all over, dead and alive, but like old Oscar lipped no matter where you go we'll always be together, no matter where we wind up on this Earth

because we hold on dearly with the indelible memories and perhaps more importantly "Once a Bear Always a Bear!"

Byrnes Tavern, Westmorland and Richmond, September 17th. (Rear left to right: Pete Kosmalski, Harry Warner, Joe Palko, Harold Wambolt, Mike Cavoto. Front: Franny Alba, Georgie Madden, Lou Christine, Jay-Jay Somski & Jackie Christian.)