

# **Joe's Shorts**

**His Most Popular  
Short Stories**



**by Joe Cuhaj**

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## Introduction

I began to take my writing a little more seriously back in 1980 when my radio career began. Between spinning records, I would tell tales of my childhood that seemed to resonate with my listeners. The stories were told in what humorist Jean Shepherd called the universal “eye” – they could be about you, or you, or you. They were trips down memory lane with adventures we all could relate to in one way or another. They were all true, albeit loosely based on faulty memories. After the show, I would jot down notes about the stories and tuck them away.

Fast forward to 2000 when I was afforded the chance to write my first real book for a real publisher, *Hiking Alabama*. No, it wasn't the New York Times best seller that I always dreamed of writing, but hiking was one of my favorite hobbies and subjects. The success of that first edition gave me the courage to start putting the old stories to paper, getting them published in magazines and of course, retold on my podcast.

The response to the podcasts, blogs, videos, and articles that I have written ever since has been amazing and I can't thank all of you enough for reading and listening to them. I've really enjoyed bringing the stories back to life for you.

SO, with that in mind, for my *Holiday 2018 Giveaway* this year, I thought I would present to you a collection of my three most popular stories as rated by YOU. And as a bonus, two brand-new-ish old stories (if you've followed me through the years, you'll know what I mean).

Let's get started! The number one most popular story of mine is called, *The Mitt and the Pendulum*. The story of spring, new beginnings, and the dream of being the next Mickey Mantle.

Coming in a close second is a tale about being bitten by the love. Do you remember when you were first bit by the love bug? I'm not talking about when you finally found the love of your life and soul mate. I'm talking about the *VERY* first time and the angst of asking someone out for your very first date. The number two story is about just that - *Love is a Many Splintered Thing*.

Who taught you to drive? Were your parents too afraid to teach you and shelled out the bucks to have a professional driving instructor risk their life instead of theirs? Or did your parents take their life in their hands and teach you? For me, it was Dad, the worst choice to teach me. The third most popular story dives into driver education classes. It's called, *Hello, I'm Driver Ed*.

Then there are two new-ish stories for you. The first hasn't seen the light of day in forever. It is the story of my first real steady during high school. It's titled, *Goodbye, Fish and Chips*.

Finally, there is a new compilation. Over the last several years I have written some short pieces where I reminisced about Christmas traditions, holiday television programming, and great toys from days gone by. I called these pieces “rambles”. This year, I've put them together into one updated version cleverly (or not so cleverly) titled, *A Christmas Ramble*.

Thank you again for your support over the years! Have a Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays!!

And now, the stories. Enjoy, won't you?

## 1. The Mitt and the Pendulum

It's amazing how the jargon of a particular era makes its way into the American lexicon and sticks to the walls of one's brain like a spit ball on a chalkboard. These can include the transposition of one term for another. Back in the day we used to make copies. For the past several decades we've stopped making copies and now go to have something Xeroxed.

Similarly, there are labels that have been applied arbitrarily to globally describe a person or a thing. The classic moniker today is "Soccer Mom". Where did that come from? It seems like every mother these days consider themselves to be a "Soccer Mom".

What exactly is a "Soccer Mom"? What delineates your average, every day, run-of-the-mill mom from a "Soccer Mom"? And when did that term creep into our psyche?

It was only recently that Funk and Wagnall's, Webster, American Standard, all of your mainstream dictionaries and encyclopedias saw fit to etch a definition of what a "Soccer Mom" is on their pages. But even without a dictionary entry, most people already have a mental definition, a visual of what this icon of the SUV set is like.

For most the word "Soccer Mom" conjures up one image. It's more of a movie, really. A mental movie of a selfless 30-something mom hustling around town in a mini-van or SUV adorned with stickers saying "Kelsey – Cheerleader", "Billy – Quarterback", or a series of stick figure people representing everything from dad to the youngest child in the family to the pet hamster.

Keeping a stoic face this modern day Artemis does more than carry the moon. She performs impossible feats as she shuttles her future gold medal winners from soccer field to soccer field, braving the elements as she watches her son or daughter try to make sense of the game, hoping beyond hope that the hours of practice, the discipline of a structured game, and the mortgage breaking uniforms and gear are worth it. She gives all to her kids.

I've often wondered how many of these moms are doing it for the kid's sake or if it is something else, something buried deep within them. Perhaps at one time this was a dream of hers, or one of several dreams, that she was never able to fulfill. Could it be that she is living vicariously through her children, forcing them into a sport that few parents really understand? No matter, as God is her witness her child will play it, they will like it, and they will be good at it.

And another question - where are the soccer dads during all of this?

For the life of me I can't remember when the term "Soccer Mom" first appeared in the English language or when I first heard it. I do, however, clearly remember when there was no such thing. Even the word "soccer" was as alien as *Marvin the Martian*. The game of choice before the days of Soccer Moms was baseball.

There is something about baseball that brings out the best in all of us. It's hard to explain. It's a tangible feeling, an urge, an expectation. Someone should do a college thesis on the subject if they haven't already. Is it the lush carpet of green grass that begs to catch and cradle you as you dive for a line drive? Is it simply the exhilaration of finally being able to get outside after a

miserably brutal winter and simply bat a ball around with your friends? Maybe it's just that age old feeling that only spring can provide, the feeling that everything is new, a fresh start, and that this year could be "the year".

While some naysayers down play baseball's role in society saying it's too boring or that it takes too long to play, there is something about it that makes even the most rabid baseball hater love it or at least appreciate it. They get the bug and want to go out and watch a game or better yet, play a game.

Every young man has had dreams of being the next Mickey Mantle, roaming the outfield, scanning the skies for high fly balls like tracer shells searching for incoming missiles. Once locked onto their target they begin to take a few tentative steps forward then start to circle like a vulture waiting for the right moment to claim its next meal. Like an incoming meteor from out of the blue, the ball streaks through the atmosphere seemingly out of the reach of most normal human beings, but with superhuman strength and dexterity the player sprints forward to make an impossible diving, sliding catch at breakneck speed. When they slide to a stop, they hop to their feet and hold the ball triumphantly high in the air in their mitt to the roar of the crowd. Of course they would also have to lose their cap in the process. That was protocol. To be considered a classic diving catch you had to lose your cap.

Baseball. What a game. A sport where everyone has an equal chance to be a hero or a goat.

My love of the game began with my Mom. On Saturday afternoons I would run inside the house after a full morning of hanging out with the gang, and find my lunch on the table. Usually it was a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup. Here's a tip – mix the condensed tomato soup with milk instead of water to make it thick and creamy. It's much better.

I'd wolf the meal down and head into the living room where my Mom stood behind an ironing board. The steam from the Proctor Silex iron encircled her face as she ironed my Dad's uniform. He was an appliance repairman and my Mom kept that gray Dickies-type uniform immaculate with crisp pleats in the pants.

I would turn on the television and we would watch the *NBC Game of the Week* together. Each week, NBC would select what they thought was an important game and air it. It didn't matter what the match up was. It could be Philadelphia vs. San Francisco, Pittsburgh vs. Houston, Mom and I would watch the game and as we did, she would teach me the nuances of the game, the intricate rules, why certain calls were made by the Umps, and retell stories about her favorite team, the Brooklyn Dodgers. Her favorite players were George "Shotgun" Shuba, Jackie Robinson, Gil Hodges, and Roy Campanella.

Spring had just arrived in northern New Jersey as it always does, ushered in with a torrential rain that pounded the ground turning ponds into oceans and streets into rivers. It was one such stormy Friday morning. The wind howled through the giant oaks outside my bedroom window as I languished in a tranquil state of bliss fighting every urge not to get up and get ready for school. More than likely I was dreaming about those spectacular diving catches and hitting the game winning home run in the World Series.

Yes, it was spring, and while I had never played the game before, like millions of other kids before me and millions after, I wanted my shot at the dream.

A branch raked the window, squealing like fingernails on a blackboard then thunder boomed and rocked the house.

“I’m up!” I shouted as I fell out of bed and onto the floor.

I slowly put my hands on the nightstand next to the bed and pulled myself up looking over the edge of the faux oak top like Kilroy.

“Crap!” I sighed as I realized that I was late.

I grabbed a handful of crumpled clothes from the floor where I had tossed them carelessly the night before after promising my Mom that I would put them in the dresser and ran for the door. Closing the bedroom door behind me I turned and there at the opposite end of the hallway was my sister Joyce. She was closing the door to her own bedroom and as she did, she turned and saw me at the opposite end of the hall. We glared at each other for a moment then faced off like gunslingers at high noon.

Being the only boy in the house was tough. The stories of teenage sisters monopolizing the bathroom for hours on end are not an exaggeration. How many mornings was I late for school because I was forced to sit on the floor in the hallway waiting for the paint to dry on both of my sister’s faces? Not this morning. Not today. I was going to stand my ground.

Our goal - the bathroom - was smack dab in the middle of the hallway between us. Joyce’s eyes narrowed to slits sizing me up, trying to figure out my next move, which was blatantly obvious – a mad dash for the bathroom. I charged down the hall like a raging bull. In an instant Joyce bolted and hit the floor running at a blinding speed.

“No you don’t!” she yelled. “I was here first!”

We both reached the bathroom door at the exact same moment and since we were both hockey fans, we immediately went into a defensive position, hip-checking each other as hard as we could. It was like Phil Esposito and Rod Gilbert colliding.

The effect was not pretty as we collided. Imagine, if you will, two freight trains colliding head on at breakneck speeds. The impact threw us both backwards onto the floor with my clothes flying through the air.

My other sister, Sharon, strolled out of her bedroom, stepped through the carnage, and walked into the bathroom, shaking her head in disbelief as she closed the door behind her. Joyce and I could only look at each other.

“Moron,” she muttered.

“Dip,” I retorted.

I raced downstairs and into the kitchen as the rain pelleted the house mercilessly. I was much too late for breakfast so I grabbed a glass of milk and chugged it down as I tried to put on a heavy, thick, bright yellow raincoat one arm at a time around the glass. Snapping the thick metal clips that held the front closed into place, I slipped the matching wide brim hat down over my ears and hopped into a set of black rubber boots.

In theory the boots were held onto your leg by a thick rubber band that was attached to a button at the top of the boot. To latch the boot onto your foot you had to pull the rubber band around the front of your leg and latch it onto another button on the opposite side. This never worked. If you walked through one good mud puddle the boot, with your *Ked's* sneakers still inside, would be sucked right off your foot along with your sneakers leaving you standing there barefoot in the rain or snow.

I looped the rubber bands around the buttons and dashed out the door.

The rain continued pouring as I approached the brook that coursed past Brookside Elementary. It was common practice for the gang to avoid taking the footbridge that crossed the brook and instead jump from one side to the other. Despite the downpour, I was in the mood for some rock hopping.

After three days of torrential rain the brook foamed white like a Class V rapid in Colorado, but I was determined to hop it anyway. I jumped from one rock to another, precariously regaining my balance on one foot with each landing, my arms flailing to right my body, rain pouring off the brim of my rain cap blinding my vision.

I jumped three rocks and was only one hop away from the opposite bank. With one mighty push I leapt forward and missed the mark, landing in a quagmire of thick, viscous mud. My momentum kept me lurching forward and I landed face down on the bank. My boots, however, stayed behind stuck in the mud. And of course, my *Ked's* were still embedded deep within.

But that didn't matter. I was late for school. I trotted back to the creek sans boots and sneakers wearing only a formerly white pair of socks, pulled the boots out of the muck, and ran off to school.

Creep met me at the classroom door as I squished in greeting me with a chuckling, "Very nice, Pipi Longstocking!"

"Cut it out," I said as I flowed to my seat.

The classroom was abuzz with noise. Squadrons of paper airplanes flew to and fro and gooey spitballs oozed down the blackboard. Our teacher, Mrs. Hammelshmitt, walked into the room and took a spitball to the side of the head. Slowly she turned and shot us a look that could have taken our heads off. She glared at us, her eyebrows furrowed, and a menacing grimace crossed her face. Her voice bellowed.

"That will be quite enough!" she yelled at full volume. An immediate hush fell over the room with the exception of a persistent and quite annoying clacking sound from the very back row. Mrs. Hammelshmitt's face turned from a scowl to one of bewilderment. What was that sound?

The kids in the classroom began murmuring and looking around for the noise. Was the radiator on the fritz? No. It was me. I sat oblivious to my surroundings as I gazed mesmerized at my favorite red *Click Clacks* as they clacked wildly before my face.

"Joe!" Mrs. Hammelshmitt yelled.

The clacking continued.

“JOE!” she yelled louder. “Stop it this instant!”

My *Click Clacks* slowly ground to a halt as I came out of my clack-induced haze and looked around. Mrs. Hammelshmitt stood at the head of the class looking me dead in the eyes, her right hand was planted firmly on her hip while her left hand was outstretched palm up toward me. Her right foot tapped angrily on the scarred and scuffed oak hardwood floor. She didn’t have to utter a word. I knew what to do and marched straight to the front of the class and handed her my most prized diversion.

“These are dangerous,” she said. “Someone could be injured.”

That was an understatement. *Click Clacks* were two hard plastic balls dangling from two separate strings connected in the middle by a stick. The idea was to move the stick up and down as fast as you could so that the balls would meet at the top and bottom of the arc, clacking each other with unbelievable force. They were deemed to be too dangerous by some kid protection bureau in Washington and were banned from the market not long after they were introduced being labeled “lethal weapons”. Heck, I had sets shatter and embed themselves in walls, wax fruit, even the pet cat, but I completely deny any responsibility.

Mrs. Hammelshmitt put the *Click Clacks* into one of the drawers of her huge wooden desk then picked up a stack of white-ish papers. They were white, in a sense, but had a tint of blue from the ammonia in the school’s ancient mimeograph that highlighted the paper’s crinkles and creases. As she peeled a small stack from the top of the pile the unmistakable aroma of that ammonia wafted about the room.

She walked from row to row and handed several of the papers to the kid sitting in the first desk of each row.

“Take one and pass them back,” she said.

I nervously watched as a stack headed down my row until it finally reached me. Damn! There were extras! I hated when there were extras! Now I had to walk back to the front of the class and bring the left over sheets to Mrs. Hammelshmitt. I took one of the flyers and put it on my desk then started up the aisle, squishing all the way in my rain soaked socks to the amusement of my classmates.

“Ha-ha, very funny!” I chuckled angrily.

Back at my desk, I finally had a chance to take a look at the paper. A huge, bold blue banner stretched across the top of the page.

“Boys!” it announced in a tone that spewed masculinity. “Sign up today to play Little League Baseball! Games will be held Saturday mornings. No experience necessary. Ball caps will be provided!”

My mind began to whirl. At last! This was my chance, my dream! I loved the game although I had never played it. I loved watching it on television and listening to it on the radio, but this, this was my big break.

My mind began to wander as the voice of legendary Yankee shortstop turned announcer Phil “Scooter” Rizzuto popped into my head.

“Cuhaj is a real hot dog out there in center field,” the Scooter said, his voice sounding tinny coming through a tiny 2-inch speaker housed in a portable Bakelite transistor radio. “He’s really making quite a name for himself this season roaming the outfield for the Yanks. They’ll really need him now as Carl Yastrzemski comes to the plate. The bases are loaded, two outs, and the Yanks are clinging to a 4 to 1 lead. Yaz could end this with one whack of the bat. Here’s the pitch from Mel Stottlemyre. Yaz hits a towering flare! Here comes Cuhaj! He’s racing in! I don’t think he’ll make it! Wait! He leaps in the air trying for a diving catch! His hat flies off his head and --“

I was jolted back to the present by raucous laughter and Mrs. Hammelshmitt’s stern voice.

“Joe!” she shouted. “Joe!”

“Yes ma’am?” I finally answered shaking the ball field grass out of my brain.

“We are talking about Columbus,” she said as her voice lowered into a more calming pitch. “When Columbus came to the New World he was greeted by Indians. Where did Columbus land?”

“Cleveland?” I asked, still coming out of my baseball-induced daze.

The lunch period finally arrived and to our delight the rain had passed and a beautiful cerulean sky awaited us. After wolfing down a bag lunch of *Fluff-a-Nutter* sandwiches and *Ding Dongs* we flooded outside to the playground. I hated *Ding Dongs*, and so did everyone else I knew. You couldn’t trade them for anything. I would usually take mine out of the bag before I left for school and stick it behind books on a bookshelf near our front door or feed it to the gold fish. I’d do anything to get rid of it.

Today my mind was focused on more important things - baseball.

“C’mon, Creep,” I said. “Let’s scale some cards.”

Scaling baseball cards was an underage form of gambling. We would take our collection of Topps baseball cards and fling them against a wall, sort of like throwing a Frisbee. You would take the corner of the card between your index and middle finger, flick your wrist, and send the card sailing.

The rules were simple – the card that landed closest to the wall wins the other fellow’s card. If a card ended up leaning on the wall, that card won, but you had to call leaners before you threw the card.

To make the game more exciting, we would pit our most valuable cards against our challenger’s. A daring wager if ever there was one. How many Hank Aaron or Willie McCovey rookie cards were lost in a “friendly” game of scaling?

With all the confidence of a Vegas gambler I took out my most valuable card, a Topps “Bomber’s Best” that featured Mickey Mantle, Bobby Richardson, and Tom Tresh. I set the card between my fingers and flicked my wrist as hard as I could. The card hit the ground and skidded to a halt a mere quarter of an inch away from the bubble gum encrusted base of the red brick wall.

“Beat that, buddy!” I said.

Creep held a stack of cards in his hand that were wrapped together tightly with an old rubber band. He thumbed through the cards and slid one from the stack. It was a Topps index card.

“Hey!” I shouted. “What gives?”

An index card was just that. Each year Topps put out a card that was merely a checklist of all of their cards for the year and you could check off the ones you had. That’s all it was, a lousy checklist.

“So,” Creep said artfully diverting the subject, “you’re gonna join us and play ball this year?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said obviously flustered by this sleight of hand.

“What position are you going to play?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Centerfield, I think.”

Creep snickered.

“What?” I asked. “What’s the matter?”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Can’t wait to see that. You never played ball before, but I guess you can’t balk at the chance, can you?”

I moaned at the bad joke.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Was that a ‘foul’ joke?”

“Will you stop it?” I shouted. “Quit with the crummy jokes! Let’s just play!”

I had been successfully sidetracked as Creep flicked the index card. It fluttered through the air and landed gracefully almost vertical leaning against the wall.

“Leaners!” he yelled.

“HEY!” I shouted. “You’ve gotta call leaners before you throw!”

As the bell rang he picked up my prized card and started for the building cackling all the way, “Mine! All mine!”

The day seemed endless and drug by. I watched the thick second hand of the ancient Waterbury tick-tick-tick around its face. My mind was far removed from “new math”. All I could think about was playing ball. I kept watching the clock and when it was within a minute of the bell ringing, I did a mental countdown until, RRIINNGGG! It happened, the last bell of the day.

I exploded out of my chair and burst out of the building heading straight for home. Even though the clouds had parted and I had virtually dried off I still managed to get soaked to the bone as I unconsciously hit every puddle on the way.

I nearly took the front door off of its hinges as I darted into the kitchen. As usual my Old Man was home from work nursing a Schaeffer beer while reading the paper. Mom was at her post next to the stove making boiled kielbasa and sauerkraut, the standard Friday evening fare for this European heritage family.

“Hi, Mom,” I shouted breathlessly as I ran past her and flung the flyer at my old man.

The paper fluttered down onto the table next to him. I watched the backside of the newspaper waiting for a reaction. Slowly a head peered around the paper and looked at me. Then at the flyer. Then at me.

“What’s this?” he asked breaking his silence.

“Read it!” I said excitedly.

His eyes moved back and forth scanning the page.

“What do you know about baseball?” he asked.

“You get a free cap!” I answered.

“Do you know how to play?” he asked.

“You get a cap!” I replied.

“What position would you play?” he asked.

“But, Dad! You get a cap!” I replied in my best “poor little kid” voice.

Chuckling he shook his head and taking a blue *Bic Click* from his shirt pocket he signed the permission form. My secret ploy had worked. I figured that if he didn’t have to buy the baseball cap I could convince him into signing off on this. Whether or not that had anything to do with it is up for debate but that didn’t matter. I was in.

I flew out the door to gather up the gang so we could practice. There was just enough daylight left to have a good bat around.

For the next two weeks the gang gathered in an old sandlot behind the firehouse. The evenings were still. A light chill was in the air signifying winter’s last gasp. I didn’t have a mitt yet so I would borrow one from whoever was up to bat at the time. I wasn’t concerned, though. I knew I’d have a mitt before the first shout of “play ball” reverberated across the town.

The nights seemed to last forever. It was magic as we batted around and laughed the night away. Inevitably, the sun would slowly set turning the sky a deep golden hue then velvety purple before dipping below the horizon. Fireflies twinkled around us as we kept playing even though we could barely see the ball. The only thing that stopped us was the distant voices of our Moms echoing in the stillness calling us one after the other home for dinner.

We practiced like this every night without missing a beat. It was bordering on obsession. But I wasn’t the only one with the baseball bug. Every one of us in the gang had been bitten and we had it bad.

The two weeks before tryouts flew by. Amazingly, during that time we only took out three windows in a neighboring barn and the windshield of a ’65 Corvair when a rouge bat was hurled into the air.

The day finally arrived when my baseball prowess would be put to the test in front of dozens of would-be Ted Williams’. Tryout day had arrived.

A bunch of kids would play out in the field while one by one the new kids came up to bat. We would each get 10 pitches to show what we could do.

I sat nervously in the bleachers watching as lanky boys looking all cocky with their hats tipped back on their heads stepped up to the plate, a softball size wad of chewing gum crammed into their mouths causing their cheek to bulge like an enormous cancerous tumor. Each one took

their ten swings and each swing had the same result: Whack! Base hit. Whack! Double. Whack! Base hit. They were good.

Then it was my turn. I feebly swung at each pitch, swinging so hard that you could hear a mighty rush of wind from the Louisville Slugger I had a death grip on. The sound was impressive but didn't mean a thing. I never connected, not once. I had fanned on nine of my ten swings. My baseball career hung in the balance.

The pitcher looked me dead in the eye, taunting me, daring me to knock the ball out of the park. He reared back. My sweaty hands gripped the bat so hard that my knuckles turned white. He rifled the pitch toward the plate and I closed my eyes. That's right, I closed my eyes.

Holding my breath, I turned just enough so my shoulder leaned in over the plate and wham! I was nailed in the arm by what felt like a 300-mile per hour fastball.

The coaches huddled together, murmuring in low whispering tones. Occasionally a head would pop out of the group and look my way or a hand would jut out and point in my direction. Then one of the coaches walked over to me.

"Cuhaj," he said, "that was impressive. Good to know you can take one for the team if we need it."

And that was it! I was in! The Hallelujah Chorus rang in my ears. I was jubilant. But there was no time for celebrating. The following Saturday, a mere seven days away, was opening day.

On the eve of the season opener I picked up my new ball cap at school and wore it proudly the entire day. Mrs. Hammelshmitt didn't even ask me to take it off. She knew this was the beginning of something big. I still didn't have a glove but I didn't care. I had a hat.

After another grueling day of dodge ball, scaling baseball cards, and taunting the girls in the schoolyard, I ran home and into the kitchen, which was uncharacteristically empty. There was nothing on the stove simmering away and no cloud of cigarette smoke.

I looked around and there on the ancient chrome table with Formica top was a box. Taped to the box was a note that read, "Hope this helps your career". It was signed by my Dad.

I tore the box open and was immediately greeted by the aroma of tanned leather wafting up from within. I threw yanked the packing paper out of the box and threw it around the room manically.

I finally reached the bottom of the box and there it was. A mitt! A mitt? Yes. I think it was a mitt. It had four fingers and a thumb. It was big. It was so big it could have been an oven mitt. No, this really was a baseball mitt. I had seen one of these before. It was in an old photograph I once saw of Ty Cobb and Honus Wagner. It was an antique. My heart sank knowing that I'd be the laughing stock of the team, but after a moment or two of looking the mitt over, I realized just how amazing and priceless this gift was and I came to treasure it.

Opening day was a sight to behold. I booted everything that came my way, not from a lack of trying, but because of the glove. The leather was as unyielding as a dog's rawhide chew toy and the padding so thick that it would be impossible to ever get it to bend, unless you ran it over with a steam roller.

Eventually, though, I became good at impossible catches. Picture if you will someone trying to catch a baseball with their hand wide open and not being able to bend their fingers to grasp it, flat handed, as it were. That was me in left field with my circa 1910 glove. I couldn't wrap my fingers around the ball, but I made it happen.

That was my first and last season of playing organized baseball. While I may have been good at making those catches, my batting average was, well, non-existent. There is only so many times you can be beamed by a fastball. Oh, if they only kept a record of the number of times someone was hit by a pitch. I would have made the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, or at least the Guinness Book of World Records.

## 2. Love is a Many Splintered Thing

Since the dawn of time, great philosophers and writers have waxed poetic about love:

“There is only one happiness in life – to love and be loved,” George Sand

“A flower cannot blossom without sunshine, and man cannot live without love,” Max Muller.

“Love is something sent from heaven that will worry the hell out of you,” – Dolly Parton.

Yes, there have been some great quotes about love over the centuries. Plato, Socrates, even Groucho all had something to say about love.

It really is what makes the world go round. You can’t live with it, you can’t live without it. At one time or another in everyone’s life love come your way. When it does, the feeling is indescribable. It’s a feeling like you have never felt before. I’m not talking about the moment you find the true love of your life, your soulmate. I’m talking about the absolute very first time that you are bitten by the love bug.

When the love bug bites that very first time, you go into a state of confusion. You have no idea about what is happening to you as your body goes weak, your mind goes into a whirl to the point where you can’t think straight, and you lose all ability to speak with words incoherently spewing from your mouth. Your first reaction is that you are catching some virus or worse, dying.

No, friend, you were bitten by the love bug.

For most people it strikes at the most inopportune moment of their life and for many, that moment is when you are no longer a kid going to elementary school, but you’re not an adult, either. It’s that purgatory period of time in your life when you’re confused and have no idea where life is taking you, sort of like a ride down the river Styx with the Grim Reaper. You don’t know where you’re going or how to get off the raft.

It’s that time in your life when you exit elementary school and enter the seventh grade. Today, most school systems call this period of time “middle school”, but for us kids growing up in the northeast, it was called “junior high”.

It was called junior high for a very good reason – the school board, in all of their infinite wisdom, decided that kids coming out of the safe confines of elementary school should be thrust headlong into the lion’s den and shoved us into the high school.

We were already dazed and confused about this sudden change in life, but to then be thrown to the lions with kids that were much older than us was terrifying. We would be walking the campus with 18-year old high school seniors, many of whom were demons from our past. We had all thought that once these goons graduated from elementary school, we would never see them again, but no. We would meet up with them once again face-to-face.

You know the ones I’m talking about – the ones that would knock the books out of your hand for no reason at all, hit you in the side of the face with a slush ball in winter just because, or give you a perpetual wedgie.

Our high school had some real pips, too. There was Phil “the Weasel” Wiskowski, Janet “Deranged” DeBartollo (she was just crazy), and the worst of them all, Knuckles Nesmith. Brrrr! It sends shivers down my spine just mentioning his name.

Amidst all of this confusion, the love bug decided it was my turn. I had enough to worry about, but it bit me and it bit hard.

Our first week of junior high came to an end. The gang was to meet up at Badger’s house to watch the tail end of an afternoon Yankees’ baseball game. I arrived at Badger’s and immediately headed to the basement. Not only had the gang graduated from elementary school, but we had also graduated from the old treehouse to our new hangout, Badger’s cellar.

There wasn’t anything fancy about that basement – steel grey cinderblock walls crammed with a washer, dryer, furnace, sump pump, and that telltale musty smell that never goes away. It was also decked out with a big, fluffy couch that had a few tears in it, two wide chairs with thick cushions that blew up a cloud of dust when you sat in them, a coffee table that always had a bowl of pretzel sticks on it that were probably months old, and a grainy black and white Zenith TV with aluminum foil bedecked rabbit ears spread out across the top of its fake wood grain finish. On the screen I saw that the game that was already in progress.

I grabbed a bottle of Hoffman’s Root Beer from the refrigerator, a handful of stale pretzel sticks from the bowl, nodded a “hi” to the gang, and plunked myself down on the couch where Badger was deep into the game.

“Bottom of the ninth,” he said without looking away from the TV. “Orioles are winning 5-zip and we have two outs.”

“Who is that guy coming up?” I asked. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“His name is Waslewski’,” Crash said sipping at his own root beer. “He came from Montreal.”

Crash wiped the foam from his lips with his sleeve and continued, “He played only six games up there before being dumped.”

Good old Crash. Our own Wikipedia before there ever was a Wikipedia.

“So,” Badger said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. “How was your first week in junior high? Meet up with Knuckles?”

The gang and I laughed.

“No,” I chuckled, “I didn’t meet Knuckles but when I do, we have a score to settle.”

The gang laughed even harder knowing that when Knuckles and I met, I would be mincemeat.

“Man,” I continued, “when I see him, I’m going to --”

I stopped right there in mid-sentence. I couldn’t finish my thought. Our idle chit-chat and bully banter had been broken. Something wonderful, no, something magical had stopped me in my tracks. Something that would turn my already topsy-turvy world of starting junior high upside down. It came without warning and hit me hard.

A sweet young voice with only a slight hint of a Jersey accent said, “Hi, Joe.” The voice was coming down the stairs into the basement. It was Badger’s sister, Denise.

Now I had known Denise from time in memorial, since the dawn of time, or my limited time anyway. She was the rock, the pillar of the gang. She was our voice of reason. Whenever the gang would try to do something stupid, she would talk us down. But seeing her tonight, it was somehow different.

“I didn’t know you were here,” she said almost as an afterthought.

I was speechless. My mind whirled. What was wrong with me? I could only utter a meager, “Uh..hi...uh...Denise.”

She walked past us and disappeared into the adjoining garage. I sat and stared blindly at the closed door until Denise walked back into the room.

“It was good to see you, Joe,” she said as she started walking back up the stairs. “We’ll catch up sometime this weekend.”

“Uh..uh...yeah,” I said in a deep foggy haze. “See you around.”

She scurried up the stairs and I sat there staring at the stairwell for a good long while as if she were still there. What was different about her tonight? Was it the light that streamed down the stairs giving her a glow, an aura? Was it the sweet, angelic voice and how she said my name? I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I was hooked.

“Joe!” Crash shouted as he shook my shoulder. “Joe! Hello? Earth to Joe! Snap out of it!”

“Oh,” I said startled. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Thought you got caught in a tractor beam there, buddy,” Badger said. “What’s up with you?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’m not sure. I think I’m getting sick.”

It didn’t take Badger long to put two and two together. His face lit up. He turned and punched me hard in the shoulder.

“It’s Denise, isn’t it?” he asked. “You like Denise!”

“Of course I like Denise,” I said. “She’s one of my best friends.”

“No, no,” Badger said in a chiding voice. “You *really* like her. I mean *REALLY* like her.”

“So what if I do?” I asked. “That’s my business.”

“You want to ask her out on a date, don’t you?” he asked.

Again I was speechless. Could this really be happening? Could this be – gasp – the result of the love bug?

I sat quietly on the couch, my mind a million miles away. I was so far gone that I was oblivious to the game playing on the TV, which the Yankees lost handily. That had to be it. There was no other explanation. I wasn’t sick. The love bug had struck. I was hooked and I really did want to ask her out on a date.

You would think that since the two of us were such good friends and had known each other forever that this would be easy. But it wasn’t and I was having a hard time mustering up the courage to run up the stairs and ask her.

“Face it,” Badger said sinking deeper into the couch, “you’re chicken. You’ll never ask her.”

Chicken didn't quite sum up what I was feeling. Petrified, is more like it. That was a good word. The only dealings I ever had with women were with my mother, an aunt or two, two obnoxious sisters, and Denise who was, well, one of the gang. I had never asked a girl out before and to put it mildly, the idea seemed insane, it scared me to death, but it gnawed at me.

"I'm not scared!" I insisted.

Badger stood up and looked at the gang. "All those who think Joe is too chicken to ask Denise out on a date say 'aye'."

In unison, the gang shouted and clucked like a chicken, "Aye, brack, brack, brack."

Badger clicked off the TV with the set's clunky remote control that only had two buttons on it, on and off.

"I'm putting it all on the line, buddy," he said. I knew I was in for it. "Five bucks says you won't ask her out."

"You don't have five bucks," I replied.

"Do too," he insisted, "and I'm willing to bet it all that you won't do it."

I didn't know how to play his bluff. What was his little game? One thing was for sure, the gauntlet had been thrown down. The challenge had been issued. Would I fold or call his bluff?

"Alright!" I said standing up. "Five bucks!"

"One thing," he said. "We need to set some ground rules. You have to ask her out no later than 9 o'clock tonight otherwise, I win."

"Why 9 o'clock?" I asked.

Badger laughed. "If we don't set a time, you'll be 'saying' you're going to ask her for the next 10-years."

What a pickle. My head was spiraling with thoughts. If I don't take the bet, I'll be ridiculed by the gang. If I ask her out and she accepts, I'll be on top of the world, plus I win five bucks. But what if she turns me down? I could lose a close friend and be embarrassed and humiliated in front of the gang. I had no choice. I was cornered.

"You're on," I said masking my quivering, shaking horror with a slight air of confidence.

That night I went home and sat on the edge of my bed. The sun was setting turning the light in the room into a purple hue. A clock in the living room chimed eight times as I sat in the withering daylight. I stood and began pacing the floor back and forth like a caged lion. I couldn't think straight and had to rid myself of the butterflies that filled the void in my stomach. I needed to come up with the perfect pitch line. I knew that if I didn't, I would sound like a dork when I got Denise on the phone.

I was completely oblivious to my surroundings as I tossed ideas about, so much so that I didn't hear the telephone ring in the kitchen, but I did hear my Mom.

"Joe!" she shouted. "Telephone!"

I walked into the kitchen and took the receiver from her hand.

"Hello?" I asked quietly.

"Hey, Joe!" the voice sang out. It was Badger. The swine! He was trying to force my hand. I had no choice but to play it to the end.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“You called me,” I replied.

“Oh, so I did,” he chuckled. “Hey, hang on a second.”

Over the wire I heard the sound of a hand being placed over the phone’s mouthpiece then some mumbled and muffled talking that was followed by a sweet feminine voice – it was Denise.

“Joe?” she asked. “Is that you?”

No time to think. Must regroup.

“H, h, h, hi, D-d-Denise,” I stammered.

“Fred said you wanted to talk to me.”

That was Badger’s first name. We didn’t like it so we just called him by his last name – Badger. Much more distinguished sounding.

I took a deep breath and the words flowed like mush through a sieve from my mouth. Friends, the following is not a misprint. This is actually what I said:

“How you go night eat something Friday movie?”

That is word for word what I said. I braced for impact and the inevitable laughing. And she laughed hard, but Denise knew me too well. When the laughing subsided she asked, “Were you asking me out on a date?”

I took a deep sigh knowing that I had flubbed it.

“Yes,” I said humbly. “I did.”

Then the unthinkable happened.

“That would be fun!” she said rather excitedly. “What time?”

What? She said yes? My heart raced in excitement. This is great! Wait...what time? I wasn’t expecting this. I hadn’t worked out the details so I just threw out a time.

“Uh, how about seven?”

“I’ll be waiting. See you tomorrow at seven. Oh, do you need to speak with Fred again?”

“No, no,” I said. “I think what I have to say to him would be better said in person, but thank you.”

And that quickly, it was done. I was going on my first date and it was with Denise.

I hung up the phone and turned to see my parents sitting at the table looking at me. My Dad had his patented “this is going to cost me money, isn’t it?” look on his face, while my Mom just smiled a big toothy grin. Her boy was going on a date with Denise.

The next thing I knew it was Saturday afternoon and I had to get ready for the most important moment of my life up to this point. I took three showers using Lifebuoy soap. Did you ever use Lifebuoy? It actually has particles of lava rock in it. You could scrape the oil off an old 1969 Ford Mustang oil pan with this stuff and seven layers of skin if you weren’t careful.

Next, I slathered on a good dose of Old Spice under each arm which was followed by the sniff test. I raised each arm - sniff-sniff? Yep, good to go.

I didn’t have a hair on my face yet so I didn’t shave but I did douse myself with my old man’s *Aqua Velva* aftershave. I made a mental note to not stand near anyone who was smoking that night. I could ignite.

Finally, I took a big swig of Scope mouthwash. After nearly choking on the pure alcohol, I spit it out then cupped my hand over my mouth and nose and exhaled heavily to make sure that the *Scope* was working. Yes, I was ready.

The only thing that stood in the way of making this a truly memorable first romantic encounter was that I had no wheels. I was too young to drive and so was everyone else in the gang for that matter. I would have to rely on my folks to chauffeur us around. Awkward does not adequately describe what followed.

My Mom and Dad hopped into the front seat of the family's beat up Ford Maverick and I slid into the back. The Maverick was one of those fire engine red models with a black half-vinyl roof and blinding 1970s plaid interior. A real impression maker for your first date.

It was a quiet ride across town as I stared aimlessly out the window, my heart beating faster and faster as we got closer to Denise's house. It seemed like it took an eternity to get there. When we arrived, I was so nervous that I hopped out of the car before we even had wheels stop.

I scampered up the stairs where I was greeted with an open door and Denise standing there waiting for me. After exchanging a few quick and nervous "hellos" to her parents and assuring them that she was in good hands, I gathered Denise's hand and we whisked off down the sidewalk to the car. I jumped into the backseat on the driver's side, Denise on the passenger side.

"Now Joe," my Mom said, "where are your manners?"

I thumbed through the index cards in my mind, looking for the right answer. Is this a trick question? No, stupid! You forgot to get the door for Denise.

I stepped back out of the car, raced around to the other side to close the door but found that it was already closed. So I rushed back to my side, hopped back in, and off we sped into the night.

It was an awkwardly quiet trip to the movie theater. Denise and I didn't have much to say, we were afraid to with my Mom straining her neck to watch us from the front seat, a big toothy "proud mother" smile on her face while my Old Man kept an eagle eye on us through the rear view mirror to make sure that there wasn't any hanky-panky going on.

We finally made it to the only movie theater in town where tonight they were showing the movie "*Billy Jack*". This was a B-movie saga about a half-white, half-Native American Vietnam veteran who believes in "turning the other cheek", but when people from his old home town routinely beat up the Indian kids from a local school that his girlfriend operates, Billy's blood pressure hits the boiling point and he takes matters into his own hands with a vengeance, breaking a few heads along the way.

Even though we were sitting together, Denise and I sat virtually a mile apart quietly watching the movie. This flick was way too complex as it conveyed a deep message and that message was, "get a bigger budget next time".

Eventually the ice began to thaw and the two of us, unknowingly, slowly shifted closer together. We shared a mega 50-pound tub of popcorn and an industrial size Coke. We started

laughing and having an amazing time. We laughed at the movie and the people around us. Everything was going well until the movie actually grabbed our attention.

From out of the blue, right there on the giant silver screen, there was a rape scene! No kidding, the movie had *A RAPE SCENE!* I slumped my head over into my hands. What will Denise think of me? What kind of guy am I taking her to a movie like this? I'll be labeled a pervert for the rest of my life and Denise would never speak to me again. What will her parents think? Ugh, I'd rather not think about that. I would rather take my chances with a pummeling from Knuckles Nesmith than what I imagined her parents would unleash on me.

As the scene ended, I noticed that the women in the theater were crying, most notably right next to me. It was Denise.

I glanced over out of the corner of my eye. Cripes, what do I do? Was she upset with the movie? Was she upset with me? Did a popcorn kernel get in her eye? I stared straight ahead for a moment. This is where the knight in shining armor is supposed to save the day, right?

I finally turned to her and said, "Are you okay?"

She dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex. "Yes," she sniffed, "I'm okay."

"Okay then," I replied satisfied that all was well and went back to the movie. Problem solved. What a dip I was.

The movie droned on and on and finally, as it neared the end, I remembered something. This is where the guy is supposed to slide his arm across the back of his date's seat and wrap his arm around her. Then they would lean their heads on each other's shoulders romantically. I learned that from movies and television shows. That had to be the way it's done, right?

I took a deep breath and ever so slowly slid my arm across the top of her seat being sure to keep my focus straight ahead on the movie screen, acting like nothing was going on. As my hand made it halfway behind her back, the house lights came up. The movie was over. My arm quickly snapped back to my side but Denise caught the motion and looked at me with a puzzled look on her face.

I chuckled half-heartedly and rubbed my arm. "Ha, ha. Cramp," I laughed. "Yep, cramp in the arm."

I shook my arm like it was half asleep.

The two of us waded through the mounds of tissues on the floor and headed out of the exit to our next stop, a small ice cream joint across the parking lot, Howard Johnson's. We joked and laughed at the silliest things as we walked. We would make up stories about the "secret lives" of the people who passed us or made up tales about what each of them did for a living.

We walked into the restaurant and plopped ourselves down in a booth next to a window where we ordered up a couple of club sandwiches and continued to laugh the night away. Sadly, it didn't last long. My folks, being the punctual ones, made it back to pick us up in front of the restaurant at the exact time they said they would. Damn them.

When we pulled up to Denise's house, we stepped out of the car and walked slowly up the sidewalk to the front door.

"I had a great time, Joe," she said. "Thank you."

“I did too,” I replied. “It was a lot of fun. Let’s do it again.”

She smiled and started to open the door but hesitated. There was an awkward moment of silence before she turned back toward me. My heart began to race again. This was it! The big payoff! What a way to end my first date – with a kiss!

Denise pulled something from her pocket and slipped it into my hand.

“Fred wanted me to give this to you,” she said.

I looked at it and saw that it was a \$5 bill.

She leaned in close to my ear and whispered, “I knew about the bet all along.”

She pecked me on the cheek and walked inside, closing the door behind her and on this short lived romance.

That was the first and last time that Denise and I went out on a date together, but after all was said and done, the two of us became closer friends than ever before. They say a guy and a girl can’t be best friends especially after dating, but I disagree. We were, and still are.

### 3. Hello, I'm Driver Ed

It's official. After months of research and deliberation, all of the white jacketed, pocket protector laden scientific Brainiac's of the world met in the back room of a septic laboratory on a remote island off the coast of Tanzania and released an historic document which appeared in *Insane and Trivial Research Results Quarterly*.

The one-page document clearly and emphatically proved once and for all what many have known all along. Their study focused on an activity that is more dangerous than climbing Mount Everest, more adventurous than a spacewalk, and more thrilling than cliff diving in Acapulco. What is it? Driving.

That's right. Getting behind the wheel of a car is more dangerous than talking politics with your Uncle Dave during Thanksgiving dinner.

With this in mind it makes you wonder why on Earth anyone would ever want to learn to drive at all, but we do. We all do. There comes a time in one's life where they want to flee the nests, feel the wind of freedom, explore. It also means you can start making some money at a real job.

Who taught you how to drive? Were your parents so afraid of you getting behind the wheel that they shelled out the cash for a professional driving instructor to take the punishment? Were you one of those who "borrowed" your parent's car after they had gone to bed to take it for a spin then bring it back before they got up? How many times were they up waiting for you when you returned?

Or did your parents teach you how to drive? That was me. Of all the people to teach someone how to drive, my Old Man wasn't the perfect candidate. This kamikaze of the motorway was the original poster child for road rage. Go ahead, look it up in Webster's Dictionary: "Road rage – See Joe's Dad".

In fairness, though, you had to be like that. Where I grew up in northern New Jersey, we had two highways that were consistently voted the most dangerous roadways in the nation - Route 17 and Route 4. You had to be a real thrill seeker, or just plain crazy, to drive those highways. It was either be aggressive or get off the road.

When I was old enough to get my license, that didn't matter. I was ready. I wanted to flee the nest and explore. I was chomping at the bit to get behind the wheel of a steel bullet and tempt fate on those very same highways.

I was fast approaching that magical age when I would join the ranks of millions of other mindless teens taking to the highway and I needed to get up to speed (no pun intended). Dad was quite eager to jumpstart my budding driving career and I accepted. A choice I would later regret.

It was an otherwise non-descript Friday at the Cuhaj house when the adventure began. It was getting dark. My Dad had just arrived home from another tough day at work. As usual he followed the same routine as he had done so many times before: He walked in, slammed his

lunch box down on the kitchen counter, reached into the fridge for a beer, and then plopped down on a chair at the kitchen table.

My mom's timing was impeccable. As soon as my Old Man's rump hit that red vinyl covered kitchen chair, she would plunk dinner down in front of him. Inevitably Dad gave his typical reaction, a look at the plate, a slight turn up of the lip to show his disapproval for the meal, and then he would dig in appreciatively anyway.

The bit about turning his lip up summed it up for all of us. It wasn't that we didn't like Mom's cooking. The meals were just a bit, shall we say, humdrum. Mom always had our dinners planned out weeks in advance but never strayed from a basic format so in reality there wasn't any planning involved. It was the same menu night after night, week after week for the first eighteen years of my life: Monday was spaghetti night; Tuesday boiled hot dog night; Wednesday leftover spaghetti baked in the oven; Thursday was fried hot dogs; Friday would be Kielbasa (just a foreign word for boiled hot dogs); Saturday it was re-baked baked spaghetti from Wednesday; and on Sunday we had an actual dinner: pot roast bathed in a glorious horseradish marinade.

And the dinner conversation was the same every night as well. Mom would sit there and have the appearance of listening intently to my Dad's every word as she looked down at her plate and scooped up dinner. The stories were hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute accounts of every movement he made. They were vivid swashbuckling accounts of his day, punctuated with flowery four letter expletives to add an extra sense of ebullition. They always centered on some "moron" who mounted an air conditioner in his bedroom window by hammering a few nails through it which busted the coils and then the guy would go ballistic when he learned that the warrant on the unit was now voided.

Mom would sit there nodding her head every now and then in agreement, throwing in a few "that's nice, dears" to placate my Old Man for the thirty minutes or so it would take to finish his diatribe. Dad would finally take a long, deep breath, almost winded, then turn to Mom and ask, "So, how was your day?" To which the answer was always, "Oh, the usual."

End of conversation.

Every once in a while my Old Man would break the old habits and surprise us by asking, "I wonder what's on TV?" and pick up his plate and head off to the living room. This was one of those nights and we all moved into the other room, plates in tow.

Dad flicked on the set and after a good long warm up the picture flickered to life. He flipped through the seven fuzzy black and white channels several times to get a sense of what was on then finally just left it on an arbitrary channel while we continued eating. We weren't really watching the TV but I remember that *Good Times* was playing in the background.

Tonight we were feasting on three-times-baked spaghetti, which I could have sworn we had eaten more than three times that week. As we dug in the subject of driving came up.

"Damn lunatics," my Old Man started. "I was heading home on Route 9W and some jackass moron cuts me off on a motorcycle – A MOTORCYCLE!"

My mother didn't look up from her meal. It was another one of Dad's driving discourses. Everyday some jackass moron would cut him off infiltrating his road space. She would just murmur her patented demure, "that's nice dear," and continue eating.

"So this here motorcycle," he continued with a strand of spaghetti hanging out of the corner of his mouth, "cuts me off. So what do I do?"

While I usually tuned out the witty dinner time banter between my folks, when it came to Dad's adventures on the highway, it was a different story. Dad's driving exploits were known far and wide and I knew I could learn plenty from him. Subconsciously a switch would click in my brain and I would be fully engaged in the conversation, and now with the excitement of learning to drive burning in my belly, there was an extra sense of urgency to learn all I could from him.

"What did you do?" I asked anxiously sliding to the edge of the couch. To me his driving stories were more gripping than any James Bond chase scene.

"I pull up behind him, right on his bumper, see, and --" He let out a long, pregnant pause.

"And?" I begged. "And what?"

He had stopped mid-sentence but not for emphasis. It was my mother. She had stabbed him with a simple wounding glance from the corner of her eye. Dad picked up the subtle hint.

"And I, uh, I waved to him and, ah, went about my way."

Mom smiled at him approvingly releasing him from her stare.

"Oh," I said disappointedly sitting back on the couch. "I thought you might have run him over him or at least ran him off the road like all the others."

"You know," he said, sitting back in his yellow-orange leather monstrosity of a Lazy Boy recliner, "you're getting to be about that age, aren't you?"

"I sure am!" I flashed back excitedly knowing exactly where this was heading.

"I think we should go out for a drive tomorrow, what d'ya think?"

"Can we?" I shouted jumping out of my seat.

"Be ready to roll by seven."

This was exciting! It was more than exciting. It was stupendous! I was finally going to learn to drive and my Old Man, the undisputed king of the demolition derby, was taking time out of his busy schedule of hanging out at the fire department, mowing the lawn, and hanging out at the fire department, to teach me how.

It was a sleepless night as I tossed and turned in bed counting the hours and minutes down until at 7 a.m. sharp I flew out the back door and hopped into our red Ford Maverick.

Dad strolled out of the house nonchalantly, walked up to the driver side door, and tapped on the window. I immediately rolled it down, being careful not to roll it too quickly. The window was known to jump the track and disappear into the door itself.

"Forget something, Mario?" he asked leaning on the roof and peering down at me through the window.

I strained to think. What could I possibly be missing? I didn't want him to think that I was a moron and wasn't up for this challenge, but nothing came to mind. I sheepishly shook my head back and forth.

“How about some keys,” he said jingling them before my face.

“Oh, yeah, ha-ha,” I chuckled nervously.

I took the ring that held the 50 or so keys for every imaginable house lock or car we had ever owned since 1947. I deftly found the shiny silver key with the Ford emblem embossed on it and cranked the car.

The Maverick was the undisputed workhorse of the family. It had seen many years of service with us and now a new chapter in its history was about to be written. It sputtered to life with a big billowing black cloud of exhaust encircling the car.

Our house sat on the side of a ridge at the base of Houvenkopf Mountain, a foothill to the Appalachians. Getting out of our driveway was a feat in and of itself. The driveway was a good half-mile trip down a 45-degree slope. In the middle of that half-mile, some brilliant engineer placed an almost 90-degree bend in the road. The combination of the slope and bend made it treacherous in the winter when there was snow and ice on the road. Miss that bend and you’d go plummeting down off the mountain.

To top it off, the road emptied directly onto the infamous Route 17, which is one of, if not *the*, busiest and most dangerous highways in the Garden State and in the entire country. After navigating the treacherous descent, you would have to pull into this mad traffic by going from zero to sixty in less than the blink of an eye.

“Just take it slow,” my Dad said, his knuckles turning bone white as he clutched the dashboard for dear life. I could see the padded vinyl compress under the pressure.

Slowly I drove down the hill, inching my way closer to the bottom where I could see streams of cars flying by at breakneck speeds. I finally reached the bottom and the lesson was about to begin.

“Okay,” he began. “Just take your time and wait for --”

Before he could get the next word out I floored the old Maverick and with a wheeze and a cough it went sailing across three lanes of traffic and onto the median somehow averting every car that was careening towards us.

“All right,” he said in a shaky voice, “not bad, a bit slower next time, maybe a little more cautious.”

I pulled off the median and started cruising down the highway doing the 50 mile-an-hour speed limit. Before long, I was feeling pretty good about myself. I wasn’t swerving or riding the brake like most newbies. As a matter of fact, I had the window down, wind ruffling my hair, one arm resting on the door while the other was propped up on the top of the steering wheel controlling the car. I noticed that even my Old Man was beginning to relax. The color was returning to his knuckles.

At one point I glanced up at the rearview mirror and all I saw filling the view was bright, shiny chrome with a highly polished statue of a bulldog on top of it – it was an eighteen wheeler and this guy was high balling it right up on my bumper.

I gripped the steering wheel as the truck zoomed around us and then cut back over in front of us with only inches to spare.

“You sorry S.O.B.!” Dad yelled.

“It’s not a problem,” I said trying to reassure him. “He had plenty of room.”

I could feel his anger now being diverted from the truck to me.

“Plenty of--? Are you blind?” He shouted. “The moron nearly took our bumper!”

“But he didn’t and we should be thankful for that.”

Oh my God, I was sounding like my mother, and he thought I was, too.

“Oh,” he said in a ridiculing voice, “be thankful? Yeah, well we didn’t thank the Japanese after they bombed Pearl!”

Da-hell? Where did that come from?

“Don’t let him get away with that!” he shouted in my ear.

I could see that his blood pressure was starting to hit the boiling point the more he thought about that truck.

“Hit the gas!” he ordered.

“What?”

“Floor it!”

My foot slammed the pedal to the floor and the chase was on. We inched closer and closer to the truck that was cruising along oblivious to what was happening behind it.

“Pull around the front of him,” he shouted, the wind howling around us as we prepared to meet our maker.

I slowly moved to the left lane to pass the truck. The Maverick began to shake from the tremendous forces being exerted on its rusting body. Then, just as this cat and mouse game was reaching its fatal climax, my Dad’s attitude changed to one of serenity and calm. He looked out the window and said in a matter-of-fact voice, “Oh, there’s our exit. Turn here.”

I was perplexed and scared witless at the same time. What was the deal with this Jekyll and Hyde routine? One minute we’re gunning down the enemy to teach them a lesson, the next we’re a commercial for ESSO: “Happy Motoring!”

I slammed on the brakes and jerked the car back behind the truck, flying off the highway on the exit ramp with a precision that only a fighter jet pilot could achieve at these speeds. As far as I was concerned, if I could survive this, driving was a breeze and I would pass any driving test with flying colors.

I coasted to a stop at the traffic light at the end of the ramp.

“Not bad, my boy,” he said patting me on my sweat soaked shoulder. “Not bad for your first time out. Almost professional.”

“You can take the wheel now,” I said shaking and stammering.

“Nonsense. We have plenty of time left.”

“Yes,” I thought to myself, “but not on this earth.”

It wasn’t long before my Dad’s above average driving lessons were augmented with the high school’s driver education class. I was now ready to graduate to the real deal when it came to learning the rules of the road.

The chief job-maker in the area was the Ford Motor Company. They had an assembly plant right there in town and just about everyone I knew had a family member who worked there. My Mom even worked there for a time.

Ford was a big sponsor of everything in the town – Little League baseball, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July Fireworks, even the school system. In fact, every year the company would donate a brand new Thunderbird to the high school for the driver education program and this year was no exception. As a tip-of-the hat to Ford and all they did for the town, everything in the school was named “Thunderbird”. Our mascot was a thunderbird and our teams were called the Thunderbirds.

It wasn't mandatory for us to take the school's driver education class, but it was to our parents. If you took the class their insurance would get a hefty price cut. So I signed up for it.

When not teaching sex education classes or torturing kids with mindless hours of jumping jacks, burpees, and rope climbing in gym class, the school's football coaches would alternate teaching driver's ed. For my class it was Coach Carpenter. The word on campus was that when it came to driving instructors, Carpenter was the best. He was laid back, understanding, and easy to get along with. I felt like I was in the best hands for this adventure.

The class was divided into two sections. We would study and do book work the first half of the quarter, then pair off into groups the second half. On those days, one of the teams would get behind the wheel and take turns driving the Thunderbird around town. I was paired up with a causal member of the gang. Her name was Martha.

Being the gentlemen that I am, I hopped into the backseat and allowed Martha to take the wheel first. We sat there basking in new car smell for a few moments as we waited for the coach to finish his preparations for departure which included counting on rosary, popping two Excedrin to handle the upcoming Excedrin headache number 629, and downing a glass of water. When all was at the ready and the coach felt secure, he hopped into the passenger seat.

“Okay, then, Martha,” he began. “What is the first thing I told you to do before starting the car?”

“Start the car?” Martha replied.

“No, before you start the car.”

“Pray?” I answered.

“Good answer, but not yet,” he replied.

“Look both ways,” Martha replied.

“We're not moving yet,” Coach said. “How about your seatbelts?”

“Oh, yeah,” we said in unison and snapped the lap belts on.

“Okay,” Coach continued. “Start the car.”

The T-Bird cranked and purred like a kitten.

“All right, now let's back out.”

Nothing happened. We just sat there motionless as Martha raced the engine. I lightly cleared my throat with an impatient cough.

“What's wrong, Martha?” the coach asked.

“How do I make it go backwards?” she finally asked timidly. I could only slap my forehead and shake my head.

Coach pointed at the steering column. “Do you see those letters there?” he asked. “What does ‘R’ stand for?”

“Racing!” I shouted excitedly. I was quickly subdued with a blinding, evil stare from the coach.

Giggling, Martha put the car into reverse and we made our way out of the parking lot and the great unknown.

The three of us were cruising along the main road through town when both the coach and I realized that we were only doing 20 miles per hour in a 40 mile per hour zone.

“You’re doing great, Martha,” the Coach said. “We just need to get up to the speed limit.”

Martha dutifully pushed down on the gas and we started speeding up. I looked over her shoulder at the speedometer as it hit 40, then 45.

“Ok, Martha,” the Coach said starting to show a little concern. “That’s fine. Back it down a little.”

I continued to watch the speedometer. It reached 50, then 55. Gripping onto the dashboard the Coach screamed, “STOP!!!”

Martha jammed on the brakes and we screeched to a halt. I was tossed around the back seat of the car.

“What were you doing, Martha?” the Coach asked. “The speed limit is 40. You were doing 55!”

“The speedometer wouldn’t go to 40,” she said. “It only went to 3.”

“Martha,” he said, “what gauge were you looking at?”

“That one right there,” she said pointing at the dashboard.

The Coach let out a sigh. “That’s the tachometer, not the speedometer.”

Martha just looked at the gauge and muttered a low, “Huh. Who knew?”

“Let’s keep going,” the Coach said settling back in to his seat. “Do you see that cross street ahead?”

She just nodded affirmatively, hands clutching the wheel at ten and two almost to the point of breaking it off the column.

“I want you to go through this traffic light and make a left turn.”

And she did. She went straight through the traffic light – that was red!

“No!” Coach shouted. “You went through a red light! Oh, never mind. Just make the left turn.”

Martha dutifully turned on the blinker, put her hand out signaling her intentions, and made a beautiful turn. We came to a stop just past the corner.

“That was very nice,” Coach commented, “but you turned to the right instead of left. This is a one-way street and you’re heading the wrong way.”

That was it. Martha had reached her breaking point. She let out a gasp and began to cry.

“Now, now,” Coach reassured her patting her lightly on the shoulder. “Just carefully back up and we’ll straighten this out.”

Sobbing, Martha put the car in reverse and we immediately slammed into something.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I hit a car!” Martha screamed.

“A car?” the coach asked. “You’re going the wrong way on a one-way street! That’s impossible!”

“The flashing blue light blinded me!” she whimpered.

“What flashing blue light?” Coach asked.

“The one on the top of the car I hit!”

After thanking the officer for being so understanding, the Coach took over the wheel and we limped back to the school to end the abbreviated class.

Well, I finished the class, passing with flying colors and acing the state driving test the first time I took it, and it was all thanks to the heroics of my Old Man and Coach Carpenter.

While much of what they taught me is just a blur and faded memory, there is one thing the Coach told us the first day of class that I will never forget. It was a quote he attributed to no one in particular, anonymous. He said, “It takes 8,460 bolts to assemble an automobile and one nut to scatter it all over the road.”

Truer words were never spoken.

#### 4. Goodbye, Fish and Chips

There comes a time in every young man's life when things change. It's a time when just hanging out with the guys in a basement or on a ball field just isn't enough. It's a time when a young man learns of the birds and bees and finds that the soft voice and touch of a young woman beats a pickup baseball game hands down.

Granted at this age it is nine out of ten times just an infatuation, or what Donny Osmond and millions of parents called it, "puppy love". It's an incredible feeling. It's a feeling that sweeps over you like the tidal surge from a hurricane. It knocks you down, sweeps you off your feet, and takes your breath away. It is a full-fledged dose of love, or just a very bad case of puppy love in disguise.

I don't know exactly what it was that attracted me to her. It could have been the deep dark brown eyes that pierced my soul from one side to the other as if she were wearing a pair of *Johnson Smith X-Ray Glasses*, looking right through me as if I weren't really there. It could have been the long auburn hair that playfully slapped me in the face leaving slash marks across my cheek as we sped down the highway at 70 miles an hour with the windows open in my '69 Ford Mustang. Or it could have been that accent, that lilting, British accent.

There is something about a British accent that can make a heart melt like a York Peppermint Patty on the dashboard of a car in July. You get the same reaction from a northern guy, a Yankee, when he hears the smooth drawl of a Southern Belle. But a British accent, there's something magical about it. It conjures up visions of elegance, charm, nobility. Each sentence comes out sounding as if they are in the form of a question when they are obviously meant to be statements. It can make a man's heart go to goop in an instant, and I became a big 'ole pile of goop from the moment I laid eyes, and ears, on her.

Our senior year of high school saw the gang begin a new ritual. Every Friday night we would have a party. While purchasing and serving beer to high school kids is totally not politically correct today, back in our day the line of thinking was that if the kids were going to drink, why not have them do it at someone's house where their parents could keep an eye on them and keep them off the streets?

Eh, good and bad philosophy. It had its merits and bad points but for the gang, it was good. My Mom and Old Man were the best. They would host our little get-togethers each and every week.

It was one of those Friday night parties and as always, the gang broke into two distinct camps. As was always the case, the boys outnumbered the girls by a ratio of 3-to-1 and as usual the boys ended up in the main living room where Aerosmith blared over the stereo. Someone would always wind up standing on the coffee table to do his best Steven Tyler imitation, reaching back to belt out the high notes of *Dream On* and then fall down into the deep florescent orange shag carpet, hopelessly lost in its pile.

Meanwhile the girls hunkered down in our dining room gossiping about the other girls who weren't at the party and dreaming of Barry Manilow singing at their wedding. Well, that's just an assumption on my part. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I digress.

Yes, it was a typical Friday party, with one exception – a new face had joined the fracas. It was a scene right out of a Nora Ephron movie as she walked through the door with Denise.

The world around me seemed to stop as she walked in. I saw her movements in slow motion as she strolled in, flicking her hair seductively as if she were in a *Head and Shoulders* commercial.

Our eyes met, my breath was taken away just like when you step into an icy cold shower. My heart not only skipped a beat, it stopped completely as Denise walked over and made the introductions.

“Joe,” she said, “I'd like you to meet Donna.”

For one of the very few times in my short life I was speechless, I couldn't say a word. I just stood there frozen to the ground. I was dumbfounded.

“Allo,” Donna said. That was it. The topper. The icing on the cake. That accent washed over me like a tidal wave. That's all she had to say – “allo” – and I turned into primordial goop. I knew it was love at first sight. What else could it be? Okay, there was that case of nachos and extra spicy salsa I had just eaten at the party but this was a different feeling.

My parents, on the other hand, had a rather different initial impression of Donna. Nobody in the gang smoked. Heck, we didn't have to. There was enough second hand smoke from my parents in our house that you could load up on a year's worth of nicotine with plenty to spare just by breathing, but tonight as the party slowly wound down, the girls got a little crazy. They thought it would be cool, hip, the “in-thing” to do to head outside and try their hand at lighting up.

My parents watched as the line of teenage girls filed out the door and into the backyard and were curious as to what was going on, they joined the procession and followed the girls to a huge oak tree next to our driveway. There they were met by the soft red glow of a dozen or so cigarettes fading in and out like radio tower beacons in the night and the harsh dry hacking sounds of coughing that filled the still night air.

Now keep in mind that my parents were conservative. My Dad was the typical father of our generation - he had fought the war in the Pacific; he went hunting every weekend but never actually shot anything; he belonged to the local volunteer fire department and could down a case of Schaefer Beer in 30 minutes flat. My Mom was super housewife – able to clean 10 toilets in a single bound. Every day she would prepare dinner, cook it, and have it on the table all in the short time it took my Dad to walk from his truck to the front door after work. That's impressive.

Being your typical middle-class American family my parents shied away from sexual innuendoes and would be the first to tell you that they had never uttered a four letter vulgarity in their life – ever – even though my Dad would hurl them out spontaneously from time to time but again according to them, he never did that.

Donna was the only one of the girls in the group without a cigarette. My Dad stepped up next to her and took in the scene. Without blinking an eye Donna unleashed a common British colloquialism. Looking right at him she casually asked, “Got a fag?”.

The blood rushed from my Dad’s faces. A fag? I knew exactly what was racing through his mind as he blindly walked back into the house in a zombie-like state after being blindsided. I don’t think they ever recovered from that moment, but for me, it was the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Our high school was not your typical school building. Instead of just one big brick building, the high school was a series of twelve or so buildings, a campus. This made walking to class in the freezing cold northern New Jersey winters akin to walking from McMurdo Sound to the South Pole. To make matters worse, the school was built on the side of a sizeable mountain, or at least some daunting hills. At each turn, steep inclines stood between us and our next class. Walking between buildings was an adventure. First it was down one slippery slope, hurtling toward the bottom at breakneck speeds, then up the side of another hill using ropes, pitons, and ice axes until we finally reached our next class.

The Monday following that eventful party was one such icy, snowy day. I was shushing to my fourth period class when I spotted Donna inching her way down an icy slope towards me. Without warning one of my feet turned inwards and I began tumbling out of control down the icy path with the grace of a goony bird landing in the Pacific. The voice of Jim MacKay rang out in my brain, “the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat”, or in this case, “da feet”.

I skidded to a halt on my backside right at Donna’s feet. Shaken but not stirred I slowly picked myself up but my anchor foot, still planted on the ice, slipped out from under me, clipping Donna’s knees causing her to tumble on top of me in the middle of the walkway like we had been playing *Twister*.

As we tried to pick ourselves up our eyes met. It was a moment frozen in time, literally on this cold winter day. Without hesitation, without a thought of embarrassing myself, which is what I’m prone to do, my mouth opened and went out of control.

“Donna, you me go Friday, ha-ha?” I blurted out.

I was so nervous that I couldn’t get the words out. I sounded like a complete dork and felt like my brain had disconnected from my mouth at the most important moment of my life. My mind raced to recover from this obvious gaffe.

“I mean, would you go outside Friday?” I said.

What did I just say? It was getting worse. My brain was racing but the synapses were not connecting. Come on man, what happened to that rapier-like wit of yours? Say something! Get out of this mess! But all I could muster was a feeble, “ha-ha-ha”.

I braced for impact. What’s it going to be? “Thanks, but I’m seeing someone?” “Thanks, but you’re not my type?” “Thanks, but you just crashed into me at 60 miles-an-hour and my lawyer will call you in the morning?”

“That would be lovely”, she said. “Pick me up at seven.”

She winked, picked herself up, and skated off to her next class. I just sat there on the walkway, the ice melting beneath my butt. I was numb from the experience, her response, and my now frozen underwear.

As I picked myself up the reality of the situation sunk in. This was totally unexpected. I never thought my heart would run my mouth like that and actually ask her out. I never thought past the asking part. Who knew she would say “yes”? I certainly didn’t. I hadn’t made any plans. Where could I take her? What could we do? It had to be something extraordinary. I really had to impress this girl. After all, this was the girl I was going to marry. I just knew it. Heck, we would be married by the end of the week.

The gang caught up with me and I told them the story of what just happened as we skied along to the science building.

“Jeez,” Creep said, “what da heck were you thinking’? You just don’t blurt something like that out!”

“That’s just crazy,” Stretch tossed in.

“Thanks for making me feel better,” I said. “Seriously, guys, I’m in a pickle. I’ve got to impress her. There’s got to be some place really special where I can take her.”

“It’s wrestling night at the armory Friday night,” Stretch blurted out. Without looking at him, Greg lifted his left arm and shoved Stretch over into a snow bank.

“How about a movie?” chimed Creep. “*Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice* is showing at the drive-in.”

That had possibilities but may be moving too fast. And then it hit me.

“What do the British like?” I asked rhetorically, immediately regretting saying it out loud. The local PBS television channel had just started showing a new British comedy series that we loved, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, and the conversation quickly turned into a Python routine.

“Churchill!” Creep shouted.

“Very old bricks!” Stretch said.

Then the others chimed in:

“Rain!”

“Rusting bridges!”

“Witch hunts!”

“Goofs,” I said loudly shutting down the banter. “They like fish and chips! I’ll take her to a movie and dinner at *Arthur Treacher’s Fish and Chips!*”

Arthur was a super-suave British actor in the not-too-distant black-and-white motion picture past. The gang knew him best for being the co-host of the *Merv Griffin Show*, a national television talk show. With his affable British demeanor, he was the last person you would expect to have a chain of faux fish and chip restaurants, but he did.

It was a brilliant plan: show her that I was hip to her culture. The gang broke out with spontaneous applause. I took deep bows satisfied with my choice.

The week flew by and before I knew it, it was Friday night – “D-Day: Donna Day”. I pulled up to the door of her modest suburban ranch home in my 1969 Mustang, “Old Blue”, and began walking to her front door.

Slowly I walked, step by step, inching my way ever closer to the door and my date with destiny. At first it was a fast jog but subconsciously I had slowed down. Slower and slower I walked, sweat beginning to bead on my forehead and drip from the end of my nose. Would her parents be home? Would I have to meet them? Would I make another complete and total fool of myself?

While I pondered these questions it dawned on me. I had subconsciously turned around and was heading back to the car.

“This is ridiculous,” I said to myself. “What could possibly go wrong?”

Suddenly from behind me I heard a door open and a deep cockney accent reverberated down the street, “Allo, boy!”

I stopped and winced realizing that it could be only one voice – her father’s. I was frozen like a deer in headlights. “Shit!” was the only word that spewed from my lips.

Now I am not, nor have I ever been, one to verbalize such profanities, but this was a most inopportune moment for me to start. My eyes rolled back into my head. Oh, great. If he heard me he’s probably thinking, “What kind of dork is dating my daughter?” This date could be over before it even gets out of the starting gate.

I waited for the door to slam behind me but instead her father yelled, “Hey, ya bloody bastard! Welcome to our ‘ome! Yer comin’ in or what, ya poof?”

Fortunately for me it turned out that her father was at one time a roadie for the Rolling Stones. He was completely deaf to such language and it just bounced off him like a June bug on a windshield.

After a few minutes of pleasantries, we headed off, Donna and me, traveling down the New Jersey back roads for a date with destiny. Softly in the background the car’s *Spark-o-Matic* cassette player crooned a collection of Beatles love songs that I had copied to a cassette tape especially for the occasion. Yes, I did know the British culture.

“Hope you like the Beatles”, I asked.

“Luv ‘em,” was her reply.

While everybody else in the free world drove around with an expensive Alpine brand car stereo mounted in their dashboard blasting out the latest tunes through high end Jensen co-axial speakers, with power boosters to boot no less, my little Mustang tooled around north Jersey with a Spark-o-Matic cassette player mounted precariously under the passenger side dashboard. The quality of the sound it produced ranged between the tinny, scratchy noise produced through the horn of an old RCA Victrola and the sound made by a bull elephant in heat. To top it off the chute where you loaded the cassette had earned the nickname “the guillotine” by the gang. The door that covered the opening was steel and razor sharp. It would stay open when a tape wasn’t loaded but push a tape in with your index finger and the door would slam shut clipping more than your fingernails.

I will be the first to tell you that I am not a genius when it comes to wiring electronics, so installing the Spark-o-Matic was a challenge. The wires for the unit's power and speakers dangled precariously below the unit just barely touching the floorboards and usually wound up getting tangled up in the passenger's feet.

As Donna and I drove along with a full moon lighting the way I noticed that the music began to cut off and then back on. Then off and on again. It was embarrassing but not unexpected.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You'd better watch your feet. I think you're kicking the wires loose."

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

At about that same time a whiff of ozone and a puff of bluish smoke rose from around Donna's feet. It was the Spark-o-Matic. It had vaporized and was threatening to burn up the car.

I slung the wheel hard to the right and pulled off to the side of the road to watch the cassette player, and all the electrical wiring in my car, go up in smoke. Oh, the memories we were making.

The only saving grace to this "dream date" was that it was only a short walk to the restaurant. Abandoning the movie, and my car, we started walking. All the while my mind raced trying to figure out how I was going to get her back home without looking like a dunce.

A few quiet and often awkward minutes later we arrived at *Arthur Treacher's*. I finally composed myself as we walked up to the counter and, being the worldly gentleman that I am, I suavely said, "Allow me."

I cavalierly cleared my voice and placed our order.

"We'll have two number twos with the vinaigrette dressing, please," I told the man behind the counter, "and be quick about it, my good man!"

I was a real bon vivant. I think I even raised an eyebrow. That's what the sophisticated British gentry do, isn't it? Or was that Leonard Nimoy?

We took our order outside to eat on the restaurant's outdoor patio. The restaurant was located high up on the Palisades, a set of rocky cliffs that offered a breathtaking view of the Hudson River far below.

It was a gorgeous winter evening, not too cold with only a slight breeze blowing. Lights from passing tug boats danced on the lightly rippling water. Stars were shining brightly down surrounded by a velvet curtain of black. You could get lost in a moment like this.

Donna unwrapped her fish, coyly smiled at me, and then took two quick bites. I looked down for a moment to unwrap my meal then glancing up our eyes met once again locking firmly on one another. It was a moment that seemed to last forever. Slowly she leaned over toward me bringing her lips close to mine for our first kiss.

We closed our eyes. My heart raced waiting for the light touch of her lips. Her *Bal a Versailles* perfume, or a cheap knock off of the swanky Saks Fifth Avenue fragrance, wafted around me in the cool evening air. But our lips never met. I slowly opened one eye, then the other. They engaged hers once again only now the look in her eyes had changed and morphed

into something else. This was not the look of love. The stars in her eyes had dimmed, no, turned themselves off. It was a look of surprise, no, wait, I take that back – discomfort. Yes, it was definitely a look of discomfort.

I sat back in my chair puzzled. What did I do? I did use deodorant, didn't I? Then I noticed her face was changing. At first I thought it was just the moonlight but no, it was more than that. Her face was changing color. So help me her face was changing color! It was turning red!

I reached for her hand and realized – her hand was swelling! As God is my witness, she was blowing up like the Bullwinkle balloon at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade!

I began to panic. "What's wrong? What's happening?" I shouted.

Struggling with the words she managed to squeak out, "Allergic...fish... pills."

Well of all the...she was allergic to seafood, of any kind it turns out, but thinking that all Americans were artificial she figured the fish was, too, and assumed it was made of artificial synthetically processed compressed composite fish and that everything would be okay, which it wasn't. She didn't want to spoil the evening so she went right along with my romantic play, even at the expense of her own safety.

Through the miracle of modern medicine, she gobbled down a fistful of her allergy pills and an hour or so later we had managed to get through the incident relatively unscathed. Needless to say this romantic comedy of an evening had come to an end.

We walked to a nearby phone booth where I plunked in a quarter so Donna could call her Dad who graciously picked us up. It was a very quiet ride. Donna and I sat in the backseat and every once in a while I noticed her father glancing at us through the rearview mirror, his eyes beaming with a look of "my daughter has hit the bottom of the food chain this time."

We finally pulled up in front of my house. Not a word had been spoken since we left the restaurant. I felt the world was crashing down around us and this budding romance would be just a memory to dream about in my golden years.

I opened the car door and began to slink out but paused to break the silence.

"Thank you for picking us up, sir," I said humbly to her Dad. "I'm sorry to bring you out so late."

Then the unexpected happened. Donna grabbed my arm, yanked me around to face her, and kissed me with everything she had. Our lips parted and she gazed deeply into my eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Joe", she said and under her breath with a sly little grin on her face she sang a line from an old Beatles' song. "A love like ours could never die..."

The car sped off and I was left standing there in the smoke ring of exhaust it left behind, oblivious to the cool night air, but warmed by that first kiss.

## 5. A Christmas Ramble

When I hear people say that Christmas just isn't the same any more, I have to wince. Could there be a more obvious observation? I mean, of course it is different. Our Christmas traditions change; our interests change; technology changes. But that's life, right? Time marches on, moving ever forward for better or worse.

What these people are inferring, in a polite way, is that their generation's Christmas was better than another's. It's all subjective.

The "Golden Age of Christmas" for those of us known as "late Baby Boomers" was in the 60s and early 70s. It was a simpler time. Not as simple as the time of our parents or grandparents but much simpler than today. This is about where our kids roll their eyes and say, "here we go again!"

For our generation, no matter who you were or where you lived, two things united us during the Christmas holidays – television and toys.

Let me take you back in time to some of those television and Toyland memories. How many do you remember? What memories do you have?

Not long ago, a dear friend of mine from the old "gang" posted a story that told about her own Christmas traditions as a kid growing up and one struck a chord for me and for many kids who grew up in the northeast. It was when a local TV station would air the 1934 movie, *March of the Wooden Soldiers*, aka *Babes in Toyland*. Now don't confuse this movie with the *Babes in Toyland* starring Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon. No sir. This movie featured Laurel and Hardy in all of their black-and-white splendor (although it has since been colorized. Blasphemy!)

In a nutshell, the story revolves around an evil landlord, Barnaby, who is going to throw the Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe out of her shoe if one of her daughters, Little Bo Peep, doesn't marry him.

Insert boos and hisses here.

Barnaby's evil henchmen were known as the Bogeymen. They were really creepy creatures that were sent to abduct Little Bo Peep. My friend wrote how the Bogeymen scared the Dickens out of her. See what she did there?



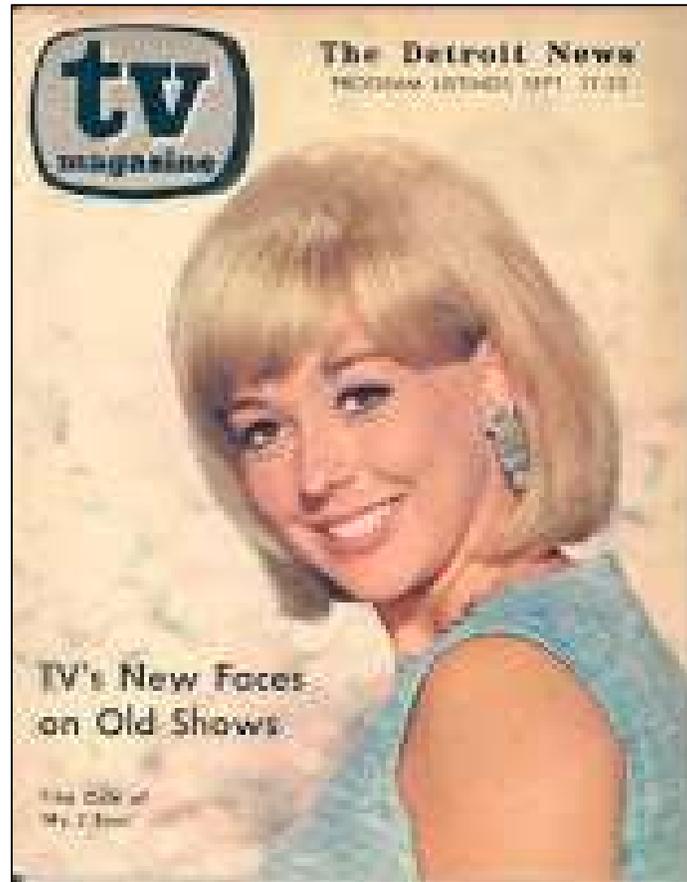
What scared me in that movie came near the end when the wooden toy soldiers march through town to save the day. One of them walks through a door that was too short for him and he knocks his own head off! Ahhh!

But reading her story made me think back to those happier times of childhood, and just like Santa Claus appearing at the end of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the airing of that movie signaled one thing for us kids – the start of the holiday television viewing season. From that moment on until the big day, Christmas Day, our grainy black and white televisions would be filled with Christmas special after special.

Being the youngest of 3 children, I was rarely allowed to choose what we watched on TV in the evenings, but when the holidays rolled around, I was granted rare access so that I could watch a few Christmas shows. And that's fine, but do *not* under any circumstance take control of the set when my Mom was in charge! She didn't watch a lot of TV but by God, when it came to Christmas, she had her favorites and she was going to watch them. There was no argument. Even my Dad would sit there helpless when she commandeered the set.

The shows she loved were variety shows with a holiday flare, shows like the *Hollywood Palace* when Bing Crosby would host it. We watched Bing religiously every year all the way up to 1977 when he recorded his last show with that amazing duet with David Bowie of the *Little Drummer Boy*.

Being a military family, we often watched Bob Hope and his holiday USO tours at military bases in Vietnam. And then there was the *King Family Christmas Special* that featured the singing King Cousins with Tina Cole. Ah, Tina Cole, the stuff dreams were made of for young boys my age.



Another of her favorites was the *Andy Williams Christmas Special* with his special guests, his wife at the time, Claudine Longet, and my favorite, the “talking” black bear, Cookie Bear. Yes, I was into cheesy movies and TV even back then. Years later when I had a chance to meet and interview Andy on the radio, my questions quickly went from "tell us about your new record" to, “so, tell me about that bear.” He was not impressed.

I could write an entire book about holiday programming in the 60s. I was an aficionado of the genre, a true connoisseur. My love of Christmas programming went way beyond just the classics. I always found the odd and off the wall stuff.

There was one program, though, that became a staple in our house and it has since become an iconic tradition all across the country. For as many people that love this unique show, there are just as many that ridiculed it. The story of how this show began is nothing short of programming genius. The program I’m talking about is the *Yule Log*.

Once again it was a local independent station, WPIX in New York, that began the tradition. It was in 1966 when the President and CEO of the station, Fred Thrower, decided that he wanted to do something special for the residents of New York City who didn’t have fire places. He also wanted to give his employees time off for the holiday.

With the permission of the city’s mayor, John Lindsay, Thrower sent a crew to the mayor’s home, Gracie Mansion, and filmed a few seconds of a fire burning in the ornate fire place. It’s said that a rogue spark damaged a \$4,000 rug during the filming.

That Christmas Eve, WPIX cancelled over \$4,000 in advertising and the telecast of a local roller derby match to air the *Yule Log*. The resulting 17-second film would be looped for hours with holiday music played over it.

It’s hard to believe but the show was a huge hit and it ran every Christmas Eve and morning until it was cancelled in 1990. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the station brought the *Yule Log* back, digitally remastered, of course, and it has aired ever since.

Today, several satellite and cable companies have produced their own version of the *Yule Log* and you can actually buy DVD’s of the show.

An unlikely but remarkable holiday tradition that has thankfully survived.

Back to kid’s holiday programming. The thing about watching TV back then, some 50 years ago, was that you only had one shot to catch your favorite show. There were no VCRs, DVRs, or Netflix. If you missed it, too bad. You would be shunned by your friends because you missed the greatest show EVER! You’d have to wait until it came around the following year. That is IF it came around the following year.

A few nights ago, I watched the annual showing of Rankin and Bass’ *Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer* with the Grandkids. They love Rudolph and I’ve got to say, after watching it for 50+ years, I still do, too.

When you're a kid it seemed like that show went on forever. If you took out the commercials for Norelco shavers with Santa gliding down a snowy slope on a triple-head razor, which is apparently safer than it appears to be, the show lasted only 15 minutes.

Over the years I found myself quoting lines from *Rudolph* during conversations. For example, when my grandson Stevie realizes he did something wrong I'll call him a "humble Bumble" or when things aren't going well at work I'll shout out, "I want to be a dentist!" (It's better than the alternative, a lumberjack, but then I'd have to break out in song.)



There is one quote I quickly learned never to say again. It also came from *Rudolph*. It's when Rudolph turns up missing and his Dad decides to fight a blizzard to find him. When Rudolph's Mom says she's going to help, his Dad would say, "No! This is man's work!"

When something had to be done around the house like mowing the yard and my wife or daughter said they would help, I'd jokingly say, "NO! This is man's work!" to which I would be summarily thumped on the head

There is one thing that has bugged me about that show that continues to bug me even after all of these years. On the Island of Misfit Toys there is a toy bird that can't fly. During the closing credits, we see an elf attaching umbrellas to toys so that they can float happily down to children waiting below. He does that for all of the toys *except* the bird that can't fly! He simply drops the bird over the side!! Oh, the humanity!

Now don't get me wrong. I didn't watch a lot of television when I was a kid. The bulk of my viewing was on wintery Saturday mornings when cartoons would run from 7am to noon and the only way you knew that it was time to go outside and play was when *Johnny Quest* came on. But it was different during the Christmas holiday. There were some amazing shows to watch.

For Christmas cartoons, a real favorite of mine was *Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol* starring Mr. Magoo who was voiced by Thurston Howell III who was played by Jim Backus. It had that one sad song that Scrooge sang when he found himself by himself at his old school during the holidays, "I'm All Alone in the World." Ugh. Brings tears to your eyes. It also had an upbeat and beautiful song called, *The Lord's Bright Blessing*, which mentions eating "Razzelberry Dressing". Razzelberry? I tried to find that at Whole Foods. No luck.

Of course there were all of those other Rankin and Bass productions – *A Year without a Santa Claus*, *Santa Claus is coming to Town*. But looking back on it now, I wonder: was it the

shows I liked or was I more into the commercials? *Those* were fantastic! Each commercial for all the new toys only added to my Christmas list to Santa, which was easily over 100,000 words. Then I'd say a little prayer that the Christmas tree would be overwhelmed with a bajillion "some assembly required" toys scattered around it Christmas morning.

Santa was usually kind to me and I'd always have a handful of neat toys. First thing on Christmas morning I'd run down and check my stocking that was thumb tacked to a cardboard fireplace with faux flames produced by red flickering lightbulbs inside. The stocking usually had the staple items in it: an orange, apple, and maybe some nuts tossed in for good measure. Even I knew that they were absconded from the bowls of goodies that my Mom always adorned the living room coffee table with during the holidays. The stocking also had a small toy in it like the classic metal *Slinky*. Ugh, that thing frustrated me. We had carpeted stairs leading to the second floor of the house that my folks were renting at the time. The Slinky would always get caught on it. The commercial was right when it asked, "What walks down stairs...?" I had no idea. It sure wasn't my Slinky.

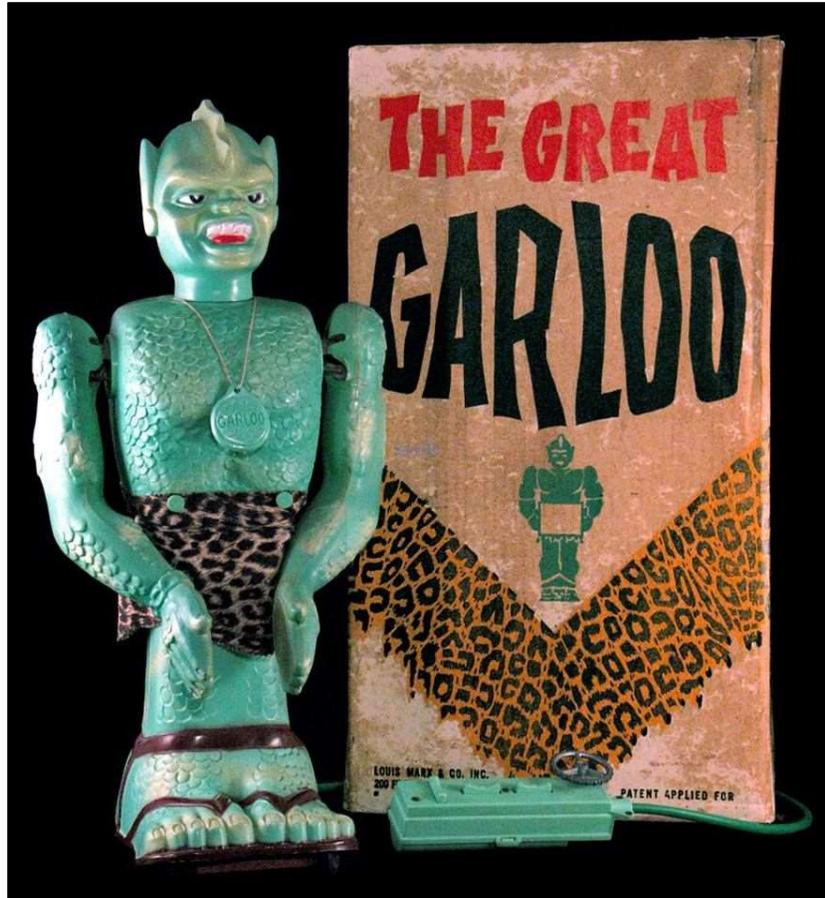
The gang would gather up at around noon on Christmas Day to show off what Santa had brought them. Maybe you remember some of these:



*Mr. Machine:* A red robot that looked like it was made of steel beams with gears. It didn't do anything except walk aimlessly from one side of the room to the other with its mouth silently moving up and down.



*Ideal's Robot Commando:* Now that was a hoot. A giant tethered remote controlled robot with swirly eyes that you could use to fling marbles at your sister with or shoot missiles from its head at people passing by. Now don't confuse *Robot Commando* with the *Great Garloo*. *Garloo* was a hideous green giant of a remote controlled, albeit via cables, monster that could gingerly bring you a glass of Bosco.



*Major Matt Mason, Mattel's Man in Space: A rubbery doll for kids that dreamed of exploring the outer reaches of our galaxy. The set came complete with helmet (space station and crawler vehicle sold separately).*

As a side note, Tom Hanks was actually signed on to play Matt Mason in a movie recently. The idea was shelved. Too bad.



I remember one year I got a *Creepy Crawler* set. This thing was one of the reasons they established safety regulations for kids toys. The kit came with solid metal plates that had the imprints of different bugs stamped in them. You would put the plate into the *Creepy Crawler* gadget, which closely resembled a bare metal hot plate, fill the impression with Plastic Goop, then plug it in to the wall. The plates would get ridiculously hot and turn the goop into a rubbery toy bug. The instructions said to let the plate cool completely before removing the bugs, but come on! We're kids! We don't have time for that! Never mind the third degree burns.

Ah, those were the days. Back when playing with toys was a true adventure.

But that's only the short list. There were plenty more: *Mystery Date*, *Easy Bake Ovens*, the ORIGINAL *Troll Dolls*, *Satellite Jumping Shoes*, and the list goes on and on.

Happy Holidays and a Merry Christmas to you all! May *this* be your greatest holiday!

