
**CONFESSIONS OF AN AMERICAN
SPEAKER**

**If B.S. Were Concrete,
I'd be Route 66!**

**AMERICA'S NUMBER ONE
FUN-MOTIVATOR EXPOSES THE
HILARIOUS, BAWDY,
UNPREDICTABLE STORIES OF
HIS LIFE THAT WON HIM THE
TITLE**

Bob Basso

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People Magazine called me, “America’s number-one fun-motivator.” I’m grateful, but I seriously doubt it’s true. You see, there are 3,500 of us running through airports every day on our way to every manner of gathering, from national conventions in posh marble halls to a company picnic on an Alaskan ice floe. We all use humor, and we all exhaust ourselves in an attempt to uplift the moment to a place of hope. And most of the time we all get there.

I’m an American speaker.

Oh, sure, I’ve held other titles: “Brooklyn Dodger batboy,” “Catskill Mountain social director,” “Broadway, TV and movie actor/director,” “Burlesque baggy pants comedian” (about the same time I was still an altar boy), “Navy Public Affairs Officer,” “NBC-TV News anchorman,” “business consultant,” and “college professor,” but it’s all been about having fun just moving my jaws, talking my way through life.

According to Dr. Philip Viviano, “You came out of the womb talking. It was the darndest thing. You didn’t cry. You were moving your lips as if you were ... well, talking.”

My message to audiences is always the same: Lighten up. Stop taking yourself so seriously, and use the healing power of humor to beat back the monsters. But it seems as the echoes of a simpler America grow dimmer and dimmer, and a strange new reality of uncertainty sets in, it’s becoming harder and harder to get that message across.

I started to doubt it myself.

So I called “Time Out” and went where I always go when I press the pause button: my mango treehouse on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. I waited for an answer, and it came as I was reading the preface to Gloria L. Cronin’s colorfully enchanting book of Hawaiian folklore, *Tales of Molokai*:

Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence. I am not talking here about those stories we call novels, plays and epic poems. I am talking about the more profound stories that make people, nations, religions and disciplines unfold in order to make sense of the world.

I thought, “That’s it! Tell the stories of your life, those first-hand encounters with the people and events that wander by while you’re too busy saving France or trying to create those elusive footprints in the sand and, voilà! you’ll have it again.” Meaning: So, here they are, the stories of one ordinary, blue-collar kid from Brooklyn, born just before the worst of times and the best of times, World War II.

There’s no planned rhyme or narrative to them, no more than there is an obvious moral or enlightening new philosophical conclusion, unless it’s the one that visited me when I finished the last story: Ultimately, at the end of all the trouble, pain and mayhem of daily survival, there is always a pie-in-the-face waiting for all of us. None of the sanctimony, seriousness and soul-worry is all that important. And, maybe, the only real tragedy in life is entertaining a negative thought.

Lighten up and enjoy.

BOB BASSO

Mango Treehouse, Molokai

P.S.: As you read my stories, I encourage you to think about the stories of *your* life — all of them — the funny ones, the sad ones, the confusing and the average ones. They contain all the gifts of meaning you need to appreciate the greatest gift of all: Life.

5:51 p.m., Wednesday, July 1, 1987,
at my father's death bed

“Dad, what do you really think of me?”

With Parkinson's Disease shaking his body uncontrollably and with cancer attacking every major organ, he summoned his last strength and whispered, “If bulls--t was concrete, you'd be Route 66.”

I watched the greatest silent laugh in the universe as Daddy slipped away. The man who taught me never to exclude humor in any human activity was offering his final proof.

He was also telling the truth.

Mom said I never had a chance. It came with the genes. “It's all your damn grandfather's fault.”

Chapter 1

Grandpa Satch, the Undisputed Heavyweight Champion of B.S.

Grandpa Satch was a rascal, a diamond pinkie-ring dandy in top-of-the-line, \$400, custom-made Italian silk suits. He spoke nine languages, badly, sexually harassed every woman he ever came in contact with, and did it with such subtle charm and easy aplomb they never knew they were being had.

When I was 21, I introduced him to my Junior Prom date, the luscious, enormously-breasted but terminally shy Joyce Kowolowski. I had planned my seduction ever since I first saw her frisbee-sized nipples beckoning to me during freshman orientation high mass at St. John's University in Brooklyn. She was a well-publicized, no-sex-before-marriage Catholic. Getting her to commit the mortalest of all mortal sins would take time, lots of time. I was willing to wait another year. Bringing her 60 miles out in the country from New York City to meet my hand-kissing, a-story-for-every-occasion, always-the-consummate-gentleman-on-first-meetings retired grandfather was part of the softening-up process.

Joyce was a biology major. I was sure she'd understand that Grandpa's compelling charm and swarthy virility had to be part of the male DNA in our family. Just so long as she never found out he was my maternal grandfather, I'd be safe.

All my friends found his meticulously-told tales of chasing Pancho Villa with Black Jack Pershing or supporting Sergeant York's right flank in the Ardennes while the gentle Tennessean was busy winning the Congressional Medal of Honor blasting the black leather jodhpurs off a few dozen bloody Huns, totally believable adventures told by a reluctant, modest hero.

All lies.

While ol' Pancho V was terrorizing Texas border towns, John Joseph Fackner was collecting fares on the BMT Subway Line in Brooklyn, and, later, while his WW I outfit was sucking German gas and being cut down by blistering enemy machine gun fire in eastern France, he was grooming cavalry horses and fornicating with officers' wives 3,000 miles behind the front lines in Yapank, Long Island.

If only Grandpa stuck to the truth of his army escapades, he wouldn't have needed Alvin York's right flank to command an audience. For, in fact, he gained a measure of military immortality by becoming the fastest-made Top Sergeant in the war, perhaps of all time. He went from buck private to top gun in less than ten hours.

Private Fackner, upon arriving at the debark station, noticed that the hundreds of horses being readied for shipment *over there* to pull artillery wagons and carry officers to their appointed duties, weren't being handled properly over here. He convinced his colonel that ill-groomed equines would severely hamper the war effort and that he, a former New York City fireman with extensive service driving the horses that pulled the fire engines through the blazing war zones of Sheepshead Bay and Coney Island, was the man for the job.

True, he was a fireman. But first-hand accounts testify that the only time he sat in the driver's seat was for a Fourth of July picture-taking session.

No matter. When Grandpa decided to persuade you, you were waging a losing battle with the combined elocutional brilliance of William Pitt the Younger, Daniel Webster and Clarence Darrow at their peaks. The colonel promoted him on the spot. Grandpa then pointed out that the current grooming detachment was headed by a master sergeant and that he would need a superior rank to take charge. Another procedural miracle — promoted again, this time to acting sergeant major.

The fact that the colonel's lady, known to have hypnotic control over her husband's thinking, had already fallen under the spell of the young sergeant's matinee-idol good looks may have added a mite to his meteoric rise through the ranks.

I don't want to give the impression that Grandpa was a unconscionable playboy. He wasn't. Playboys go hunting. Grandpa never fired a gun or shot an arrow into the air, but the birds fell into his lap anyway, lured by that fabled certain *something* women can't seem to describe but have no trouble recognizing when it appears. Clara Bow got all the publicity, but Jack Fackner had an infinite supply of "it" too.

Both Joyce and I were about to find out just how much of it was left after 75 magnetic, colorful years of spewing the blarney while moving effortlessly through high society hobnobbing with some of the greatest history makers of his time.

It was mid-August-hot, hot, hot. I suggested we all go down to the Atlantic a few miles away and take a cooling dip. Joyce demurred. She would stay to keep Grandpa company. After all, our genial host was recovering from two heart attacks and a stroke and was living alone in the East Long Island outback in 1958 without benefit of electricity or indoor plumbing, and that added burdens to the elderly infirm. I reluctantly agreed to go alone. Another fantasy put on hold: seeing Joyce jiggling on a lonely stretch of beach in her celebrated yellow daisy bikini.

I swam and swam and swam some more, until the heat of my lust faded with the sunset over Montauk Point Lighthouse.

Back at Grandpa's shack in the middle of Middle Island Road. Quiet. No signs of movement. Maybe he was out back in his beloved tomato patch explaining the secret genesis of his melon-sized veggies to my sympathetic prom date. No, nobody there. How about "Heaven's Gate," the affectionate name we gave the two-hole privy out past the Indian burial ground next to the rusting '28 Chevy now serving as an experimental laboratory for Grandpa's wildflower farm. No, nobody home.

I went back past the two ramshackle "house of doors," living cartoons from *Li'l Abner's* beloved "Dogpatch, USA" — guest cottages built in 1921 by Grandpa's brother, Al, with the help of a wandering tribe of firewater-swilling Indians who obviously worshipped the god of entrances. They were completely constructed with doors, hundreds of them, all sizes, shapes and colors — all still bearing their original knobs.

I know they weren't in there. Grandpa never could figure out where the front door was.

Back to the main shack. Dark. No kerosene lamps burning. Got to be careful running the obstacle course starting with the potbelly stove in the kitchen, past the wind-up Victrola nudging the doorway to the living room, and weaving my way around the pre-Victorian red velvet and fringe furniture to my great-grandfather's solid, hand-made mahogany tool chest housing our one modern concession to the twentieth century: a flashlight. That's inaccurate. It was a mobile searchlight — two-and-a-half feet long, housed in a sterling silver tube, and powered by twelve 1.5 volt batteries. Every time we turned it on, it felt like a Hollywood premiere. Its gigantic beam would gallop through the woods and bring a scream from Crazy Tony, the avocado farmer 300 yards away. Tony never talked to anyone. He

muttered incessantly in his native Polish tongue, and only spoke English when his reclusive life was suddenly shattered by our Buck Rogers super illuminator.

“Turn that damn thing off or I’ll shoot, goddammit.” He did once and provided “Heaven’s Gate” with some much-needed ventilation.

Now I bravely put my body between the flashlight and Tony’s 12-gauge double-barrel and pressed the switch forward. The beam danced off the glass ceiling (the Indians ran out of doors when they got to the main house), made a quick pass through the spare bedroom with the proud, rusting wrought-iron bed with the silver nameplate announcing its birth in 1862 at the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania Iron Works Foundry, past the six gold-leaf “midnight rescues” (chamber pots), and into the main bedroom where, suddenly, catastrophically, I conclusively knew God was finally turning on me for all those years of libidinous glee searching for the nuns’ panty lines every time they bent down at St. Pancras Parochial School, tearing out the ladies’ underwear ads in the Sears catalogue, and now misleading my innocent prom date into thinking ours was a relationship based on mutual respect.

Both my demise and redemption were at hand.

There they were, squinting in the center of my hand-held moonbeam, my grandfather and the object of my lust, sitting on the edge of my great-grandmother’s Scottish oak four-poster, holding hands ... in their underwear!

Svengali had done it one more time.

I had seen my grandfather’s great verbal dexterity work like Merlin’s magic on many heretofore strong-willed giants, but to talk a student saint, albeit well-endowed with fleshy bounty, 56 years his junior, out of her clothes and into Great-Grandma’s bed while under indictment from two heart attacks, no significant blood pressure, a missing prostate, and only one-half of one emphysemic lung still operating was even a mile-and-a-half beyond possibility thinking.

My mouth stayed at half-mast, while my arms moved aimlessly around the room. The intergalactic moonbeam shot off at a hundred different angles.

“Turn that damn thing off, or I’ll shoot, so help me, Jesus!”

Even sudden oblivion from Crazy Tony's big boomer didn't shake my first encounter with Freudian trauma.

Grandpa, his eyes aglint with that old devilment I had seen so many times before his big kill, smiled contentedly, turned to his wide-eyed prey, and nonchalantly, affectionately patted her porcelain-smooth, bare thigh. Oh, my God. How was this possible?

Did this barely-breathing septuagenarian on death's door have any idea of the mythical proportions of his spectacular feat? Did he realize 1,100 male underclassmen at one of the most respected Catholic universities in the country would renounce the Pope and turn in their crib sheets to the Latin final just to bear witness to this Herculean climb up Mount Erotica?

I think not.

He once told me, "There is no such thing as an impregnable fortress, only attackers who get tired of looking for the weak spot." Grandpa had "it," and weak spots, in whomever they resided, just seemed to double in size around him and beg for exposing.

Heading back to the city on the old Jericho Turnpike, which was the only serviceable passage to and from the untamed wilderness of Long Island in the Eisenhower years, Joyce broke her contented trance long enough to tell me what happened.

"Your grandfather just started talking and, eh, well, the next thing I knew I had my clothes off. I'm not sure why. Strange. And I took a vow never to take my clothes off with a man until I was married. I swear, I'll never do it again."

Thanks a lot, Joyce.

It was ever so. Grandpa started speaking, and you didn't have a chance.

I loved my grandfather, Satch (I'll get to that name in a minute), and I loved being with him. I always knew I'd be an eyewitness to history, and I was, many times.

He was so many talents squeezed into one five-foot-ten inch, 230-pound frame, each with the gift of mesmerizing speech. Actor, master showman, raconteur, dialectician, master chef, ladies' man, man's

man and, despite never having finished the second grade, the number-one insurance adjuster for the number-one insurance company in the world at the time: Continental Casualty, 90 Church Street, downtown New York. His job: to drive all over the five boroughs of the largest city in the world and settle claims against the company for as little as possible. He did it better than anyone in the business. And why not? He had more tools. I was six, and he started taking me along because, “Someday Robert (Grandpa and Sister Mary Alphonse, my grammar school principal, were the only ones ever to refer to me by my proper first name), you’ll be a very successful criminal attorney (at the time I only aspired to playing second base for the St. Louis Browns, but I kept that a secret from Grandpa), and you’ll need to know how to read people. I’ll show you how to do that. Along with the ability to speak intelligently, it’s the greatest single success skill in the world.”

Grandpa would take me on his interviews under the rather transparent pretext I had to carry his big ol’ shiny brown briefcase, you know the kind you used to see frontier lawyers using in all the cowboy movies. He called it his “satchel.”

Satchel, Satch. Grandpa “Satch.”

Inside were all his secret papers, mumbo-jumbo documents, actuarial and mortality stuff he never read. There was also a small, black address book secured with a gold lock and, most importantly of all, the largest size legal notepad you ever saw. Satch had them specially made, “To draw attention to my writing down every word the client is saying. When people are telling you their problems, let them see you writing them down and shake your head up and down a lot. It makes them believe you really care.”

I guess Grandpa really didn’t care, because what he was really writing down was nifty drawings of the Maggie and Jiggs Sunday comic strip characters.

He’d always introduce me as “My grandson Robert. He’s studying to be a criminal attorney.” Seems improbable any biped even of minimum intelligence would believe a six-year-old, second-string infielder for the Glendale Junior Dodgers’ stickball team would be moonlighting as a young Felix Frankfurter¹-in-training, but Grandpa had a way of flashing his explosive Teddy Roosevelt Smile and making you believe Jesus was a Buddhist from Jersey City, if that’s what came out of his mouth.

¹ Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court, 1939-1962.

Nobody ever questioned my presence, not the society ladies on Park Avenue, the movie star out in the Hamptons¹, or the guy who owned the racetrack in Jamaica, Queens. Not even the fat, fat lady from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, who opened her door wearing a big, thick bandage around her head like the one Van Johnson wore in *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* after he crash-landed. She held a meat cleaver in one hand and a fat, fat naked baby in the other. The baby kept peeing on her dirty white apron, while she kept waving the cleaver and shouting gobbledygook at Satch.

“Yásou. Ti thèlis? Ìme poly apasholiménos.” (Hello. What do you want? I am very busy.)

Satch recognized the lingo. He grew up in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, a real United Nations, long before the fake one on the east side of Manhattan popped up. He spoke just enough German, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Greek and Russian to exchange greetings and con you out of your socks. This lady was speaking Greek.

Grandpa winked at me.

I knew this poor, big, big lady who smelled like the bathroom at the 42nd Street subway station didn't stand a chance of getting what she wanted from Grandpa. And what she wanted was one point one million dollars. Seemed she was smoking a cigarette while trying out a new Richard Houghnut hair product called an “aerosol spray can.” She sprayed and got the fastest perm in history. It exploded in flame and took all her hair off. I guessed all those big black blotches on her neck and in between those grandma-size breasts were also part of the record claim that had ol' Continental Casualty as nervous as a gelding in mating season.

Not to worry. Grandpa Satch was bringing out his big guns. First, implement Satch Success Rule No. 2: learn to speak enough of the language of every victim, eh, client, you come in contact with to put them at ease, meaning off-guard.

He bowed his head the way Bishop Fulton J. Sheen used to do every Tuesday night on Channel Five when he closed his show with a prayer, and whispered, “Signómi pou sas enohló.” (I'm so sorry to bother you.)

¹ Fashionable section of Long Island, New York

The big, big lady went limp with surprise, then a little of that embarrassment you feel when you start shouting at that jerk who cuts you off on the freeway until he turns around and you discover it's your neighborhood priest, and now you've got this big goofy Popeye smile on your face. That kind of look.

She wiped some baby pee off her big, big right hand and asked Satch if he was Greek. Even I could figure out that's what she was saying. He said, "Then ina olie, Grikos?" Meaning: isn't everybody? Satch always tried to avoid a frontal assault on the truth whenever possible.

More smiling, bowing and gobbledygook, and she invited us inside her cluttered working-class apartment to sit down.

The ice had melted and a master carver was at work.

Satch Success Rule No. 3: Always agree with the opposition, and then cook them a meal.

Grandpa listened to the big, big lady cry and scream and cry some more about what a terrible thing Richard "Hard-not" had done to her and that her husband, who was coming home for dinner in an hour, wouldn't allow her to take anything less than a million dollars and change.

Grandpa asked her if she had prepared dinner yet. She got even crazier than before. More shouting, jumping, crying. Satch patted her gently on the shoulder, asked something in her native tongue, and they both went to the window where she pointed to a little grubby food market on the corner. Satch quickly jotted down some strange words on the world's largest yellow pad, handed it to me along with a brand-new hundred dollar bill, and pointed me to the grubby store with the orange sign: Pan-Hellenic Deli.

I returned with the dolmas, rize, tarama salada, fila, and the pastichios which Satch, the master chef from his days as the owner-cook of the Manhattan Beach Club in Rockaway (another story for another time), miraculously transformed into some pretty delicious tasting brown-and-green stuff with yellow gravy.

The big, big lady's even bigger husband came home and melted even quicker than she did when he found out Satch used to be a sandhog digging tunnels for the Canarsie Subway Line just like him. Well, maybe true, maybe not. I do have an old publicity photograph of Grandpa 100 feet under the East River in one of those coal miner's hats with the light on the top with his sooty right arm around a showgirl holding up a glass of champagne.

Eyewitness to history: After the brown and green stuff with the yellow gravy, we ate Grandpa's Greek muffins and drank the licorice-tasting wine I brought back from the grubby store and watched the big, big woman look at a paper from the satchel saying Continental Casualty deeply regretted her unfortunate incident and hoped the forthwith sum at the bottom would recompense her discomfort. Grandpa filled in the blank after the words "sum of" with the words "two hundred and fifty dollars." They spoke a little more Greek, laughed, sang a stupid song, and she signed at the bottom.

Continental was rescued from financial disaster; Richard "Hard-not" escaped oblivion; aerosol scientists were alerted to find a way for folks to spray their hair without blowing their faces into their neighbors' backyards, and Satch found a way to get a 50-dollar kickback from the bald-headed lady who started off wanting the biggest product liability settlement in South Brooklyn, but settled for the smallest. History.

There was plenty more ahead.

When I was seven, Satch became the owner of the largest nightclub in New York, the Manhattan Beach Club in Rockaway, a sandy, blue-collar resort town squeezed tightly between Broad Channel Harbor on one side and the temperamental Atlantic on the other and inhabited by some of the most persistent beer-drinking Irishmen this side of Lake Donegal.

Soon, through the beguiling power of Grandpa's oratory, their tastes were to change.

He hung a large sign on the front of the club: Exclusive distributor of the 1945 Winner of the Best Champagne in France.

A bit overstated.

Technically, it might qualify as a kind of, sort of simulated champagne. Realistically, it was cheap "Dago white" wine Grandpa bought from a shoemaker in Flatbush named Caravalli. He poured it all in a big silver tub, added some salt and some yellow stuff, poured it in bottles with real fancy labels an old Army buddy made for him, and taught me how to "fizz" the bottles with CO₂ cartridges and say, "*Voilà, champagne!*" I got a nickel a bottle.

Satch then invited every patron from the two biggest beer joints in town, Brady's and Duddy Hanrihan's, to come try his famous French grapes, *free!*

Any time any bar in Rockaway gave anything away free, all non-essential activity like working, shopping and heavy breathing of any sort came to a halt. They came in droves, listened to Grandpa in his white apron, red-sleeved garters and black silk tie sporting the diamond from Great-Grandma's wedding ring in his big silver stick pin.

There were over 300 McGinty's, O'Reilly's, Mac "This" and Mac "That's" crowded around the longest black mahogany bar in New York City. Grandpa raised the ceremonial first glass the way I saw Monsignor Pheiffer raise the holy chalice at mass every morning at my parish church, St. Pancras in Glendale. But Monsignor was a terrible speaker. Even the nuns fell asleep when he spoke.

Not so with Jack Fackner.

Grandpa waited until everybody was quiet. He looked everybody in the eye, paused, moved the glass back and forth under his nose like William Powell used to do in all the *Thin Man* movies, and said very solemnly, "Ladies and Gentlemen, from this moment on there will be no more recreational drinking in Rockaway. Only a liquid kinship with the gods." Everybody laughed and cheered. Grandpa drank a small sip and then talked a long time about the history of champagne. I'm sure none of it was true, especially the part about champagne grapes being caressed instead of squeezed, but it sure held everybody's attention. A lady in a big green hat and black mesh veil whispered to me, "Your grandfather would have made a wonderful priest. Everything he says sounds like the Sermon on the Mount."

They kept on coming and they kept on drinking Mr. Caravelli's cheap "Dago white" disguised as the pride of Paree. Soon, Ryan's and Hanrihan's closed. Grandpa's club became the number-one nightclub in town. Champagne replaced beer as the drink of choice.

That was historic.

Big shots, celebrities, and the hoi polloi crowded the joint every night and kept my piggy bank overflowing with shiny, Indian-head nickels.

One night, Jack Dempsey, the former great heavyweight boxing champion, came in with two very pretty blond ladies in brown fur coats and silver high heels. Grandpa introduced me to my first close-up legend.

“Jack, this is my grandson, Robert. He’s going to become a criminal attorney.”

Shaking Mr. Dempsey’s big bear claw of a hand while concealing my CO₂ cartridge in my other hand made me feel I was a lot closer to becoming the former than the latter.

I became neither. Whether through genetic determination or nurtured through life’s absurdities, I became what I think I always was — a teller of tales, a stand-up comedian, a consoler, an evangelist, an arch-enemy to solemnity and complex solutions.

In short, an American speaker.

Chapter 2

The Time of My Life

It was 1944, and the war had finally come to New York City. I knew it would. The Nazi spies in the *Rex*, the *G-Man* matinee serial at the Loew's Gates Theatre had been plotting it for three straight weeks.

The city was blacked out as an unidentified airplane entered restricted space. Suddenly, the busiest metropolis in the world went dead silent. Nothing moved. Eight million hearts beat as one at the anticipation of the first enemy bombing raid in America looming 10,000 feet above. The monotonous drone of four engines filled the skies as a hundred 50mm ack-ack guns followed its every dip and turn.

Daddy, the fireman, had to rush back to his firehouse and stand by to put out all the fires from the bombs that were sure to drop. Before he left, he said to me what he always said before he went to work, "Make sure you take good care of your mother and sister. You're in charge." I was only six years old, but I knew exactly what to do. After all, I had seen every war movie from *Watch on the Rhine* to *Hitler's Children*. I knew how to fight Nazis.

"We've got to get under the bed, Mom, with plenty of food."

Mom drew the blackout curtains across the bedroom window of our three-story brownstone on Kosciusko Street in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn and asked, "Wouldn't it be safer in the cellar?"

Mom didn't know bombs don't go through mattresses. At least they never did in *Mrs. Miniver*¹ when Greer Garson used them to protect her and her children as the Nazis bombed England.

I reminded her that I was in charge and that she would just have to trust that I knew about these things.

As always, Mom went along with my plans. She made four cream cheese and jelly sandwiches and a quart of grape Kool-Aid. I got my Red Ryder Daisy BB gun, official U.S. Army combat helmet, three rubber hand grenades, and my Captain Midnight secret decoder ring, and we camped out under

¹ 1942 film.

Grandpa's big, black wrought-iron bed. Bonnee kept complaining because we were all scrunched up next to the old fat porcelain chamber pot that smelled just like the disinfectant Mom used in our bathroom.

I told them what Preston Foster, the Marine chaplain in *Guadalcanal Diary* told William Bendix when they were being bombed in their foxholes: "It's important to keep our minds off getting killed or we'll go nuts." Mom thought that was a good idea, so we started singing. Back in those days, families did a lot of singing together, and it always seemed to make you feel better.

Bonnee didn't understand war, so she went to sleep ... holding her nose.

We got through *Der Fuehrer's Face*, *I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire*, and three choruses of *Tangerine*, when Daddy came home and told us, "It's all clear. False alarm. It was only a Pan Am plane that strayed off course. You can come out now."

I whispered to Mom, "Don't believe it. Nazis are very sneaky. They probably painted the words Pan Am across one of their Fokker A-47 bombers. We'd better stay here all night, just in case."

We did.

Daddy huffed and puffed and said we were nuts, but Mom held her ground. One of her children wanted something, and nothing would stop her from making sure he got it.

We sang some more, ate our sandwiches, made believe we heard Germans marching through our street, threw a few hand grenades, and laughed about silly things, and just had a lot of fun in the dark.

I made Mom promise to go to sleep before me, so I could stand guard over her. Somehow that was very important to me.

She kissed me on the cheek, told me how safe she felt and how proud she was to be my Mom.

I stayed at my post all night listening for Nazis and just watching Mom sleeping.

In the 49 years since that night, Mom and I have shared many real-life adventures and a lot of wonderful times together when we just sat somewhere and talked about all those little things sons and mothers talk

about when they're alone. But somehow, in that deep down special place beyond reason, where we hold onto memories, that one night long ago under Grandpa's bed was the most important time of all.

Chapter 3

How Do You Prove that You Are Really You?

September 2, 1945, was memorable for two reasons: one, that the war with Japan was over and, two, I suddenly lost my mother, father, two sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and every other treasure I held so dear.

I was a orphan, adopted by strangers who loved but lied to me for the first seven years of my life. I knew this was true because Walter Gradwohl told me. He was nine and the smartest kid on the block. Oh sure, Mom always warned me to stay away from him because he was a sneak and a troublemaker, and his father, the doctor, was a Nazi who sent money directly to Hitler. I'm not sure how she knew that, but all the other mothers said the same thing, so we all just figured mothers have a special sense about these things that other people will never understand.

I'd better explain how the most devastating moment in my life got started.

It was one of those half-summer, half-fall days when the trees couldn't make up their minds to hold onto their leaves or let them go for the coming winter. So one side of the street had bald sycamores, while the other had the regular kind. Everybody in Glendale was running around getting ready for their block parties celebrating V-J Day. If it was as good as the ones we had back in May for V-E Day, then we were in for another great time. There would be dancing, lots of food, no gossiping, just hugging and laughing and everybody feeling very happy.

You would think planning such a big event would take a lot of committee meetings and long discussions about who does what and stuff like that, but it didn't happen that way at all. It was kind of a miracle. People just seemed to pull together without anybody telling them what to do. Mr. Buck, the juke box repairman next door, hung all the wires for the outdoor speakers that would deliver the best of Glenn Miller, Harry James, Benny Goodman and Spike Jones all night. Mom and Mrs. Callahan down the street would make a big vat of chicken salad, while Mrs. Roach and the two old maids across the block would bake brown cakes, ugly on the outside but with really good icing and creamy insides. Andy Pizzalarusso's father would hang the big red, white and blue banner that said, "Happy Days Are Here Again," and old Mr. Scafidi would supply everybody with American flags and confetti.

Richie Prentiss, Charlie Rabb and I were watching all these preparations, happy that a lot of fathers and big brothers would be coming home soon, but a little disappointed that Tojo didn't hang on a few more years so we could be old enough to enlist and be the ones who captured him and get some really neat souvenirs.

Walter joined us and we walked to Volmuhausen's Butcher Shop with our Radio Flyer red wagons to pick up about four tons of cold cuts to bring back to Mrs. Simindinger's house. She put them on big plates and made the Swiss cheese, bologna and liverwurst into a giant American flag.

That's when Walter let us in on a secret that really put a big damper on our V-J Day celebrations. He stopped us in front of the A&P on Central Avenue and made us give our solemn Catholic oath we would not tell anybody. Walter was shrewd that way. He was an atheist, but he knew Catholics would go straight to Purgatory for about a billion years if they broke their solemn oaths, so he knew his secrets were safe. That was one of the really big disadvantages of being Catholic. You couldn't tell anybody any of the good stuff you knew.

He looked around real cautiously the way Kane Richmond did as "The Spy Smasher" in the Saturday afternoon serials at the Acme Theatre, and whispered, "Hitler's not dead. He escaped a few days ago and is living in a basement on 69th Road."

My God! Hitler was living just two-and-a-half blocks from our street! Was Walter, the trouble-making son of a probable Nazi fundraiser, finally clearing his conscience and telling us the truth?

Sure, Glendale was a predominantly German neighborhood and, sure, the FBI had raided a few beer halls and found some Bunds — a group of dirty, rotten American-Germans with a short-wave radio sending secret stuff over to Germany. But were they so stupid as to think they could sneak the Führer into our town without our mothers finding out about it? No wonder they lost the war.

Richie spoke for all of us, "So how do you know this stuff?"

Walter was smart and he didn't hesitate before answering questions, so you had to figure he might be telling the truth. He answered immediately, "Because my father has a friend who has a brother who worked for him in Berlin. But don't worry. He's not going to kill anybody. He's just going to hide out for awhile and then get a job."

Here we were, about to have a big party celebrating the end of World War II, and the guy who started the whole darn thing was living in a basement around the corner and we couldn't tell anybody. This was a very big problem.

But it got worse, at least for me. After delivering the cold cuts to Mrs. Simindinger's house, Richie and Charlie said they had to go home to listen to *Terry and the Pirates* on the radio. That was just an excuse. They were very patriotic Americans who had collected more scrap metal and old newspapers for the war effort than anybody on our block and were probably feeling as bad as me about Hitler moving into our neighborhood.

Walter sat with me on the brown wooden stoop my Dad had just built so my mother would stop complaining that we were the only ones on the block without one, and then he did something he never did before. He put his arm around me and looked real sad. Now that was another thing about him. He was a very good actor and always got the lead in all the school plays at PS 91. He always played the good guy, and that was a joke because everybody but the teachers knew he was a sneak, a troublemaker, and his father charged twice as much as Dr. Viviano down the block and didn't make house calls if he didn't like you. But now he was real serious, like I'd never seen him before.

"I've got another secret ... about you. You wanna hear it?"

"Yeah, but I'm not taking any more oaths."

He hugged my shoulder a little tighter and dropped his second bombshell of the day. "Bob, are you sure your mother and father are your *real* parents."

Well, that can be a real silly question you laugh off under ordinary circumstances, but when you've just found out that Hitler is alive and well and living in your vicinity, you tend to question a lot of things.

"What are you talking about, Walter? Of course my parents are my parents."

He got real close to my face and whispered, "But how do you *know*? How can you really prove you are who you think you are? How do you know you're not adopted?" Walter continued planting his seeds of doubt. "You gotta be adopted. You don't look like or act like your mother and father and, besides, you eat like a Jew, and your family is Catholic."

Well, it was a known fact that I always carried two bagels and plenty of cream cheese in my school lunch pail, and I was the only kid on the block who ate salami and banana sandwiches, but was this proof enough that I was a stranger in my own house?

Walter's seeds were taking root. I ran inside and pulled out the family album in the bottom drawer of the living room dresser. I compared my baby pictures with Mom and Dad's baby pictures. Oh, my God, that dirty, rotten, sneaky troublemaking son-of-a-Nazi sympathizer was right. I didn't look anything like my parents, or the people I thought were my parents until now.

While my *alleged* mother and sisters ran around the house the rest of the afternoon preparing for the big block party tonight, I compared my picture to every photograph we had in the house. The evidence was overwhelming — I was definitely an orphan, probably Jewish, living with four very nice people who had done a pretty good job so far treating me like one of the family. But now the game was over. I was just like one of those kids Spencer Tracy took care of in the movie *Boys' Town*, only I was lucky. I got adopted.

I didn't feel lucky. I felt lousy, just like John Wayne must have felt when he had his horse shot out from under him in the movie *Tall in the Saddle*. Like John, I was now alone in the world and didn't know which way to turn. I was hungry, so I decided to stick around until we had dinner that night and then, maybe, leave home for good.

My *alleged* father, the fireman, came home at five, and we all sat down at the kitchen table to eat. In those days, you did more than eat at the dinner table. You also had to tell everybody what kind of a day you had. It was kind of mandatory.

I usually had a lot to say because I thought this was the best part of the day, when the people you loved shared lots of secret stuff that happened to them. But tonight, I didn't say a word, and I hardly touched my meatloaf and mashed potatoes. I mean, how do you tell the people you thought were your family that Hitler is living around the block and you know you're adopted?

My father, I mean, Mr. Basso, immediately knew something was wrong and asked me what it was.

I said what every seven-year-old says when they want to be clever and hide something from their parents, "Oh, nothin'."

It didn't work. Mr. Basso had just come from putting out four fires, having half a burning roof fall on his helmet, and catching a heavy lady who jumped out of a two-story building. He was in no mood for diplomacy. So I told him about the saddest day in my life.

Mr. Basso, like most of the fathers in those days, was a realist, using a realist's logic to answer any of life's problems. He huffed and puffed a lot and then said, "Look, if you're adopted, then your mother pulled it off two minutes after they wheeled her into the delivery room with the fattest belly at Jamaica Hospital. Now, eat your meat. It's getting cold."

I told him I checked all the photographs we had, and Walter was right, I didn't look like anybody else in this family.

Mr. Basso was about to blow again when Mrs. Basso took me upstairs to her bedroom where she kept all the important family papers in a small tin box under her bed and showed me a birth certificate that confirmed a male child weighing seven pounds, eleven ounces named Robert Louis was born to Janet and Louis Basso at 4:25 A.M. on May 27, 1938, at the Jamaica Hospital in Queens.

Mrs. Basso gently took my hand and rubbed it across the embossed seal of the State of New York at the bottom of the paper, hoping that would forever put this controversy behind us.

It didn't. I thanked her, but reminded her that documents like this are forged all the time in Charlie Chan movies, and maybe she faked this one just to make me feel good.

Now she was huffing and puffing just like Mr. Basso as we returned to the kitchen.

Mr. Basso said we'd settle this matter once and for all after we got back from the block party. That's when I told him I didn't think anybody should celebrate the end of the war because Hitler was still alive and living in a basement on 69th Road.

"That's it, that's it!" my alleged father bellowed as he grabbed my hand and headed out the back door.

I had a real hard time keeping up with him as we raced down 68th Street past Mr. Guggenheim and Mr. Ritter setting up tables and chairs for the party and toward the big white house on the corner. Mr. Basso was about as angry as he was when he went to the convent to find out why Sister Mary Allen wouldn't let me go to the bathroom after I raised my hand.

He pounded on the big oak door until the shiny brass hinges started to shake.

A very nervous Dr. Gradwohl opened the peep hole and wanted to know what the problem was.

My alleged Dad shouted back, “My son is an orphan and Hitler is living around the corner. That’s the problem. Now get your boy, Walter, out here right now, or I’m going to start the damn war all over again.”

Dr. Gradwohl got Walter to admit it was all a lie and that none of his relatives even knew a real Nazi, much less the Führer. Then, after sending Walter to his room, he revealed the only real secret that day when he apologized to us saying, “I’m so ashamed of my son. A good *Jewish* boy shouldn’t even mention the name of Hitler without spitting first.”

Whatdayaknow, the Gradwhols were Jewish, and all our mothers must have been wrong about them sending money to the Third Reich.

That night was the biggest, happiest party I had ever seen. Even neighbors who didn’t like one another were laughing together and jumping up and down like kids. Everybody, including Dr. Gradwohl and his wife, was waving American flags and hugging everyone they met. Just before midnight, all the moms threw their war ration books in the middle of the street and started a giant bonfire. We all held hands and sang “God Bless America.” It was really something to see 400 people singing and crying at the same time.

All in all it was a very good day. Hitler was dead, and I was sure I was who I was.

It was also the last time I have ever felt that just about everything in the world seemed right.

Chapter 4

What Do Bums Have in Their Pockets?

Ever since I met Black Bart, I've been fascinated by bums. Oh, his name wasn't really Black Bart, but that's what the kids around the railroad tracks on Otto Road at the end of our block called him. Probably because that was the name of the bad guy in the *Cowboy G-Men* serial at the Belvedere Theatre up on Myrtle Avenue. Just like his movie counterpart, he was covered in black — hat, shirt, vest, bow tie, pointy shoes, and even the old beat-up doctor's bag he carried was midnight black.

I was maybe seven-and-a-half and Bart was about a hundred years older than Mr. Kiershner, the candy store owner, the oldest man we knew in our neighborhood. And he was very, very old. Richie Prentiss's mother remembers when he opened the store when she was just a little girl. But Mr. Kiershner didn't have deep black circles under his eyes or wide scruffy canyons running across his face ending in strange purple ink blots on the back of his neck. And Mr. K didn't walk in slow motion hunched over like a bird hunting for a worm. No, we were all certain Black Bart was the oldest man alive, and what good luck for him to be living right there among us where we could come home every day from St. Pancras Grammar School next to the pickle factory and watch a living legend.

For a long time that's all we did, just sit on the top of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima — that's what we called the large mound of sand on the side of the water tower where we played "Marines" — and just watch Bart do amazing things, things like taking slivers of railroad ties, scraps of old discarded boxes and umbrella frames and make model castles and fire trucks and PT boats and stuff like that. He'd sit for hours alongside the tracks concentrating on constructing his miniature world. Nothing bothered him, not even when the Great Southern or the Bell Atlantic roared past him at about a thousand miles an hour. He kept on gluing, bending and sanding.

Richie, Walter Gradwohl, Andy Pittsalurusso and I figured Bart was probably too old and too slow to be any kind of threat to a squad of battle-hardened Marines who had single-handedly taken Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Midway and Tawara from crack Japanese troops. Heck, didn't each of us have a Congressional Medal of Honor, Silver Star and a dozen Purple Hearts? How could one old man in scrubby black clothes hurt us? Still, we didn't approach him for a long time. Probably had something to

do with what our mothers had told us, “You know what your father will do to you if he finds out you’ve been talking to that old bum.”

Yeah, we knew, so we just watched until the day the Japanese surrendered to General MacArthur aboard the U.S.S. Missouri. We were Pacific warriors. Now our war was over, and peacetime was boring.

So we sat on Suribachi watching Bart and wondered out loud. Walter wanted to know, “Where does he come from?” Richie was the philosopher in the group, so naturally he asked, “I wonder why he became a bum.” Andy, who always thought a long time before answering anything finally said, “I’d like to know what bums think about. Do they think about things normal people do, or do they know things the rest of us don’t?”

I just wanted to know what bums had in their pockets, particularly old bums. I think about the time I began to walk upright I noticed that the stuff people put in their pockets falls into two categories: stuff you have to get at right away, like keys, change for the trolleys, bubble gum and scout knives to carve your name in the wet tar on the street, and stuff you think you want to throw away, but you’re not sure it’s a good idea, like grocery receipts, Double Bubble cartoon wrappers and shopping lists your mother wrote out for you.

But old people are different. They put strange things in their pockets that nobody else would think of. I know because I used to sleep over at my grandfather’s house a lot, and I’d watch him and his brother, Al, the special cop, empty their pockets before they went to sleep every night. There were little shiny silver things, gold locket, pieces of faded yellow paper, parts of the daily newspaper, usually with a big circle around something somebody important had said, and always a mysterious little something you’d never seen before, like Uncle Al’s handmade blackjack — an old wrench with lots of black tape wrapped around the top — or Grandpa’s little black book with the gold lock and the embossed picture of an eagle on the front. Old people always had secrets in their pockets, and that always made them a lot more interesting to me than other people. Surely peeking into the pockets of old bums had to be right up there with finding the magic inside ol’ King Tut’s tomb.

Richie drew the short straw and had to make the first known contact with Black Bart by anyone from 68th Street, Glendale, Queens, New York. Richie was fearless, but not very diplomatic. He slid down Suribachi, marched right up to the old man, and shouted loud enough for Mr. Rabb watering his lawn

about a football field away to hear just in case Black Bart had a derringer hidden in his shoe or a throwing knife concealed behind his neck like the real Black Bart in the movies.

“Hi, I’m Richie Prentiss. Those are my friends up there. Why are you a bum, anyway?”

The old man didn’t move anything but his eyes. They kinda got squinty and serious, like when Sister Mary Allen asks you a real tough geography question and you know the answer but you want to take your time and check everything in your head to make sure.

Black Bart, the oldest man in the world, spoke the first and only words anyone in Glendale, Queens, had ever heard. They sounded raspy, like Daddy’s saw cutting through a tough piece of wood, and it must have hurt a lot just to push the air up into the mouth to speak, because the old man looked like he was going to die.”

“Because it doesn’t hurt anybody.”

We didn’t know what that meant, and we never asked him, because he never spoke another word again.

But we did become good friends. Old men and little boys seem to be able to do that very easily without words.

The seasons changed and summer became fall and fall turned into a hard, cold winter, but our days remained pretty much the same: 6:30 mass and communion followed by Monsignor Phieffer pounding on the white marble pulpit, staring at us first- and second-graders, and repeating his favorite quote from the Bible, “Depart from me you cursed sinners into the everlasting fires of damnation.” Then we’d walk across the street single file to the unheated classrooms of St. Pancras with about the same enthusiasm as the Bataan Death Marchers and continue our Marine Corps basic training under the watchful eyes of the Sisters of St. Dominic, who were convinced the only way a seven year old could qualify for sainthood was to sit on Arctic cold wooden seats with one hand behind his back and one finger over his mouth for eight hours.

Then the dismissal bell rang at 3:40 P.M., and the real learning began. We headed for the train tracks where Black Bart taught us many valuable things, like how to make towers for medieval castles from matchboxes and how to feed baby birds who have fallen from their nests and what plants and ferns you could eat to survive if you didn’t have any money to buy food at the A&P.

On the last school day in March, 1946, Richie, Walter, Andy and I skated up to Otto Road to show Black Bart our team science project, a large crayon drawing of our neighborhood with a living sample of every edible plant from the Presbyterian cemetery on 62nd Street to the train yards on Fresh Pond Road. In the upper left-hand corner, Walter drew a picture of an old man dressed in black, holding a doctor's bag, smiling while pointing to the title, "How to Survive in Case Things Get Tough."

When we got to Suribachi, there was no Black Bart, only a very tall policeman, chewing gum and making chalk marks on the railroad ties.

"What are you kids doing here?" he said, without looking up.

We didn't want to get Bart in trouble, so we made up a pretty good story about taking a field trip to interesting places in the neighborhood.

I don't think he heard us, because he was one of those people who concentrates on one thing at a time and just kind of ignores everything else, like your mother does when she threads a needle or when your father studies your report card. He just kept on chalking and measuring and looking for stuff.

"What happened here, Sir?" Richie shouted.

We didn't expect the policeman to tell us. After all, we were just kids. But he did.

"Some old bum was killed by a train this afternoon. But don't you boys worry. Everything's been cleaned up."

Well, not everything. Scattered at the foot of Mount Suribachi were parts of King Arthur's castle, the rear milk cap wheels of a hook and ladder fire truck, and a crushed handle from an old doctor's bag.

Thirty-seven years later, Andy Pittsalurusso, now a video producer with his own studio in Marina del Rey, California, called me and said, "I'm going to do a cinéma vérité documentary on bums. You know, who they are, where do they come from, how do they survive, what do they think about things. That kind of stuff. You interested?"

I was interested. There still remained one great mystery of my youth that had not been revealed to me.

We decided to dive into some gritty living research before turning on the cameras.

For 23 days, Andy and I dressed like bums and rode the rails from Keokuck, Iowa, to Abbeville, South Carolina, up to Sault Sainte Marie near the Canadian border. We slept in flophouses, under bridges, and inside abandoned cars. We begged on the streets, watched helplessly in a grimy back alley in San Pedro, California, as one bum cut the throat of another bum over a bottle of dirty wine. We were trying to get close to all those complex things that lead a person to this final degradation. To do that we needed first-person stories. We needed their words, their thinking, their answers to all the “why” questions.

We failed.

All we learned conclusively is that bums know the difference between a real bum and two middle-class documentary film makers dressed up to act the part. They didn’t speak to us. They didn’t invite us into their councils. They didn’t share their food or reveal their deep-down secrets.

Tired, cold, and without two pennies between us, we ended our dark odyssey on a park bench in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

Andy was particularly dejected. “All this punishment we put ourselves through for nothing. What a complete waste.”

I’m pretty sure I had a smile on my face when I answered him. “Maybe not, Andy. Maybe not.”

I was emptying my pockets from 23 days on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Of course, I would become the instrument of my own deliverance from a mystery. Hadn’t I lived like a bum, felt their hunger, desperation and fear? Hadn’t I learned to think like them in order to survive?

Some bread crumbs, two toothpicks, a phone number of somebody named Razzelli, some shiny silver things I didn’t recognize, lots of wads of toilet paper, and some red string. Nothing more.

Andy ready my disappointment. “Whatdaheck were you looking for, anyway?”

“Oh, just a little magic.”

Chapter 5

Why You Should Never Double Date with a Bona Fide Nympho and Her Friend

Every thirteen-year-old guy on our block knew one, some knew two or three. Donnie Kirchner lived with one. “My sister pads her brassiere with wads of Kleenex every morning. She’s one for sure.” Richie Prentiss had no doubts Mrs. Roach was one because, “She always hangs out her see-through underwear on the clothesline every morning just so the guys going to school could get hot.” Charlie Rabb figured Mabel, the cashier at the A&P Supermarket was one solely based on physiognomy. Every time we went to replenish our supply of Ovaltine, he’d whisper, “She’s got big breasts. Believe me, she’s looking for action.”

It got to the point that every female in our neighborhood, except our mothers and the nuns at Saint Pancras Grammar School, of course, were certifiable nymphomaniacs. It had to be an epidemic right up there with the Black Plague. Everywhere we turned, we were overrun with oversexed women just itching to pounce on our pre-adolescent bodies for their own gratification.

Somehow, miraculously, we avoided direct contact with the contagion. Although there were a few dangerous near-misses, like the night we went trick-or-treating on Halloween, and Mrs. Roach invited a few of us into her house to pick our candy. She was wearing a robe, and when she turned suddenly to answer the phone, it flew open and you could see, if you looked real hard, of course, she was wearing her infamous see-through underwear. Naturally, we skipped the candy corn and bars of Bit O’ Honey and left immediately. No amount of enticement could bend our young Catholic wills.

The day after eighth grade graduation, the guys on the block met me for one last time before marching off to adulthood and high school. We played two games of Johnny-on-the-Pony, four games of Chinese handball against the Wertz candy store wall on Central Avenue, and then formed our brotherhood circle to predict the future. Donnie would become a priest and work in the mission fields of Africa; Richie would marry Maryann Kurtz and run her father’s bakery store after he died; Walter was a sneak so he definitely would become a spy, and so on. Strangely, the highest possible honor was bestowed upon me. All agreed I would become the first of the “68th Street Rangers” to mate with a real live nympho.

Life eventually made a mockery of all our prophecies, except one. I did get to mate with a real live nympho ... well, almost.

Two years later, a virtuous life of prayer, sacrifice and the fact that my father had connections landed me the greatest summer job in the universe for a fifteen-year-old extrovert — social director at McNaughton Farms Resort in the Irish-Catholic section of the Catskill Mountains. Well, technically I was hired to be a pot washer, but the social director, Byron Absect, was fired because he preferred to spend his days in the lotus position on the floor of the sports equipment shack in quiet Zen meditation rather than organizing the bourgeois pursuits of scavenger hunts and cribbage tournaments.

Thus I became the sole determinant of the recreational schedule of 222 weekly guests, mostly female, mostly blue-collar, but all joined by a common bond: let's get crazy and have a ball.

I was born to satisfy their fantasies. After all, Jerry Lewis and Jackie Gleason were my role models. Sure, we got crazy, but it was all good, clean fun. That was the only kind we knew in those days. There were the sing-a-long hayrides, the donkey softball games, the boys-dress-as-girls, girls-dress-as-boys costume dinner parties, and the weenie roasts in center field on Wednesday nights before the "Salute to the Forties" amateur night across the street at the casino.

It was at one such weenie roast that the fateful prophecy of the "68th Street Rangers" came dangerously close to reality. A bona fide, real live nympho was about to challenge the very core of my strict Catholic upbringing.

Her name was Jobyna Ralston. She wasn't a guest. She just showed up one night and blended in with the merriment. She was everything the guys on the block would have imagined the ultimate temptress to be — flaxen hair, farm-fresh wholesome looks, a world-class gymnast's body, and breasts that would easily have shuttled Mabel of the A&P to the second team. She was happy, energetic, and dripped hormones every time she opened her perfect mouth to speak. She wore the first pair of short shorts ever seen on the Irish side of the Catskills, and continued the fashion breakthrough by eschewing the use of a bra under her thin muslin blouse with the fleur-de-lis sheep dancing at the precise spot where the apex of her bosom pushed the imagination of every male slapping mustard and relish on their weenies.

Jobyna was a 16-year-old Circe, a seductress by nature's design made more desirable by the fact that she did not appear to work at it. She played charades, enthusiastically joined the sing-a-long, and shyly tried to muffle her giggles when a few naughty words found their way into our "Biggest Lie Contest."

I figured I didn't have a chance, so I made no overtures. Oh, heck, that's not it. The truth is that the altar boy side of my nature was dousing my flaming libido with massive amounts of holy water and guilt. Besides, I was greatly overmatched. She was obviously a veteran of the sins of the flesh. I wasn't even a rookie.

Then fate opened the door to the palace.

"I'll help you clean up when everybody leaves," she whispered as I repackaged the unused frankfurter buns.

She did. We loaded the '38 Chevy pick-up with the empty kegs of beer, No. 10 jars of condiments and leftovers, and then neatly restored the party area for another day.

Then it happened.

"Oh, darn. I spilled some ginger ale on my clothes," she said. "I'm going to dry them by the fire, if you don't mind."

My response froze somewhere between my loins and my throat, because the desirable Miss Jobyna was taking off her shorts and blouse and holding them close to the glowing charcoal in the grill. *Holding them*, mind you. I was now less than 10 feet from my first naked female. Oh sure, she was wearing panties, but they were even more transparent than Mrs. Roach's on the clothesline and could hardly be the cause of downgrading her condition to *semi-naked*. Next, she turned to me, revealing the first pair of designer-perfect breasts I had ever seen in person. My body went numb. Well, most of my body. Then she calmly spoke the words every "68th Street Ranger" and every other male who ever lived through puberty yearns to hear, "I'm a nympho. I need sex all the time. Does that bother you?"

Bother me? Lady, you just dissociated all my major organs from the rest of my body and left me a shivering mass of jelly. Yeah, I'm bothered, but I don't think I can do anything about it. But I can't let her know that, so I call on Jerry Lewis to answer her. It had to be Jerry. My voice had risen higher than a

Hawaiian falsetto and I was moving like a spastic in a windstorm as I responded, “Hey, this is America. You can be anything you want.”

Even though this encounter happened over 40 years ago, I remember every single detail of every single moment of what happened to me after this. It’s probably a male thing but, somehow, the memory takes an indelible picture of your first meeting with a nympho that no amount of time can erode.

Miss Jobyna moved into my bloodstream and exploded every hormone in my body. She quickly elevated the sometimes awkward rite of passage known as “making out” to a pleasure right up there with the beatific vision or shaking hands with Joe DiMaggio. She brought the volcano to the point of eruption but, alas, 10 years of parochial school training was too much of an obstacle even for the Homeric skills of a naked, bona fide nymphomaniac. I broke off our lust by insisting, “We ought to really get to know one another better before we ... get to know one another.” Who am I trying to kid? That wasn’t it. My volcano *had* erupted, prematurely, and I needed some clever camouflage, quickly.

She smiled the smile of a veteran warrior watching a raw recruit fumble through boot camp and said, “Okay. Let’s go to the drive-in movie tomorrow night.”

“Eh, that would be great, but I don’t have a car.”

“No problem,” she said, as she slithered into her dry clothes. “I’ve got a friend with a car. We’ll double date. You got a friend who likes to, ah, groove? You know what I mean?”

My God! Of course I knew what she meant. She was bringing another nympho. Imagine, two nymphos in one lifetime, and they were paying for the gas. The guys on the block would never believe this. I raced back to my cottage to tell my roommate and prospective double date partner, Billy, the dishwasher, the incredible opportunity we were facing.

Poor Billy was so overcome with possibility thinking he couldn’t make a complete sentence. He just kept clapping his hands and pinching his cheeks exclaiming, “Wow. Oh, boy. Oh, boy. Nymphos. Wow. Oh, boy. Oh, boy!”

Although an admitted virgin, Billy felt he knew the female psyche better than any other 16-year-old lothario-in-training. He assumed command of all preparations for our sexual debut into a life of wanton debauchery.

“We gotta be cool. Can’t be too anxious. Play hard to get. It gets them hot.”

“But Billy, they’re nymphos. They’re born hot. They wouldn’t care if we jumped them as soon as we get in the car.”

He got indignant. “Look, nymphos are like all women. The less you give them, the more they want you. Just act like you’re not interested, and we’ll drive them nuts. Trust me.”

I didn’t, but I had to live with him in an eight-by-ten room until Labor Day, so I agreed.

His next piece of strategy, however, made perfect sense to me. “We’ll wear two jocks apiece. It’ll tighten us up and keep the ol’ firehose from shooting off before we want it to. Know what I mean?”

I knew what he meant.

Jobyna and friend drove up promptly at 5:00 P.M. in a shiny ’54 Chevy Impala with Flash Gordon tailfins and matching pink sweaters with the lowest V-cut ever seen in the Irish Catholic Catskills. It was beginning to look like we should have gone to three jock straps for insurance.

The friend, Dorinda, was a Marilyn Monroe clone, complete with super-glossed ruby red lips and a bra-less bosom even larger than Jobyna’s. She was older, maybe late twenties, early thirties, but one of those happy chameleons that seems to adopt the energy of the group she’s with and feels totally comfortable.

She drove. Billy was up front with her, while Jobyna and I settled in the back seat.

The six miles to the Greenville Drive-In Theatre and Swap Meet was relatively uneventful, mainly because every time Billy looked in the rear-view mirror and saw my super-sexy date reaching for any part of my anatomy, he’d flash me that “Remember, play hard-to-get” look, and I’d reluctantly disengage.

We steadfastly maintained our strategy of “playing it cool” well into the first reel of Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*. That’s when Billy let out a strange sound that was a combination full-out moan and half-hearted giggle. Obviously, Marilyn Monroe had touched him where no other female had ever touched him before. The bugle charge had been sounded. Our joint resistance to sin immediately dissolved in the steam heat of passion.

While Burt Lancaster and Montgomery Clift were still two reels away from their moment of truth, Billy and I were rapidly approaching ours. Our first experience with the ecstasy of the mating process, and with two bona fide nymphos at that, was just moments away, or about as long as it takes to remove two athletic supporters over your cordovans, when *it* happened. The world stopped spinning on its axis. Time stood still and a giant camera high in the heavens burned a picture of this unspeakable infamy deep within our Christian guilt that we were destined to carry around for the rest of our lives. No amount of penance would free us. We would be remembered right up there with Judas Iscariot as the world’s most loathsome betrayers of goodness.

It was only nine words spoken by Miss Jobyna, but it was the first one that did all the damage. She said, “*Mom*, could you please move the front seat up a little?”

Billy and I froze in our own self-contempt for a very long time. Finally, he broke the silence, slowly turning toward Jobyna with the agonizing look of Quasimodo under the lash and disbelievingly asked, “Is Dorinda really your mother?”

Jobyna nonchalantly assured us she was and added, “Hey, no big thing. We double date all the time.”

Billy’s moral indignation resounded throughout the outdoor theatre and threatened to drown out Burt Lancaster’s showdown with the Japanese Air Force bombing Schofield Barracks.

“My God,” he shouted. Two nymphos is one thing, but a nympho and her nympho mother — my God! That’s going too far!”

We were unsuccessful that night in hitching a ride home. Probably most motorists are turned off by the sight of two slumped-shouldered teenagers holding a pair of athletic supporters and spitting a lot. The spitting was more symbolic than functional. At times like this you feel your mouth and your conscience

are hooked up in tandem. If you clean out the bad taste in your mouth, it scientifically follows your conscience gets cleansed as well.

Billy didn't speak to me until Labor Day that year, when we were packing up our summer and heading back to our junior year in High School.

He shook my hand as we boarded the No. 20 Greyhound bus and said, "No hard feelings." Then he paused in deep thought before posing the greatest moral dilemma of our young lives. "You know, if you're ready to lose your virginity to two nymphos, why should you stop just because they're a family?"

We would have the rest of our lives to think about it.