



*Ralph Shapira,
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has shared the following on
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four PDF documents:*

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MY FORTUNATE LIFE

Chapter 1, The Countryplace

Posted on June 8, 2022

I have lived an extraordinarily fortunate life in the wonderful U.S. of A. for 76 years. I was born in 1946 into a comfortable Jewish family in Pittsburgh. My father, a Columbia-trained lawyer, was an executive in a supermarket chain co-founded by my grandfather. My mother, a homemaker, also had a graduate degree from Columbia. Neither Mom nor Dad were physically affectionate parents — I wasn't hugged or kissed after early childhood — but I was well cared for and knew I was loved in the matter-of-fact, non-demonstrative fashion of the times. I never had to endure war, poverty, abandonment or abuse.

I was the third of three boys spaced 2 ½ years apart. A baby sister followed seven years later whom I adored. We lived in a modest brick home on a narrow block-long one way lane adjoining a sylvan park. Cars were so few and drove so slowly that we comfortably rode bikes and played ball in the street. I managed to get myself hit by a car once, on ice in winter, but it only knocked me to my knees and pushed me a few feet.

We lived in the city during the week, but the most vivid part of my growing up was spending weekends and vacations in the country. In 1950, my parents bought a 50-acre rundown mountain homestead nestled against Chestnut Ridge in the Appalachians, at the end of a half-mile gravel road 56 miles east of Pittsburgh. It had a one-room uninsulated shack that we called the Little House, with a cold water kitchen sink, no bathroom and an outhouse. Some of my fondest memories are falling asleep in that rustic room, surrounded by my family and listening to my

mother doing dishes, the patter of rain on the thin roof, or the crackling fire.

We shared the house with a five foot long blacksnake that usually lay coiled above us on a rock ledge of the fireplace chimney just below the ceiling. We were happy to have it since it fed on



the mice that infested the place. The snake came and went as it pleased; the place was so ramshackle we never knew where it was getting in or out.

The Little House sat beside a one-acre pond tucked against a high forested hill. My favorite activities involved the “Lake,” as we generously called our pond. We swam in it in summer and ice skated on it in winter. I became enraptured with its denizens. I caught and briefly kept frogs, newts and water

snakes. We fished idly for bass and bluegills, and occasionally ate our delicious catch. I made a dam in its outflow stream and watched my little pond teem with life.

My favorite animals were the turtles. I loved rowing out towards a painted turtle sunning itself on a fallen branch. When I got near, the turtle would dive and hide in the mud at the bottom. I would then row to a spot 10 or 15 feet away where I guessed it would resurface, and wait. Sometimes I was right and the turtle came up close enough that I could scoop it into my net. I would keep it in a plastic swimming pool and play with it for a few hours, then let it go to play again another day. On hikes I would sometimes find beautiful box or wood turtles, and keep them a small while. The Lake also harbored a few huge, prehistoric-looking snapping turtles. They would sun themselves floating on the surface, their noses little triangles in the air and their shells a long dark shadow below. Fortunately, they were extremely shy and never got near us.

There were no other homes on our road. We were surrounded by tens of thousands of acres of beautiful hardwood forests, streams, meadows and trails, which we freely explored. We virtually never saw or heard another person except for distant gunshots in hunting season.

There was a high stone promontory on the side of the ridge that we called “The Rocks,” towering out of the forest about a 45 minute hike from our house, which became our frequent hiking destination. We would climb to the top, where we could see far into the beautiful Laurel Valley below. The view was particularly spectacular in the fall when the leaves turned bright oranges, reds and yellows. Everywhere out there was stunning in the fall.



Our family would drive to our “Countryplace,” as we called it, every weekend and on vacations, and live in a paradise of unspoiled nature. It became the gravitational center of our family life, where weekday schoolwork and other concerns were put aside.

Every morning at breakfast my father would announce a work plan for the day, whether clearing dense hawthorn thickets, cutting firewood, working our half-acre vegetable garden, or, on rainy or snowy days, burning the brush we had cut.



In summer, when work was done, we boys would strip off our sweaty clothes and leap naked into the cool lake, where we swam and played on inner tubes and rafts. As I grew older I became expert with axe, chainsaw and garden tractor. I enjoyed mowing our acres of grass.

After the first year my parents hired a local farmer/carpenter, Mr. Muir, to build us a larger but still simple two-bedroom house near the Little House. Mr. Muir became our friend and handyman, who would work with us

occasionally on big projects and teach us city folks how to do things in the country.

At the end of each workday my Dad and he would have a small argument. Dad would ask what he owed. Mr. Muir would add up his hours and quote a figure. My Dad would say it wasn't enough, and propose a higher payment. Mr. Muir would refuse to accept it, and they would quibble until a compromise was reached at a figure higher than Mr. Muir had asked. When he died alone in his farmhouse in his late 80's, decades after his wife had passed — they were childless — Mr. Muir was found in his easy chair holding a picture of himself working beside my father at the Countryplace.

The new house had two big picture windows overlooking the Lake and the mountain beyond. We had an indoor bathroom for the first time. I was happy to leave behind the spidery outhouse, which vaguely frightened me, and we celebrated when we burned it down.

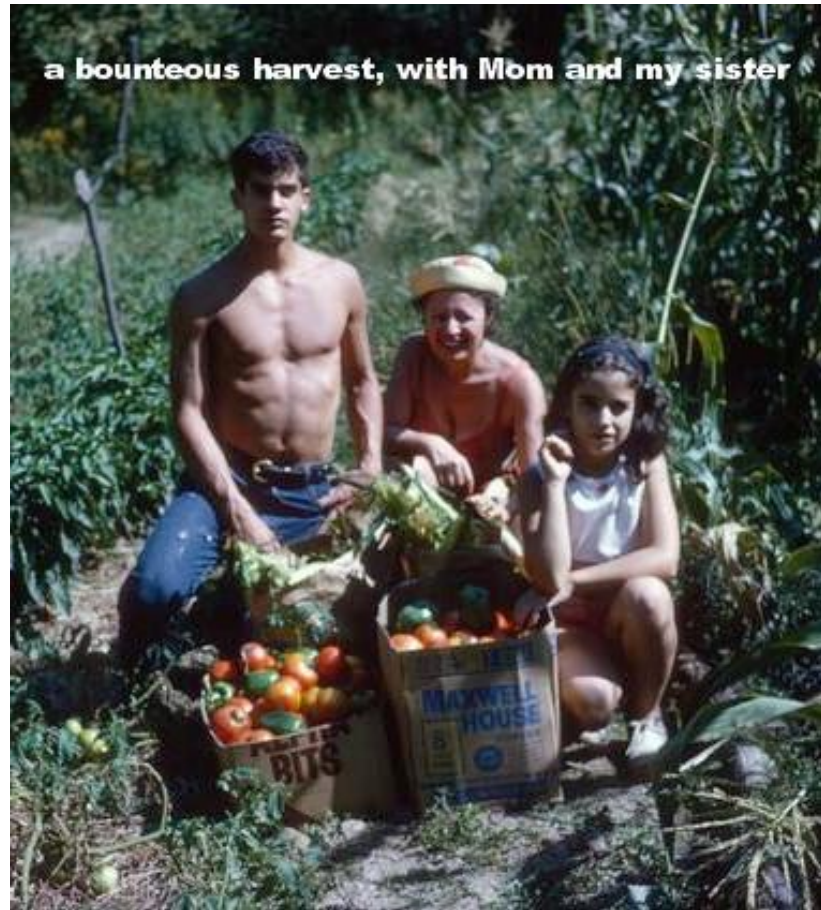
The house was heated in winter by a wood-burning fireplace with vents to its two bedrooms, one for my parents and the other for us children. It got stone cold in the middle of winter nights after the fire burned out, but we slept soundly under heavy piles of wool blankets.

Some of my favorite times were rainy days when it was too wet to work. I would kneel against the back of the couch and look through the picture window at the mesmerizing patterns of rain swirling across the Lake. On cold rainy days, at nights and in winter, I loved sitting and reading by the fire, stirring the flames and fetching logs from the woodpile. Snowy and rainy days were also when we would occasionally burn the brush we had cut. The flames would shoot 20 feet in

the air, searing our faces almost unbearably, as the snow or rain cooled us from above.

My mother made certain we appreciated the beauty around us. The most cheerful person I have ever known, she thought Western Pennsylvania was the most beautiful place in the country, even after we took two cross country summer trips touring the western national parks.

She had what we jokingly called the “look gene”: wherever we went, she would command us to “Look!” — “Oh, just look” at the blooming mountain laurel, “look” at those tall tulip trees, “look” at the streams surging with winter melt, “look” at the views from the Rocks and mountaintop.



My older brothers were grumpy about being controlled in that way, but I tried hard to absorb and appreciate everything she pointed out, and regarded it as a special bond between us. She made me a nature lover for life. And I have inherited and inflicted the Look Gene on my children.

In 1994, decades after my childhood, the Countryplace was threatened with extinction. The owner of a 5,000 acre property, abutting ours and covering the entirety of Chestnut Ridge behind us, announced a plan to develop his land into a giant limestone quarry. That would have erased our mountain, destroyed our natural streams, blanketed our property in dust and turned our quiet gravel road into a highway for 80 giant trucks a day.

My brother Danny mobilized his Pittsburgh law firm to fight the project. They helped organize the neighbors on both sides of the mountain, choked off potential road access, won a court battle over disputed surveys, defeated proposed railroad access and reversed a decision by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection to grant a permit. They succeeded in killing the project before a single shovelful of rock was dug. Every threatened wilderness should have defenders like these.

Remarkably, our family’s life at the Countryplace continues to this day. My dear parents are gone and I moved to California, but my three siblings have expanded the property as adjoining acreage came for sale. Each now has a house with its own lake for their families’ weekends, and

the place remains the center of our extended family's life. I visit with my children when I get the chance.

There has been a great re-wilding of the area since my childhood. The trees in the forests, logged in the early 20th century, are now tall and mature. There are flocks of wild turkeys, and porcupines, which we never saw in my youth. And there are bears.

The bears have provided us an extraordinary experience. The Pennsylvania Game Commission puts radio tags on adult female bears and checks their health and reproduction during winter hibernation. When a mother bear hibernates on our property, the rangers invite our family to join the inspection. They briefly remove the cubs to measure and take tissue samples from the mother, and hand them to us to cuddle inside our parkas until they're done. I cannot describe how adorable the bear cubs are. It is the thrill of a lifetime to snuggle with them for a while, feeling their little claws on my chest, then see them returned to their sleeping mother.

In the early 1990's I tried to recreate the Countryplace experience in California on a plot of wilderness acreage surrounded by National Parkland high in the Malibu Mountains. But that's another story.



Chapter 2, Schooling

Posted on June 14, 2022

On weekdays in the city I attended Falk School, a small laboratory school of the University of Pittsburgh atop a hill near the University. I thought my third grade teacher, Miss Hawkins, was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I cannot imagine how the practice began, but every morning on arrival, alone among my classmates, I would walk straight to Miss Hawkins' desk and kiss her on the cheek.



This seemed perfectly natural until one day our class was held on Pitt's main campus in an amphitheater classroom. Rows of elevated education-student observers loomed around us as we streamed in. As always, I walked straight up to Miss Hawkins and kissed her. Turning around to go to my desk, I was greeted by gales of laughter from the observers. I flushed red and still remember the humiliation.

I was in the advanced group of three in our class of 25. Lessee Klein, a thin, freckled, boyish girl with close cropped hair, was my academic equal; she was also the swiftest, best athlete in the class. I fell head over heels in love with her and thought about her constantly from first grade until we graduated in eighth. I never confessed my adoration, and if she had an inkling she never betrayed it.

In fourth grade, I had my first experience with what I now know was Attention Deficit Disorder ("ADHD", though I did not suffer its "hyperactive" component). I had to write a paper on Argentina. Although we had weeks to do it and the exercise merely required reading and summarizing the entry in our World Book Encyclopedia, I could not force myself to the task. The night before it was due, I worried myself into a frantic, weeping mess. My parents were attentive but would not help me write it. Eventually, near midnight, I pulled myself together enough to write it, and my mother typed it up for handing in. The ADHD problem, first revealed then, would bedevil my school performance all the way through college.

In the summer after eighth grade, I worked up the courage to phone Lessee and invite her to the movies. She said yes! My dad drove us to the local theater. I sat next to her throughout the film with my arm curved so uncomfortably atop the back of her chair that it fell asleep, yearning to touch her but not daring.

We never did touch. We went to different high schools and I lost track of her; my years-long obsession ended with the distraction of all the new girls in ninth grade. Decades later, I learned that Lessee had been killed in India in a bus crash on a mountain road. I felt and still feel a great loss that I never got to know her as an adult.



I entered Allderdice High School, Pittsburgh's largest public school with over 3,000 students, in ninth grade in 1960. Allderdice actually started in seventh grade, fed by a number of public elementary schools. That meant that when I finished my private school in eighth grade and entered Allderdice in ninth, virtually everyone else had already been there for two years. It seemed to me everyone was friends with everyone except me; I knew no one in that cavernous place except for one classmate from Falk.

I was apprehensive on my first day, as it turned out not without reason. When I went to my first civics class, Wesley Schmeltz, a hulking tackle on our football team known more for breaking legs than playing his position, paused behind my chair before taking his next to mine. Without warning, he punched me hard, squarely in the back of my head. I slumped forward and saw stars, then his face pressed close to mine. He snarled, "Kid, you're gonna give me every answer to every test or I'm gonna put you in the hospital."

Though not otherwise a bright light academically, Schmeltz aced Ninth grade civics.

Later in the year, during a break between classes when tightly packed throngs of students would stream past one another, I witnessed another unlucky student's encounter with Schmeltz. I was walking down a wide stairway when the crowd stopped abruptly. My skinny friend Paul had accidentally bumped Schmeltz in passing. Wesley grabbed him by the neck with his huge left hand and, squeezing tightly, pinned him against the wall six inches off the floor, his right fist cocked at Paul's head. Paul was crimson in strangulation and his arms and legs jerked like a crazy puppet on strings. I stood by and did nothing, frozen in fear and deeply ashamed of not helping my friend. Then tall Billy Conn Jr, son of the eponymous Irish boxer from Pittsburgh renowned for an epic title fight against heavyweight champion Joe Louis, strode through the crowd. Conn grabbed Schmeltz from behind by his shirt collar and belt, pulled him off Paul and swung him away, as Paul slid limply to the floor.

That ended that fight. Nobody in our town, not even Wesley Schmeltz, wanted to mess with anybody named Billy Conn. I wished I could be more like him.

I was a good but not outstanding high school student. I could never force myself to keep up with nightly reading assignments. I had no concept that I suffered from a medically treatable condition. Decades later, as a lawyer, I discovered Ritalin and Adderall, and found them transformative.

I rationalized my apparent unwillingness to study by convincing myself it wasn't "cool" to do homework or prepare for classes. What *was* cool was to show how smart I was by doing no class reading all semester, cramming the textbooks before finals in long, sleepless nights (when the pressure finally overcame my disability), and getting good grades nonetheless. This worked in most classes, but it was hopeless in French and calculus, un-crammable courses where I pulled down D's and F's.

Late in my junior year, the school held an annual election for President of Student Council. The faculty nominated four candidates, and I was one. The other three were much better known and popular. Students' votes were to be cast following an all-school assembly at which we candidates would make speeches.

I was called first up to the podium. Addressing the packed audience in our huge two tier auditorium, I began: "A-students, B-students, C-students, . . . and Friends." That got a good laugh. Then, referring to a notoriously hard-grading English teacher and to my best friend, another of the candidates, I continued: "I was going to tell you that I got a "D" from Mr. Sommerfeld, so you'd know I was one of the bunch [pause for laughter] . . . , but then I found out my friend Rick Slone up here did me one better." That brought the house down. It also gave me a powerful sense of how to engage and amuse an audience, which served me well in later life.

The rest of my speech was about increasing school spirit and other council initiatives, and it cannot have been very exciting. But none of the other candidates even tried to be funny, and I ran away with the election.

During the summer between junior and senior years, I attended Northwestern University's Summer High School Institute in Speech and Debate. Although I was active on my school's debate team, the intense practice I got at the Institute considerably sharpened my speaking skills.

The Institute had a companion film division. A girl there asked me to star in a movie she was making, a Buster Keaton-like slapstick comedy in which I would play a hapless beach lifeguard. We had great hijinks filming it on the Evanston waterfront. When the final student films were to be shown at the end of term, I was running late, so I stuck out my thumb to hitchhike to the auditorium. A car stopped, but the driver and a passenger were Institute faculty members. Because hitchhiking was against Institute rules, they drove me back to my dorm and confined me to quarters. I never saw my film.

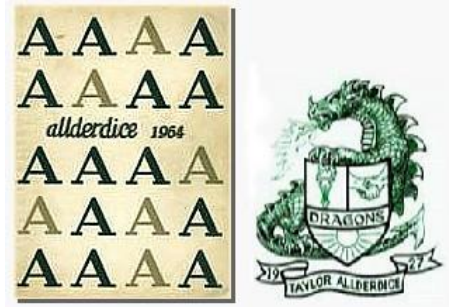
The student council presidency put me in a powerful position senior year. I was in charge of handing out counsel committee chairmanships and memberships, prized "extracurricular activities" that would sweeten my classmates' college entrance applications. My control over this largess made me much more popular than before.

I was the starting backstroke on our swim team, which reached the finals for the All City Swim championship against South Hills senior year. My teammate Paul Safyan was a prodigy who could win any event, including mine. But the rules limited each swimmer to three events, and our coach had to be strategic about where to use Paul.

Backstroke was the third to last event. When its time neared, we all knew which team was going to win the last two events. The championship would turn on the backstroke, where we needed to win both first and second place. The coach put Safyan in, guaranteeing a first. The unknown was whether I could beat the other team's best backstroke for second place. We knew his times in prior meets were about the same as mine, so second place would be a nail-biter. If I beat him, we would be City Champions; if not, we would lose the meet.



The gun sounded and I swam harder than ever before. The race was close but I touched the wall a fraction of a second before him, winning second place. Our teammates leapt out of their chairs in celebration and hoisted me on their shoulders. I've never forgotten the joy of that victory, nor the irony that it was me they carried, not Safyan, who had won the race handily but whose victory was pre-ordained.



But my enduring high school fame came when we at student council, without consulting the administration, announced that the next day would be “sweatshirt day.” When everyone showed up that day wearing sweatshirts, the administration thought it somehow subversive, and the principal announced over the PA system that everyone had to take their sweatshirts off immediately.

The other kids had worn their sweatshirts over their regular shirts, so taking them off was uneventful. I, on the other hand, had worn my sweatshirt with nothing underneath. I was angry at the administration for countermanding our sweatshirt day, so in a spontaneous act of defiance, I stripped off my sweatshirt and walked through the halls bare from the waist up, my sweatshirt in my hand. I was thrilled by my counter-move, and equally pleased to show off my taught swimmer's body to the girls.

No student had ever appeared bare-chested before, and a shock wave reverberated through the school. Between classes, when we were all in the halls, students laughed, high-fived and celebrated my giving the middle finger to the administration. After a couple of hours I was apprehended and sent home. At every class reunion since that day 55 years ago, classmates have told me how much they loved it the time I stripped my sweatshirt off.

I didn't have a steady girlfriend in high school and was almost always away with my family on weekends, but I did date some. For a while I was seeing Barbara, a notoriously “fast” girl. One Saturday when my parents had to stay in town I took Barbara to the Countryplace for the day. We practically leapt into bed, and she initiated me into the wonders of sex at age 16. It was a great time and place to do it.

When time came to apply to colleges in fall of senior year, I felt my prospects limited by my less-than-stellar GPA, despite strong standardized test scores and extracurriculars. Both of my brothers had gone to Oberlin College in Ohio, the best small liberal arts college close to Pittsburgh, and I had enjoyed my visits there. I have never been particularly adventurous and was content to follow their footsteps. I applied to Oberlin “early decision” and was admitted promptly. With college assured, I became even more scholastically lackadaisical than before for the rest of the year.

Chapter 3, Oberlin

Posted on June 18, 2022

Oberlin College was an idyllic place with vast parklike lawns, mature trees and lovely old buildings. Students were not allowed cars, so social life revolved around our classmates. All freshmen and most others lived two-to-a-room in severe 1950's style dormitories. Meals were served in the girl's freshman dorm and boys had to wear a tie and jacket to dinner. Girls had a nightly curfew, and boys and girls were forbidden to be in a room together with a closed door. The town of Oberlin was "dry" — you couldn't buy liquor or anything stronger than 3.2% beer, and there were no fraternities or sororities to host drunken parties. My friends and I didn't do much drinking in my four years there.



But in sophomore year, the fall of 1965, we discovered marijuana. The first time I smoked, I became rigid with fear as my conscious control began to slip away. My alarmed friends rallied around and even ran to fetch my brother. Finally I was able to relax into the high and calmed down.

My bad first trip didn't discourage me. There was always plenty of pot and I partook often. I made a group of four or five close friends who smoked pot, laughed and had great times together throughout our years at Oberlin.



A particular favorite was Peter Griswold (left), who had a warm laugh and heart, a round cherubic face and a twinkle in his eye. His sense of humor meshed perfectly with mine, and still does. Though we live 3,000 miles away, our close friendship has endured.

I approached classes like I did in high school, but my problem was worsened by Oberlin's freedom: not only did I not have to keep up with class reading assignments, I didn't even have to *go* to classes, and often did not.

Unprepared when I did show up, I rarely contributed to class discussions and was barely noticeable academically. Nor did I participate in many campus activities outside class, so I was not as well known as others. My focus, and the reason I enjoyed my college years immensely, was hanging out and laughing with my good friends, trying to find women to be with, and driving my Honda 305 Superhawk motorcycle.

Although I didn't understand it then, my "do-nothing-then-cram" study habit was my way of coping with ADHD. It was not until the panicked emergency of imminent finals overcame my attention deficit that I was able to focus intensely. That meant that I took all my finals after virtually sleepless nights of cramming the material (I always tried to catch an hour or two of sleep). While I was able to learn the course for the test, the strategy wasn't conducive to long-term retention.

Once I persuaded a lovely classmate to study with me the night before a final exam. Our study session devolved into a night-long make-out. She left in the morning and took the exam, while I slept through it. When I awoke I desperately sought out the class's professor, and, without identifying the girl, explained to him exactly what had happened. He let me take a make-up exam.

Students needed special permission to move out of dormitory housing. Through some now-forgotten stratagem, I got approved and rented a room in "Totsky house," an old three-story clapboard a few blocks off-campus where my friend Buck lived. On a couple of nights, the two of us smoked a lot of pot in his room and chugged a bottle of codeine cough syrup from the pharmacy. Totally blasted, we then did handstands against his bedroom wall. Holding it as long as we could, our blood rushing to our heads, we then stood up quickly to produce a "white flash" in our brains that nearly knocked us unconscious. Such are the sorts of things lonely boys do without girls.

Living in Totsky house was the first time in my life I had to do my own laundry. My mother had handled it growing up and the two dorms I had lived in both had maid service. While I learned quickly how to wash my clothes, I had no idea that my sheets needed to be changed and washed. I slept in the same increasingly soiled bed linens for almost an entire semester until finally I figured it out.

In the spring of sophomore year I invited an attractive classmate I'll call Ellen Goodman to take a day trip with me on my motorcycle. Driving through a small town, we approached a traffic light turning yellow. I stupidly gunned the bike to beat the red light. At the same time, a car in the approaching lane on the other side of the intersection turned left across my lane. I braked hard and pulled the bike left and down into a skid, but was helpless to stop, and we plowed into the car's right front fender.



Ellen flew in the air and landed on her back on the car's roof, fracturing some vertebra. I was propelled into the car's fender. I tried vainly to block the impact with my forearm and sustained minor injuries less serious than Ellen's. An ambulance transported us together to the town hospital, where we were diagnosed, treated and released the same day. I don't remember how we got back to Oberlin — my bike was a wreck, and I never rode it again — but our time together in the ambulance and hospital brought us closer. Despite the inauspicious start, Ellen became my girlfriend for the last couple of weeks of sophomore year. I was very fond of her and thought we had a future.

That summer vacation, Ellen traveled with an Oberlin group to Paris to take classes. We were sad about parting. We agreed to meet again in the fall on the first day of school, at noon by the campus bookstore, and we exchanged letters frequently throughout the summer.

When fall came, I went to the bookstore on the appointed day and time, excited for our reunion. I waited . . . and waited . . . but she never showed up. I was heartbroken. I learned later that she had become involved with another student in Paris. We must have passed by each other in that small place many times later that year and the next, though I have no recollection of it. But I'm certain we never spoke again.

I became friends with an odd couple, a flagrantly gay student and a sexually voracious heterosexual female classmate. They would regale me with tales of their weekend sexual competitions — which of them could have sex with the most men on a given night. She complained that she lost every time, because heterosexual encounters required more time undressing and redressing. She and I had encounters of our own in private. Our friend knew and pleaded to be included, but I resisted.

One night in junior year I smoked pot and walked across campus to a 3.2% beer joint in the basement of Student Union. The bar was crowded, noisy and smoky. I circulated, talking and drinking with friends, and then saw a girl I'll call Nicole Hargrave standing alone near me. Nicole was the kind of girl who made guys tongue-tied: she was unapproachably striking, tall and shapely with high cheekbones, beautiful lips and stunning long blond hair. I had often noticed her — everyone noticed Nicole — but never had the nerve to talk to her.

My insecurities dampened by pot and beer, I stepped over and got her attention. I can't imagine what possessed me to do what I did next; I have never done the like before or since. I leaned in close to Nicole and said in her ear, above the din of the bar and music, "You wanna fuck?"

She straightened up and considered me a long moment, then leaned forward and said in my ear, "I'm with some people now and can't get away yet. Give me your address and I'll come by later."

Stunned by this improbable success, I grabbed pen and paper, wrote my name and address, and gave it to her. She looked at the paper, nodded, folded it and put it in her handbag. I left the bar to straighten up my room and wait for her.

I was then living on the third floor of another clapboard house with five friends. My room looked out under the eaves onto the street and sidewalk below. When I finished tidying and showering, I pulled a chair to the window and sat watching the sidewalk, brimming with excitement.

Half an hour passed, then an hour. After an hour and a half I realized she likely wasn't coming, but I sat forlornly in that window watching the sidewalk until the wee hours of morning. I ached with disappointment and loneliness, and felt rejected and pathetic. I imagined her laughing with friends back at the bar about my crude proposal and the fact that I was waiting like a fool for her to appear, when she never had any intention of coming. Finally I went to bed, deeply dejected.

I ran into Nicole on campus a few days later. I told her I had waited for her that night and asked what happened. Without apology, she told me, “Something came up and I couldn’t get away.”

I asked whether she wanted to go to a movie together. She said, “Sure.” This time we did meet up and had a great date. I found her funny, irreverent and warm. Within a few days, we became romantic.

Nicole was my first serious girlfriend and we stayed together my last and two happiest years of college. She got along well with my friends and we enjoyed great times together. I took her home one weekend to visit my parents at the Countryplace, and I visited hers, a fundamentalist Christian family in upstate New York whose rigid religious strictures had deeply estranged her.

Sitting at their grim dining table facing a large painting of Jesus, I felt like Woody Allen visiting Annie Hall’s parents, who were able to see him only as a bearded Jew in Hasidic garb.



In junior year Peter Griswold and I were assigned to the same co-op housing dormitory for meals. When I went to the bathroom one day, I penned a highly obscene graffiti on the stall wall featuring Peter’s mother, a vat of Vaseline and the Washington Monument. I told Peter to have a look, whereupon he penned an equally offensive paragraph to the effect that more strange men passed through my mother than the Seventh Avenue subway stop.

For many weeks, we added incredibly lewd “Mrs. Griswold” and “Mrs. Shapira” insults to the stall wall daily. Word spread, and it became a “thing” around campus to visit the bathroom and laugh at the latest outrages. Whatever all this might have said about the state of Peter’s and my psychological health, we and others found it hilarious. The duel ended abruptly when another co-op staged an attack on ours and white-washed the stall wall. No one had written down our now-lost substantial body of collaborative humor. We bemoaned its erasure but never again rejoined the battle of mother insults.

When Army recruiters scheduled interviews with Oberlin seniors my junior year, we students demonstrated and blocked their car from campus.



Then in the fall of senior year, Nicole and I and busloads of Oberlin fellow-travelers went to Washington to join the 100,000-strong anti-war March on the Pentagon immortalized by Norman Mailer in a best-selling book.

I remember the exhilarating feeling of getting swept up in that huge festival-like crowd of protestors. I suffered my first bitter taste of National Guard tear-gas when we got near the Pentagon. But mostly, it seemed like a huge, exciting coming-out party for our generation.

In the spring of senior year I got a call from Abigail, my sometimes high school girlfriend. She asked if she could drive up to visit me on an upcoming weekend. Although Nicole and I saw each other often, we weren't together every night and didn't live together. Imagining I could sneak Abigail in and out during the brief time she would be in town, I agreed to her visit. She came on a Saturday afternoon and we had an overnight reunion.

Nicole somehow got wind of the other woman. On Sunday afternoon after Abigail left, she stormed into my apartment rigid with fury. She marched straight to my refrigerator, pulled it open and began hurling its contents over her shoulders, making a horrible mess of broken glass, mayonnaise, meatloaf and other food on the floor and walls. Then she reached for my board and cinderblock shelves, carefully set aside my goldfish, and pulled them and their contents over onto the ruined food and floor. Nicole was a big girl, strong and filled with rage. She destroyed everything in my apartment she could lift or pull down — except the goldfish — then stormed out. I stood aside throughout, chastened by guilt. Not a word was said between us.

I wish to God I had learned my lesson about infidelity then and there, but I didn't. Decades later, my cheating would cause the greatest tragedy of my life.

As it was, I had a lot of cleaning up to do, of the apartment and of our relationship. I apologized profusely and begged Nicole to take me back, and eventually she relented. We stayed together junior and senior years, then went our separate ways to different coasts after graduation.

Because I was such an academic nonentity at Oberlin, I was never befriended by any faculty members — a supposed selling point for small liberal arts colleges — except for one prominent male professor in the government department, my major — the same guy who had let me retake the finals exam I had missed after an all-night tryst. He began including me in small groups of students he occasionally had over to his house for drinks, co-hosted by his student girlfriend. We drank heavily, always Jim Beam bourbon on the rocks. I never left his house remotely sober.

In senior year I took a seminar he taught. I was assigned to read and make a verbal half-hour presentation about an important new book, then lead class discussion. It was a command performance I couldn't avoid, and for once I studied the book and prepared diligently. When my presentation was over and class ended, the professor was practically hopping up and down with glee. "I knew you had it in you!" he said over and over, enthusiastically praising my performance. It was the only time I was recognized for anything academic at Oberlin.

Later that year he invited me to accompany him to a political science conclave in Cleveland. He would drive and we would share his hotel room. We arrived the night before the conference began and he introduced me to friends at an informal reception. As always, we drank a lot of bourbon.

We drank a lot more in his room, where he sat very close, to the point of touching. Finally it dawned on my inebriated brain that everything had been a prelude to having sex. I had never had a homosexual encounter, but, in the spirit of the times and the bourbon, I was not unwilling to try. We had oral sex, at least to the limited extent two stinking drunk men were able. However, I wasn't physically attracted to him and found the experience mildly distasteful. In the morning a hotel maid knocked and walked in, and was visibly shocked to see the two of us lying naked entangled in bedsheets. I looked up and saw her, but was still drunk and couldn't have cared less.

From my current vantage, I know the professor's interest in me, and the way he groomed and seduced me, was predatory and inexcusable. But I have never felt angry or victimized by it — I was a big boy, willing if not eager to experiment. The experience did not put me off girls, launch me into a life of homosexuality or harm me in any way.

Indeed, it may literally have saved my life. Facing the Vietnam War draft after graduation, my psychiatrist wrote to my draft board that I had homosexual experience and “tendencies,” and that got me out of the draft.

The beginning of senior year, 1967, was time to apply for still higher education. I had no idea what I wanted to do after college, so I applied to law school — I was told you can do pretty much anything with a law degree. I had decent but not great grades from my first three years of college, bolstered by strong LSAT and GRE exam scores, and Oberlin was a top college whose graduates were widely sought.

I was admitted to three of the best law schools in the country, UC Berkeley (“Boalt Hall”), the University of Michigan, and NYU. But the San Francisco hippie movement was in much-publicized full flower; I had no desire to continue on the academic treadmill when there was such fun to be had.

Amazingly, the University of Michigan Law School allowed accepted candidates to post a \$50 deposit and gain the right to begin school there any later year they wanted. It was the best \$50 I ever spent and my ticket to freedom. It enabled me to go off and do anything I wanted for as long as I wanted, yet still have the ability at any time to rejoin the “straight” world by becoming a Michigan-trained lawyer.



I graduated college on Memorial Day 1968 and left Ohio that day with my lifelong high school friend Ed Forstenzer in his Chevy Corvair convertible, headed for San Francisco. We missed the famous 1967 “summer of love” by a year, but still found plenty to go around.

For me, the best of Oberlin was the friendships, the lovers and the freedom. To this day, my closest Oberlin friends and I, scattered around the country, gather weekly on Zoom to talk and laugh like in the old days.

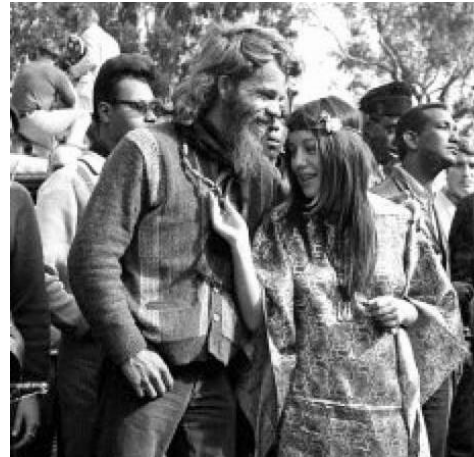
I hope you won't be overly shocked by one of my longest-held secrets — the predatory actions of one of our most prominent professors towards me. I wonder which of you may have suffered similar experiences with our professors . . . those were very different times than these.

Chapter 4, Berkeley

Posted on June 22, 2022

When I graduated college in May 1968, the radio was playing “When you come . . . To San Francisco . . . Be sure to wear . . . Flowers in your hair . . . ”

I left Ohio on graduation day with my high school friend Ed and drove straight across the country to the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco, where he and I joined an endless procession of long-haired hippies in flowing robes and flowers, floating like butterflies through Golden Gate Park and up Haight Street.



I first stayed on the floor of an unfurnished flat in the Mission District abandoned by a college friend with two paid weeks remaining on the lease. I was invited to a party in the Haight-Ashbury. I left the party at 2 am sky-high on pot and thought it a good idea to walk across town alone to my flat. I didn't consider that the route would take me through the heart of the Fillmore District, at that time an African American ghetto (since then “gentrified”).

My walk took me past a dozen teenagers hanging in front of a house on Hayes Street. One stepped up to me. I asked where I was. He said, “You're where you shouldn't be” and punched me in the mouth, knocking me to the pavement. The gang then dragged me into a dark alley, where they began kicking and punching my prone body. I felt them go through my pockets and take my wallet. I lay passively, suffering their blows while trying to shield my face and head with my arms and hands.

After an interminable pummeling, it dawned on me that they were going to keep kicking and punching me until I was dead. I was immediately flooded with a surge of adrenaline. I leapt to my feet and began running through the crowd of assailants, twirling my arms to throw off guys trying to hold me and screaming “HELP” at the top of my lungs. I vividly saw one teenager take a wind-up step forward as I ran by and kick me squarely in the balls, as if he were punting a football. I felt nothing except my own exploding energy.

I ran out of the alley back to Hayes Street barely ahead of my pursuers. At that lucky moment a Municipal bus was driving down the block. I ran alongside it and pounded wildly on its door, screaming for help. The driver saw me covered in blood and stopped mid-block to let me in. He then left his route and drove me straight to a hospital. I realized there that I had soiled my pants during my frenzied extraction.

Aside from cuts and bruises and a broken front tooth, I was not seriously injured. The mugging taught me something important about myself: Despite my self-image as a weakling and coward, I was capable of summoning great power if pushed to the wall. I recuperated for a day in my brother's house in Palo Alto, tended by his wonderful wife Karen.

After returning to my bare apartment, I saw a want ad in the San Francisco Chronicle for a lifeguard in Berkeley's Claremont Hotel.



I was unfamiliar with Berkeley and with the hotel, and I was stunned, when I arrived for an interview, to find that it is a grand, beautiful, sprawling behemoth in the Berkeley/Oakland hills, overlooking San Francisco Bay and out through the Golden Gate Bridge. I got the job, which paid \$400 a month plus room and board, and moved across the Bay into the worker area of the hotel, in the far back next to garbage bins.

I lived and worked there for about six months until the entire pool staff was summarily fired due to the misdeeds of our erratic alcoholic supervisor. I then moved into a room in a brown shingle home in the Berkeley foothills, sharing rent and living space with several other Oberlin graduates and Mac, a gardener at the hotel I had befriended.

One of the Obies, Phil Levy, had written a play called *Transfusion*, a brilliant, funny clown show for two clowns, a dancer and a musician. I agreed to play the short fat clown, while Phil played the tall skinny one; beautiful Kim Hahn and Steve Detray, both Obies, were the dancer and musician.



We performed *Transfusion* on weekends at free venues around town, always to good laughs and enthusiastic applause. A stage was built in the famous People's Park, and we gave the only performance ever given on it — candle lit, to a big crowd — before the police and National Guard closed the park and fenced it off (it had been built on University of California land wanted for another purpose). Huge protest demonstrations followed, where I was tear-gassed a second time. If you've never experienced it, . . . don't. We travelled to Oberlin and put our show on in its main performance theater, Hall Auditorium.

I took a civil service exam and got a job appraising houses for the Alameda County Property Tax Assessor's office. It was a lazy job. Each day we were assigned a number of houses to appraise, generally in new tract developments. It took only a couple of hours to do the daily work load, and all the appraisers in my crew would disperse well before noon, some to a second job. I would return to Berkeley to hang out with friends until 5 PM, when I would meet my coworkers again and check out for the day.

After a while I was promoted out of the "field" to the office's front desk in the County Administrative Building, where I became the public face of the Assessor's Office, explaining things to an endless line of property taxpayers with questions or complaints.

I signed up for Karate classes at a Japanese Dojo on University Avenue. Classes were three nights a week, and I never missed a class. I had fast reflexes and proved quite good at it. I learned to deliver powerful blows and excelled at sparing with my classmates. Rather than closing my eyes in fright and confusion as I had when my older brother waved his fists in front of my face, I learned to calmly look an attacker in the eye and block and counterpunch effectively. I earned a brown belt. Then one day I had to miss class for the first time. This somehow broke the spell, and I never went back.

On weekends and vacations, I explored the mountains and beaches of Northern California in my small Toyota pickup truck with a camper top, generally in a haze of psychedelic drugs, with friends and such women as I was occasionally able to attract.



I fell in love with Big Sur, with its beaches, crashing surf, high rolling mountains and endless springtime wildflowers.

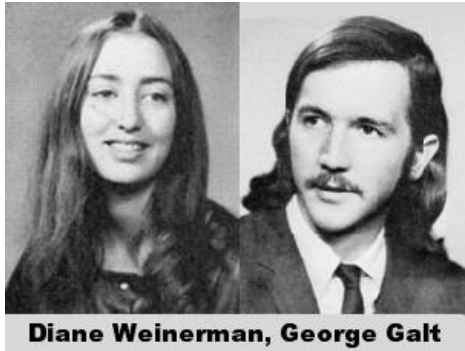
I marched in two huge anti-war demonstrations, in Berkeley and in San Francisco, when people tightly packed the wide streets as far as you could see in both directions.



I had been a hitchhiker myself, and often picked up others. Once, after I let a group out, I found hypodermic needles on my bed pad. Another time I picked up a beautiful young woman and enjoyed a days-long affair with her before she moved on.

My gardener housemate Mac, heavily tattooed from his many times in reform school and “Juvie” jail, was reputed to be the toughest fighter in working class Hayward. He had a physique like Popeye the Sailor Man. Mac was good company when he was sober or stoned. But when he drank heavily, he would turn white as a sheet and become crazy, aggressive and threatening. One day in that condition he got a big hunting knife and accosted me and several others in my bedroom. He closed us in behind its pocket doors and waved the knife up and down in the crack where the doors joined, screaming at the top of his lungs that he was going to kill us all. We were terrified, and had no way to summon help — this was long before cellphones, and my bedroom didn’t have a telephone. After an hour of terror, he went away. He was sober and contrite the next day, but we evicted him on the spot.

I often visited “Cloud Mountain,” a magnificent 640 acre mountaintop commune near the coast in Mendocino County founded by younger Obies Diney Weinerman, George Galt, Bob Sheridan, Jenny Thierman and Heather Johnson. Diney had bought the land with monies paid by an airline after a crash killed her parents. My housemate Carl Sohn was also a frequent visitor, and he built a small rustic cabin there that fit in perfectly with the groups’ other home-built living spaces, including a teepee, a yurt and a geodesic dome.



Diane Weinerman, George Galt

Many years later when I was a lawyer, Diney called me when she was dying of cancer. She and George were unmarried but had a child, and she wanted to know how to assure that George could keep custody after her death.

I consulted a family lawyer and told her the best way was to get married. They held a deathbed wedding, and George got custody.

After four years of living large in Berkeley, I realized that hanging around stoned with my friends was unlikely to support me comfortably into my deep 20's and beyond. Nor was my laid-back lifestyle enhancing my attractiveness to the fairer sex. It was high time, I decided, to go to law school.

With my \$50 receipt from Michigan, I had long assumed that getting back into law school would be automatic. But after four years in Berkeley, I had come to love the Bay Area, and all my friends and my psychoanalyst were there. Pulling up stakes for Michigan was unthinkable. So I applied a second time to UC Berkeley's law school. I was hopeful they would accept me again.

I didn't realize that the landscape had changed dramatically between when I applied in 1967 and 1971. Young people marching for civil rights and against the war had changed the world, and gotten a taste for it. Idealistic college grads eager to work for political and social change were applying to law school in droves. And legions of women had applied for the first time — the women's movement had just then forced open the gates of the nation's law schools to females.

All of which meant the applicant pool in 1971 was much bigger and better qualified than the competition I had faced in 1967. My qualifications, on the other hand, had depreciated due to my four-year academic hiatus and the pedestrian jobs I'd taken to support my hippie lifestyle. My application to Berkeley Law was summarily rejected. It didn't even make it to the admissions committee — I was weeded out by a clerk as plainly unqualified for that year's class. My future plans, such as they were, teetered on the rock of that rejection.

So I wrote a letter to the law school's Dean of Admissions explaining my situation, declaring my new seriousness of purpose and asking for an interview. It was a near-hopeless Hail Mary pass, since they'd already rejected me. But miraculously, I got a return call and an appointment.

I was ushered into a large, richly furnished office and greeted by a lovely woman not much older than me. I told her, "When I applied here in 1967 and was accepted, I was a mixed-up kid unable to focus. I've spent the last four years in intensive psychoanalysis and now I've straightened myself out and am prepared to devote myself fully to law school. I'm a much better candidate now than I was when you admitted me four years ago." I begged her to reconsider my application. We had a long, very pleasant conversation and good rapport — there may even have been some sparks between us — but she was noncommittal at meeting's end. A few weeks later, I was delightedly surprised to receive a thick package admitting me to UC Berkeley Law School's class of 1975. Amazingly, I had managed to talk my way into law school! It was also the second time, after my draft deferment, that seeing a psychiatrist had changed my life's fortunes.

My excitement was tempered by my conviction that I would be the dumbest kid in my entering class. I was so unqualified I'd been rejected by a clerk, while my classmates would be top students from the best colleges.

My only hope would be to knuckle down and devote myself to school like I never had before, and that's what I did. For the first time in my 16 years of student life, I worked hard, kept up with assignments, attended classes and kept careful notes.



Then, disaster. Two weeks before first-semester final exams, when I was visiting a friend after school, someone broke into my car and stole my briefcase with all my class notes. It was a devastating blow to my hopes of doing well on exams.

So I asked for help. Laurie was the most diligent student in our class. She sat front row center, participated actively in class and kept meticulous, legible notes — the kind of “uncool” student I had long looked down on. I sought Laurie out, told her my misfortune and asked whether I could copy her notes. She generously agreed, and I was able to prepare for finals with class notes better than my own had been.

When finals were over and grades were posted, I was astonished to find that I had finished very high in my class. I thought of showing my grades to the woman in admissions who had taken a chance on me, but never did. I continued making excellent grades throughout law school.

I met a great guy in class the first day of school, John True, who has remained a lifelong friend. His marvelous sense of humor, like my college friend Peter Griswold's, meshed perfectly with mine, and his fresh perspectives — he was older and had just returned from years in the Peace Corps in Nepal and Afghanistan — were always valuable.

But there was another, deeper friendship I craved. Esther, another classmate, had made an immediate and indelible impression on me. Slender, with a lovely figure and sunshine smile, she was the heart and center of a group of lively friends who laughed and enjoyed themselves despite school pressures. I yearned to be close to her warm flame, but our class was large and I was too tongue-tied smitten to approach her.

One day at home I was shaking water from a gallon glass jar of sprouting alfalfa seeds when I shattered it against the sink and cut my wrist badly. The next day I was standing near Esther in the locker room — lockers were alphabetical, and both our last names begin with “S” — and she asked about my bandages. It was our first conversation, and we laughed together at my clumsiness and quirky diet.

I did everything I could to get near her. One Sunday I came to bat in a casual class softball game when Esther was catching for the other team. I turned toward her while digging into the batter's box and stage-whispered, “Your center fielder is playing me too shallow.” She didn't betray me by yelling to her teammate to move deeper.

On the first pitch, I hit a line drive over the center-fielder's head and scored a home run. In my mind I had proven myself a worthy suitor and imagined it might be a turning point in our budding friendship. Esther has no recollection whatsoever of this event.

I was in great spirits during an after-game party in the house she shared with six other first-year women, and we danced together to the Rolling Stones.

Although we were getting closer, I was not Esther's only admirer. She was also seeing Ed, a handsome, chiseled 6'2" classmate as smitten as I.

One day in the spring of first year, Esther and I took our lunch together on a grass hill behind the law school. We did it again a sunny few days later, and kissed. Our attraction was intense, and in full public view we rolled together on the grass in bridled passion. Our lunches became the highlight of my life. Our friends poked gentle fun at us from time to time when we returned to afternoon classes with grass in our hair.

Though we had become romantic, Esther would not abide any thought of exclusivity. Ed was not my only competition. One weekend her long-time boyfriend from her Wellesley years, a Harvard graduate named Dan, came from the East Coast to visit. Like moth to flame, I pulled my car up beside her house that night. Through an unblinded window into her bedroom, I saw Esther and Dan in intimate embrace. I have never felt so miserably lonely.



During the summer after first year Esther volunteered to help Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers' Union in the hotly contested 1973 lettuce strike, and she moved to a small town in the Central Valley. She lived in a crowded dormitory with other volunteers and a single payphone, so we were able to talk only occasionally and briefly. She was totally committed to the cause, and I suspected from something she said that she had become involved with one of the union organizers as well. I visited once, and felt out of place and useless.

Esther was drained and exhausted by her summer on the picket lines in the hot, dusty Central Valley with an omnipresent threat of farm-owner violence. Missing her badly and sensing opportunity, I proposed treating her to a week's vacation before school restarted at my family's Countryplace in Pennsylvania. I was overjoyed when she accepted; it would be our first time away together.

My family is Jewish and Esther is Chinese. Asian-white interracial couples were a rarity in 1972, even in Berkeley. Neither my brothers nor I had ever brought a non-white girl home. Esther was also far-left politically. I wasn't concerned about the interracial thing, but I was worried that my father, a liberal but sober businessman, would be put off by her radical politics. Nevertheless, I trusted my parents and hoped they would approve my choice.

My dad was not gifted in small talk. A well-read intellectual, he would sit our friends and girlfriends down and engage them in serious conversations about the events and issues of the day. He had several long talks with Esther, who demonstrated her thoughtfulness, intelligence and erudition. The cooling waters and deep woods of Western Pennsylvania were a balm to Esther after her scorching summer. My parents liked her and were impressed. She fit comfortably into the family and enjoyed her time there, as my love deepened.

We returned to school, and the stalemate for Esther's affections between Ed and me continued for the next two years. One night Esther was out with Ed when a man broke into her apartment and raped her roommate. The police warned he might come back, and the two women hastily moved out. I invited Esther to stay with me, and she moved into my apartment for a wonderful few weeks. Feeling constrained, she moved out again and into a girlfriend's walk-in closet.

When it proved too difficult to study there for finals, she moved back with me; then was gone again. I couldn't tell whether I was the Victorious Boyfriend or a flophouse manager, but I was grateful for all her attention I could get.

I didn't work during either of my summer vacations. My parents supported me throughout law school, and I neither had to nor wanted to get a summer job. Unlike most of my classmates, who took paying legal internships during summers which often garnered offers for post-graduate employment, I relaxed and had fun during the summers in Berkeley like I had before law school. I got no experience doing legal work and got no job offers.

In the fall of my third and last year, many law firms and other legal employers came to school to interview students for postgraduate employment. I had to buy my first two suits for the interviews. The salesmen at Hastings Men's Store in Oakland must have spotted me as a rube, and I came home with a bright polyester grey and black checked suit and a dark pin-striped green one. I signed up to interview the leading San Francisco firms and, despite my laughable appearance, got several good job offers. I was disappointed that Pillsbury Madisons & Sutro, San Francisco's preeminent large firm, didn't make me an offer.

I had no interest in Los Angeles, which we Bay Area dwellers thought a smoggy hellhole that couldn't compare with our beautiful Northern California. But I got a call out of the blue from Natalie, a high school friend I hadn't spoken with in years. She was then a junior lawyer at O'Melveny & Myers, which she told me was the most prestigious large law firm in Los Angeles. She urged me to interview when their recruiters came to school. I did, and very much liked the two partners I met. They invited me to fly to Los Angeles at firm expense for two full days of 20 minute interviews with lawyers in different departments around the firm, plus lunches and dinners. I liked most all of them and became persuaded that the firm was at the pinnacle of the legal world in California. At the end of my visit, notwithstanding my suits, they gave me an offer of employment as an associate attorney and many weeks to consider it.

When I returned north and asked around about the firm, a senior federal judge whom I had clerked for part-time during second year told me that O'Melveny was without doubt the best litigation firm in California. That was the field I was interested in, so — holding my nose about Los Angeles — I was inclined to accept the offer. But I needed to discuss it with Esther.

She would not commit either to joining me in Los Angeles or in an exclusive relationship. Had she agreed to be mine if I stayed in the Bay Area, I'd have taken one of the jobs on offer in San Francisco with firms less prestigious than O'Melveny. As it was, we seemed to have reached a final impasse, and I accepted the Los Angeles offer. She took a job at Berkeley teaching a semester of legal writing to beginning law students.

Esther's friends dispersed after graduation and gave up the lodgings she'd been staying in; again she moved back with me. We studied there together for the Bar Examination, a trial that would strain many relationships but didn't faze ours. To prolong our happy cohabitation, I asked O'Melveny whether I could delay my start from that summer until after the New Year. They agreed, giving me more time to live in Berkeley with the woman I loved.

Nothing had changed when my sabbatical ended. Reconciled to losing her, I drove to Los Angeles on New Year's Day 1976 and moved into a worn hillside rental house in Echo Park. Esther flew down to attend a welcome party with me for the new associates. We met a wonderful couple, Merrick Bobb and his wife Aviva, who became lifelong closest friends. Merrick was a senior associate at O'Melveny and Aviva was head of the large San Fernando Valley Neighborhood Legal Services office. Aviva gave Esther a job offer on the spot.

I was quickly sucked into working round the clock on a huge lawsuit. I spoke with Esther nightly and found her lonely, but unmoved. The first semester and Esther's teaching job ended, and she explored other jobs in the Bay Area.

In the spring of 1976, I was home one night when I heard an unexpected knock on my door. I opened it and to my astonishment found Esther on my porch with suitcase in hand. Without telling me, she had packed her possessions into her Datsun station wagon and driven to Los Angeles to live with me. I was ecstatic to be with her, particularly 400 miles beyond Ed's clutches.

That September I got a phone call from my mother, who said, "Your Dad and I and your brother are coming to Los Angeles in three weeks for a business convention, and we think you and Esther should get married while we're there."

Firmly grounded in the counterculture of the '60's, and with Esther's aversion to commitment, the two of us had never spoken the M-word. I put my hand over the receiver and yelled to her in the next room, "Esther, my family's gonna be in town in three weeks and they want us to get married while they're here."

Esther walked slowly into the room, paused an agonizing minute, and then said matter-of-factly, as if I had proposed nothing more momentous than going out to dinner, "Okay."

Thus was our marriage born. Esther has always maintained that it was my mother who proposed to her, not me.

Having since wedded off two daughters in more deliberate fashion, I'm aware that putting together a wedding in three weeks' time was an implausible undertaking. But that's what Esther miraculously accomplished.

Her Aunt Nora knew the Chinese proprietor of the restaurant in the Miramar hotel at Wilshire and Ocean in Santa Monica. We reserved the space and he, Esther and Nora planned a grand Chinese banquet for 50 guests.

Esther managed the other logistics with aplomb. Our wedding was held under a magnificent spreading fig tree in the hotel's front courtyard.



Esther was stunning in a sheer off-white dress with a light diagonal floral stripe, like a shimmering vision in watercolor. A judge she had clerked for and befriended in law school did the honors. The feast was fabulous. Some friends and family said it was the most beautiful wedding they had ever been to, and I thought so too.

One small fly remained in the ointment. I hadn't spent a lot of time with my Hasidic grandmother growing up, but there was enough for her to warn me a hundred times over, with wagging finger, "Don't go with those Shiksas", meaning non-Jews.

Some aunts and uncles thought news of my wedding to a Chinese gentile might kill her, and Grandma wasn't told. Years went by until, tragically, my father passed away at 67. Esther and I flew into town with our toddler daughter, and the whole family, including Grandma, was to gather at my parents' house for visitation. The secret could be kept no longer.

Aunt Leah, whose family lived with her, was delegated to deliver the coup de grace to Grandma. Hemming and hawing, she stammered out, "We haven't told you before because we didn't want to upset you, but Ralph married a Chinese girl and they have a daughter and they'll be at the house." I'm told that Grandma looked back, perplexed but unperturbed, and replied, "The Chinese are the lost 12th tribe of Israel."

When I introduced Esther and our daughter to Grandma, all was warm smiles and welcome.

Early life through law school

Career and temporary wealth

Parents, new house, cheating

Fire, lifesaving, singing, family

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