

Don't Forget to Breathe

A memoir

by Warren Croce

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I'm middle aged. I've slept approximately 18 years. I figure it's a good time to take stock of my life up to this point and tell the story of my waking hours as I remember it. All told, I've really been very lucky.

before me

My roots are Italian. My mother Elena was born at home in Sora Italy in 1946 and moved here when she was 4. She grew up in Jamaica, Queens. My father Alan is second generation by way of Naples and grew up an only child in Valley Stream on Long Island. I didn't know my grandfather on my mother's side until I was in my teens. He was known as Papa Joe. I never got to meet my grandmother Luisa as she died at 40 from kidney disease.

Albert (Pop) and Rose are my paternal grandparents. Pop served in the Navy in WWII as a "data processor" in the early days of computing and later spent the majority of his career in sales. Rose owned a consignment store in East Rockaway. I loved them very much. You'll get to know them better later.

I have one vague memory of my great grandparents on Pop's side - Elvira and Dominic. I guess I would have been about 4 or 5 and I can remember being at their house for dinner, a piano, and their faces. That's about all.

My parents were married very young, at age 20. At that time my maternal grandmother had been dead for about 5 years and my mother was essentially raising her sister Dolores, seven years younger. I can't imagine what it must have been like for two

young girls, 15 and 8 to be left without their mother, with a father who couldn't handle his wife's early death and resorted to anger and alcohol. My father didn't like the way he treated my mother and offered her a way out. Dolores would live with them.

March 22, 1968

"I was born in 1968. The year they tried to murder hope in America." -Van Jones

I was hatched in Mercy Hospital in Rockville Center on Long Island a year after my parents were married. '68 was a tumultuous year; MLK was assassinated, RFK was assassinated, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised the Black Power salute at the Summer Olympics, and Captain Kirk and Uhura kissed - the first televised interracial kiss. Of course, Vietnam was in full swing, as was the counterculture movement. Sgt Pepper was released.

It's always interesting to see what happened of historical significance on the day you were born. Obviously in Vietnam there were countless associated horrors on the day, but I found some other things:

- Martin Luther King Jr. called for a march in Memphis for Justice and Jobs.
- LBJ was kicked off a trolley in San Francisco for eating ice cream.
- The top song was "Love is Blue" by Paul Mauriat (who's that?).

That's what I found. I'm not going to cite my sources. This isn't a fucking college essay.

childhood

My earliest memories take place in Brightwaters NY. We lived in a beautiful house on a channel of the Great South Bay until I was 6. My very earliest memory is being taken for a walk by Rose. I was in one of those old (now hipster) style baby carriages - the navy one with the white wheels. I think it had springs to act as shock absorbers and many places where tiny fingers could get caught. We were in my front yard and I simply remember looking up at her face. It was sunny and warm outside.

I also clearly remember going to story time at the local library. I was probably about 5 years old and it's one of the fondest memories I have of early childhood. My mom would take me every week and I loved the warmth of the librarian who did the reading. I remember her being very calm and kind. The stories were always fascinating, and there was something about being in a small group of other children and their moms that was warm and comforting.

My parents deemed me intelligent (or just wanted me out of the house sooner) and insisted I skip kindergarten. I was sent to a Montessori school where I spent most of my days drawing. One afternoon my parents received a letter from the teacher stating that I was drawing too much. I think they withdrew me soon after that. I also got into my first fight at that school. I remember this

punk kid would pick on me from time to time and once he pushed me and I punched him in the face. Maybe that's why they withdrew me.

I was sent to St Patrick's in Bay Shore for the first grade. I was terrified of school. On numerous occasions on my way to the bus in the morning I would walk very slowly, and then hide behind a tree or bush as the bus pulled away. I would then return home and explain to my mother I had missed the bus. She was very understanding and would let me stay home and play. I think she may have felt a little guilty about thrusting me into academia too soon. Once my father, who was an English teacher at a nearby Catholic high school, St John's (more on that lovely place later), came home and was furious. I was upstairs playing a game with my mom when he stormed in and insisted she bring me to school immediately. I was late for class and I was mortified - probably why I have always had a hang-up for never being late.

My other ploy which I am very proud of and remember using at least five or six times was to feign illness at the Nurse's office. Once I was so convincing that she drove me home. I remember sitting in her convertible with the top down, sun shining, happy as a clam, trying to look deathly ill.

The biggest memory I have of those years was accidentally setting our neighbors' garage ablaze. They lived behind us and the garage was detached from their house by at least 50 yards. There was no door on it. One day I went there to explore. It was mostly empty save for some garden tools, a lawn mower. I noticed a big push broom and picked it up. Out poured hundreds of earwigs. They just kept coming. I decided I needed to do something so I found

some gasoline in the garage and a match. I'm really not sure how I got the match. My dad smoked so it probably wasn't too difficult. And I set the broom on fire to burn those fuckers. It worked, but the fire also got a bit out of hand. I ran back to my house screaming and mom called the Fire Dept. Fortunately there was only minor damage, but my dad whipped me with his belt when he got home. It wasn't bad, I totally felt like I deserved it, and I do not disparage him for this. I never lit random shit on fire after that.

That's mostly what I remember of 0-6. Oh, and the time I kept a piece of steak in my mouth for *twenty* minutes without swallowing after being ordered to eat everything on my plate by dad. I just sat there with this partially chewed chunk of meat in my cheek, as it lost any sense of flavor and became a saliva-sucking mass. I remember the pale gray color when I finally spit it out. Why so defiant so young?

We moved to West Hurley, New York in late 1973. It was a few miles from Woodstock. Hippies. My father and mother were going to start a theater. A real theater with plays by Beckett, Pinter, Voltaire. The plan was to buy a desacralized church and do some minor renovations, and then all the intellectual hippies would show up in droves to see quality art. They found a place and arranged to live in a very small home next door until the paperwork was done. My brother David (a year and a half younger than myself) and I were sent to Sunday School in order to curry favor with the priests (mom and dad were nowhere to be found)- to show that we were a good Christian family. It was all a ruse, but it worked. We ended up buying the church and the adjacent rectory - a huge house - three floors, a stone basement

that seemed like a medieval castle. And the church, oh the church. It was marvelous. For a six year old boy it was a wonder. There was so much to explore. So many places to hide. We would spend hours playing there. It even had bats in the belfry!

I am very grateful to have been a child at a time (the last time in human history) when children played freely without adult supervision. I had woods and animals for my backyard. I would go for long walks, exploring. Dave and I would build forts in the forest. It was pure magic. I also made my first friend, my next door neighbor Michael Fitzsimmons. "Fitz" was three grades above me but we still had a lot in common. Baseball, for one. We started playing baseball games in my backyard (actually a gravel parking lot for the church) every Saturday morning. My dad and brother would play, even Pop would join in every now and then on his bi-weekly visits from Valley Stream with my grandmother. Soon three other kids from the neighborhood joined, Dave R, Bob and Herbie. Later Paul, a friend of Dave R's would join. Paul lived about a half hour drive away and was the most dedicated participant of all of us. His dad would drop him off at 7 in the morning on his way to work at Sears Automotive in Kingston. We would become very good friends.

Bob lived in a trailer park about a mile away. He loved two things: Kiss and BMX. He loved BMX so much that he built his own track. All by himself. It was truly amazing. My brother, at that time known as "Little Dave" became good friends with Bob. Bob was strong, and could be mean. Once Fitz was picking on Little Dave and Bob punched him in the face. We didn't see Fitz at our Saturday games for a while after that. Another time playing football on the backyard gravel, Bob hurt his leg but continued to play all afternoon. The next day he came over with a cast up to his hip. He had broken it. He got me really into Kiss. They were

definitely my favorite band for a few years there. I thought Ace Frehley was the coolest. Many years later I ran into Bob at a casino bar in Reno. He looked much the same and we gave each other a hug and reminisced over a beer.

Herbie and his family were something none of us had experienced before. They were like aliens. They lived across the street in a small house that smelled of piss. His dad was about 75 at the time, could barely speak and was almost deaf, which was probably a blessing because his wife (maybe also his daughter, who knows) was about 40, would constantly scream at the man so loud that we could hear it at our house a good two hundred yards uphill. I think Herbie had a brother and sister, both younger. I have two distinct memories of him. The first was breaking into the small house I mentioned earlier (the one we lived in while we awaited the church sale). I was about 8, Dave about 6, Herbie was my age. I don't remember it being particularly difficult to get in, and the thrill of being inside was incredible. We roamed around, I think at that point it was a weekend getaway for a New York City couple. We didn't disrupt anything. Anyway, we were hanging out in the bedroom through whose window we had entered when Herbie decided to pull his dick out and start masturbating in front of us. Dave and I flew out that window.

The second distinct memory I have of Herbie was visiting his house - honestly it was a structure with no resemblance to a home of any sort - like a crack den - and he offered us something to eat. He opened the fridge and all it contained were Twinkies. NOTHING else but Twinkies. Years later I heard that Herbie served jail time for statutory rape.

I will briefly mention our other neighbors Alice and Frank. They were both in their 60's or 70's - and if you were to describe them as a photograph they would have been a combination of a Dorothea Lange portrait from the Dust Bowl and a Diane Arbus. Alice was a big nasty woman and Frank was frail and feeble. The house was in such disrepair it looked as if it would fall down at any moment. And they had the loudest meanest dogs chained up out back. She would regularly stand outside yelling and occasionally beating him. She once stood there with her shirt off, no bra, her huge tits hanging down to her belly, barking. Poor Frank.

As our neighborhood ball games grew in size, so did the theater. They called it The Hamlet Theatre. My father and his friend John Haag were partners in the venture, both actors. My mom acted here and there and did a lot of the admin. Dolores moved with us from Long Island and was about college age. I was in awe of the theater. People coming and going, watching rehearsals, selling concessions. My favorite thing to do was to hang out backstage before and after the performances. I really loved the energy before a show; everyone putting on makeup and costumes, chatting, smoking, telling jokes. I would describe the post-performance backstage atmosphere as this great vibrating energy, as if something significant and memorable had been accomplished.

When I was seven we performed *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. It was and still is my father's favorite play. I got to play the part of A Boy. I was so incredibly excited when my dad asked me. John Haag and Brian Benben (who later had a respectable TV career and married Madeleine Stowe) played Vladimir and

Estragon. My father directed it and played Pozzo. We took the play on the road to local colleges and such. After a performance one evening at SUNY New Paltz I was so ecstatic I kept saying backstage “Let’s do it again, let’s do it again”. John and Brian just chuckled (they had poured their hearts out over two hours, I had a few lines here and there).

I was sent to sleepaway camp at Frost Valley when I was 11 with Billy K who also comes up later in my story. He was a grade above me, thus two years older (remember Boy Genius skipped Kindergarten). It was to be for two weeks. We bunked with a number of black kids bused up from the inner city. It was eye opening to be sure. We were from completely different backgrounds. They were decidedly more worldly in terms of their life experiences up to that point. Billy and I were a couple of kids from the sticks, and I for one was both amazed and terrified. I kept mostly to myself and tried to participate in as little as I could that first week. I think I sobbed quietly in my bunk a couple of times. But a funny thing started happening toward the end of the first week - I started to enjoy myself. I found the independence from my family to be freeing, and I started to participate in more activities and I even made friends with one of the city boys. By the end of the second week when my parents came to pick me up I didn’t want to leave. It taught me a lesson early on about life; that if I opened myself up to experiences, and forced myself to come out of my shell, good things can happen.

A very good memory from those days was visiting Pop and Grandma in Valley Stream for a week or two during the summers. It was just the two of us and the two of them. They would both take time off work (grandma owned a consignment shop and Pop

was a salesman for a company that made office furniture) to bring us to Jones Beach. We loved going to the beach. They would pack a lunch which always included cherries or peaches. Pop would build sand castles with us. It was just a joy. Much of my love for the ocean I owe to my grandparents. Grant Park was another popular venue. It was a few minutes drive from their house and we could play basketball or baseball. Dave and I would also spend hours playing “tennis ball” against the chimney in the backyard. Tennis Ball was basically baseball but with a tennis ball instead and only involved a pitcher and hitter. The house was very small and the backyard was only about 20 feet deep with about 8 of those taken up with trees along the fence. So that meant we would pitch from about 12 feet away, so the ball came in fast. Getting a hit in itself was an accomplishment. We would go to Arbys at least once during the week. My Grandmother didn’t enjoy cooking and Pop didn’t cook much until later in life, so if Grandma didn’t want or have time to cook we would go out, which was fine with us. We hardly ever went out to eat at home so it was a novelty. We usually slept in an addition off the back of the house which was like a sunroom but also used as a dining room when they had guests. Valley Stream is about 5 miles from JFK airport so planes would come in low and constant. I’ll never forget laying out there in bed at night and listening to the planes. Being from the country it felt so foreign to me and I loved it.

Back at home, I also remember “running away” once with Dave, though I was told I tried it more than once. We had actually packed a suitcase and started down the driveway, which was about a hundred yards to the road. It was early evening and we got as far as the road and turned back. I always feel that this time in my life was for the most part a happy one, full of wonder, and

in many respects it definitely was, but you don't run away for no reason.

In addition to the neighbors' screams, there was plenty of yelling going on in our house. My father was volatile. Sometimes when he would yell at us I would get this feeling in my chest like it was constricting and turning to icicles and would have to take deep breaths to make it go away. He once lashed out at Pop for offering to buy a drawing I did of Donald Duck. It was awful (not so much the drawing but the yelling). I felt so bad for my grandfather. All he wanted to do was encourage me but instead was cut down for "corrupting the purity of art" or some such bullshit. There was a lot of yelling between my parents in West Hurley. My mother was and still is a very strong woman. She grew up early and wasn't meek. One day she was wearing big Elton John-like sunglasses in the house. I asked why a number of times and finally she lifted them up to reveal a black eye. I was furious, and confused, and scared all at the same time. I'm not sure how exactly I reacted but only being about 10 or so there wasn't much impact I could make. We left soon after that; my mom, Dave and myself. Dad and Dolores stayed at the theater. It may have struck me as odd at the time, but aside from the time Dolores was at college she was always there, so maybe in a ten year old's mind I didn't give it much thought.

We moved to a rental in Mt. Tremper, about a half hour away. It was much closer to our elementary school and far enough away from the yelling. The property was beautiful. There was the main house which the landlady and her sister lived in - a grand stone building - and a couple about a hundred yards away was our house, and an adjacent apartment.

My mom had bought a rundown health food store in Kingston called Pan Health Foods and built it up into a vibrant health food restaurant and market. The Harder They Come by Jimmy Cliff was the store's soundtrack, and my first exposure to reggae music. Mom would drive every day into Kingston, picking up her friend and co-worker Rochelle and dropping us at school on the way. Pan was a fun place to visit. Dave and I would rummage around the basement, and when we got a bit older did a very small amount of waiting tables. One thing I'll always remember was Elephant Man. He was a police officer who did street patrol on that block and he had the disease where his face was completely disfigured. It terrified me - not him per se, he was friendly, but the fact that something like that could happen to someone, and they had to live with it their entire life, seemed so cruel.

We were mostly happy in Mt. Tremper. Pop and grandma would come visit every couple of weeks and when apples were in season he would make pies from the trees on the property. Grandma would bring us clothing from the consignment shop. We actually got some really nice clothes throughout the years, though for a while I did wear tighty whitey underwear with the name Brad Gordon written along the waistband - just to let you know what our financial situation was like. There were woods behind the house, and a stream, and for my exploring spirit it suited me just fine. Some family friends, Dennis, Hank (a woman), and their daughter Wendy lived in the apartment adjacent to us. I remember one day coming home during a snowstorm and Dennis was outside on the deck in a t-shirt, grilling steak. He just smiled and said "Ya gotta love life". Hank was hot. The OG Milf. She

oozed sex and provided me with hours of masturbatory fantasies. Wendy was a little younger than us and she was a cool kid. We would hang out and play on occasion. I can't remember exactly how long we lived there. It had to have been a couple of years.

Unfortunately the time there was marred by an accident concerning Dave. It was Thanksgiving morning. I was 11, Dave 10. My mom was downstairs cooking, I was upstairs in my room (probably pleasuring myself over Hank), and we were awaiting the arrival of my grandparents. All of a sudden the front door burst open and Dave came running up the stairs. I caught a glimpse of him as he closed the bathroom door. His face was brown and I thought he got muddy playing outside. It wasn't until a minute later when I heard sobs that I went over and opened the door and saw that it wasn't mud but burned skin. I yelled to my mom who came running upstairs and screamed. She quickly ran cold water all over his face, and kept running cold water over his face as I ran next door to get Dennis to call an ambulance. He was rushed to a hospital in Kingston and then straight up to the Albany Medical Center burn unit. I was terrified, purely terrified. I felt sick for him and I was helpless. A few days later I went to see him. Dad and Dolores were there. They wheeled him out and his head looked like an uncooked sausage. We weren't sure at that point how bad the lasting damage would be. I can't imagine how scared Dave must have been. It's probably one of the reasons he grew up into a fearless person, not afraid to try things, always pushing the edges so to speak. I think Dave was in Albany for a couple of weeks. Thankfully he made a remarkable recovery and the only visible lasting damage is a scar at the top of his forehead. Besides that you would never know. He said at the time that a Duraflame log

had blown up as he was trying to light it. We were baffled as we didn't know this was possible. It wasn't until years later that he revealed that it was gunpowder. You see, there was an old cannon on the property and the week before we had discovered a cup of gunpowder sitting inside. Our friend Lyndah was visiting from Queens and she was a few years older and more crazy so she took a bit and set it on fire. It provided some fireworks, but that was all. On Thanksgiving morning Dave wanted to see what would happen if he lit the whole cup on fire and it exploded. He never wanted to tell the truth because he thought it would get Ruth the landlady in trouble. I am so very grateful that he's ok.

We visited dad every Friday after school until Saturday late afternoon. He would drop us off at the health food store before closing, or if Pop and grandma were visiting they would take us home.

The theater was floundering. The Woodstock intellectual hippies did not show up in droves, leaving my dad bitter at what he considered a town of posers and losers. I can't remember exactly when but he decided to go into puppetry with his friend Steve. Steve was already touring the area doing puppet shows for schools, jails, I guess wherever he could get a gig. They did a show on 42nd Street in NYC called Mr Pinwheel's Porno Puppets, which must have been something to behold. Every now and then they would book gigs for schools in the Caribbean. It now seems so random, but I guess it made for a great business trip. Steve was very creative, and a very good cartoonist. He inspired me to try my hand at cartooning and I started by copying his style. Dave and I also dipped our toes into puppetry. We developed and performed a play called The Cookie Man. It was a two character play involving a man trying to sell his cookies on the street (me)

and a kid (played by Dave) who would make a nuisance of himself, and over time conned him out of all his cookies. That was a lot of fun. I think there's still an audio recording of it somewhere.

Dolores had finished college by then and opened up a preschool on the premises of the theater, in a former chapel closer to the road. Dave and I would help out every now and then. Dolores would spend her entire career as an educator.

This period was very hard for me. I was young with newly separated parents who weren't any good at communicating with each other and oftentimes I was the go-between, the messenger. "Tell your mother", "tell your father". If I was older or more confident I would have said "fuck no, you tell them yourself". But I wanted to keep the peace and so would relay messages. It was unhealthy and took me many many years to realize how it affected my trust in people, and how it left me with an aversion to confrontation. I think I am inherently guarded and distrustful because of this period in my life. It has taken me a long time to be more "open", and still to this day it is something I work on. The problem was that nothing was really ever discussed. My father never sat us down and talked about what he was going through, asked how we were feeling, how was mom doing? Nothing. It was a weird thin veneer that covered this huge event in our lives. I remember Pop and grandma saying many times over the subsequent years, "your father loves you". I knew he loved us, but he was so emotionally stunted he lacked the ability to convey it very well. My mom was obviously devastated and very angry but she took the time to talk to us. The three of us grew very close. She has always been very open with her feelings and it helped

Dave and I to continue moving forward. However, I was in a position of being “the man in the family”. It didn’t really strike me as such at the time, but now looking back on it, I think I felt that I had to be more responsible, had to take care of my mother’s frailty as a result of her trauma, had to look after Dave. Too many “Had to’s”. I was an adult for most of my youth.

I started exhibiting signs of what I later determined to be OCD around this time - having to touch things multiple times before moving on, not stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, that kind of thing. I once spoke about it with Dave and he said that he too was experiencing it. We named it “Cursed”.

OCD is a reaction to trauma. It’s a misplaced attempt to protect yourself from bad stuff happening - to feel like you have some sort of control over things. It can be a debilitating condition that traps people in completing repetitious actions before they can even do the most mundane tasks. I get really upset when I hear people talking about “how OCD” they are. Organizing your fucking underwear drawer doesn’t alone get you into the club. This is serious stuff.

Dave and I mentioned it to mom one evening when we went away for a long weekend. She listened and said not to worry, that it would probably pass. Back in those days therapy wasn’t much of a thing - especially if you were a kid, but Dave and I probably could have benefited.

Eventually I simply admitted to myself that I couldn’t prevent bad things from happening, and it went away for the most part but not completely. In times of stress I still catch a glimpse of it and my general state of anxiety can probably be attributed to it. As far as I know Dave has also managed it decently.

I was not a great brother to Dave. Maybe I took out my anger on him - I remember fighting with him a lot. I was such an insecure asshole, I wouldn't let him fall asleep before me, and if I thought he was sleeping I would say "Dave, are you awake?" and ask until he woke up. I'm not sure what that was about. I don't think I was a true friend to him. I am his big brother and was supposed to protect him. Instead I often behaved more like a bully and that I will always regret.

I started shoplifting from Al's Supermarket in Boiceville. Small stuff, mostly candy. It was exhilarating and over the course of a few months I built a small stash of junk food by the side of my bed. This phase didn't last too long. I never got caught but didn't want to push my luck, though this part of me never really disappeared. Even now when I go to the supermarket I put the cat litter on the bottom of the cart, you know, below the main basket. I don't try to necessarily hide it - it's in plain sight, but if the clerk doesn't recognize it, I rarely take steps to rectify the situation. Just happened again yesterday. Wegman's won't miss it. (What is it with me and supermarkets?).

Our Saturday baseball games were getting more robust. We added a few more neighborhood kids and as we got a little older and bigger we outgrew the backyard gravel. We found a Little League field adjacent to the drive-in off of Rte 28 in Kingston and for a time moved our games there. It had dugouts, a real pitcher's mound, and a fence. It was such an upgrade from the backyard and made us feel special. Some of us were also playing in the Shokan Little League, and later Saugerties Babe Ruth, so the added practice on Saturdays helped make us into pretty damn good ballplayers.

We were also becoming pretty good pranksters. I was reminded of this one in a recent conversation with Paul. One Saturday afternoon in the summer, after playing ball, Paul, Little Dave, Dave R and myself were pretty thirsty. Fitz's parents used to get milk delivered in bottles to their doorstep. Paul had the idea to take a bottle for all of us to share, and then refill it with some plaster of paris and water to make it look like milk. It looked perfect. I do remember Fitz commenting a few days later that someone tried to poison his family, but I didn't let on.

On another occasion, this time around the holidays, we were pretty hungry after our Saturday football game (I believe this was Paul's idea as well - kid was a genius) and decided we needed to get lunch money. We painted a tin coffee can with "Toys for Tots", and persuaded Little Dave, because he was the youngest and cutest, and was up for anything, to stand outside the Dairy Queen and solicit from passers-by. Within an hour he had collected something like \$30, which we then used to buy ourselves a nice lunch. Dave would later work as a door-to-door salesman, and I'm sure this experience served him well.

adolescence

My mom didn't enjoy living in the sticks. I think it was very isolating for her and she was unhappy. When I was about 12 or 13 she couldn't take it anymore and decided we would move back to Long Island. We packed up and stopped at my father's house to say goodbye. I was shooting some baskets outside on the hoop attached to the garage roof. Mom and Dad were in the house a

long while. Eventually they came out and announced that they were going to give it another try. I can still remember the joy. It was one of the happiest moments of my life. All was right with the world; my parents were getting back together and I wouldn't have to leave my friends. I think it may have lasted 4 months before we moved out again, this time to Boiceville, close to Mt. Tremper but not quite as far. Pop had bought an A-frame house and I guess we paid him rent, I don't know. The great part about the Boiceville house was that it was a 10 minute walk to school and closer to Paul's house (though it was still a drive or a hitch-hike away). Across the street were woods and a mountain, and like West Hurley and Mt. Tremper I took full advantage of exploring. There was a large concrete slab that I discovered one day not very far off the road, about seven feet long by two and a half feet wide, and at least six inches thick. I was convinced it was a tomb and spent many frustrating hours over the next couple of years trying to pry it open. I got so far as moving it a few inches and could indeed see that there was a dark space beneath it but I suppose I lost interest and stopped pursuing it.

There were also three features of the immediate area which were great for extreme sports. The first was on the road to our house. It contained a short but steep hill which was great for speeding down on bicycles. One day Dave was flying down and his front wheel popped clean off. He slid face first about twenty feet and came up bloody from head to toe. It was, as they say, radical. The second X Games feature was a hill which featured a long and windy dirt road that we discovered made the perfect sledding course in the winter. Paul would come over and he, Dave, and I would spend hours flying down the track on the old metal blade sled, the one where you lie on your stomach and steer with the

wood cross-piece. We would time every run and it was very competitive, many times coming down to tenths of seconds difference. Finally, Dave and I would beat the summer heat by riding the Esopus Creek rapids without a tube or canoe. They are class II and III, which meant nothing to us back then - we didn't even know there were classes. All we cared about was keeping our feet in front of us and our heads above water. Looking back on it, it was completely mental, but some of the best times we ever had living there.

We were playing Saugerties Babe Ruth baseball by this time. Paul was on the team, and my Dad coached one of the years. We had bright orange uniforms (top and bottom) with white pinstripes and blue hats. We were from outside Saugerties, representing Woodstock, and we were the red-headed, orange-uniformed, stepchildren of the league. But we had a chip on our shoulders and were pretty fucking good. Paul was a great pitcher. Another kid, Billy, lived and breathed baseball. He was a purist. He would only hit with a wood bat, even through high school. Rob, a kid recently moved from Oneonta who became a close friend, was a basketball prodigy but also a very good baseball player. Joey, from Brooklyn, and one of the few mixed raced kids in the area, was super fast on the bases. We could all hit and were well coached, my father having been an excellent baseball player in high school, foregoing a tryout with the Reds to attend pharmacy school, but that's his story. I can't remember where we finished that year but I think it was top three.

I went to Onteora High School. Our varsity baseball team was never much good while I was there. We had so much talent and we did care, but I think we collectively cared more about whose

party we would be going to that night than with winning the game. Billy was the captain and was not a big partier and it drove him nuts. Once, a few innings into a particularly lackluster performance our head coach refused to coach us and railed at us on the bus home that we were useless.

I can remember a weekend tournament we played and we hosted a team from Oneonta. We organized a huge party that night and got absolutely shitfaced. I took some mushrooms and either I was too drunk to feel any effect or they were bought in a grocery store. Everyone woke up with huge hangovers and the game was a morning game which didn't help. The guy who pitched the next day was staying with me and I hit a homerun off him. The only homerun I ever hit in high school. Go figure.

A year after Paul and Billy aged out of the Babe Ruth league our All Star team made it to the New York State tournament. We had a tough road to get there and I had the greatest day of my short baseball career one summer afternoon against Kingston. They were an excellent team, having a much larger demographic to draw from in terms of talent. We came in the underdog, having to win both games of a double-header in order to advance. The first game I played third base and made one of those diving catches for a line drive that you see on ESPN. I also had two hits and an RBI that game. We won by a score of 4-2 and played the second half of the double-header. We had run through all our pitchers on the journey there and I was the only one left standing. I had no idea that I might pitch that day. I may have pitched only one or two games all season. I threw slowly and accurately the whole game and I can only think that Kingston wasn't used to seeing Little League speed pitching and their timing was totally off. I also drove in the run that put us ahead in that game. It was

miraculous and the best feeling I have ever had playing sports. Pop and grandma were there to witness it and they were so proud.

We went up to Utica the following week for the State tournament. We all stayed with host families. It was a double elimination tournament and unfortunately we went 0-2 and we were on our way home pretty quickly. The bright spot was that Dad and Dolores brought up my girlfriend Valerie to watch one of the games. That was a great surprise.

I saved Billy's life that summer. We went out fishing on a pond in his metal rowboat. I don't remember there being any alcohol involved as Billy definitely wasn't about that. He was wearing red sweatpants with shorts over the top (yes, that was the style back then) and stood up to either reel in a fish or untangle a line. Anyway, he went over the side. I figured he would just pop back up and hop in but when he emerged he was panicked. Being fully clothed he was being weighed down and was not a good swimmer. I can remember the look of pure terror on his face as he was screaming. Somehow I reached over without being dunked myself and hauled him in. He was a big boy, but adrenaline is a funny thing.

I also learned to drive around this time. We had two cars, one of which my mom would take into work and the other was the Comet. It was unregistered, uninsured, but I couldn't just let that sit around. Paul's father, being a mechanic, had a few junkers sitting around in the back of his house. One of them had old plates on it so Paul would take the plates off and would bring them over and slap them on the Comet. At first we would stay close to home (after all we were just learning) but after a while we

would drive all the way to Kingston, go to the movies, get something to eat. It felt so rebellious and I loved it. We never got into any trouble, and mom never knew until years later. She did get angry when my neighbors told her that they had seen a headless driver going past their house. Apparently Dave was learning too.

Mom always encouraged Dave and I to be well-rounded. More than encouraged, she demanded it. She had gone to Italy the summer of '82 and reconnected with family and even came back speaking Italian. I suppose language can lay dormant. That trip was life-changing for her as she has made Italy a part of her life ever since. The summer of '83 she decided she would bring us on a tour of Europe eventually staying with the family in Italy.

We flew to Brussels from JFK and were so exhausted that we all slept for a solid 16 hours. I have never since even come close to that amount of sleep. We did the trip on the cheap. Lots of bread and cheese but I felt like the luckiest kid in the world. We saw Bruges, Paris, Lausanne, Venice, Florence, Rome, and then our final stop was Sora where she was born. We have two sides of the family there - the DiPucchio's on the paternal side, and the Cerrone's on the maternal side. At the time the immediate DiPucchio family in Sora consisted of Agostino, my mother's cousin, his wife Santina, and their children Roberto and Gianna. Roberto was about a year and a half older than myself and Gianna about three years older. Agostino's parents also lived with them and were called Nonno and Nonna. We stayed primarily with the DiPucchio's. Each morning Nonna would prepare hot chocolate and biscotti for breakfast, always with a welcoming smile. Agostino and Santina owned an agricultural supply store

and Roberto and Gianna helped out. I was impressed because Roberto drove the forklift around at age 15. Agostino instantly struck me as the kind of man I wanted to be when I grew up. He was gentle but stern, had a great laugh and sense of humor and an easy smile, and always made us feel welcome.

Dave, Roberto, and I had an instant bond. We loved being together. We got by speaking a little Italian, and he a little English. It was all we needed. They had a motorino (moped) and being Italy there were no restrictions about riding them - even helmets were alien. The sense of freedom that jumping on the motorino and tooling around the countryside and town provided to a boy of 13 was indescribable. It was definitely the most fun I had in my life up to that point. One afternoon we followed Roberto into the town center to an old church which seemed like it was carved out of the hillside. We walked around the back and down into a crypt area where there were thousands of human bones arranged. I didn't really understand what he was trying to tell us - I had never seen anything like that before. When we asked mom later she explained that displaying ancestor's bones in such an open manner is not unusual in Italy.

They also had a gymnasium next to the house and would get the key so we could play basketball for hours. We helped out around the store from time to time, especially when Roberto needed to make a delivery (yes, he also drove the pickup truck at 15). And we watched porn. There was an English kid that Roberto knew who vacationed there, probably 15 or 16, and he introduced us to the local porno theater. They had absolutely no qualms about admitting an 11 and 13 year old, and we took full advantage. I would always make a bonered beeline home afterward to relieve myself.

The Cerrone side of the family consisted of Zia Teresina (my mother's sister), and her husband who was quite old and senile at the time, their daughter Gina and her husband Pasquale, and their three children Antonio, Giorgio, and Elisa. The Cerrone side of the family is huge. My grandmother was one of 10 children, and many of their children emigrated to the United States back in the 40's. Zia Teresina was the closest thing to Mother Theresa (huh, just noticed the names as I wrote it) that I will ever meet. Her smile was so incredibly warm and enveloping. When she spoke everybody listened. I wish I could have spoken Italian just to listen to what she had to say, though she was one of those people who transcended language somehow - she communicated so much without us having to have a conversation. I can't really explain it. She was deeply religious but never made a show of it. And her hands. The strongest hands I have seen on a woman, like they were painted with thick brushstrokes. She was a hard worker and truly the matriarch of the family. Antonio and Giorgio were close in age to Dave and I and were so kind and really wanted us to have a great time when we stayed with them. We would often bike over to the pool for an afternoon or play bocce in the front yard.

Mom, Dave, and I would take day or overnight trips to Rome or Florence, Pompeii, or the Amalfi coast. Sometimes Roberto or Gianna would accompany us. The whole experience was truly magical. I believe we spent three weeks there that first summer and would go back each summer for a number of years. One thing Dave and I enjoyed doing was fake-fighting as we walked down city streets. Fake fighting involved one of us pretending to punch the other and the punchee would simultaneously rock his head

back and make a slapping sound with his hands. When done correctly it was quite effective and caused many turned heads. But then we'd laugh and diffuse the situation. It was a way to pass the time.

When I was about 14 Dad and Dolores announced that they were moving to the Bahamas. I guess those puppetree trips to the Caribbean rubbed off. I remember they brought Dave and I into the kitchen one Saturday afternoon before dropping us off to tell us the news. I don't remember feeling particularly hurt or sad. I do remember thinking that it would make for some fantastic vacations. I think they were gone within a few months after that. They were also leaving me their 1962 Mercury Comet, my first car mentioned earlier. I wasn't old enough for my license yet but it was the coolest car. I felt like I was making out on the deal. They sold the theater and it was the end of an era.

Dave and I would visit just after Christmas just about every year, and usually for a little bit of the summer, early on accompanied by Pop and grandma. We would stay overnight in Nassau before taking the morning flight to Long Island (yes, there's a Long Island in the Bahamas). One night in one of the hotels we were awakened by a woman screaming in the next room. It was horrific. I said "Pop, Pop, we need to help her!". He replied "It's ok, just go to sleep". I thought to myself "how could he be so uncaring to just let a woman die like that!" It wasn't until a few years later I figured it out.

The Bahamas were a wonder for us. Dad was running a marina bar and also the beach sports that were part of the Stella Maris resort. Dave and I had free reign over the Sunfish and

windsurfers. Initially they were living in an apartment attached to the bar and it was a little tight. I think by the second or third time we visited they had moved to an octagonal house closer to the ocean which they would soon buy. Much of the island at that time did not have electricity and a lot of the Bahamians lived in very spartan one or two room concrete houses with metal roofs. There was one main road running the length of the island and you couldn't drive more than about 25 mph due to the condition. I got my scuba diving certification at 16. Dolores was usually my dive buddy. Dave also dove but I don't think he ever got certified. A friend of Dad and Dolores' named Jason was the divemaster for the Stella Maris resort and he was just fantastic. I always felt in very good hands with him. His wife Pam was also a diver and would often join us. We did a dive called Shark Reef one year and that was a thrill. It's not a deep dive, only about thirty feet with a sandy bottom. As soon as you enter the water you see sharks. It can take your breath away initially, but the golden rule in scuba is don't forget to breathe. When you get to the bottom you essentially stay put while the divemaster feeds them. They swim all around you. I loved it, and many years later would dive it with my wife and boys.

The house was about a 10 minute walk to the ocean, and there was a beach we would often visit. Most of the area was rocky and good for exploring. We would often take walks along the rocks when we weren't swimming. One day I saw a box in the distance. Like most beaches there was always a lot of man-made stuff that washed up and this looked like a pretty good size box. As I got closer, maybe thirty feet away I saw that the edges were too soft to be a box and as I approached I realized I had stumbled upon treasure - an entire bale of marijuana, probably jettisoned from a

drug boat being pursued by police, or dropped from a plane. It didn't matter how it got there. What mattered was that I had made the discovery of my young lifetime. The bale had been damaged a bit, it was broken open in one corner. I ran back to tell Dave, Dad, and Dolores. Everyone excitedly hurried over. We left it on the beach - there are rarely people on these beaches - and that night Dave and I retrieved it. We smoked some and got decently high, but it also had a salty taste from part of it being open to the elements. We decided to stash some but get rid of most of it and I contacted my friend Manny who gladly took it away. Manny would later become a drug dealer and serve time in Miami. I hope that my marijuana wasn't his foray.

We mostly visited Long Island twice a year - once right after Christmas and once during the summer. One year though we went a full year without seeing dad, it might have been when I was 15-16. I can't remember exactly. I do remember him saying that mom had done a great job raising us and that we were growing into fine young men.

I started drinking alcohol at about 15. The first time I got really drunk was at Paul's aunt's house. We planned to spend the night and acquired a couple of cases of beer. I drank fifteen of them. The next morning I thought I was going to die, and death would have been preferable. I've drank a lot since then but I've never as much as that night. Partying was a big deal in that area. I suppose it's the same today in most any school anywhere, but I felt that we went "especially hard".

I had two distinct groups of friends; Paul and his buddies who were a year above me (and thus two years older - remember

Kindergarten genius!) and they were mostly a drinking crowd, and Brian, Heath, and Rob who were in my grade. I have known Brian since the third grade and we continue to stay in touch. He is like a brother in that we both get each other, make each other laugh a lot, and even if we don't see each other for years we pick it right back up. We all liked to smoke pot and started about the same time. The first few times we got high together, Rob's girlfriend Hillary would drop us off at the mall and we would people-watch and laugh our asses off. It was really fun. Brian liked to smoke every day, and I think still might to this day. I liked to think that I could do it every day but I've always had a very low tolerance. The best parties were before school dances and nighttime football games. There was an old rusted out VW beetle a short distance up the mountain behind my house, and with my house being so close to school, made for the ideal pre-game. A couple of dozen kids would show up and we'd party. We'd toss the empties into the bug and after a few years it was nearly filled to the top. Everyone would stagger back down to the school and dance like madmen. I felt my first tits and bush by that VW. Maybe that's why I like driving VW's.

In my sophomore year both groups of friends migrated to Phoenicia for parties. Rob lived there so it was convenient. There was a kid, Peter, who was a grade below us, whose dad owned a restaurant. Peter would steal cases of beer for us, God bless him. We had some great parties in the park. There was a school bus that would be parked in a lot behind some stores and on more than one occasion we would sleep in it, anywhere from 10-15 of us. Once we all decided to strip off and streak down Main Street in the middle of the night. It was truly liberating and we couldn't stop laughing.

The reality was that there was a lot of drinking and driving and as a result every year there would be a death or horrible accident. I am still to this day surprised it wasn't way more. I have been in cars where nobody was near sober and have driven cars under the influence. My teammate on the baseball team, Sam, died in an accident which also left the driver more or less in a vegetative state. It was like there existed a badge of honor for who could party the hardest and be the craziest. As a friend recently said, "it was almost warrior-like". I think a part of it worked its way into my DNA as I have always enjoyed getting a bit out of control and disrespecting authority.

My mom is responsible for Dave and I having not gone off the ledge those early teen years. She would get frustrated with us for not helping out more around the house, and she was right, we did the bare minimum, but she was always very open and receptive to knowing what was going on in our lives and we could talk to her about most anything. She was obviously going through a lot of shit herself trying to work through why her husband and sister betrayed her, and for a lot of the time didn't have another adult to talk about it with. Then she met Jim.

Jim was kind of a wild man. Not in any partying kind of sense, but he was fairly tall, had a huge head of hair and beard, drove around and often slept in an old Chevy, and carried a gun, a Walther PPK. He also drove a motorcycle and took us for rides every now and then. He adored my mother and us as well. We loved having Jim around, but we were little pricks and would constantly be pranking him. I will never forget two distinct pranks we played on him. Since our house was an A-frame it had

a skylight window on the downward slope of the roof in the first floor bathroom. Once we locked Jim out of the house and he made his way to the bathroom window which we had forgotten to close. In order to get in you had to jump a couple of feet and grab ahold of the bottom of the window frame and hoist yourself up. Dave and I went around to the front of the house and looked around the side as he was just starting his climb. We immediately decided he needed to be repelled so ran inside and grabbed a pot full of cold water. I think it was Dave who threw it out the window on top of him because I have a distinct memory of watching him get drenched and losing his grip on the window. The other prank was my last. Brian, Rob, and Heath were over and I decided to show off and piss on his car. He saw me and ran outside yelling but we booked and he couldn't catch us. I guess it just wasn't enough for my delinquent mind so we came back a while later and I mounded up some mud to make it look like I took a shit on the roof of his car. He came bounding out of the house like a train. I turned to run, but he was too quick and jumped OVER the hood of his car and tackled me, yelling in my face about how he'd kick my ass if I ever tried anything like that again. I was terrified and embarrassed and apologized profusely. I was a punk and I needed a father figure to put me back in line.

There was a pedophile who lived down the road. All of us kids who lived across the Esopus Creek had to cross an old rusted bridge to get to school. It was me, Dave, Carsten, a dick named Chris and two albino-looking brothers who smoked a lot of pot. The guy was probably in his mid thirties and every once in a while he'd hang out on the bridge. Call him the troll from The Three Billy Goats Gruff. I wasn't entirely sure of what his deal was and most of the time he'd look straight at you and simply nod

hello, although once he started some small talk and got me to stop. After a minute The Troll asked if I would be interested in “a mutual”. I told him that I didn’t know what that was and he explained that it involved “me beating you off and then you beating me off.” I quickly said “no thanks” (as if a thanks was somehow necessary) and got on my way. When I got home I told my mom and she advised us to “stay away from him”. Uh, ok. I am pretty sure he started abusing Carsten, though I never had any proof, it was just an instinct when Carsten stayed home more and more instead of playing. I should have pushed harder to find out if anything was going on but I did not.

My friends and I used to break into the high school every now and then. Mostly on Sundays during the winter when we had nothing to do and wanted to play basketball. There would always be a window open somewhere that we could get through. We would open the doors for other neighborhood kids and it was great to have the gym to ourselves. This was way before people realized that you should provide some sort of outlet for kids’ energy that was somewhat safe, so we did it ourselves. We also took the opportunity to roam the halls now and again, and it was on one of these jaunts that we did something that I regret to this day. We had driven to the school in the Comet. I was unlicensed but it was cold so walking was out of the question. On the second floor was the biology lab which contained a real skeleton. I can’t remember how the idea came to life but we decided to steal it. I parked the car outside the doors and we ran the thing down the stairs and stuffed it into the trunk. We had no clue what we were going to do with it so we had the idea to bring it to a friend of Brian’s older brother Wade. We showed up to his house with a skeleton and he was amazed. I believe he kept it in his closet and

brought it out for parties. I can still remember the look on my biology teacher's face in class the following day. He was so sad, upset, angry, and betrayed. He explained to the class that his skeleton had been stolen and I felt like shit. I was so ashamed. We were never caught, and I have no idea what ended up happening to the thing, but I will one day make reparations.

It was about this time that we discovered that Dad and Dolores had gotten married. On one of our visits to the Bahamas I noticed that everyone was calling Dolores "Mrs. Croce". They were both teaching at the local school by this time and were very well known on the northern part of the island. Teachers are revered down there. Anyway, I asked them what was up and they explained that they had gotten married in the past year. It was one of the most hurtful moments of my life - that we found out second hand, and honestly that they had gotten married at all - it was a lot to process for a teenager, and one of those times when I had that feeling of my chest turning to icicles.

When I was 15 I hosted a party at my house. Paul and I planned it and dubbed it "Sophomore Skip Day". The idea was that we would have about 10 to 15 of our friends, composed of Sophomores and Juniors come over in the morning instead of going to school. There'd be lots of beer etc and we'd take the day off. The problem was that word traveled like wildfire, even in those days (way) before cell phones. People were getting off the buses at the high school and instead of going inside were walking down the road to my house. There was a line of kids like some sort of pilgrimage. This was all unbeknownst to us, and around 8:00 we sent a friend off to get some beer. By 8:30 there were about 50 people at the house and it was obvious it was out of

control. By about 8:50 the police showed up at which point everybody ran out the back and scrambled into the woods, including myself. I remember launching myself off my porch into the woods as the shout of “Freeze!” echoed behind me. After a few minutes hunkered down I came to my senses and realized I needed to own up and get back to my house so nobody would be arrested for breaking and entering. Other than a joint or two there was nothing illicit inside as the beer had not yet arrived. The police brought me, Paul, Brian, and a couple of others down to the high school and we sat in the Principal’s office waiting for our parents. I’ll never forget how disappointed my mom was and I felt terrible. I received a day’s suspension.

By midway through my Junior year I was not enjoying smoking pot very much. The days of hysterical laughter were over and I would become very self conscious when I got high, and I didn’t like it. I also didn’t feel like drinking until shitfaced anymore, and both of these things caused me to isolate myself to a degree from social life, since that was basically what most people I knew ever did. So it actually came as a bit of a relief when mom announced that we would be moving back to Long Island after my Junior year. She had stretched her life in the Catskills as long as she could. Things with Jim didn’t work out - he continued to adore her but she didn’t feel the same about him. Of course, I was horrified about the prospect of entering a new high school in my senior year, and would have rather finished my final year with my friends, but as I said, I was isolating myself from them to a degree anyway. Might as well go full-on lone wolf.

I remember moving day quite well, or as much as you can when you drive from Woodstock to Long Island after smoking a joint

with your two friends in tow. I remember thinking I was too stoned to drive, but I managed quite well cruising in the Comet along the New England Thruway with Brian and Rob. They were coming to soften the blow, help get me situated, and have some fun at the beach. Pop also took the opportunity to put us all to work painting the garage, something Brian talks about to this day. I think they stayed about a week, and we had a blast, garage painting aside. I was very grateful for their friendship. It turned out to be a pretty good summer. Mom bought a small boat which was docked in front of the house, and we had the whole Great South Bay to play with.

I was to attend St. John the Baptist High School my senior year. I protested as we weren't religious but both my grandparents and mother insisted that since it was the school my father had taught at many years before it would be the best choice. I never understood that logic. I imagine going to any new school your senior year would suck, but a Catholic high school after being in ultra-liberal Woodstock was a shock. The nuns weren't very kind, and didn't seem to have much energy at the age of 80 to teach much of anything. I had to wear a loosely assembled uniform of khakis, shirt, and tie every day, and that also sucked. Dave and I drove to school in the Comet and it might as well have been a spaceship for how different it was from the BMWs and Corvettes that daddies bought their babies. I did manage to make three good friends there, John, who played guitar and would come over and we would play Dylan songs, me on my drums. Michael, who I ended up sharing an apartment with during my freshman year at Stony Brook, and Paul C who was probably one of the friendliest people I have ever met, but wasn't playing with a full deck. He just wasn't very bright, but I didn't care, we liked each other. I also had two girlfriends that year. Christine was blasian. Her

father was black and I was convinced that he must have been a Black Panther back in the day. The man did not care for me at all, and actively tried to keep Christine and I from seeing each other. We broke up after she found out that she was going to be named Homecoming Queen and decided to go to the dance with the star football player who was black. My other girlfriend's name was Lynn and I lost my virginity to her. She had a dry sense of humor. She was struggling with her sexuality - she was kind of tomboy-ish and was also attracted to girls. Shortly after I had sex with her she went full-on lesbian. That pretty much sums up St. John's. I put my head down and got through it. Dave transferred to Bayshore Public after that year and served his last two years there.

I would make trips up to Woodstock every now and then throughout that year, see the boys, do some partying. I also asked Allison to Onteora's prom that Spring. Allison was a special person to me during high school. We weren't even technically boyfriend and girlfriend, we were just really close. I lost touch with her after graduation and none of my friends have heard from her. She was quiet and kind of a lone wolf like myself. I hope she has a good life.

I had a couple of jobs that year. The first was at a health food store run by the unhealthiest looking older couple. It was named "A-Bree Health Foods" and had absolutely none of the earthy crunchy feel you associate with such places. My main job was to do inventory in the walk-in freezer. I'd sit there for twenty to thirty minutes at a time and would eat the macadamia nuts to spite them. I probably only worked there a few months before their cold store and cold souls froze me out.

My other job was way better, at a dive shop in Bay Shore. I can't remember the name but it was run by a man named Bob and his wife Diane. They were kind, fun loving people. I mainly worked the floor selling dive gear. I had never worked retail before (the health food freezer doesn't count) and I really liked it. I enjoyed helping people figure out what they wanted. Eventually I worked my way up to inspecting tanks, which involved holding them horizontally at eye level and rotating a flashlight around the interior looking for pitting, which was a sign of rust. They let us take gear out when we wanted. Mostly I would do really shallow dives by myself at the end of our dock. But once this kid I knew from high school and I decided to do a night dive out of Montauk. How I ever thought that was a good idea, I don't know. Montauk is notorious for Great Whites, and diving in the dark leaves you absolutely zero visibility. We did an offshore dive, maybe fifty yards off and twenty feet deep. We thankfully did not see any sharks, but I will never forget the feeling of disorientation. The only thing to guide you up was your bubbles. It sucked and never did another night dive. I just don't see the fun. Mom was worried sick and didn't sleep until we returned late that night.

Probably the best part of that year was the bond me, mom, and Dave solidified. It had been the three of us for years but I think uprooting and having to rely more on each other made us even stronger. Often after dinner we would take long walks on the beach at Robert Moses. Even today, in the rare instances the three of us are alone together there is a definite magic.

young adulthood

July 5 1985. I was 17 and had just graduated high school. I had convinced mom to let me travel to London for a week in advance of the three of us meeting up and heading over to Italy. The TWA Terminal at JFK was jammed. I first saw her as I was standing on line waiting to check in - one of those times you do a double-take, and then just can't keep your eyes off for very long. She had these amazing almond shaped eyes that curved upwards at the end ever so slightly. Brown skin, tight body, frizzy hair, about 5 feet tall. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I think she was a few people behind me, or the adjacent aisle, I can't remember exactly. I turned quickly back to my Rolling Stone magazine. She caught my eye a few times and after about an hour of waiting at the gate, and the seventh or eighth time of furtive glances, she looked straight at me and I'll never forget her index finger gesturing me over. I swallowed hard and I think I floated the 30 or so feet and introduced myself. She had been talking to two other women but I completely blanked them, I was so focused on her. It wasn't until later that she told me that was rude but I didn't do it on purpose, hopefully they recognized love at first sight. Her name was Jacqueline and she was living in Brooklyn but going back home to London for a few weeks to visit her family. We managed to move our seats around on the plane to sit together. I gave her a foot massage and we also smooched a little. And we laughed a lot. I was truly head over heels in love. When we got off at Heathrow we exchanged numbers and promised we would get together when she returned. We kissed goodbye and went our separate ways.

I had no idea where I was going to stay. I figured it wouldn't be too difficult and got on a train into central London. A guy around my age sat down across from me and engaged me in conversation. He was tall and confident and very friendly. He had just dropped his girlfriend off at the airport and was on his way back home. His name was Nigel and he asked where I was staying. I told him I wasn't sure so he invited me to stay at his flat for the week. I said definitely. He shared a two bedroom in Islington, just north of Central London, with a very effeminate young man named David, who I would learn years later wanted to fuck me very badly. Nigel was an amazing host. We toured around the city, smoked hash, drank lots of beer, and he taught me the basics of cricket. He was a very popular guy and would always have friends around day and night. When his girlfriend came back after a few days she added even more wonderful energy. Her name was Orit and she was beautiful and loved to laugh. The week culminated with the three of us attending a huge outdoor music festival in Battersea Park. It featured five stages with the likes of Billy Bragg, Aswad, Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark, Ravi Shankar, and The Pogues.

One thing that made an impression on me was how politically minded Nigel and all his friends were. There were stimulating discussions around how the government wasn't serving its people and what a monster Thatcher was. I had never really been political at all - not an uncommon trait amongst the youth in America at the time. We sailed glibly along, more concerned with beer and pussy (yes, more fun, but usually only gets you into trouble and doesn't make you a better citizen) than understanding how America was treating its own people and people around the world. It was truly a transformational week in my life. I met this incredible girl at the airport, immediately

followed by meeting someone on a train with whom I am still close to this day, who opened my eyes to a bigger world. I will always cherish that magical week.

Right after we both got back to NYC later that summer, Jackie and I reconnected. I remember our first date. It was a Friday and we met outside Penn Station after Jackie got off work. We made our way down to the East Village and had a fantastic Indian meal. I was just getting acquainted with Indian food and loved it. We picked up right where we left off and after dinner was over I asked if she wanted to come out to my house on Long Island for the weekend. She said sure and just like that we jumped on the next train bound for Bayshore. It was definitely odd that Jackie met my mom on our first date but we were so excited to be together that's all that mattered.

I was starting college a couple of weeks after that so we didn't see each other for a little while. I moved into an apartment in Port Jefferson, close to the Stony Brook campus and set about getting ready for my freshman year. Living off campus for your freshman year was allowed back then, and though I liked the independence it certainly didn't lend itself to living "the college life". I didn't really mind that much though. I got involved at the radio station on campus, WUSB, which unlike many college radio stations was actually a big deal and broadcast over much of Long Island. I got my FCC license but never made it onto the air that year. I was responsible for making sure we didn't have any dead air which basically involved making sure the right switches were flipped at the right time, but really I spent most of my time in the sound studio exploring new music and making mixtapes for Jackie.

After my first semester I decided that I wanted to pursue art and started making plans to transfer. I applied to only two schools - Pratt Institute and Cooper Union. Both required a portfolio as part of the application, were both very competitive, and Cooper Union had free tuition and was especially so. I put together some work and had a review with an admissions officer at Pratt. I remember him being kind, and honest, and he saw promise in my work but essentially said I needed to step it up. He would see me in two weeks with what we both hoped would be work worthy of admission. During that period I heard back from Cooper Union that I was not accepted. All eggs were in the Pratt basket.

Around the same time the music director for WUSB was in his senior year and thus on his way out the door soon. He pulled me aside one day and asked if I'd like to be the next music director. I'm not sure what made him believe I was qualified, I could only think that he liked my diverse musical tastes and the fact I liked hanging out in the studio, and figured I would be a good fit. I was very surprised and humbled, and explained that I was in the process of applying to art school and depending on how that went I would let him know. Sometimes I think that radio would have been a great career. I have always been acutely aware of the music around me, and when I have parties I like to create a great vibe through music, a task that has lately been largely handed off to algorithms.

I returned to the admissions officer at Pratt two weeks later with a greatly updated portfolio, with two new paintings and a handful of drawings. He responded favorably, paying particular attention to one painting I had done of a street scene in Italy. I remember him saying that it was "strong". We shook hands and I headed

back to Long Island. I received a letter a few weeks later. I was in. And I was ecstatic. As a transfer student I declared a major before my first semester. My mom supported my going to Pratt, but said in no uncertain terms that if I was going to an art & design school, and she was going to help pay for it, I was going to study something that would make me money when I got out. She knew the plight of the artist and wanted to spare me. It was both good and bad advice, but honest advice nonetheless. I majored in Communications Design (graphic design) and have been a designer my entire career. It has provided me with a good living and it's a craft I love.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I want to describe that first year living away from home. College was almost an afterthought. Being with Jackie, and the anticipation of being with Jackie, whether it be in Port Jeff or in NYC, was exhilarating. Every couple of weeks she would visit on the weekend, or I'd go take the train into the city. I'd walk from Penn Station up to 52nd Street to Novotel, the hotel where she was a front desk assistant manager, take the elevator up to the second floor and sit in the reception area for the last few minutes of her shift. We'd then get something simple to eat or more often head straight to her apartment in Park Slope. At that time she shared a place on 4th Avenue and 5th Street with Julia, an acquaintance of her father Frank's, and Julia's friend Pepe, who I believe fought in the Spanish Civil War.. It was a very small place so we didn't spend much time in it and it wasn't long before she found another place on 8th Avenue and 14th Street which had more privacy.

I was feeling a lot of independence, and it felt great. I was only 17, living in an apartment away from home, going to college, with a

girlfriend in the city. Stony Brook was only about 45 minutes from my home in Brightwaters so sometimes I would spend weekends at home, and sometimes Jackie would come out on Friday and stay until Sunday. Mom was very easy about her staying over.

Summers in Brightwaters were amazing. The boat provided us with such freedom. The beaches of Fire Island were just a fifteen minute ride across the bay, so we'd either spend the day there, or simply ride around the bay, do some clamming and fishing, and come back and eat what we caught for dinner. Sometimes I would go out solo, anchor a couple of hundred yards offshore and lay down and take a nap. For Jackie, it was a very welcome break from the city.

I headed to Pratt that fall. I loved Pratt. Tucked away in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Clinton Hill, the campus was small and beautiful, and meshed into its environs nicely, though danger was never far away which lent a nice edge to the whole experience.

The transfer students showed up for orientation to learn that we wouldn't be living on campus, but instead on the top two floors of Long Island University, a mile away on Flatbush Avenue. The boys were on the 16th floor and the girls on 15. We each had our own really large room and since we were essentially a band of misfits living at some other school, bonds were formed early. I had brought a juicer to school and would make carrot juice for whoever wanted it. There was Martin, Chris, and Dale who were all amazing illustrators, and Vincenzo, an Italian painter who would later become my roommate. And Lee from Wisconsin, who

would become a lifelong friend, and I would be his best man years later. Lee was a few years older than most of us, and because he had spent time out in the real world working and saving money to put himself through college, was super focused and driven. He knew exactly why he was there. He was a film major, loved The Talking Heads, and was just super creative and fun to be around. He wore black Converse Chuck Taylor's which I thought was cool. We, along with Vincenzo and another roommate Dave Sheen, would spend any extra money, after art supplies and food, drinking at McSorley's in the East Village.

The curriculum involved a wonderful (as in full of wonder) Foundation first year where you study just fine art. Subsequent to the Foundation year, I took as many of those classes as my schedule would allow. Two events stand out in my mind from the foundation year. Both involved my figure drawing class. The first was a visit to Columbia University Medical School to draw a cadaver. I had never seen a dead body and the experience was very intense. We were assembled in a small lecture hall with the man laid out on a table on the stage. At first we just sat in the seats for the preamble about how they get the bodies, how they are used, etc. They explained that this gentleman was homeless. I don't remember the exact explanation for how homeless people ended up there. I believe this particular person had no next of kin they could find. I remember the smell of formaldehyde was very strong. We were able to get right up close and assembled ourselves all around him. He was very "picked through", muscles were cut open revealing bones. His organs were plainly visible. I remember the body being very gray and quite large. It was a very fascinating experience. I'm not sure it made me any better at figure drawing but I'm happy I got to do it.

The second event was toward the end of the semester. One morning we were to go on a field trip to the Fulton Fish Market to draw. It's an overnight market where buyers and sellers from all over the northeast come to do business. There are thousands upon thousands of pounds of fish of all kinds, people bustling around - it's a very exciting place, especially if one of the workers is a lunatic. Our class was to meet there at 5am to take it all in and draw. We needed to stay out of the way and so we separated here and there and settled in. I was drawing for maybe ten minutes when a man approached me, yelling in half Spanish half English, something about his sister. He had a fish hook in his hand. Not a little hook you put on the end of your fishing line, but a big fucking hook you use to gaff a 300 pound tuna. He came closer and raised it over his head screaming about his goddamn sister or some shit I could only half understand. I was like "hey I don't know what you're talking about, I don't know your sister (please don't put that hook through my neck)!". He then pushed me backward into a large bucket of icy fish and advanced toward me. I was pretty helpless with my ass buried halfway down the ice bucket. I had my hands up to defend against a swing of the hook and was waiting for someone to come help. My teacher appeared and, I'll never forget this, asked whether "this was really necessary?". I said, "no it's not necessary, he's a fucking lunatic!" By that point a few other workers had arrived and pulled him away. "Is this really necessary?" - what a goddamn asshole. I lost all respect for him after that. He did follow up with me the following week and told me the man had been fired. I would have assumed so, thanks for the information.

While we're on the subject of assaults, I think it was that same year that I got mugged. I used to walk. A. Lot. I loved exploring the city. I started to get the nickname "Walker" (never stuck). One afternoon I had walked into lower Manhattan. On the way back, it was probably around 3 or 4 o'clock, I had just come back across the Manhattan Bridge. Yes, it's possible. It has a narrow walkway, nowhere as nice as the Brooklyn Bridge. I was back on the Brooklyn side and was underneath the bridge, near the Watchtower buildings, and I passed this small group of teens, guys and girls, maybe six of them - the only other people around. A few seconds after I pass them I get pulled violently from around my neck backwards onto the ground. I remember it being hard to breath and I'm yelling "hey let me go!". The kid asks for money and I pull out my wallet, open it and give him the motherload of six dollars. Then he let me go and they all continued slowly on their way, laughing. It was a very upsetting experience and my neck hurt for a few days. I had surmised that they were showing off in front of their girlfriends. They could have kicked the shit out of me but just took my six dollars and laughed. I never reported it.

I wasn't passionate about design when I started. Back then they were just on the cusp of introducing computers into the curriculum, but we did it all by hand. My very first graphic design class was how to use rubylith, t-squares, and the ruling pen. A ruling pen was a contraption that had an adjustable tip with an opening in the side where you added ink. You adjusted the flow of ink by turning a knob. We had an assignment where we had to draw all sorts of lines and line widths. I made such a mess of it that it looked as if I had drawn it with my feet. There were black and grey blotches everywhere and layers of whiteout which only

made the mistakes even more sad. The professor was not at all impressed. I still have that board. I was very concerned because if this was graphic design, I was fucked. Thankfully that wasn't graphic design, or at least it was a very small (and rapidly dying) part of it.

The professor who "made" my time at Pratt was Charles Goslin. He was an older gentleman probably in his sixties at the time, with piercing eyes and piercing criticism. I'll never forget my first classroom critique (crit). There were a number of us who had never taken his class before and an equal number who had. Upon entering the room you put your work up on the wall with all the other students. Goslin would then go through them all one by one. I knew within a few seconds of seeing the wall that I was screwed. The assignment was to create a poster for an organization that had something to do with heart health, I can't remember exactly. My solution was a heart shape that was divided up into equal rows with a title at the top and some copy under the image - all center-aligned. Many of the solutions were montages of disparate images which together formed a cohesive message, and always, always slanted text and images to create visual tension. When it came time for my crit, Goslin peered at it for a moment and said, "What the hell is this? Whose is this?" I sheepishly owned up to it and he proceeded to explain why it was boring, that it showed little imagination, and I was instructed to re-do the project. I definitely got hip to what it was he was after very quickly, and it was liberating, and fun, and made me fall in love with graphic design - it was all about storytelling, but you had just a few seconds to tell the story. I'd still get comments like "stop being so constipated with your work" but I was learning and improving. The montage was the vehicle, and the layout must never, ever, in Goslin's view, be without tension. I took a few of

his courses during my time at Pratt. One was a summer class that I needed to complete in order to graduate in January. Since I had been in a couple of his classes before, I became his poster boy for those poor souls whose shoes I stood in not long ago. It felt fucking wonderful.

Back at home, mom had taken Papa Joe in so she could take care of him. He had a variety of maladies from many years of neglect. Ultimately he had his colon removed and had a colostomy bag attached. She would clean his waste multiple times per day, day in and day out for many months before he died. He never really spoke English, even after 50-odd years in America. Mom said during this time he would recount in detail many stories from his childhood, most of which she had never heard before. He was a welcome addition to the household, smiling and laughing often. I really admire my mother for doing this for him. He had never really done much for her, but that didn't figure into the equation. She simply saw it as her duty.

We also lost my grandmother that year. Rose was a fascinating person, an enigma. She loved David and I like her own sons...more than her own sons. She was very protective of us, but also played favorites, with me as the benefactor. Sometimes it was so obvious that Pop would call her out on it and take Dave's side so there was some balance. Every other weekend they would dutifully drive up from Long Island, pretty much the whole ten years we lived upstate. Each time she would bring some clothes from her consignment store.

Rose was one of these people who could talk to literally anyone. I think my father has that gift, and myself to an extent - if I liked talking to people, that is. She was an extremely giving person and

seemed to have many, many acquaintances and people who cared about her, but I don't remember her having many close friends. She would say to me "you don't need friends, you can't trust them." She taught herself how to play the piano - couldn't read music, it was all by ear. And she was GOOD. I can remember she would play what I can only describe as a jazzy style with all these flourishes sprinkled around. She was the person at the party everyone would gather around as she played and sang. She was also a bigot. I can remember hearing her here and there say disparaging things about black people. After she met Jackie, and granted this was toward the very end so who knows about her mental state, she asked me "why did you choose a colored?" Regardless, I loved her very much. The love she had for Dave and I is what I remember most. The good far outweighed the bad.

She detected a lump in her breast and chose to not do anything about it for many months. She was always very fearful of doctors. By the time she saw one there wasn't much they could do. She went on chemo. On occasion I would take the train out to have dinner with them, and grab a few more precious moments. Within six months she was gone. My grandfather was obviously distraught and also angry with her for keeping her condition a secret for so long when something might have been done. It was a very sad time, but the huge, momentous silver lining that came as a direct result of her death was that my mom, Dolores, and my father reconciled. They had come up from the Bahamas for the funeral. Mom wanted her sister back in her life and in a display of what I can only describe as incredibly forgiving and beautiful allowed them back into it. For me it felt wonderful, and I felt lighter. It's a shame it took my grandmother's death to be the

catalyst, but I suppose only a lever that heavy could move a weight that big.

It was also during my time at Pratt that Jackie and I split up and she ended up moving back to London. I had met a girl named Brooke. She was in many of my classes and was very different from all the other students. She was very independent, didn't come from money, smoked cigarettes and didn't give a shit. She dressed kinda goth and was fun to be around. We had a radio show together at Pratt where we just played records and talked a little. The radio station signal *maybe* reached the outskirts of campus. I had drifted away from Jackie and didn't nurture our relationship - I put it down to being in college and wanting to be more free. The memory of her walking up the gangway and her plane tore at my insides and I was deeply depressed for many weeks afterward.

It wasn't long after that I broke up with Brooke and called Jackie begging her to come back. She had moved in with her dad and was starting to adjust to life back in London. Obviously this was completely selfish on my part - I drove her away, she was starting her life anew, and here I was asking her to return because I couldn't bear being without her. I don't remember exactly what we said on that call. I remember tears, and I remember her saying she needed to think about it. I concentrated on my schoolwork, hung out with Lee, Vince, and Dave and plowed through the semester.

I made a trip to England that summer but that required raising funds to do it. I took a job at a construction company on the east end of Long Island that my mom's uncle connected me with. It

was June and it was a very hot summer. My first day was well into the 90's. The job basically entailed moving 100 pound concrete forms from truck to ditch, over and over again. They were so heavy I could barely manage one at a time. The other guys on the job were Mexican, and these little fuckers would literally leap out of the truck, pile two on their backs at a time and jog up and down the ditch. They were incredible. The first night I came home and the top layer of skin from my shoulders had been peeled away. I lay in the bath, had some dinner and went to bed. On the second day I felt that I was starting to get the hang of it. I was beginning to build some stamina and despite the heat felt that I put in a good day's work. At the end of the shift the foreman told me that I didn't have "the killer instinct" and dismissed me. That was the end of my construction career. Two days. I quickly found a job with a floor sanding company closer to home. It was rigorous but way easier than humping 100 pound forms for six hours a day, and I learned a skill that would benefit me later. It was owned by a husband and wife. They were quite old, probably in their seventies at the time, and they worked hard every day. It was a fun crew of five of us; the guy who worked the finish would always be smoking a cigarette around the chemicals and I was sure he would set himself on fire one day. The foreman was the nephew of the owners. He was young, maybe early twenties and a decent guy. There was a dude who wore a Slayer t-shirt and a mullet and was always smiling. And Ruby, a smoking hot Asian girl, probably 17, and myself. I started with the menial job of working the scraper and within a month graduated to working the belt sander. It was a big deal because if you fucked up, which simply entailed letting it spin in one spot for more than a few seconds, you would gouge the floor.

I made enough money in about eight weeks to get myself over to England. It was a great road trip. We started by going to Wales with her brother Frank and his girlfriend (and later wife) Marion, and then made our way up to Newry in Northern Ireland to visit her mom's side of the family. Her mother, Eileen, had long since passed away, but she had many siblings and Jackie had many cousins. It was a really fun time, even though I had to sleep with Frank because none of us were married. One thing I'll always remember from that time was the military checkpoints - gray, wet, and fortress-like with armed guards everywhere.

About a month before the semester started Jackie called and said she'd come back to New York.

At that point I was all in. There was no way I was going to mess her around again. We sublet an apartment on President Street in Park Slope from friends of my father's toward the end of the summer and started living together.

Fall was my last semester at Pratt and I remember being very heads down on schoolwork, and many late nights putting all my portfolio work together. I also had a part time job designing ties at S. Broome Uniform Cravats on 25th Street right beside the Brooklyn Queens Expressway in Brooklyn. There were two fellow Pratt students there and our boss went to the Rhode Island School of Design. Our job was less creation and more implementing a fairly standard design of stripes of varying widths containing logos spaced evenly along it. As the company name implies, they were corporate ties, many of them airlines. Our product was a board with sheets of mylar taped to it. Each overlay had a different part of the design (one would be logos, one the small stripes, one the large stripes, etc) and when placed

flat would represent the final tie. These would then be used for printing the patterns. It wasn't a terrible job (unless you were one of the undocumented in the back doing the sewing. When it was hot outside, passing out was a regular occurrence for them). I liked Brigid, our boss, and my co-workers Marisol and Lisa were great company. If I had a lunch hour I would often take a walk to the Greenwood Cemetery (it's not morbid, it's a beautiful place and was the only green space around for at least a mile), or I might pop into the adult bookstore around the corner (rarely!), and even go for subs and get really fucking high (once!) with a guy named Mike who all the girls loved. That was an interesting afternoon attending to my stripes and logos!

Once I had just finished some pizza at a local restaurant and was taking a piss when there was a really hard knocking on the bathroom door. I was like "Ok one sec". And then more rapping on the door. I say "Relax, I'm coming right out!". I open the door and find myself staring down the barrel of a police officer's gun - literally pointed between my eyes about 18 inches away. I put my hands up and the guy next to the officer says "that's not him" and the policeman puts the gun down and I leave. I remember a small crowd had gathered outside and they were all jeering the officer saying "ooooh wrong guy!!!". Apparently the man's shop had been robbed. I went back to work pretty shaken up.

S Broome was a family run business. The patriarch Marvin, ruled with an iron fist and would not hesitate to scream regularly at his two sons or whomever had fucked up that hour. As I look back on it now after my career in the corporate world (where that kind of openness and honesty is replaced with gossip and backstabbing) I have a renewed respect for how that place was run, as dysfunctional as it was.

It all went by very quickly and then before I knew it I was done, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Communication Design in hand. I was exhausted and didn't want to rush into getting a job. We decided to move to Seneca Falls where Dad, Dolores, and their baby daughter, my sister, Shakira, were living. They had recently bought a fixer upper in town and Jackie and I would live there while helping restore the house.

Seneca Falls' claim to fame is the birthplace of women's suffrage in America, hosting the Women's Rights Historical Park and the National Women's Hall of Fame. That area of New York was settled by Quakers who were pretty damn progressive when it came to equal rights. Jackie fit the mold perfectly, strapping on a tool belt and framing walls. We really didn't know what we were doing. Dad had done a bit of carpentry when he was in his 30's and knew the basics but the budget for the whole house was like \$10k, which even by today's dollar was woefully small. We pretty much hacked the shit out of the place. We even built a bathroom directly off the kitchen - as in, the bathroom door opened right into the cooking area. There were no permits pulled. The upside was that we had a place to live (in the house) and we learned some basic skills which would come in handy later on. Jackie also took a job at the clubhouse restaurant at Silver Creek, the local golf course. She was the hostess. I think she enjoyed it there. I mean, it wasn't a great job, but she liked the people she worked with as well as the guests. She's always been great at relaying stories from her day at work, and she would come home with some good ones. I remember something about the head chef doing coke and drinking heavily, throwing pots and pans, punching someone. I'll need to fact check this. It wouldn't be

surprising though. That area was economically depressed, a hard-living place where many of the better jobs in manufacturing had disappeared, or were soon to be added to the pile.

Seneca Falls was an opportunity to get to know my father a little better. We would drive around in his pickup truck, doing errands or visiting his friend Smitty, a chain smoking, chain coffee drinking antiques dealer in Clyde NY. He owned a building in the town and it was full of furniture in all states of disrepair. He took a liking to me and when he learned I was an artist got me to do some hand-painted chairs. I wasn't very good at it and lost interest fairly quickly. Dad also had a friend named Bobby who had cerebral palsy. He couldn't really use his limbs anywhere near full capacity, his eyes went this way and that, but that man knew his way around a car. Our van was in need of a head gasket replacement. I really knew nothing about car mechanics before I moved up there and the three of us, under Bobby's tutelage, not only replaced the head gasket but the valves as well. It was very interesting, like surgery but on a car, and it dispelled some of the mystery around mechanics and certainly made me more confident and has served me well my entire life - or up until about ten years ago when cars became way too complex to work on.

There was another project I remember working on with my dad during this time. I can't remember exactly what we were trying to accomplish but whatever it was involved me climbing into the attic. I was trying to be very careful, but because I'm a clumsy oaf I put my foot through the bedroom ceiling. I really thought he was going to have a fit, but I called to him from the attic to come into the room. He just looked up, said something like "oh well that's unfortunate" and we proceeded to clean it up and patch the

ceiling. I was relieved but also impressed. He was treating me like a man.

I went on some interviews with design firms in the area and got some very part time work laying out street maps for a small firm in town. There really wasn't a lot going on in that area in terms of work and general excitement, and after about a year we decided to move.

We picked Chicago, the main reason being that our friend, and Jackie's former roommate Andrea had moved there some years prior. We had visited her once before and really liked the city. We packed up the van and said goodbye to Dad, Dolores, and Kira. The first day we got as far as the Cleveland suburbs and found a motel for the night. The following morning I woke up in a real panic. I had a strong feeling that we were making a terrible mistake. Jackie and I spoke about it and decided to head back to New York. The plan wasn't to settle in Seneca Falls but to make our way back to the city.

We spent a couple of weeks at Dad's to think things through, and an opportunity came up to live at the house Papa Joe had left my mom in Elmont, only about a half hour ride on the Long Island Rail Road into the city. We paid utilities and in return had to take on landlord duties, of which I was ill prepared. We both got jobs quickly. Jackie, working the front desk at the Sherry Netherland hotel on Fifth Avenue, and myself as Art Director of both Rug News magazine and The Exporter magazine on West 37th Street. It certainly wasn't what I had envisioned for myself as my first "real job" as a graphic designer. I had shopped my portfolio around to a handful of the top firms - Seymour Chwast (who left

a handwritten note that he liked my work - I guess just not enough), Chermayeff and Geismar (I would have shit myself if I got a job there), and some others I can't remember offhand. In those days you made an appointment to drop off your "book" and a couple of days later would go pick it back up. If they liked your work enough, you would score a follow up interview. That interview never came so I decided to take the job at Rug News. It was a small outfit, owned by a man named Les Stroh and run by a very kind woman named Susie Williams who was the editor. There were a few young writers also looking to get their careers going, and a great guy from Thailand named Ray Luksanapol who kept the finances organized. Les fancied himself to be part Ernest Hemingway, part Orson Welles, part Joseph Pulitzer and spent his days speaking loudly on the phone at his desk doing deals, following leads, or going out to business lunches. He worked hard as his whole life was in these two publications. There was no art department, just me, so I was the Art Director of myself, and there was a lot of work to be done as both publications were monthly. I learned quickly that there was a definite rhythm to the month - the first few days of the first week were a breather of sorts where you could take some time to get organized for the onslaught. Weeks two and three were an all out sprint to get the articles laid out, figure out how many ads were going to run, design many of the ads, and even go out into the field and visit the high end rug galleries in the city to take photos. The fourth week of the month was getting everything tightened up for printing, and then running it down to the printer on 21st Street. And then the process would start all over again. I learned a lot about handmade rugs during that time. I mean I'll admit it is funny when you hear "Rug News" and think "Ha silly! Rugs! What a silly topic!" but some of these fucking things were in the

tens of thousands of dollars and all the owners of these amazing galleries were serious Persian dudes. I learned less about Exporting, though to Les that seemed like the more serious side of the operation as it was dealing with banks, regulations, and obviously worldwide trade. It just wasn't as accessible a topic for me as the rugs. I spent a couple of years there and got to attend Domotex, a huge international textile fair, twice. My job was to be the staff photographer and make sure I visited all the right booths and got all the right photos. It was fun but tiring being on your feet all day. At night me and a couple of my coworkers would eat a nice meal and then go spend some money at the strip club talking to all the girls working their way through college.

Back to the landlord duties. It's a bit fuzzy but I remember my grandfather having two sets of tenants. He lived in the (mostly unfinished) basement and had families on the first and second floors. My mother felt like these people had been living on the cheap and took advantage of a senile old man for too long and she got rid of them. She was living in Florida during this time and it was up to me to find new tenants and keep the income flowing. I found a young single mother and her two year old son to live in the basement and a Haitian couple to live on the second floor. Soon after the single mom moved in, she also moved the boy's father in with them. They were nice enough people but I felt that she should have asked in advance if that was ok. I asked for more rent as I was giving her a bit of a discount with her situation but there was always some sort of excuse. The situation lasted like that for about six or eight months and then I gave her a month's notice and sent them packing. The couple upstairs were probably in their early thirties and expecting their first child. She was home all the time as she was heavily pregnant and I think he had

an automotive repair shop or some business in Queens. They got behind on their rent and stopped paying altogether. Mom was like, “what the hell are you running up there, a halfway house!?” I can’t remember how I procured their exit. I do remember the guy accusing me of being a racist. It was all too much for my 21 year old self to handle.

A nice aspect of living where we did was that we had mom’s aunt Margaret and uncle Guido (yes you read that correctly) living just around the corner. They were probably in their late sixties at the time and would have us over for dinner from time to time. Aunt Margaret had a very sweet way about her - very smiley. Uncle Guido was a stonemason and looked like he was made of stone. He was maybe 5’7’ but was built wide and hard with big calloused hands. He had a very good sense of humor and liked to joke around. They had arrived from Italy some forty years before but, like Pap Joe, barely learned to speak English. That really wasn’t all that uncommon in those days - people immigrated from Italy in their twenties and thirties and found jobs with other Italians, socialized with other Italians, shopped at Italian stores, so on a day to day basis they really didn’t have a huge need to learn English. It was a different situation with their children however. My mom was discouraged from using her native tongue and she more or less forgot how to speak Italian until she returned there in her early thirties. After the Haitians moved out, my mom came back to live in Elmont with her friend Pepino from Italy. We moved to the top floor and they lived on the ground floor. Dave even moved into the basement.

One morning Jackie and I were sitting down to breakfast and Dave came down. He was groggy, disheveled. I chalked it up to a

drinking night out with the boys. After a few minutes however it was clear that something wasn't right. There were some scratches on his face and arms and a faraway look in his eye. When mom went into the kitchen Jackie and I asked what was going on. He told us the story of the night before. He and his friends were driving home on the Southern State Parkway in his friend's Ford Bronco. If you are not familiar with the Bronco, it is sort of a predecessor to the SUV, but more truck-like. It was after midnight and the Southern State Parkway had a lot of fast curves. His friend misjudged a curve, hit a median and flipped the Bronco a number of times. Dave was tossed from the car and landed on a grass embankment. He describes the feeling as having been lifted out of the vehicle and gently placed on the ground. Miraculously nobody was seriously hurt. We took a drive by the kid's house later that morning to see the car. It looked like aluminum foil. I am still in awe to this day that nobody was hurt, much less killed.

The other story I remember was when mom hired a handyman to remove a chain link fence, probably 30 feet. She didn't want to pay for disposal so she had him dig a huge hole in the back yard and bury it. Out of sight out of mind.

It was very nice all being in the same house and we did that for about six or eight months before we decided that we needed to get out of the suburbs and back into the city. In 1992 we found a garden-level apartment in a brownstone in Park Slope on 9th Street and 7th Avenue. It was good to be back in Brooklyn.

It was also in '92 that my second sister Renee was born. Even though I was much older than she and Kira, they would both become a very important part of my life.

I ended up rearranging my work hours so I was four days at Rug News/Exporter and one day a week at S Broome, which I could walk to in about 20 minutes. It broke up the monotony a bit, and it was good seeing old friends at the cravat company. One of the best things about being in Park Slope was that Brian had an apartment in the "North Slope" closer to Flatbush Avenue. I would go over often and he had a basketball court right next door. It was there that I went from being a very mediocre player to a somewhat mediocre player. There was always a good run going and the black fellas made you play better.

New York City in the late eighties and early 90's was a very different place than it is now. It was a lot more in your face and by that I mean it had an edge. It could be dangerous and you needed to be vigilant and aware of your surroundings. I mean, it wasn't a war zone, but it was waaaaay different than it is today. I'm all for feeling safe in my surroundings but I think NYC has lost its grit. Of course that's a very white privileged point of view and if you live the projects I'm sure there's still plenty of grit to go around to this day. Where I was going with this was that living that way, always looking behind you, started to get to us after a while. Lee and his girlfriend Cathy moved out to Palo Alto CA in 1990. The four of us had become very close and seeing them leave was very sad. Cathy was born and raised in Queens and moving across the country was a big step. Lee had already been far from home in Wisconsin since leaving for Pratt. California began to stew in the back of our minds.

On a windy, freezing cold Sunday in February and I somehow managed to convince Jackie to take a ride out to Jones Beach. “Aw come on, the fresh air will feel great, get out of the city for the afternoon.” There was nobody there (obviously) and we ran out onto the sand. Jones Beach is a deep beach, a couple of hundred yards at least to the water. The wind was so cold we were shaking and laughing at the same time. We ran about halfway in and stopped. I turned to her and asked her to marry me. I didn’t have a ring to give her, there was no way I could afford one, and waiting until I could just seemed pointless. We had tears freezing to our faces and held each other against a cold we couldn’t even feel.

We decided we wanted to get married in England for the simple reason that there were more Browne’s there than Croce’s here. We also knew that we wanted a small wedding. We would be paying for a good portion of it so it simply had to be a small affair. The one wrinkle with the plan was that at the time you couldn’t just get married under a tree on a hillside - you needed to be married in a church. And we weren’t religious. So started our quest to prove our religiosity and worthiness of the blessing of the church in England. The first step was to begin attending services at the local Catholic church in Park Slope. After a couple of months of showing our faces we had to schedule meetings with the priest once a week over the course of about six weeks. As I remember them, those meetings involved questions about our faith, or plans to raise our children Catholic, and so on. We went through the motions, genuflected when required, and received the necessary letter of worthiness that we could then share with the priest in England. During this time Jackie made a weeklong

trip to England with the goal of finding a suitable venue. She and her sister-in-law (and best friend) Karen drove out into the countryside in search of such a place. They discovered the beautiful town of [Malmesbury](#) in the parish of Wiltshire in the west country. Malmesbury is quite old, so old that the first king of England was buried in 939 in the Abbey, which was founded in 675. That's old.

But before we tied the knot we made a trip out to California to see Lee and Cathy do the same. It was April '93 and we had just come off a bitterly cold Northeast winter. For all I remember it was probably still snowing in New York when we left for sunny Palo Alto. I had only been to California once before, when I was about 10, on a bus trip with Dave, Pop, and Grandma. Arriving there that April felt like we had landed in the Garden of Eden. The sun shone every day, flowers were in full bloom and people were warm and friendly. The morning after we arrived Lee and Cathy took a bunch of us on a walk in the hills behind Stanford University, called the Dish Walk as there is a huge old radio telescope perched atop. It was just gorgeous and you can see a huge swath of the Peninsula. I remember throwing a big frisbee-shaped cowpat at Lee. It was also on that walk when I turned to Jackie and asked her if she could live here. She said "oh hell yeah". The reception took place at the beautiful Garden Court Hotel in downtown Palo Alto. I was the best man and rehearsed my speech well in advance. It was adequate - some love, some laughs, not too long. It was extremely nerve-wracking as my obsessive nature seems to rear its head whenever I've had to do public speaking and instead of it being a three minute speech it became a three week speech when you factor in the amount of

time I spent thinking about it. But I was honored to do it and it was just a small bit of stress on an otherwise perfect weekend.

Fast forward two and a half months to England and it was our turn. A few days before the ceremony we had to meet with Father O'Mulligan, or O'Sullivan - O'Something. We had met with him once before and this time it was more of a final, "make sure we still love God, blah blah" thing - and also he wanted to meet Dave, who was the best man. Dave had just come off a long flight from New York, and had probably drank a bit too much the night before. As we went through the motions with Father O', I noticed Dave starting to nod off. A few minutes later he was fully asleep and Father O' gave a slight shake of the head and wink of his eye and said "well, I guess he's not a Believer."

Our wedding day was so full of joy. Jackie spent months making her own dress and she was so beautiful. We only had about forty family and friends there, including many of their children. After the ceremony we walked in a procession through the town to the reception venue, The Old Bell (is that the fourth time the word "old" has appeared in the past 30 seconds?) purported to be England's oldest (there it is again!) hotel dating from around 1220. It was really the perfect venue. The sky was cloudless and the air warm. We spent a good deal of time outside in the beautiful gardens, and the in-house pub got a lot of attention. The evening featured most everyone on the dance floor going shirtless and dancing to "I'm Too Sexy" by Right Said Fred. Since all involved had stayed in or around Malmesbury, the following day had us taking over a nearby pub and playing lawn games, eating, drinking, and just having fun and enjoying each others' company.

We honeymooned with Lee and Cathy in Positano, a truly magical town on the Amalfi Coast. We just winged it - took the bus from Rome and figured we'd find a place to stay. At first Lee and I went forth in search of shelter and after about an hour came back empty. Jackie and Cathy left us at the bar and within twenty minutes had found a lovely apartment overlooking the sea, owned by a spry old man named Pietro Pane (as he liked to say "Peter Pan") and his wife who's name I cannot remember. We spent a number of blissful days there, exploring, swimming, eating, drinking, and it was on to Sora to spend some time with family.

The reception we got when we arrived was something I'll never forget. My mom was there about a week before and helped organize a beautiful party for the four of us. Family from both sides gathered for an incredible outside dinner at the home of the Cerrone's. Everybody lives within ten miles of each other so it's very easy to gather. There was so much laughter and amazing food, drinking of wine, maybe a little bit of dancing - it was so heartwarming and indicative of who those people are, and we were very grateful.

We stayed at the home of Roberto's grandmother. We didn't know her very well, but the house was empty and it was just a mile or so from Roberto's house so it worked. There were some very old photos around, and I remember one distinctly because it was of a very old woman, stern-faced with piercing eyes. Roberto called her the "Shamani" or shaman, and we didn't really probe much about what the hell that meant, but it did give the place a spooky aura.

We were there only a few days when my mother received a call from an American friend of Jackie's, Laura, who came from the States to our wedding. Now, this was way before cell phones and I can only say that receiving this call before we headed back home was a miracle as it required that multiple people at our wedding, who didn't know each other, exchange phone numbers, for whatever reason. Jackie's father had died suddenly from a heart attack, just two weeks after the wedding. It was obviously devastating and we left immediately for London that afternoon. Frank was such an interesting man to me. I knew him after he became a Mason, and maybe that had something to do with it, but he had a certain spiritual power that I cannot adequately put into words. He said a lot by not saying anything, or very little. Plus he had a great sense of humor. And I cannot imagine the fortitude it took to raise four remarkable people by himself, all while working full time. That part of the story is Jackie's to tell, but I'll say that her mother left them while they were all very young and died not too long after. I only knew Frank Browne for a few years and deeply regret that he left us so soon, at the age of 57. It was a painful couple of weeks. Lee and Cathy were there with us. It was their honeymoon as well and it meant a lot to us that being together was their priority. Jackie was torn apart, she was so close to her father. She cried buckets. Her family all pulled together. We had moments of laughter, and there were many tears, but at least we got to be there, all because someone gave someone who gave someone else a phone number at our wedding. I cannot imagine receiving the news upon arriving back home. Back in Brooklyn we were shaken by the experience but excited to start our lives together. We had a move across the country to plan.

I'm going to break with the method I've been using to write this up to this point (the "point" being the wedding bit), which has been in a linear fashion from beginning to end. The reason being, is that we're in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic and I think it deserves writing about in real-time.

Pandemics have always concerned me - I've always thought that the end of the human race would be caused not by nuclear war, asteroid, or global warming, but by pandemic. Historically we've done a remarkable job at containing them. After all, the last one of this magnitude, the Spanish Flu, was over one hundred years ago in 1918. I have always assumed that world governments would typically have the containment of such viruses as a top priority - simply because it's a survival of the species issue - and the global community would pull together in such times. As of this writing we are nine months in (at least) with over 62 million infected and over 1.4 million dead globally, 13 million and 265,897 respectively in the U.S alone. The United States has fared far worse than most of the rest of the world in terms of number of cases and deaths, however as a percentage of the population, the death rate is quite low, at around 2%, according to the [Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center](#). That's still a lot of people, and it's getting worse, not better. In the last 26 days alone, the U.S. has seen over 100,000 cases per day.

I am quite sure that I had it, very early on, back in mid-February/early March. I had a cough, fever of 103, tested negative for the flu, but there was no Covid test at the time - the word wasn't even mentioned by my doctor. The cough lasted for

months, and here we are in late November of 2020 and my chest still hasn't completely cleared. I have tested negative multiple times. I personally know only one person who has died of the virus, a second cousin in Italy, named Gabrielle, Agostino's sister's son, who was about 57 and a cab driver and he passed fairly early on. It hasn't struck home, so to speak, in a horrific way, and I can only pray that it does not. The boys are well. Ellis lives in Amherst with his girlfriend Brittany. They are very sensible and safe, especially considering Ellis being immune-compromised. Aaron gets tested weekly through his job at UNH. Jackie goes into school every day, with far fewer students, everyone masked and so far it has worked out surprisingly well. My extended family is all healthy, though quarantine has taken a toll on my mom, living alone. I have been working from home since mid-March, and to be honest it's been the best experience of my entire career. I was always skeptical that I could work from home full time - I thought it would be too monotonous - and it certainly can be, but the freedom it has afforded in terms of how I structure my day, and that fact the stress of a daily commute has been removed, has made a world of difference in my attitude toward my job. I am one of the lucky ones. Another silver lining that has come out of this is my renewed focus on what really matters - I cannot remember ever spending so much time in nature. My level of gratitude, even for the smallest things like my breath, has become heightened. And looking after the well-being of family and friends has become a more of a priority. Jackie and I have discovered hiking, which we love, and have found that Massachusetts has preserved so much of its precious open space and within 20 miles of our home there are an incredible number of beautiful treks.

Vaccines are on the way. There are currently three candidates that look promising. It's going to be a huge undertaking in terms of distribution and will take many many months to get the entire population vaccinated. Well, that will never happen here in the U.S., but hopefully enough people get vaccinated that herd immunity sets in. That would require about 70% of the population, which in this country will be a stretch. As one wise doctor on TV said, "vaccines don't protect people, vaccinations do." I can only hope that by this time next year we are back to something resembling normal.

*So that's the big picture. Now I want to share my thoughts about this situation, because it didn't have to be this way. In the beginning "We're all in this together!" signs were quite common. Even though we had the most inept, corrupt, heartless piece of shit as President at the time, there was a feeling that despite Trump, we would pull together. Isn't that the myth about America we've been fed after all? That when the going gets tough the people of this country would all pull together for the greater good? Well I can say with certainty that is complete bullshit. If a pandemic cannot pull us together nothing will, and to me that's been one of the most depressing and disappointing learnings from this thing. The problem is that the response to the virus was politicized from the very beginning by the Trump administration. The message was continuous and consistent - **science was the enemy, it's a Democratic hoax, fake news, whatever little we had of it was all going "to magically disappear" so keep living your lives and don't let anybody restrict your freedom.** The simple act of wearing a mask became politicized - to the Trumpers, wearing*

one meant that you were a snowflake lemming with no balls. To the rest of us, wearing a mask simply meant you wanted to protect yourself and others, and was quite obviously the quickest way out of this mess and back to normal. Hence, mask wearing varied by State, and even by town. Trump was in way over his head from the start, definitely not up to the job, and left it largely up to each state to determine its own course of action. There was little to no federal guidance and instead of fighting the virus and bringing the country together, Trump surrendered, hit the golf course, let the virus rip and kill as many people as it could. Human beings are just numbers to him. Leading scientists receive death rates on a daily basis, front line workers struggle to keep the sick alive and themselves healthy and sane. The “All in this together” signs have long ago disappeared. And if we all had just worn masks - *JUST WORN MASKS* - tens of thousands of our fellow Americans would still be alive. But, as Trump said, “it is what it is”. Thankfully we have ousted the bloated, orange, fat-assed, lying and cheating sack of shit from office and look forward to an adult response from the Biden administration. He doesn’t take office for another 50 days, 22 hours, 23 minutes and 45 seconds, and by some estimates we may lose another one hundred thousand souls between now and then. Let’s pray that does not come true, and let’s hope that sanity will prevail.

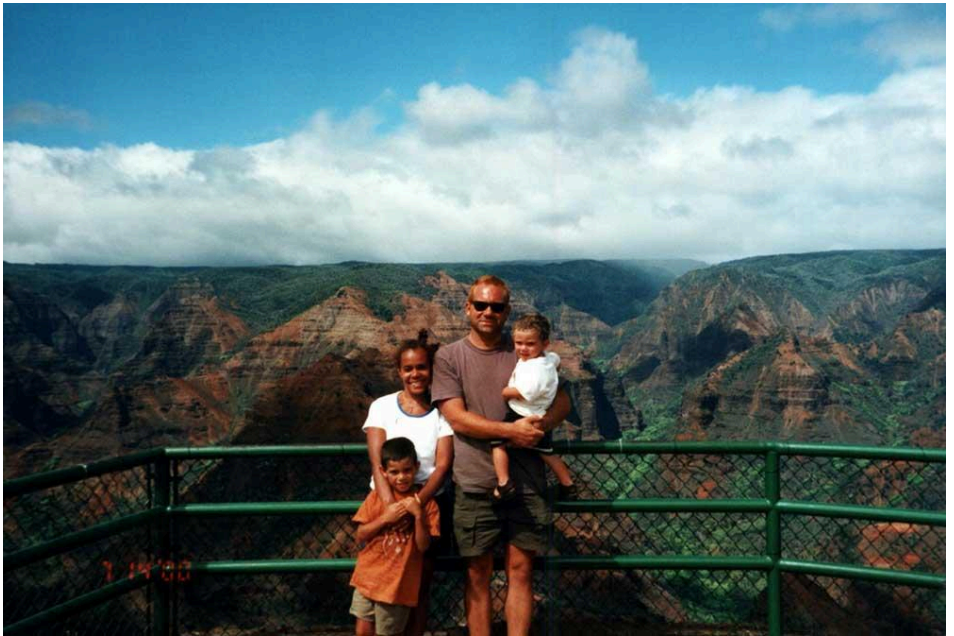
I always love when books have pictures in the middle, so here's mine



Mom and Bubbala 1968



Croce family 2018. L to R, Max, Renee, Aaron, Ellis, Esther, Dad, Shawn, Kira, Mom, Jackie, Dolores, me, Dave



Kauai, Hawaii 2000



The strangest picture of me ever taken



Looks like I was really happy to be in FL. With Grandma, Pop, Mom and Dave, c. 1983



Shark bait. Long Island Bahamas, 2012



With Rhona and Terry, Eastham MA, 2016



The Browne's, London 2015, L to R, Adrian, Sarah, Ellen, Jackie, Ellis, Amy, Karen, Maxine, Frank, me, Aaron, Kyall, Luke



Oak Bluffs with the Miley's, 2007



With Mom, Dad, and Pop, Malmesbury, 1993. Jackie made her own dress



Fixing a problem somewhere in the Southwest, 1993



Generations of Croce Men, Belmont, 2004



The love of my life, Roche Harbor, WA 2021

One beauty of youth is that stuff doesn't need a lot of planning - even big stuff doesn't carry the baggage it does later in life. That's why, three months after we got married we had packed up everything we needed in our second circa 1983 Dodge Ram van that we bought for around two thousand dollars. It was very basic and we loved it. Slate grey, no passenger windows, just two porthole windows on the side and a window on each back door. A bench seat for passengers, and the rest was bare. I outfitted it with a CB radio figuring that might be useful if we encountered a Hills Have Eyes sort of event out West.

It was October and a good time of year for cross country travel. The plan was to take a northerly route until we hit Colorado and then dip down into New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and then come up from southern California to the Bay Area. We decided that sticking to highways was probably the best idea as having had the van for only a matter of weeks prior, we weren't sure of its reliability.

I am going to include the diary Jackie and I kept during the journey and she has miraculously saved it all these years. It will be better than me getting facts wrong like "yes Wyoming was so big and beautiful" when in fact we went nowhere near Wyoming.

October 1, 1993

Jackie

"We left Elmont on a bright sunny day - great driving weather. It feels so good to be leaving NY. The fall leaves have come out and the colors are spectacular. Stopping off at the Bandit Truck Stop where Elena is eating cold broccoli pasta - yum yum - oh now out comes the cold fish leftover from last night. W had previously

thrown the potatoes in next door's garden." I can only assume that we were giving mom a lift to Seneca Falls as we were stopping there on our way to Chicago.

October 8

Jackie

"Well the time spent with family was very nice, no major events but being with the family was nice. At the moment we are between OH & IN. We made a pit stop to change drivers and W discovered a fan belt was off. Luckily he had a spare. Then he had to jump start the van! Fingers crossed, we have a long way to go." (In storytelling they call this foreshadowing.) "The rain started in Gary Indiana - no doubt acid. Found Andrea with not much difficulty but couldn't find parking so Warren parked behind Andrea's work. She took us for yummy pizza."

October 9

Jackie

"Woke up to a shitty rainy day after a shitty night's sleep. They don't call Chicago the windy city for nothing! Warren & I went for breakfast to give Andrea a chance to sleep. We then went to see Tony to find out if he could help us with the van. He couldn't so we decided to rent some videos and stay home. Tony made us some excellent Mexican food. Later to the sports bar (White Sox won) for drinkies."

October 10

Warren

"Went to the Conservatory which was very nice and about 150 degrees. Also next door is the Lincoln Park Zoo. Enjoyed the apes though it is sort of sad to see animals enclosed. It was a nice

warm day so we walked a lot. Cooked roast chicken and potatoes for Andrea and Tony. Then lazed around house.”

October 11

Jackie

“Happy Columbus Day! We went to Shell garage & had air pump belt installed and were on the road by 10:30. I read stupid magazines & the time to lunch went by very quickly. The landscape in this part of the country is very blah. Stopped in Des Moines for the night. The only place around to eat was Happy Chef where the waitress hadn’t shown up, so the manager was running around being manager, host, waiter & chef! Very nice man and adequate meal. It was great we had two double beds, great for a good night’s sleep.”

October 12

Jackie

“Vanny II would not start - even when hot wired! We called AAA & he came very quickly & got us started pretty much straight away. I’m sitting outside Kmart with the engine running while W looks for a starter or something. I’m just a girlie I don’t know what’s happening. 11:30 well it’s the tranny switch. W replaced the starter & it still didn’t start so we knew that wasn’t the problem. He got a mechanic who found the problem in a matter of seconds. Something to do with grounding. Anyhow, W’s gone to get a wire, it just means the car will start in any gear. I think we’ll have an early lunch & should be on the road by 1:00pm at the latest. We have found really decent mechanics so far. Let’s hope we won’t be needing them anymore on this trip!!”

Warren

“There must be enough corn in this country to feed the entire world. North Dakota has a nice license plate.”

October 13

Warren

“After a minor repair on the tailpipe (I strapped a beer can around it) “we cruised past Buffalo Bill Cody’s ranch a few miles away and headed for Colorado. The terrain changed abruptly after Nebraska. Lots of open grassy hilly and not much else. We’re now about 45 minutes east of Denver and the mountains are rising up in the distance.”

Jackie

“The drive from Denver to Colorado Springs was horrible. First there was loads of traffic then lots of hills. Poor Vanny II had the hardest time. I felt like getting out and giving a helping hand. We stopped at the El Colorado in Manitou Springs. A bunch of historic cottages done in SW style. Very cozy, it feels like a home. Because of the time zone change we arrived early & still had plenty of daylight so we took a trip to Garden of the Gods. It’s a bunch of amazing rock formations & the land was donated by some guy with the stipulation that the park will always be free. We became very hungry & while Warren called his family I chatted with the guy in the hotel office. He recommended a restaurant called The Mason Jar. We had excellent baby back ribs. On the way back we stopped in at a drug store & were amazed to see handguns (appx 75) on display & being sold over the counter!! In Colorado to buy a handgun all you need is a CO driver’s license & the ability to fill out a form! We talked to Patrick behind the counter. Actually we just needed to give him a soapbox with all his NRA & ACLU crap.”

October 14

Jackie

“Well I thought we’d have a ‘working-on-van-free-day’ today. This morning we took a trip to the Anasazi Indian Cliff Dwellings museum. Really fascinating - great work considering the tools they had to work with. The mountain range from Manitou Springs to Santa Fe was spectacular. Rather unfortunate for Vanny II though. I saw a bull with massive horns grazing along the side of the road - probably making his way up to the honeys on the other side. The clamp holding the exhaust pipe broke again” (so much for beer cans) “so we stopped and put a temporary wire on until we reached Raton - the first town in New Mexico. Had lunch & now we’re back on the road.”

Warren

“The terrain was much more mountainous than I had thought. It was a strain on the van. Sante Fe itself is high on the mountain (10,566 ft). It’s sort of a disappointment - very touristy and cutesy. Sorry this is so sloppy - I burned my fingertips yesterday.”

Jackie

Warren described Sante Fe perfectly by saying he felt as if he was in a theme park. We walked through town for a bit where we found a cafe & had yummy chimichangas. We just made it back to the hotel before the storm started. Warren had been driving all day so he fell asleep at about 9pm and I spent the next two hours fighting with Itty Bitty & trying to find a comfortable position to read without disturbing him.”

October 15

Jackie

“Oh boy oh joy the van wouldn’t start. Surprise. Anyway after replacing the starter relay we made our way down to Albuquerque. On the way we stopped off at the Sandia Reservation which was so disappointing - not a peyote-smoking indian in sight. The old town of Alb. was nice not pretentious at all, even though they had the tourist shops.”

Warren

Stayed in Gallup and walked the “old” section for a good dinner. After dinner we did our laundry with indians. Also visited Red Rock State Park. It’s very beautiful and had a large area for horse shows and rodeos. The scenery here is very beautiful.”

October 16

Warren

“Made Flagstaff around 12:30. It’s a really nice little town. We spent the afternoon walking around the shops in the rain. We stopped in to a coffee shop/restaurant which was also a very different sort of OTB where we lost \$15. Our motel is a rat hole for \$50 - it’s “parent’s weekend” at the local university so everything is full. Tonight we went to a bar/restaurant where we spoke to a Navajo (drunk) and I played pool. The Blue Jays are about to win Game 1 of the World Series. I’m excited about seeing the Grand Canyon tomorrow.”

Jackie

“We don’t know that Wilson Bahe was drunk. I enjoyed myself talking with him. Our hotel is practically sitting on the RR tracks.

Some sleep we had! Every 20 minutes a Santa Fe freight train went hurtling through blasting its horn.”

October 17

Jackie

“W & I were more than ready to get out of the hotel. We were up and out by 8:15. We stopped to get coffee and Sunday paper but the guy said they don’t open until 8:00!! We went to get gas & I asked the attendant if the clocks went back. He says they don’t change the clocks here. W & I have been walking around for a day and a half one hour ahead. We are waiting for the newsstand to open so I can buy some sort of decorating book on SW art. I got a few good books.

About 5 miles from the Grand Canyon the air pump exhaust fell apart. The garage in the Canyon said they were unable to help. As the van was still driveable we decided to enjoy the day & take care of the problem later. We took the West Rim drive & the sights were spectacular. It’s such a beautiful and amazing place. It’s best when there are no other people around. You can just hear the wind whipping around the rocks & watch the birds soaring. We had a hot dog lunch & went for a short trek. I collected pine cones for Christmas decorations. We had decided to stay in Flagstaff one more night but on the way we went through Williams where they had plenty of motels. We managed to find a mechanic who said he’ll fix the van. It was so cold. While we were waiting I threw up on the forecourt - very embarrassing. Hank (mechanic) & W took me to the Comfort Inn (v. nice) so I could lie down. I took a boiling hot bath & threw up again. I rested & W came back after getting the van fixed up. He made use of the whirlpool and came back wasted.

We went to a very nice restaurant where we wanted to buy a Clint Eastwood cardboard standup, but not for \$25. I just had soup and salad and W had chili burger and fries.

We returned to the hotel to watch the Blue Jays & Phillies. I woke up in the night and threw up the soup & salad. I had such a migraine - maybe I have the flu. I ran another hot bath & laid in the dark. My messing around woke W up.

October 18

Jackie

W got up early and did 10 laps. I couldn;t get out of bed. Anyway, eventually I did & we got ready to go. Oh yes, I threw up. It was blue-green & tasted of poison! I'm so upset. We are now on our way to Las Vegas where they have loads of cheap food that I won't be able to eat. There are a few different routes to Las Vegas & the most direct seemed like it would be difficult for vanny as some elev. Was over 7,000. So we took a flatter route making the trip much longer.

From arriving in Las Vegas it took a good 1/2 hour to get to the strip - we were so excited. We found a cheap motel & went to make our millions. We lost money in the Sahara & then W started going crazy for food as he'd eaten only a doughnut for breakfast. I wasn't allowed in the all-you-can-eat places without paying & as I am still-unable-to-eat, that option was out. We found a prime rib deal in the Sands & I had onion soup which I threw up into my hands on the way to the bathroom.

We played a few machines there & then moved on to the Mirage which I loved. Really over the top but in a more classy way. We found a couple of good slot machines & even managed to play blackjack, where I won \$1. Good fun.

I watched some of the Raiders Broncos game & sat next to such a dork. This sweaty skinny pasty faced English guy pretending to be a big butch football know-all American.

Anyway I was near collapse and almost crying when W found me. He had some Burger King & then we went back to the hotel & fell asleep almost straight away.

October 19

Jackie

Unfortunately W has been doing the driving as I am only fit to sit & sleep. We should be crossing the CA line very soon.

Warren

Just crossed the desert into Bakersfield. The desert is daunting, and much more mountainous than I expected. We're here!

October 20

Warren

After a 3 hour drive we arrived in Palo Alto around 2:00pm. It's beautiful weather. We spent time walking around town, doing laundry, and visiting Stanford U. It's been quite a trip, I'm very happy we did this. At times it was nerve-wracking, but no major problems. Now it's time to start new, which is very exciting. I really want to get a place soon and get a little settled. Palo Alto is a really nice town, I hope we can get a place here. Anyway, a great drive. Thank you Vanny II.

Jackie

Well it's been a whole day since I last threw up. Just in time to sample Lee and Cathy's cooking! Palo Alto is a nice place. I hope

we find a reasonable apt. Here. Warren says I should write something deep:

I saw tumbleweed- but it wasn't tumbling

I saw buffalo - but they weren't roaming

I saw desert - with more trees than the National Forest

I saw a reservation - but not a single teepee

Totals:

Mileage - 3,620

Gas - \$372.50

Motels - \$336.00

Repairs - \$400.00

Tolls - \$18.85

—end of diary

The night we arrived we all took a swim in the pool at Lee and Cathy's apartment complex and talked excitedly about plans. We found a cottage apartment within a few days on Woodland Avenue in East Palo Alto and within a few weeks we were moved in. A year before we arrived East PA had the highest murder rate per capita in the country. Our cozy wooded cottage was part of a complex of eight cottages set off from the road and just on the Palo Alto side of the 101 freeway. That made all the difference in terms of safety and in the three years we lived there the worst thing that happened was we had our unchained bikes stolen out of our open-air garage. Cinco De Mayo was a night to stay indoors as the Mexicans on the other side of the fence got wildly drunk and shot their guns into the air (I hope into the air). Jackie found a job within a week or two at the front desk of Sofitel in Redwood City. Having worked for Novotel in New York

she had an advantage as both hotels are owned by the same company. I started out by doing some contract work for both Lee and Cathy. At the time Lee was the Creative Director at Macromedia, a software company in San Francisco, and Cathy also worked in the design field for a small game company in Mountain View. I was woefully unprepared in terms of my computer skills. Pratt had no computer-related design courses when I went, and my only experience with the machine was working a PC at the magazine job, and the few weeks I worked for the design firm in Seneca Falls.. I wasn't familiar with the Mac, Adobe, or Quark Xpress. If I did have the necessary skills I could have had a full time job at Macromedia, but that wasn't the case. The project I remember was creating the Macromedia Director 4 logo, which I rendered by hand. At the time, Director was the go-to software for creating CD games. Cathy had me do some storyboards for one of the games she was working on and that was also a very fun job. In the meantime I was going to interviews looking for steady work and within a few months I landed a job at KPMG Consulting in Mountain View, just a short five minute drive from our home. I consider this as my first "real job" as it had benefits, a 401k, and a good salary. I was a designer in the Art Department. It was a small group, just myself, my boss, her assistant, and one other designer. Our job was to support the sales function by creating presentations for the salespeople to help win projects. It was a lot of PowerPoint layout, printing, and binding. It wasn't super creative but it was fast-paced, and for the first time I was exposed to the world of business. KPMG, being one of the Big Five management consulting firms at the time, served industries like supply chain, healthcare, insurance, banking and many others. Being a part of the sales organization gave me insight into the size of these engagements, the

competition involved in winning them, and the complexity of what KPMG delivered. Within a short time our Art Department added designers, and a writer and we became more of an in-house design team. Our deliverables started expanding beyond print into interactive kiosks and multimedia sales presentations. These were my first exposures to the world on interaction design. Everything we created was done on Director, and though it had a steep learning curve I became decently proficient and really loved creating interaction and animation, and the salespeople loved the “pop” it gave their presentations.

It was around this time when a sales guy joined the company and broke the mold. He had long hair, spoke with a New York accent, had an incredible sense of humor and was driven to win like nobody I had ever met. He was also one of the kindest and friendliest people there. His name was Paul Ciandrini and he took a liking to me. Probably because I, like him, was a bit of a freak in a very buttoned down place. I still drove the van, had long-ish hair, and was always doodling. Paul was probably ten years older than me but we became very good friends. I would even say that Paul became something of a big brother to me.

Jackie and I found getting into the lifestyle of California a very easy transition. The weather was pretty much perfect every day, except for a few days in February when it got below 50 degrees and rained. Most of the people we met were from somewhere else and eager to make friends and widen their social connections. And best of all, life wasn't “in your fucking face” all the time like New York was. It was chill, welcoming, and exciting.

Jackie soon made a friend at Sofitel named Catherine, who was about her age, and Catherine had a boyfriend named Jorge who

was from Mexico and doing a postgraduate degree at Stanford. Jorge became a good friend of mine - he had a great sense of humor and was a self-made man, having immigrated and started work hanging drywall and doing odd construction jobs when after a number of years realized this was no path forward for him and applied himself to business studies. Catherine was from France and also had a great sense of humor and was very warm. We introduced them to Lee and Cathy and all started hanging out together.

We also had a steady stream of visitors from the East Coast as well as London. We made it work in our little apartment and loved hosting people. California - the “Idea of California” - is very exotic to both foreigners and Americans alike. Jackie’s sister Maxine and her children Amy and Daniel paid a visit, as did brother Adrian and Karen (who you met earlier in the wedding venue search), and their son Luke. We even vacationed on Maui with them, which, to talk about exotic, is such a phenomenally beautiful place, Jackie and I would end up going to Hawaii four times over the years we lived in California.

My mom, Dave, Dad, Dolores, Kira, Renee, and Pop would also visit at various times those first couple of years, as did Brian and his girlfriend at the time. Dave even lived with us for a brief period while he was figuring out what to do next with his life.

When Jackie and I got married, contrary to what we told the high priests during our interviews, we really didn’t think seriously about having children. We married young and the idea of expanding beyond the two of us, though we wanted to do so eventually, just wasn’t a priority. Until it was. After a couple of years in California, Jackie told me that she was ready. It was

unexpected and I said that I needed to do some thinking about it. After a few days I decided to visit the Dish Walk and do some soul searching. It really didn't take all that much searching. I lay under a tree, and it was all very clear and exciting.

Guys like to joke that the best part of parenting is the conception part, har de har har, but in our case Jackie got pregnant almost immediately. We were so over-the-moon excited, and naive, that we phoned family right away. When they asked us how far along she was and we responded with "about two weeks!" there was an uneasy "oh... that's great!" on the other end of the line. But whatever, we were thrilled and ready for the journey.

adulthood

Jackie's pregnancy was all good. For the most part she felt well, she worked up until the last moment, and she radiated. Sometimes women get that glow when they're pregnant and Jackie definitely had it. She carried it all in front - from the back you wouldn't have known that she was pregnant. We did a class together about things I could do to support her before, during, and after she gave birth. We both really liked her doctor. She was young, caring and easy-going and affiliated with Stanford University Hospital which was close by.

The months went by quickly and when the day came I remember her calling me around lunch time and we went for a walk around a local park. I went back to work and around 4 o'clock I got the call that it was go time. I sped home, was pulled over by a cop, and explained what was happening and he let me off with a warning. She had been having contractions for a couple of hours.

Her water broke while we were having something to eat so off we went. Jackie was in a lot of pain and initially put off an epidural so they instead gave her pitocin which made her feel terrible, like she had taken a tranquilizer but did little for the pain. I did what I could to make her feel better but really it didn't help much. It's an epic journey for women, compressed into a short amount of time relatively speaking, and as men we don't really understand and are probably more of a nuisance than anything. But we try and that's all I could do. After about five hours of waves of pain and steady attention from some wonderful nurses, Jackie asked for the epidural. Our doctor soon appeared (at that moment it struck me just how much the nurses do as opposed to the doctor who comes in for some relief pitching with two outs in the bottom of the ninth). Another 20 minutes of pushing and she gave birth to our son, Aaron. I distinctly remember watching with awe and worry as his head appeared, kind of crumpled, looking around anxiously for any reaction, but there was just business as usual. In a few seconds the crumples disappeared and he was out. He was long and had big hands, and he was beautiful. The emotion was nothing I had ever experienced. The immense joy, something like what nirvana must be, was overwhelming and we just cried.

I went home later that night and got a few hours of sleep before heading back to the hospital. Lee and Cathy came by to behold the baby. Jackie was feeling well and stayed one more night in the hospital before we headed home - as a family. Paul stopped by that first day home with a lasagna which was just the most thoughtful gift as neither of us had the energy or inclination to cook.

My boss at the time requested that I be back at work after a couple of days, which I begrudged but didn't have the balls to say no. I never took any parental leave - it wasn't really a thing back then, but I could have stood up for myself and done better.

That weekend we took Aaron for his first brief walk and I so clearly remember feeling panic at the enormity of it all. I mean, you're now completely, totally, 100% responsible for another human life, and that life is so, so precious and dependent upon you. It's an incredible feeling. It helped that Jackie slipped right into motherhood like she had been doing it her entire life. I took most of my cues from her and after a few days I began to settle down.

Every once in a while Paul would come over and we would work on the van. He loved "wrenching" and though I didn't love it, I did find it rewarding to work on cars and knowing that I maintained my own. At one point I was leaking oil from the head gasket and I bought a used head from a local junkyard and Paul came over to help me replace it. We used some sort of glue to adhere the gasket to the head, tightened everything up, and went for a test drive. Almost immediately the glue started heating up and formed a cloud of smoke in the car (on vans of that age there was a cover in the cabin which you could lift off to get at the engine) from the seams of the engine cover. It really looked like we were Cheech and Chong hot-boxing ourselves and of course we drove right past a cop on the corner. This story doesn't end up with us being pulled over (we're white), but it left us laughing our asses off at the way it must have looked from the outside. However it did leave me reflecting on our choices of vehicles now that we had a baby. Beside the van we owned a tiny Mazda

hatchback upon which I learned how to shift. We got rid of the Mazda and replaced it with a Ford station wagon. Soon after that we sadly sold Vanny II and replaced it with (not a great kid car decision, but I figured one sensible car was enough) a 1964 Plymouth Savoy that I literally bought from a little old lady who only drove it to the grocery store once a week. It was in beautiful shape and was a smooth ride and since work was only a five minute drive I didn't have to put many miles on it.

We had a number of visitors that first year. After a couple of months my mom visited for a few weeks to spend some time with Aaron and help Jackie out a bit. Then Dad, Dolores, Kira, and Renee came to visit that Easter. I remember it was Easter because we did an Easter egg hunt around the cottage and we had bought those plastic eggs that you could open and put candy in. I thought I'd teach a life lesson for Kira and leave some of the eggs with nothing in them - like "life is hard, you have to persevere", or some shit - I think I only succeeded in traumatizing her, poor kid. I don't know how we fit everyone in the two bedrooms but somehow we made it work. Soon we started to want something a little bigger, to buy a place of our own.

We looked around the Peninsula - Palo Alto was out of the question financially, so we looked in Redwood City, Menlo Park, Sunnyvale, but everything was very expensive. It was that August when Jorge and Catherine took us to a huge annual outdoor flea market in a district of Fremont, just across the Bay, called Niles. This town was like nothing we had ever seen in the Bay Area. It was something out of an old Western movie - a literal "railroad town" with the train tracks and a huge hill on one side and the shops of the village running along a single street for about a half a

mile on the other. It was so damn...unique. It wasn't new and shiny and strip mall-y like so much of California, and Fremont especially. It was an oasis. There was a big white stone "Niles" sign on the hillside and we learned that it was where Charlie Chaplin had made his first movies. Niles was Hollywood before Hollywood. We fell in love instantly, and I mean INSTANTLY, and decided to go back the following weekend to look around for real estate.

All week we were so excited to get back to Niles. That Saturday we got up and headed out. When we got to Niles we drove around the streets to get a feel for the town. Even the houses were in keeping with the uniqueness of the place. There were no McMansions, just small, well-kept homes that Andy from Mayberry would have been proud to own. Jackie went out a bit ahead of us and we didn't see her for about 20 minutes. Then - and I see it in my mind so clearly - she came almost skipping and jumping around the corner, smiling from ear-to-ear. She excitedly told me that she had "found it, I found the place!" and we almost ran back around the block and there on a non-descript street was this lovely little stucco house with a For Sale sign out front.

We knocked on the door and a woman probably in her 50's answered. She was very friendly and we explained how we loved her house and that we wanted to buy it. She was more than happy to show us around. She had two grown kids who were either leaving or had left and she didn't have a reason to stay. We thanked her profusely for her time and immediately got on the phone with the realtor we had been working with for some months. We met him that evening and drew up an offer. The next day our offer was accepted and now it was just a matter of

figuring out how we were going to afford it! It wasn't expensive by Bay Area standards - \$210K - but we didn't have enough for a 20% down payment. Fortunately our realtor connected us to his mortgage broker and she helped work some shenanigans whereby we had two mortgages; one at a normal rate and another smaller one at a ridiculously high rate with the idea being that we refinance both into one as soon as possible. It all worked out and a month or so later we signed the papers on our first house - [351 Riverside Avenue, Fremont.](#)

The place didn't need much work in order to move in. Jorge and Lee helped me sand the floors - I told you that summer job would come in handy later on - and we did some painting, but that was it initially. Not that it didn't need quite a bit more work than that, but it would have to be done over time, and it was comfortable enough. The first floor had just two bedrooms, a small living room with a beautiful stone fireplace, and a good size kitchen and dining area. The basement was partially finished with room enough for another bedroom. Behind the house was a small building that was about 30 feet long by about 8 feet deep. It had kind-of-a kitchen, with a brick grill - like what you might see outside but it was enclosed inside, and a shitter (can't call it a bathroom). It was funky and over the years would be used as an art studio, apartment, and smokehouse. And we had two of the most incredible citrus trees which produced the most delicious oranges and lemons. On the other side of the house grew bananas. Apparently they were such beautiful specimens that the botanical department at the local college would occasionally have field trips to see them.

We soon met the neighbors: around our age were Mike and Michelle directly across the street, and next to them Frank and Amy and their daughter Callie, who was Aaron's age. Next to us lived Alex and Evanna, a lovely retired couple, and on the other side of us, well let's just say we had three fantastic neighbors out of four.

We felt like we belonged right away and became fast friends. Mike and Michelle didn't have children and were extremely giving of their free time on the weekends - sometimes giving entire weekends - to help on house projects. In time there was a kitchen remodel and two fence installations. We'd work all Saturday, with Frank sometimes lending a hand, and then in the evening we would gather, usually at Mike and Michelle's house for a steak dinner and lots and lots of wine. They spent a lot of money on wine and had a collection worth about \$10k. Often we would have blind wine tastings and I would invariably pick the cheapest wine, leaving Mike to grumble about how he was wasting good money on me. They introduced us to the Livermore Valley wineries, just through Niles Canyon about a 25 minute drive. And every once in a while we would take a day trip to Napa. We learned a lot about wine through them, and the main learning was simply - you like what you like and that's what matters.

My commute to Mountain View increased substantially as I had to cross over the Dunbarton Bridge. It was only about 15 miles - you could see the Niles sign on the hill from across the bay - but took the better part of an hour. There was a tech boom going on in Silicon Valley and traffic boomed as well. These were the days before flexible working from home schedules became an expectation of employees. I remember when I started working from home once in a blue moon and it felt like pure freedom. For

a while the commute didn't really matter much to me - getting to drive into beautiful Niles to our own home was well worth the frustration.

We were so content with just having one beautiful child, but we knew that we wanted more, and that Aaron should have a sibling. Shortly after moving to Niles we tried for a second, and again Jackie got pregnant almost right away. Unfortunately a couple of months later she had a miscarriage. It was very upsetting for us, naturally, and Jackie more so, being the person carrying the baby. I went into optimistic mode, rationalizing that there was something wrong and it was nature's way of taking care of it, and that as soon as she was ready we would try again.

Less than six months later she was pregnant again. This time the pregnancy went smoothly. As with Aaron, we chose not to know the sex of the child as we felt that is one of life's wonderful surprises worth waiting for. The wine tastings stopped - at least for her, I'm such an insensitive asshole that I continued drinking with bravado. When the time neared, my mom came in to help out around the house. That afternoon I was at work at KPMG and made a mad dash to Washington Hospital in Fremont. This time around Jackie didn't mess about and got the epidural right away. Compared to her first delivery it was a much less painful affair, and less stressful. I remember that we had a very warm and homey room, which was comforting as Stanford, as good a hospital as it is, had a much more clinical environment for giving birth. We sat (mostly calmly) watching the baseball playoffs until it was go-time. A short time later our second son Ellis was born and that feeling of overwhelming joy returned.

Jackie and I had decided that once we had children that she would stay at home with them. And she blossomed into the role of full time mom. I was in awe of how full a woman and fully herself she had become. She parented with such ease and confidence, and especially given the fact that her own mother had left them when she was just a child. She had a great role model in her father, but a mother's love is something different, and having missed that in her life, to just pick up and mother like it was what she was meant to do all along was just incredible to witness.

By this time I had sold the Plymouth and bought a small pickup truck - something a little more sensible and utilitarian. I also decided to learn how to ride a motorcycle. I took a weekend course which taught me some basic skills and then bought a Kawasaki Vulcan 750. It was a pretty hefty bike and I was mostly too insecure to take it on any serious drives so I would basically toodle around the area, rarely getting up past 50 mph. It was certainly a lot of fun, and the feeling of being open to the elements was both calming and exciting at the same time. It was irresponsible of me to have a motorcycle with a young family, I really wasn't thinking straight, but it was just so damn fun.

The other vehicle change we made was to sell our Mercury Tracer station wagon and buy a brand new Mercury Villager minivan. I note this not because of my dazzling ability to buy sexy cars but because there had never been a new car in my life, and it felt really weird - almost like I didn't deserve it. My parents always drove used cars, some good, some really bad. As odd as it felt, it also felt really satisfying. I was happy and proud to be able to provide this for us.

We did a lot of day trips on the weekends. The boys were great in the car - Jackie had them well trained since birth - and we would often go down to Monterey, or Carmel, or up to the Mill Valley and beyond. We went to Yosemite a number of times, staying overnight in one of their cabins. Yosemite is truly a natural wonder of the world and please go if you have the chance. One of my best memories with Dave is the weekend we spent there, just the two of us hanging out and hiking. Dave had reached a crossroads in his life and he came to live with us for a brief time to give himself some space to think about what to do next. He and Mike hit it off marvelously as they both liked to get pretty drunk (as did I, I just hit my wall sooner). He helped with some projects around the house - the two of us installed a skylight in the kitchen. Suffice it to say never install a skylight on a flat roof. Water will win. Providing a home for Dave even for a short while was an opportunity for me to do something good for him. Like I said, for whatever reason I wasn't a very supportive sibling growing up. After a few months Dave headed back to New York to pursue a degree in social work, a field he has worked in his entire career.

After a couple of years of doing the Dunbarton bridge commute I was starting to feel a little unsettled. The dotcom boom was in full swing and everywhere was crowded. I was also feeling increasingly disenchanted with Silicon Valley as a whole. Since college I had imagined it as this rich soil for exciting ideas and innovation, and it was to some small extent, but primarily it was a lot of people trying to figure out how to get rich as fast as they could. Mostly what people talked about in social situations was their jobs, and the place started to feel plastic to me.

I started studying for my Masters degree. I figured I would get a little more knowledge, get a better job with more pay. I started by taking the practice GRE, just to see where I stood. I did well enough on everything but math. I've never had an aptitude for math and having to know trigonometry annoyed me as I was continuing on with a design degree, but such is bureaucracy. I started going to the library a couple of times a week on my way home from work to study for an hour or two for the real exam. I applied to about five programs around the country, all top-level schools. After six months I took the real exam, and after all that studying I only boosted my math score like 5 points. It was laughable and discouraging, but I passed. I was accepted to Carnegie Mellon's Human Factors program and that was pretty exciting.

At the same time all of this was going on I was also looking for other work opportunities in the Valley. I thought if grad school didn't pan out at least I'd be making a change. One afternoon I received a call from a recruiter at a small company called eBay. They were looking to staff up their design department. I hadn't quite gotten my portfolio together and polished, and they didn't seem like such a big deal, so I passed (footnote - a woman I worked with at KPMG went there a couple of years later and retired just five years after that). Lesson learned: always, always, always have your portfolio ready.

I applied for a position as a Senior Designer at Intuit in Mountain View. They were a well respected software company with a history of customer-centered design. Scott Cook, the founder, practically started the practice of solving real customer problems through talking to actual customers and it showed in the quality

of their products. I interviewed for a role in their centralized design department and got the job. I/we now had a decision to make.

It really wasn't a very hard decision. I figured why would I pay for an education when I could get paid to get an education. Plus, Jackie and the boys loved California, and we had a good life there so why not stretch it out a bit longer. I took the job at Intuit and thus began my career as an interaction designer in earnest.

I was hired specifically because I had ecommerce experience. That doesn't sound like a big deal now but in 1999 ecommerce was just becoming a thing. At KPMG I had worked on the HP Commerce Center website and that was the key to getting the position at Intuit. My first project was a redesign of the Quicken Store, their ecommerce site which, oddly, sold more than Quicken but all their software products. The design team was small at the time - myself, three other designers, two researchers, my boss and her boss. Considering we were the central design group who worked on all aspects of the company's web sites, we were understaffed.

It didn't take long to figure out that my boss was insane. Mary can best be described as a Jekyll/Hyde, or a praying mantis. She must have been on several medications that didn't play nicely together. Some days she'd be lovely and others she'd have bloodshot eyes and nervous energy and would turn on you and berate your work. It was fortunate for me that someone liked her enough to fuck her and get her pregnant, and within a year of me starting there she was gone on maternity leave. I told my interim boss, Gary, that I would quit if she decided to return to work and

he replied that I wasn't the only one who had said that to him. She never returned and as far as I know spawned Satan.

It was such a joy to pull into Niles and turn onto Riverside Avenue at the end of the day and see my beautiful family in our very own house. All I really wanted to do all day was to get home and be with them. I always made it a point throughout my working life to be home in time for dinner. It was the most precious time of day for me - that and reading to the boys before bed. I loved holding them and kissing them, playing games with them, and hearing about their day. We were a family and it's an incredible feeling knowing these are the people who you would lay down your life for without a second thought. It keeps you going through all the crazy.

Lee and Cathy had also had children during this time period - Megan, who is close to Ellis' age, and Ryan, a bit younger. They were super busy with starting their own design business out of their house and starting a family. We saw them when the stars aligned.

I was at Intuit for around a year when I did a presentation to some internal muckety mucks about the redesign of quickbooks.com that I had been leading. Intuit's culture was fairly low key and casual, but being a financial software company it could also be a bit stodgy. Not KPMG stodgy, but on the scale of "show up unwashed in pajamas or buttoned up in suit and tie", it was certainly more on the casual side. At the time I had my hair dyed an unusual shade of orange/yellow as a result of not really mastering the whole DIY hair color thing, and I think I had a Hawaiian shirt on since we had recently been on vacation there

and I was still vibing. The presentation went very well, and in the room was a guy named Paul English whose company Boston Light had recently been purchased by Intuit. We chatted briefly and I went on my way.

By the summer of 2000 I had made up my mind that I needed to leave California. Jackie could have stayed there for many more years, maybe the rest of her life, but I felt a strong desire to move back East, closer to family, old buildings, and crappy weather. Jackie and I decided that she would take the boys and travel around, from New York to D.C, in search of places to move to. My mom joined them on the road trip. They remember the trip fondly, as they took their time, stopping frequently so the boys could get out of the car and play in a park. It also must have been anxiety producing for her as the parameters for what we wanted were pretty open-ended and she was more or less wandering around in search of something she didn't have a very clear idea about.

While they were away I decided to have a look at what was going on at Intuit in Waltham MA, where the acquisition of Paul English's company birthed a new office. I figured it would be an economical way to move, and since I liked the company a lot, why leave if I didn't have to. I contacted Paul and we scheduled a time for me to come and visit. That evening I called Jackie and asked her what she thought of moving to Boston. I think she was relieved as it meant she could stop chasing a moving target. Soon after she and the boys arrived back in California we took a trip together to Boston. One of the benefits of working at a good company is they have...good benefits. They flew all of us out and put us up for a couple of days in a hotel in Waltham, a stone's

throw from the office. I had an opportunity to meet the team there and I really liked the people and the vibe. Having been very recently bought by Intuit, there was a definite startup atmosphere but without the underlying, low-level panic that comes with trying to survive quarter to quarter. That was September. Within a couple of weeks we had the job details worked out and the relocation wheels were set in motion.

Leaving California was difficult. We had made close friendships in the years we were there, and leaving Lee and Cathy was very sad. We sold our house to a friend of Mike and Michele's who we also knew through get-togethers at their house. It was a super easy transaction, no realtors involved, and we had doubled our investment in three years. I was nervous uprooting us, especially since it was a happy existence there for the most part. I just felt in my bones that it was the right thing to do, and the time was the right time. We hosted a goodbye party in early October and moved to Boston just before Thanksgiving of 2000. California was a transformative period in our lives. Jackie and I arrived with everything we owned in a beat up van and left seven years later with two young children and our belongings packed into a semi truck.

When we arrived at the airport, my mom was there to meet us, and it gave us a very homey feeling. She drove all the way from Long Island to be there. That's my mom. She does things like that all the time.

Now, big picture, I will admit that there are better times to move to the East Coast from California than November. Maybe it was our thinned California blood, maybe it was an unusually cold

month, but the general feeling was “holy shit, it’s fucking cold here, what have we done!”. And it didn’t help when people would say things like “Oh it’s such a shame, you just missed the most spectacular Fall.” The boys continued to wear their shorts which Jackie and I found adorable, but dangerous. The other shock was the people. They reflected the weather. Once again we looked at each other and said, “holy shit, it’s fucking cold here, what have we done!”. You see, (and we didn’t right away, but it didn’t take us long) we came from a place where most everyone you meet is from somewhere else and eager to make friends, to a place where families went back generations, had all the friends they possibly needed, and were generally, just, cold. And pale.

Intuit put us up in a nice condo only a few minutes from the office. I think we had two months paid for, so we started looking for a place to call home pretty quickly. We didn’t know shit from shit about the area, so I asked the advice of people at work. We knew we needed great schools so that narrowed it down a bit. And primarily, I wasn’t about to do a fucking torturous commute again, so it needed to be within 15-20 minutes drive of the office.

After about a week of looking around we found a house in the town of Belmont. It had great schools, it was only seven miles from downtown Boston, and when we came to look at the house, a neighbor from across the street came over and said we had to buy it and she was very nice and made us feel like we were back on Riverside Ave in CA. So we bought it. It was built in 1916, a guess it would be called a “Colonial’ style, and even though it was on the small side, it felt very spacious compared to our house in Niles. And it was a 15 minute drive to the office.

We closed quickly and moved in mid-December, and (I certainly wouldn't have the energy to do this today) we even got it ready in time to host Christmas that year.

I settled in pretty quickly to the office dynamic at Intuit Waltham. As I described before, it was a small, renegade group led by Paul English, with the backing of a much larger company fueling its entrepreneurship. My boss was a guy named Smitty. He was about six years older than myself, and very funny and down to earth. Plus he was a great designer. We immediately clicked, and to this day he remains a dear friend who I can talk to about anything at all. Our team was building a web-based website building tool. Remember this was back in 2000 so it was fairly forward-thinking at the time. The existing tools were mostly desktop software, so making it web-based was a fun challenge. It was a good, hard-working group of people, and we rolled along for about a year before the CEO deemed the project "non-strategic" and scrapped it. A few years later Intuit bought a web-based website building tool company - so much for "non-strategic" and another reality check on my perception of the intelligence of those in power.

We didn't really start meeting people in the community until Aaron started preschool, about six months after we moved. We found an affordable place in the basement of a nearby church. Aaron had already done some preschool in Niles so it wasn't a huge transition for him. It also helped that he has always been friendly and quick with a smile and makes friends easily. A couple of them are close friends to this day.

It's funny how your children change once they start school - even preschool. All of a sudden their small world opens up and they

meet all sorts of kids, good and not so good, have other adult figures in their lives, and they start needing you just a bit less. I mean, of course they need you for many years, but even at the age of 3 and 4 you start to see how they become, little by little, more independent with each passing month.

One of our forays into the community involved a breakfast hosted by the local church. I'm not sure what we were thinking, being non-religious (though having a history of pretending we were). I suppose we thought it would just be a nice get-together and a way to meet people. It didn't take more than a few minutes to realize that it was a recruiting event and we seemed to be the only recruits. We ate some pancakes and got the hell out. We laughed at our naivety.

Probably about five years after we moved here we met a man named John Miley, through Ellis's soccer. I met him on what he describes as the worst day of his life. Jackie had briefly chatted with him once or twice before and I can remember him standing alone on the side of the field. She said "that's the guy I was telling you about". He looked pretty down so I went over and said hello. He said he wasn't sure where he was going to sleep that night as he had just learned his wife was having an affair. I can't remember exactly but I probably said something to the effect of "well maybe she's the one who should be worrying where to sleep". We talked for a while. John's house is just a five minute walk from ours and he started stopping by frequently to talk. He was one of the few men I had ever met who was so willing to talk about what was going on in his life and about his feelings. Over those difficult months we built a strong friendship with him and he continues to be one of our closest friends. His kids, Angela and

Dan are the same age as Aaron and Ellis and they too became good friends. And he happened to be one of the most sought after finish carpenters in New England. Which brings me to the house.

As the boys progressed through elementary school, Jackie was doing work on our house, which like most houses is an ongoing project. It's a very solid house, "good bones" as they say, but it had been neglected here and there and like our house in Niles we did things bit by bit. I won't get into the boring details but over the years we have put in a lot of effort making improvements, the most significant of which was installing a custom kitchen and two new bathrooms. That's where John came in. He had been prodding us for a few years to do a major overhaul of the kitchen which was separated from the dining room by a wall with a built-in china cabinet - de rigueur in 1916 but woefully out of date in the 21st century. John's dad, who spent the last couple of years of his life living on the first floor of John's two-family had just passed away and he offered to have us live there during the summer while the work went on. We took the opportunity and over the course of two months John and his team transformed the space from something that was old and cramped to an open space with gorgeous cabinetry and woodwork. It changed not only the space but how we lived and felt about our home. It brought us literally closer together as there was no longer a wall and the space became more conducive to well...living. We were lucky that he had the opening in his schedule and the kindness to offer his home to us and will be forever grateful.

John is also owner of what he likes to call "the smallest farm in Belmont." He has a beautiful garden which always produces more and better vegetables than anything I've seen around. He has had

chickens and became a beekeeper some years after we met him. He got us into both chickens and bees, both short-lived affairs. We let our chickens run around out back during the day as we felt guilty keeping them cooped up. We have a very small backyard and weren't ready for the noise they make laying eggs. Our neighbors are just too close and we felt like it was a nuisance. Jackie also gave them names and treated them more like pets than livestock. John used to call it Little Haiti as it looked like something you might find in the countryside of the Caribbean - minus the palm trees, beaches, or breeze. The bees lasted a couple of months. We kept them on our upstairs deck and apparently didn't feed them enough and they died in the summer heat. We felt terrible.

It was around this time that the entire family began spending Christmases in Virginia Beach. It was chosen because it was a destination roughly between us and Georgia. We would rent a huge 10 bedroom house on the beach and congregate for a week. We did this three or four times. They were happy events, the boys were very young and Kira and Renee were also only in middle school. We did crafts projects (mostly organized by Jackie), played touch football on the beach, went on day-trips, ate, drank and were merry. David got married around this time and he and his wife Esther and soon their baby son Max would join. Pop really enjoyed these get-togethers. Pop looked forward to any time spent with family and would talk about them months ahead of time. He had a good life in Georgia - dad and family were close by and he had a couple of neighbor friends - but he lived alone and I'm sure got lonely from time to time. Renee would invariably organize a play for us to act out. One year she wrote an adaptation of A Christmas Carol and I was to play Jacob Marley,

except I took artistic license and transformed the role into Bob Marley. She wasn't extremely happy but it was a crowd pleaser. Once we went go-cart driving at a local racetrack. Ellis was probably only around 7 and it was the first time he had driven anything. You would have thought he was training for the Grand Prix. I'll never forget Pop standing there, open-mouthed in amazement as he lapped everyone on the track. That may have also been the same day that Renee forgot how to stop and as we were all waiting in the pull out she came roaring by, shouting (imagine the doppler effect) "I can't stoppppppppp!!". Ah, good times indeed.

COVID-19 UPDATE

Well it's December 29, 2021 and I tested positive this morning. It's really no surprise. Jackie's brother Frank came over from England for Christmas. He tested negative multiple times before the flight, but it was brewing in his system. We had made plans almost two months before when everything looked chill, but as the weeks went on a new variant, Omicron, emerged. We should have called it off at that point but we didn't. We had a great Christmas Eve with the boys and Brittany, and Christmas Day with Rhona, Terry, and Matt. The following day Frank had a nasty cough. We were due to go to NYC to see the sights and pick up Dad and Dolores to spend a few days here before they headed back to GA. He took a rapid antigen test and it was positive. Two days later Jackie was, and now me. But we're all vaccinated and boosted and so far it's just a cold. They don't tell you which variant you have, but my guess is Omicron as it's spreading like crazy, but doesn't appear to be too virulent.

Worldwide the numbers have gotten much worse than when I wrote about it previously. As of today, there have been 281M cases and 5.41M deaths. The United States leads with 53.2M cases and 819K deaths. Of course we do. Only 60% of the country is fully vaccinated. Back in July many of us naively thought it was ending. We began gathering again, laughing, hugging. That euphoria lasted a few weeks and then a new variant, Delta, emerged and started to change the game. The problem is that this is a worldwide problem. It's brought into focus how connected and tied to each other we all are. We are one organism and the whole world needs to be vaccinated in order for this to end. Because it's clear that isn't going to happen, I ultimately think this will become like the flu, where we'll need to get vaccinated (or not) each year, for as long as we live. The question is how many more will die. At the moment the [unvaccinated are dying at a 14x rate than the vaccinated](#).

I began my illustrious coaching career when Aaron was in third grade. Having been a baseball player in high school I naturally raised my hand to assist with his Little League team, the Indians. The head coach, Tom, was a good man who had the right perspective, which was to ride their lazing fucking asses and make them men. Kidding!! Jeez. Nah, he taught them the game and made sure everyone was having fun. That's not to say things weren't competitive. I mean, having fun is the priority, and losing isn't exactly fun is it? Now before you go all "toxic masculinity!" on me, let me explain my coaching philosophy. The first rule of coaching, as in doctoring, should be "do no harm". And with that rule comes a lot of responsibility. Over the years I coached Aaron from 3rd grade through 11th grade, and you have to meet the kids where they are - emotionally and physically. My approach with

the Little Leaguers was quite different from the Babe-Ruthers. Fun was always a priority regardless, but the expected effort and expected results varied dramatically. I took practices seriously. It was my time to teach the kids, to have them come away from each practice feeling like they had learned something and improved in some way. When game time came around, it was up to them. I'm sure I was a little harder on Aaron than the rest of the kids as he was my son and I expected him to be a leader. He also had tons of talent, especially pitching, and I wanted to help him realize his potential.

In my first year as head coach in Little League (I took over from Tom after his son moved on) I had three assistants - Nick, Mark, and Bart. They were just parents of kids on the team and really nice guys and we all got along very well. Practices were fun and we had a decent team. I should have been on alert however when at the beginning of the season, one of the moms came up to me and thanked me profusely for taking her son on the team. I was like "sure, no problem, happy to help!" That evening I got a call from the president of the league also thanking me for taking Robert on. At that point I perked up and said, ok so what's up with this kid? He explained that Robert had to have a full-time minder in school as he could be "disruptive", and that if I ever had issues with Robert to let him know. Well it didn't take long to witness Robert's disruptive nature. It started with him spitting sunflower seeds on the other kids. Obviously we explained that is not how we conduct ourselves and I think the spitting stopped for the most part. We managed to contain him to some degree. He was a very smart kid, you could tell his IQ was quite a bit higher than average, and he was fun to converse with. But he had a temper and would go off the rails easily. The final straw was

when, after striking out or dropping a ball, I can't remember exactly what, he took a baseball bat to a plastic trash barrel and put a few gaping holes in it before we were able to stop him. I remember Mark jumping in yelling "Robert! We don't destroy trash barrels!" as he grabbed the bat out of his hands. As coaches we had to provide a safe environment for all the kids and this ended Robert's career with the Indians. Soon after he made the local news when he stole his parents car and took a joy ride around Belmont. He was 11.

Part of coaching, I learned as I took the next step up in the Little League ranks as head coach of the Giants, was to ascertain who in the coming crop of players was talented, because there was a draft. And you could game the system by asking a kid's parent if they wanted to be an assistant, thereby effectively taking the kid out of the recruiting pool and securing him on your team. Of course, you had to like the parent as you'd be spending a fair amount of time with them, and you had to know enough about the kid to ensure you weren't getting another Robert. There was one kid, Sam, who was a friend of Aaron's, who Aaron said had great promise. Sam had an excellent tryout and afterward I asked his father Terry, who I didn't really know but seemed like an affable guy, if he wanted to be my assistant. He agreed and we embarked on the season. Don't worry, this story doesn't go sideways, with Terry turning out to be a knife-wielding maniac or his son's head turning 360 degrees speaking in tongues in right field. But it was the start of a lifelong family friendship with the Kerans: Terry, Rhona, Sam, and his brother Matt who was between the ages of Aaron and Ellis. Rhona and Jackie got to know each other sitting in the stands watching the games, and Terry and I liked each other immediately. Terry is a very easy

person to like. He is warm and friendly, really listens when you're talking to him, has a great sense of humor, and doesn't take himself too seriously. And he loves to drink beer and smoke cigars! What's not to like! He's also the person who gave me the nickname Dubs. You know, "Warren...W...Dubya...Dubs". When he's feeling particularly fond of me he might throw out a "Dubbie", which makes me uncomfortable. Rhona is a very caring person, a clinical psychologist who works with some really disturbed kids (like Robert-level), who also has a great sense of humor, and enjoys wine and the occasional cigarette. We all started having each other's families over for dinner and they have become a family to us through the years. They, like us (and unlike many people we have met in MA), do not have family close by, and so we made one!

But I digress. The Kerans will appear again in this story but for now let me get back to coaching.

After Little League I coached Babe Ruth. I asked Aaron if he still wanted me to coach him. If he had said no then I obviously would have stopped, but I truly believe that he enjoyed having me as a coach. We shared a lot of good times, some stressful times, and we worked at continually improving - and after having a good time, that was the most important thing...followed by winning. We had some quality teams those years. The kids were older - 15 to 17 and most took the game seriously. We played in a radius of about 15 miles, which in the Boston area encompassed many towns. Aaron had developed into a very good pitcher and overall player. Ever since his earliest days in Little League he pitched. We would practice outside in the driveway which had a slight downhill slope. It was all so sweet in Little League, but by the

time he got to be around 15 we had to stop as I genuinely began to fear for my well being.

In the preseason the team would meet at a local batting cage once a week and we'd rent a couple of cages and get a jump on the season. One of the best players I ever coached was a girl named Daphne. She absorbed information like a sponge and was a joy to teach. And she worked hard. Before long she worked her way into our pitching rotation. Daphne ended up being an all-star softball player at the high school and got a scholarship to play at the college level.

The last year I coached Aaron we had the best record in the league going into the postseason. In the first round of the playoffs we lost which put us in the loser's bracket. This meant that we had to win every game from there on out to win the championship. We won the next four games and clawed our way back into the championship, which, because we had come from the loser's bracket, was structured so that we needed to win two out of two games. We won the first but lost the second. I was so proud of the grit the team showed. They had a lot to be proud of, but coming that close and getting the consolation prize hurt. The following year Aaron and Terry were my assistant coaches. We were again pretty stacked in terms of talent and most importantly pitching. We had great practices and having Aaron helping out was a huge bonus as he knew the game so well and proved to be a good teacher. We won the championship that year and it felt great, especially doing it with Aaron by my side. That was my last year coaching baseball. I could have kept going but I didn't want to be one of those guys (who were all too common in the league) that just kept going long after their kids were done. At that level the right thing to do is step aside and let another parent feel that joy.

I also coached basketball for a short time. I started with Aaron since he entered the program first. It was elementary and middle school level and basically involved teaching some basic skills and making sure each kid had equal playing time. I was a stickler about this and created a spreadsheet with each player's name and period they would play. Of course it all went tits-up when at the last minute the player didn't show up and I had to re-jigger the spreadsheet right before the game. And obviously (since we want to win folks!), the better players were stacked to ensure they were in the game in the last couple of periods. It was a Saturday morning league and proved to be something to look forward to during the long winters.

One year I convinced John to be my assistant for Ellis and Dan's team. John really didn't care much for youth sports and seemed to view them as an evil enterprise populated by overly involved parents and misguided youth, which to some extent is true, but I appealed to his paternal side. I figured we'd have some fun, and it was a good time. At points John even seemed to be enjoying himself. The most memorable event of the season came when Dan simply walked off the court in frustration and out of the building home. John and I looked at each other, not sure what to do. I remember John shrugging and we proceeded with the game.

I was smart enough to stay away from coaching soccer as it's a game I knew very little about. Since the basic premise is so simple, run around and kick a ball, many kids can relate and start quite early, like first or second grade. It ended up being Ellis's game of choice. He was quite good at baseball, and I think I could have really helped him develop, but he decided not to play after just a season in Little League. I think he wanted to forge his own

path separate from his brother. He played for some excellent travel teams and played at the high school level through Junior Varsity. Ellis was a fearless defender and you had better not get him angry as he made sure he let you know how he felt when he body-checked you. I think he enjoyed the team camaraderie more than anything else, but you'd have to ask him if that was the case. When it became too much like work than fun he decided to hang up the cleats.

When we moved to Boston I took up golf. I had hit balls a little bit growing up, just messing around very occasionally. And Pop used to take Dave and I to the driving range when we'd visit Valley Stream, but as a youth and young adult I viewed it as a boring way to spend one's time. During our time in California I'd go to the range every now and then and began reading about the swing and the fundamentals of the game, but in the seven years I was there I inexplicably never once played. It took moving to a place where you cannot play year round for me to get hooked.

I bought a set of Cleveland's at a place in New Hampshire where the shop had an adjoining range and they let you hit the clubs before you bought them. I began by taking lessons at an indoor facility nearby in Woburn. I figured I didn't want to get off on the wrong foot by ingraining bad habits. For the first year or so I spent a lot of time at the driving range and par 3 course, and reading as much as I could. My second year I started playing with a guy I worked with at Intuit. We'd go every couple of weeks to the Leo J Martin municipal course in Weston. It's a pretty beat-up course but I didn't really know the difference. For me it was my first exposure to playing and I would often wake up and tee off by myself by 6am, play nine holes and go to work. The year

after that the two of us joined an after work league run by some guys at Duke Energy, who were in the same building as us. That was a great way to get out every week and feel like you were becoming a golfer. I continued to take lessons in the winters, or just rent a bay to hit in. It really didn't take long for me to fall in love with the game. I found the mental side of it really crucial - the absolute necessity of staying in the moment, of breathing, of not getting caught up in the last bad shot you hit. I also found the physical aspect challenging. I am not a natural. I started out as a 23 handicapper and after twenty years of playing have only gotten that down to a 14. There are many facets to playing a good hole, and stringing multiple good holes together takes a lot of practice and more than a little luck. Even playing nine holes once/week, which is about as much as I can expect in a typical season, is not enough to move the needle very much. My goal (from the results side of things) is to be a single digit handicapper. However, I have learned that the true joy of the game is in the process. The process of practice, the process of enjoying and focusing on each and every shot, of letting go of the last shot, of looking around at the beautiful scenery, of having a laugh with the people you are playing with.

Terry has been my primary partner for many years now. We found a nine hole course called Swanson Meadows in Billerica, about 30 minutes away. We love it because it's the most laid back course around. You don't need to schedule a tee time - it's rarely busy, the owner is a no nonsense older lady, and they keep improving the quality. It's not long - there are no par fives, and most good golfers would scoff at it, but it still presents a challenge - the fairways are tight and the greens are small so you have to hit your marks. And we have a great time.

Aaron and Matt have also caught the bug over the years and the four of us have been playing together for close to ten years now. Those are the best times I have playing golf. They are precious. Sometimes Terry and I will look at each other and just shake our heads because no matter how poorly we are playing it doesn't matter, we know how lucky we are.

I'll end my thoughts on the best game ever invented by sharing a story of the four of us. It's really Aaron's story to tell, but I share it here briefly. We were playing at Pine Meadows in Lexington. It's a busy course and though I like the layout, and used to play in a league there with my Intuit colleagues, it's simply too busy. I hate having to wait between shots, or feel like the group behind me is breathing down my neck. But, it is what it is, and we used to play there fairly regularly. One afternoon we had a backup on the fourth hole. There were two groups in front of us teeing off and the groups behind us started bunching up. Number 4 is a 195 yard par 3 with an elevated tee. Terry, Matt and I hit decent tee shots. And at this point there was more or less a small gallery of golfers waiting and watching. Aaron drilled his tee shot nice and straight and it landed just before the green. We all watched it as he picked up his tee and turned around. It started rolling toward the hole. A collective silence descended on the gathered group as the ball rolled about ten feet into the hole. We were jumping up and down like kids, even the group who had just left the green appeared below to cheer. It was a magical moment and I'm so grateful to have been there. Aaron has his name on a plaque in the clubhouse.

I began practicing yoga around 2009. The building where I worked at Intuit had a gym in the basement and it offered free classes of different kinds. A couple of the people I worked with were doing the lunchtime yoga class and encouraged me to go. The teacher's name was Ruth and I liked her teaching style immediately. She stressed the importance of breath and explained proper alignments and positions in the poses. At the end there was a period of rest for about 10 minutes which I very much appreciated in the middle of the work day.

I went to class each week, and after the gym closed I followed Ruth to another facility and yet another facility after that, finally becoming a regular in her 7:30 am Friday classes at TriYoga in Waltham. There were about ten other regulars in the class, I was the youngest. We ranged in age from 40 to 80 and they were a very warm and friendly group. Ruth would always start the class by asking if anybody had any special requests, which I appreciated and have never found in a teacher since. Invariably there would be something - hips, back, or "just go easy please" (hey it was an older crowd!). The classes lasted for 90 minutes which in comparison to other classes I have taken is quite long. One key difference is that Ruth's savasana (that lovely rest period at the end I mentioned earlier) lasted upwards of 20 minutes. They were guided meditations and usually took me into a deep calm, every so often resulting in spontaneous tears, something which I can't really explain. I would guess it has something to do with all that focused stretching and breathing and being able to just release it all at the end.

When I started working at Staples, the office was in Framingham, and they offered yoga classes twice weekly with two different teachers, Gail and Corey. They were both excellent, maybe not

quite on par with Ruth, but close. They too weren't about the ego of the pose but about proper breathing and posture. Since I was now going twice a week, I stopped going to Ruth's classes in Waltham. I felt some guilt, but I had also advanced past the relatively basic flows she was teaching and at Staples I was suddenly the oldest person in the room, which in itself was challenging. But I had solid fundamentals upon which to draw, and I will always be grateful for my years with Ruth Landsman.

When I first started yoga it was mostly about getting my body properly stretched but I soon came to realize how much more it is than that. It's moving meditation, it's about breathing rhythmically in time with the pose to maximize the mind body connection, and most of all it's about remaining present, no matter how uncomfortable. I even considered getting my teacher certification and began a course through TriYoga, but it was a self-study program and I wasn't disciplined enough. It's a difficult thing to do as self-study.

I can't adequately explain the difference yoga has made in my life. Since the pandemic began and I started working from home, I have been practicing almost every day through an online platform. I can't imagine my life without it, or the shape I'd be in, both mentally and physically if I hadn't opened myself up to it.

The mid-2000's also saw me start to take my art seriously. I was having a good career in design, and I liked what I was doing, but that piece of my creative self was missing. I began by waking up at 5:30 in the morning, doing about an hour's painting in a makeshift studio in our finished attic, and then going to work. I did this probably three days a week for the better part of a year

and it felt like I had accomplished something really important right at the beginning of the day and whatever crap came my way during the rest of it didn't matter all that much. After a time I decided to find a studio where I could stretch out.

My first studio was in Union Square in Somerville in an old industrial building next to the Market Basket. It didn't have heat but it was about 500 sq ft and had a nice high ceiling and a big window that looked out over the cemetery. The building housed an array of creatives; one guy repaired hammond organs, there was a small design firm on my floor, upstairs there were dancers and other visual artists, and next to me was a clown. I only met him a couple of times but I heard him a lot - he would let out random screams. It was months later that I figured out he was directing them at his dog. He was an older guy and eventually they kicked him out for non-payment of rent (and maybe verbal abuse of a dog). He came by the day before he left and invited me to his going away party which he promised would be a ripper. He was bitter at having to leave after so many years there and said loudly that "Somerville is losing their main weed supplier!". I didn't go to the party.

I joined the Cambridge Art Association (CAA) as a means to get out into the community and have opportunities to show my work. It's a great organization that's been around for 75 years. I liked the Director, Erin immediately. She was young and energetic, and didn't have any airs or graces, which is uncommon in the art world. I started entering shows right away. There were juried and un-juried exhibitions. Juried shows are always a bit harder to be accepted to as it's up to the whim of the juror, but those jurors

also tend to be fairly accomplished people in the local art scene so getting accepted does carry some weight.

I also entered shows at the Belmont Gallery of Art, our local gallery run by the town, and eventually co-founded the Belmont Art Association.

Between 2007 and 2018 I participated in 26 group exhibitions and had 7 (very small) solo shows. I studio hopped a couple of times during that time and in 2009 decided to switch to a four day work week at Intuit in order to devote the extra day to my artwork. My boss Rhonda was totally on board which I was very grateful for. It was a fantastic feeling to know that I was giving serious attention to this part of me. Jackie was very supportive, never negative, which I loved her for. I built a [portfolio website](#) and gave some talks at the CAA on how to do so. I engaged the services of a consultant to help me on the business end of things. In 2014 I entered the CAA's National Prize Show which draws mostly from the Greater Boston area, but as the name implies has a national reach and garners hundreds of entries. It's a juried exhibition and a couple of weeks after submitting I got a call from Erin telling me that I had been awarded the Best Mixed Media prize. It was a huge honor and gave me validation that my work had some merit.

In 2012 I left Intuit for good. I sold any stock I had left and saved up almost a year's worth of expenses. Roughly a year previous to my departure, I attended a design conference in Cambridge and listened to a talk given by three freelancers about how to go about working for yourself. I left that talk with a very intense, tremendously excited-to-the-point-of-tingling, resolve on what I

had to do next with my design career. I had never had such a feeling about my career before, or since.

Jackie and I had a few heart to hearts about it. She had been teaching as a paraprofessional in the Waltham school system and was very stable there and had great health insurance. And once again, with the prospect of not having reliable income, Jackie continued to be incredibly supportive. She said to me “if you’re going to do it, you may as well do it all the way” and I will forever love her for that. She never once said anything that was not supportive.

My intent was to devote even more time to art while also beginning to build out the freelance design consulting business. I found a studio space literally 100 feet from our house. It was the basement level of a small office building and it was great. I even did some advertising in the windows, something like “The best artist in the world works here.” Yeah, it wasn’t subtle, but obviously self-deprecating. I did some decent work there. I did a series of “teen angst” portraits starting with the boys and then some of their friends which I thought were fairly expressive. The studio lasted a year as it was quite expensive at \$600/month and the landlord wanted to raise it even more. So I packed up and moved to Vernon Street Studios in Somerville. During this time I was also trying to get some part time income by creating Wordpress websites for small businesses, which proved difficult - not the actual work, but trying to keep a pipeline of projects going while also doing the work. And small businesses weren’t willing to pay shit.

I last painted almost four years ago. I can’t really explain why I stopped. I didn’t enjoy the commute to Vernon Street and I

wasn't spending more than a few hours a week there. I was also becoming disenchanted with the growing body of work in my basement. I tend to work fairly large (3-4 feet in either direction) and those pieces take up space. I saw some success here and there in selling work; our friends Ed and Martha have supported me as have Rhona and Terry, but I decided to give away some of the older pieces I saw as not up to snuff. I would just leave them in parks with a note. But these are all just excuses. In reality I realized that I really wasn't very good, and even that is an excuse. Art, like every other endeavor, is a process of continuous improvement, and for every great piece an artist creates there are countless mediocre or downright bad ones. You need to show up every day, do the work, and that's it. There's no magic formula. I know that it's still in me and I will come back to it someday, but at the present moment I am not missing it, and writing this memoir is scratching my creative itch.

Renee came to Boston in 2010 to attend Boston University. She always had it in her mind, from visiting as a girl, that she wanted to go to college in Boston. My relationship with my sisters really grew into something special over the years. You see, we all have the exact same sense of humor, and when we get together we laugh our asses off. Plus they are just the sweetest people. I feel they bring out the best in me.

Renee had a difficult year here in Boston. She found it very hard to relate to other kids there and she would come over often and be very stressed out and unhappy. Kira had spent her college years at Sarah Lawrence in New York, close to my mom and Dave and his family. I was very proud of them for getting out of Gainesville and being adventurous. Obviously it helps when you have family around but New York and Boston are quite different

than where they came from. Renee ended up transferring to Emory after a year, and she had a great experience there. I'm glad we were here for her. We made a bad experience a bit less bad and for us it was a great feeling having her nearby. After school she moved to New York City and continues to live there. Both my sisters are New Yorkers!

The mid 2000's also brought pain. First, Pop died in 2009. He had a stroke which left him unable to speak clearly and soon after they discovered advanced lung cancer. I made a trip to Georgia right away. Pop was able to be in his own home and Dad was taking care of him as best he could. It was very hard to see Pop unable to care for himself to the extent he used to. He was always full of vitality and prided himself on his independence through his eighties and into his nineties. I stayed a few days and spent time just being with him. A few weeks later all four of us made a trip together as it was pretty clear he was nearing the end. I remember everybody sitting outside his house in the sun - Pop clearly enjoying it and trying to communicate as best he could. I remember thinking how incredibly frustrating it must have been for him to not be able to say what he was feeling, to express his love one final time, but I'm sure what really mattered to him was that we were all there, and he did express his love by simply being there and smiling, and holding us. Saying goodbye knowing it was the last time I would see him broke my heart.

Not long after we returned he had hospice care and within a couple of weeks he was gone. He died in his sleep in his own home. His body was brought up to New York so he could be buried next to Rose. Family from as far away as California came to the funeral. I miss him so much. I miss his advice, his sense of

humor, his perspective gained from having lived a long life, and his love for family. He meant so much to me. As I write this on what would have been his 105th birthday, I ask myself as I often do, “am I living my life in a manner that he would be proud of?” I hope the answer is yes, at least most of the time.

The second and much harder event to deal with involved Ellis. Around age 11 Ellis began complaining of stomach troubles. We brought him to his primary care doctor who referred him to a specialist at Children’s Hospital in Boston. After some tests he was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. UC is an inflammatory bowel disease which affects the large intestine. It’s painful and there is no definitive answer as to why it happens, nor is there a cure at the present time. Looking back on it Ellis had always had stomach issues to some extent. He used to have trouble keeping his food down as a baby. It wasn’t until he started seeing blood in the toilet that he came to us. It was good to know what it was, but it was also a real blow. As a parent you want to protect your child from bad things, of course knowing that you cannot, but you really don’t want to see them suffer with a chronic disease. I prayed to the universe to take it away from him and give it to me, also knowing that it would not. He was just a child and now had to live with this, and be concerned about his health, every day of his life. Kids shouldn’t have to be concerned about their health! They should be kids, carefree and pain-free.

It is my nature to try and fix things as quickly as possible and I dove head first into educating myself about UC. I joined the Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation, attended seminars, scoured the literature, trying to get him the best care possible. I realized fairly quickly that Western medicine in general is really good at acute

care - they can solve an immediate and obvious problem - but when it comes to figuring out and treating the cause rather than the symptom, they fall spectacularly short. I was trying to figure out what causes the flares, what triggers the immune response, and what could be done using alternative medicine. The flares are particularly bad because they're hard to control. They usually resulted in him having to take a course of prednisone, which is a strong steroid. It typically tames the flare but has side effects, one of them being growth-stunting.

When he was about 14 he had a flare which caused his iron levels to drop to a level that prompted his doctor to send him to the hospital. He was admitted to Children's and spent two nights there. This was a couple of weeks before Christmas and I remember calling my mom and crying. It was so fucking unfair. I spent one of the nights with him. He was taking a prep for a colonoscopy the following day and I can remember dozing and just seeing him get up all through the night so he could take a shit and clear himself out and thinking, this poor kid, having to deal with this huge thing why, why, why.

Waiting for his colonoscopy result the next day was nerve-wracking - would he need to have surgery? What might the next chapter of this be? Jackie and I paced around the hospital waiting. When Dr. Doctor (yes that's his name) came out to see us. He reported that Ellis' colon was in remarkably good shape and that he could go home. It was an incredible relief and we cried.

Through his teenage years I continued to push alternative, naturopathic treatments on him, ranging from gut healing powders to dietary modifications, to cannabis. Around 2015 I got

my medical cannabis license here in Massachusetts. Ellis had been using cannabis as a form of treatment and said that it really made a difference. I put some paperwork together about some back troubles I had a year before and got my card very quickly. I would buy weed for him (and a bit for myself, as if) and it had (and continues to have) a great benefit to his pain management. He buys his own weed now.

Over time I also realized that I was becoming depressed and that the obsessive side of me had taken hold and was making everyone stressed. Most nights I would wake up to take a piss with a feeling of dread in my stomach. I sought the help of a psychologist but a few days before my appointment I had an epiphany that I had to step back, let go, and allow Ellis who at this time was 18, start taking control of his own health and life. And in that moment a huge weight, a truckload of weight, had been lifted off me. I told Ellis I was going to back off and his response was “I’ve been waiting to hear you say that for a long time.” We hugged and it felt good. It was the right thing to do. I went to my scheduled appointment with the analyst and he didn’t have much to offer so I didn’t go back.

Through the years Ellis has learned what not to eat, and he continues to take medication daily. He has also incorporated some alternative treatments like curcumin into his diet. I still offer suggestions here and there and Jackie and I are always here for him to lean on.

It was also a bit upsetting to learn, after the fact, that UC is apparently very common on my mother’s side of the family. But nobody talks about their health in my family until something

happens, and Jackie and I feel like if we would have known this family history we would have thought differently when as a small child his stomach was upset, or maybe not given him antibiotics. It's something that continues to frustrate us.

UC is part of Ellis's story to tell. We obviously hope there will be a cure soon. But whether there is or there isn't, we never want it to define who he is, because he is so, so much more.

One thing Jackie and I wanted to give the boys was a sense of where they are from. We have always taken trips to England together, Jackie even took Aaron when he was three months old, and we have stayed as close as possible with that side of the family. Frank has two daughters, Ellen and Sarah. Maxine has Amy and Daniel. And Adrian and Karen have Luke and Kyall. Amy is the eldest - I think she is 36 at the time of this writing. Most everyone else is in their late twenties or very early 30's. They have all visited us at least once over the years.

In 2005 we took the boys to Ireland to meet Jackie's mom's family. It had been a long time since I was there (when I slept with Frank, remember). Only Jackie's grandmother had passed in the interim. We had a lovely time and they are very hospitable people.

In 2008 we visited Italy to meet all the people I had spent such precious time with as a youth. One on of our walks through Sora, we found a dog on the street. Apparently dogs are left to do as they please there. This particular dog was so sweet and took a liking to us, following us around on our walk. She was a small mutt, maybe part hound, part Jack Russell, and she followed us

all the way back to Roberto's house. We named her Sora. She hung out with us for a couple of days and we fell in love with her and decided to see if we could take her home to the States. I don't know what possessed us, but we even extended our stay a couple of days to figure it out. In the end it wasn't possible without a lengthy quarantine and that wouldn't have been fair to her. Roberto and his girlfriend Christina took her in. That was a very memorable trip in many ways, and over the years the boys have asked when we're going back. I hope soon.

We've been incredibly fortunate in being able to take some great trips. In 2010 we visited Barbados to introduce Aaron and Ellis to that part of themselves. We met family and the boys studied very hard and got their scuba certifications. I thought I was young at 16. Aaron was 14 and Ellis 11! We were very proud of them as it took a lot of work in a short amount of time.

A couple of years later we went to visit Dad and Dolores in the Bahamas. It's always best to visit when they are there as well. They know everyone and hook up rental cars, dinners, visits. It's just the proper way to go. Kira and Renee were there as well which made it extra special. The visit got off to a little bit of a bumpy start as on the first day Jackie fell down a flight of outdoor stairs and a couple of days after that had a mishap at the rock pools. The rock pools are coral formations just off the shore that on low tide you can swim around in and catch fish and just be sheltered from the ocean. We were all snorkeling around and a random wave came through. I looked behind me to check on Jackie and she had been tossed up onto the top of the coral. I thought she was ok until I saw her bleeding from her chest. She took a hard hit. We didn't know for sure then as there are no

doctors within any reasonable distance, but she suspected she cracked her sternum. She didn't let the pain stop her in any way and even did a dive with us.

I had always had it in my mind that I wanted to dive Shark Reef with the boys as a sort of rite of passage. You know, "if they don't get eaten, they're men!" The night before we went up to the Stella Maris Inn for dinner and met up with Robert the dive master we'd be going with. We were playing pool and Robert was going on about "how dem sharks dun dere aint the same sharks you dive wit as a boy, mon." And I was like, what the fuck do you mean? "Dey more aggressive mon." I didn't sleep well that night as I was very concerned I was putting my family at great risk. But for all Robert's talk there had never been an incident, and Shark Reef is a commonly dived spot. And so we persevered. The boat had about a dozen divers on it and only a few others beside us were doing Shark Reef. There was a definite intense, focused energy as we approached and suited up. As it was when I first visited, the sharks started circling as soon as the boat arrived. That got the adrenaline going. We all jumped in together. Well, I was a couple seconds later and I clanged my tank on the edge of the boat as I went in. Not a graceful entrance, but we descended quickly. I looked around and checked for everyone. Aaron and Ellis were chilling beside me but no Jackie. I looked around and then up, and she was floating at the top, a vulnerable place to be. You see, you want to get down fast and when it's over get up and out fast. No lingering on the entrance and exit. Jackie was having trouble descending and Robert was patiently helping her. And because that's who she is, she remained calm and got her ass to the bottom. It was a magical experience. Having these beautiful animals swimming around you and within a foot or two is hard to describe. The sense of having done something really special

together was so satisfying. I hope the boys felt the same way. And Jackie had a much easier time getting out than getting in. When we got back to Boston Jackie got checked out and did indeed have a cracked sternum. She had done so many activities and never let it get to her. Or if it did, she didn't show it. I think she just wanted to focus on having an amazing vacation with the family. And it was.

I'll mention one more holiday as a few significant events took place on this trip. In 2014 we spent two weeks on St John. It's a beautiful island, with many gorgeous beaches, each with its own character. You could visit a different beach each day and not be bored. We rented an apartment from a friend of John's ex wife Nancy not far from Coral Bay which is a less developed part of the island and aside from it not having AC (which wasn't insignificant) it suited us fine. I bought some weed from a Rastafarian fellow on our second night. Weed smoking was not something to be secreted away in our house. It's not like we're potheads to any extent, but as the boys grew older, and with Ellis' UC as mentioned earlier, it just was something that we were open about. The next day the four of us had a joint rolling activity at the kitchen table which was fun, as now it was literally out in the open, and then we went for a walk to the beach where we smoked together for the first time. It was an evolution in our relationship - we were meeting them where they were, so to speak, and acknowledging a more adult relationship. We also learned that snorkeling after taking a puff is a really special experience, and it was on one such occasion that I touched the divine. There was a fairly remote beach not far from us, I think it was called Salt Pond Beach, very calm with a nice reef and quite a few sea turtles. It was a gorgeous sunny afternoon and I took a puff (remember I

have a low tolerance and have learned that I just need a wee bit to feel just right) and Jackie and I went off for a snorkel. It's very shallow - six feet or so - with no worry about waves or anything nipping at your fins, so you can just chill and enjoy the scenery. As we swam around, we met up and started holding hands, and we just swam together, very slowly, completely one hundred percent in the moment, and I was overcome with the most profound feeling of love for her. I cannot adequately explain this feeling but it was overwhelming love and pure joy. When we got back to the beach I couldn't speak, I didn't want to speak as I didn't have words, and I was very emotional. I wasn't high but I know that this experience was facilitated by cannabis. I never before or since had this feeling but it was a state of nirvana that I hope to achieve again someday.

The last significant event in this two week trip was that I almost died. We had gone scuba diving as a family together one day and had a great time. I decided that I would like to go again but nobody else was up for it so I went without them. The boat had probably seven or so divers that day and it was a typical two-tank dive - deeper dive first followed by a shorter dive. I think the first dive was 60-70 feet and it went well. I was buddied up with the dive master as I was the odd man out. Now typically the time between dives is at least a half hour if not more. This gives your body time to rest and off-gas some of the nitrogen. These guys pulled up to the second reef about fifteen minutes after we emerged from the first. I'm not sure what the rush was - the weather wasn't great - there was a good wind and current - but nothing crazy so I don't think they were trying to beat a storm. I should have questioned it but I didn't. Plus the second dive was about the same depth as the first. My second red flag. Anyway, we

descended and it was what's called a "drift dive" - you basically ride the current and instead of swimming back to the boat, the boat picks you up downstream. The first 15 minutes or so went fine. And then I ascended a bit, maybe 10 feet. The goal of swimming during diving is to be neutrally buoyant so you're just flying level, not going up or down. I couldn't figure out why I had ascended and when I tried to let air out of my vest I didn't descend. Then I started swimming to get down and making no progress. I started to become unsettled and after a few minutes I began to panic. I had never, ever panicked while diving and I began to think that I might suffocate. I tapped the divemaster and gave him the thumbs up - "I need to go up!" sign. He waved me off and signaled for me to come back down. But I was on the verge of freaking the fuck out and waved him off. He gave me the ok and I started my ascent. Remember that all this time we're drifting away from the boat, and doing two dives at such depth required a decompression stop at about 15 feet for a few minutes. Usually when you do a decompression stop you hang on the anchor line so you can just chill and count the minutes. I had no anchor line so I just tried to keep a consistent depth while also counting. After what was most likely not the requisite time or depth I broke to the surface. I inflated my vest and looked around for the boat. It was easily two hundred yards away, against the current. I was already out of breath and panicked and now I was in the middle of the ocean with no flag and a difficult swim ahead of me. I swam using a backstroke as this kept my head out of the water and allowed my arms to move more freely than if I had swam stomach-down. It took about fifteen minutes to reach the boat. Nobody had even seen me until I was about 20 feet away. I was exhausted and my head wasn't right, I felt disoriented and lightheaded. I definitely had some effects from nitrogen narcosis,

which can be a pretty serious deal. When the divers got back to the boat I apologized to the divemaster, though he really should have taken me up to the surface while the other divers waited. We also should have all been equipped with flags - a pretty standard practice. So I don't know why the hell I apologized to him. The effects of my disorientation lasted for a few hours. After we got back I had to pick up the boys and Jackie, and I remember feeling like I was drunk driving. I was upset with myself for panicking. I had always held my shit together underwater and this shook me. It wasn't until about a year later that I realized that my BCD (vest) must have been defective in not allowing me to release air from it in order to descend. That made me feel a little better about my skills. It wasn't until a couple of years later that we got back in the water again in Belize, which brought my confidence back. At my age now I don't know if I have any scuba left in me. If Belize was my last trip I think I'd be ok with that. I've had a lot of great experiences and am grateful to have shared some of them with Jackie and the boys.

We also had many wonderful vacations together much closer to home. For me summer = beach. Mom used to have an apartment in Long Beach NY and it was right on the boardwalk so you couldn't get any closer to the beach. She was only there a few years but we enjoyed it for a few days every summer.

Rhona and Terry vacation every August on Cape Cod (the Cape) and every year generously invite us to spend a couple of days, which we have taken them up on as often as possible. Their latest vacation rental is on a huge pond and it's serene.

Our other close friends, Martha and Ed have owned places on the Cape for at least 10 years now, the first in Sandwich, and then they moved to Popponesset. They're very giving people and had us over repeatedly - even let us host our family Christmas there one year. We've known Martha since the boys were in grade school. Her sons, Ben and Sam are close in age to Aaron and Ellis. Martha is a sweetheart and one of the best listeners I know, and she married Ed maybe 12-15 years ago. I call Ed "the guru" of our group of friends. He's older than all of us, and wiser, but he doesn't flaunt his wisdom and instead just imparts it in pieces at the right times.

One of my favorite places on earth is Martha's Vineyard (the Vineyard). We have John to thank for introducing us to it. He had vacationed there as a youth and started going back with his kids and then started inviting us. He'd always rent a house in Oak Bluffs, usually right on Ocean Park and we'd stay the whole week. The four kids would roam Circuit Avenue without us, visit the arcade, and play in the park.

John loves the ocean like I do and we both love bodysurfing, so pretty much every day we'd visit a beach. The Vineyard has different types of beaches, from ones that will kick your ass like South Beach to the waveless State Beach, to Gay Head which is my favorite as it has just the right mix of waves, and is set up against gorgeous cliffs made of clay. I want to live on the Vineyard some day, or at least try. I love it so much.

We are grateful to have such kind and generous friends.

COVID-19 UPDATE

The Omicron variant seems to have run its course in most of the country and world. Globally, we are nearing six million dead, with 940,000 in the U.S alone. The unmasking has begun. People are tired of the virus, but the virus doesn't care. A new variant will emerge and we can only hope there is enough vaccination that it will not be severe and that this virus will become endemic, much like the flu, with us needing annual shots. It's been a horrific ordeal, and we've gotten off easy, knock on wood. Two people I know died from it. Gabrielle, as mentioned earlier, and more recently my mother's cousin's son Jimmy, who was also in his mid fifties. He was an anti-vaxxer so I have only so much sympathy, but he was their only son and they are devastated. Adrian had it before Christmas and spent nearly two weeks in the hospital. He was not vaccinated and was very lucky to survive.

I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about drumming. I have played the drums on and off since I was about 12 when I would take lessons on a drum pad in the back of Mom's store. When we moved to Brightwaters I got a decent second hand kit and I played with my friend John. Then I kind of lost it for many years. Aside from slapping my thighs or any other surface, I didn't have a kit until I was in my early thirties. We visited a couple of friends on a trip back to California. He's a very good guitarist and had also recently bought an electronic set. I played it and I was hooked. I never again had to bother anyone with the noise. Plus it's very compact and transportable. As soon as I got home I bought my own Roland and have had it for almost twenty years now. Now, I am not a drummer by any stretch. I play drums, but I am not a drummer. The chasm between what I can do and what a

drummer can do is wide. Very wide. But, I love it. At the moment it's set up in my office and I play it anytime I want during the day - to take a break, or let off steam, and it's just fun. It's really that simple. It's plain fun! I played with Frank on piano when he came over some years ago and more recently with Dave, who plays a solid bass. That was great because he was able to offer me some tips here and there, but overall he said I kept good time. I should probably look for more opportunities to play with others. I love my drums.

Recently over the past seven or so years I have been getting tattooed. It started with a single image of an ouroboros on my arm, and after a couple of years I wanted to do way more. I noticed a shop in Watertown on my way home one evening and decided to look it up. Always and Forever Tattoo is owned and operated by one woman, Holly Azzara, and she only does large pieces - arms, legs, backs, whole friggin' bodies. I initially thought it would be cool to design my own tattoo (being an artist and having drawn one for Amy in California many years earlier). I drew something up and brought it with me to our first meeting. I think Holly probably thought "oh my, um this won't work" but she patiently asked about it and we came up with some bigger ideas. When I went back for my first session she had this incredible drawing that took all 360 degrees of my arm into account. We covered up the ouroboros and over the next year and about 25 hours she painted the most beautiful sleeve. A year or so later I got the other arm done. I was a late bloomer to tattoos. The fact that it's with you for the rest of your life, coupled with my obsessive nature kept me away for many years. But as Holly likes to say, I reached my "fuck it moment" and jumped in the pool. Even the week of my very first session I emailed Holly and

said “maybe we should just do a half sleeve”, and she responded “nope, you’re going all the way”. And that was the right call. I so deeply love them and am grateful for having met such a talented artist and special person.

So what have I learned about myself in all these years? Well, for starters, I’m not a people person. I would love to be, and I’m working on it, but the problem is, they just keep disappointing me. Or I simply expect too much. Or I never learned how to trust. It would be great to be one of these people who sees the light in everyone. I even wake up every morning, before my feet hit the floor, saying the words “I honor the light within myself and all others”, and by breakfast it’s all gone to shit.

A few months ago I crystallized my thoughts about people. I will put them here but they first appeared on [my web site](#):

- A few of us are shining lights of love.
- Some of us are self-serving, power-hungry, mean pieces of shit.
- Most of us want to do the right thing.
- All of us can do better.

And that pretty much sums up how I feel about my fellow human beings. We are all (or should be) works in progress. I’ve often heard self-help gurus say that we’re all good enough. But I don’t believe that. Was Hitler good enough? He could have done with some introspection and honoring of the light in others. No, we can all do better.

The other thing is that I’m an introvert, which doesn’t lend itself to being the life of the party. It wasn’t until I read “Quiet” by Susan Cain that I really understood this part of myself. I mean, I

knew about introverts and extroverts and every so often at work they'd do these personality assessments, which I always found interesting, that would indicate that I like getting into a flow state and working alone. But it wasn't until I read that introverts recharge their batteries by being alone and extroverts recharge by being with other people that the definition was clarified for me. My grandmother used to say "stop being so inhibited!" to Dave and I when we would visit and would hesitate to play with the neighborhood kids. It made me feel like there was something wrong with me.

As a result of reading that book I began to appreciate my introversion. I have come to see it as a gift and I like the way I am. There is certainly a decent amount of extroversion in me as well, and I don't think anybody is all one or the other. I have also realized that I am anxious and a little neurotic. I believe that neurosis is passed down, not hereditarily, but behaviorally from generation to generation. I got my fair share and I know that I passed a bit of it down to the boys. I can only hope it dissipates from generation to generation!

I've recently begun to think I have some sort of attention deficit. My mind drifts quite often during conversation which really bugs me as I sincerely feel that one of the most meaningful gifts we can give others is our undivided attention. On the other hand, I am able to get into deep flow states for a couple of hours at a time during work, and I try to meditate regularly, which helps. Jackie doesn't think I have ADD as she works with kids who do have it and it's very, very obvious. It helps to be mindful of when it happens and bring myself back to the present moment. Or it all might be blamed on smartphones and Steve Jobs. I got rid of Facebook a few years ago because I noticed how it was altering

my behavior in that I was constantly checking for updates so I didn't miss out. That and Mark Zuckerberg is a facist asshole. Anyway, it's something I'm working on. There's definitely a diagnosis of some sort in there, from the OCD in my youth to my anxiety and introversion. I'm not sure if I really want to dig into it. I've become mindful of my behaviors, and maybe that's good enough. It doesn't seem to be hurting anybody. Taking the time to breathe, remembering to take a few seconds to just focus on the breath when I feel anxious helps immensely. It's something I've taken from yoga into all aspects of my life, from the simple day-to-day of work, to conversations, to golf.

The adage that parents are only as happy as their unhappiest child is very true. When Ellis is feeling bad, or Aaron is down about how things are going, we feel that at a deep level. We are both so grateful that they have grown into kind and caring men, and that they have met wonderful, beautiful girls, Aaron's Shea and Ellis's Brittany and hope one day they become our daughters (I don't really like the term "in-law").

When I think of how things might have gone wrong for me, especially early on, I am very grateful for the love of my mom, my brother, and my grandparents in keeping me on the right track, and for all my good friends along the way. I am very lucky.

I send deep love and gratitude to my wife and life partner. We have been in love since we were so young and have lived most of our lives as one. We most certainly are not the same people we were that day at JFK so many years ago and that's as it should be. But we've managed to not grow apart. We've tended the soil, picked the weeds, and I love you so very much Jackie Browne.

Thank you for living this life with me. I look forward to the adventure every day.

And I'll end this tale with a fun little story - happened last night as a matter of fact. So the back story is that I sometimes take CBD/THC tinctures to help me sleep. They tend to last a long time and the one I had been using for about 6 months ran out and I had a different brand in the fridge. I gave it a quick look for ingredients but for some reason assumed the dosage was around the same as my other one (why?! it's a different product altogether!!) so I took about a third of a dropper full. Well, I woke up super baked. Super baked. This morning I actually looked at the dosage and it said 4 drops. I took at least 4 or 5 times that. What follows are a handful of brief recordings done over the next 40 minutes.

[I'm afraid I might die in my sleep and how poetic it would be if the genius writer, after completing his draft died](#)

[I'm lamenting my situation.](#) (It goes on for 2 min because I forgot to turn it off but the talking ends after 40 sec)

[I state my dosage in case they found me dead they could piece things together](#)

[I praise my bed](#)

[I look forward to dreaming as I come down](#)

[I talk about my former chiropractor, Dr. Bogart](#)

I reminisce about Dr. Bogart's ancient tools

I feel the manic period going away and sleep coming on

Anyway, stay well and be excellent to each other. And don't forget to breathe!