

AoTL Reading 1/4/21

That's Me There

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It's one of those drift-away moments. I'm gazing into a dusty brown cardboard box at old faded yellow-edged black and white photos of myself as a little boy. A warm feeling flows around me. I think, "*That's a pretty cute little kid.*" Seconds later I begin a painstaking personal critique. My head is too egg-shaped, I have buckteeth, my clothes don't fit, and I have knobby knees and chubby cheeks with the cursed dimples that are like bull's-eyes for the poking fingers of my mother's friends. This self-criticism squeezes my heart. Sad feelings begin to wrap themselves around more memories. I don't recall the circumstances where some of these pictures were made. I shake my head in wonder, thinking about how this kid floated through childhood like flotsam on the waves of life's episodes. I wonder how he ever made it through the gauntlet of growing up?

I shoo the cat off the dining room table and pour out some more photos.

I unroll a thirty-inch panorama photo. It shows a long row of seated and standing t-shirted boys at my summer camp.

One hundred and fifty boys and their counselors sit with squinting faces, wearing white tee shirts emblazoned with "Camp Robin Hood." I smile, seeing myself sitting on both ends of this very long lineup. I recall the picture-taking session and how I figured out how to do this trick. While the photographer is setting up his special equipment he explains that his panoramic camera requires twelve seconds to travel 120 degrees from one side of the scene to the other to capture a single exposure. I have an idea. I sit on the very end of the row on the left where the photo begins. The camera's motor buzzes loudly as it starts panning from my position and moves on to capture the other campers. At this moment, after the camera's lens has passed me, I crouch low and dash behind the posing campers to outrun the moving lens. I strike a pose down at the other end just before the lens arrives and make a second appearance in the photo. I remember how I smiled smugly and felt like the comic book super-**fast** hero, "The Flash."

In another photo there's an image showing an arrangement of boys and girls sitting outside my high school. We're in three tiers on a borrowed bleachers bench, staring blank-faced and bored like a battalion of stuffed Teddy Bears, sitting on the prize shelf of a carnival ring-toss game.

I always scan for **my** face, Sometimes, in very old photos, I identify the wrong person simply because he has buckteeth. Years later, scanning pictures of events that I attended as a middle-aged man, I will learn to look at the foreheads first, for receding hairlines. In candid photos of big social events, when people are turned every which way, I scan the backs for a familiar bald spot to help narrow the search.

The one photograph I don't have is in my graduating class's high school yearbook. I remember, It's 1953 and I won't be going to the senior prom with my steady girl, Ellie, because a month before graduation, I am told by the Principals that because of my discipline record and that I failed too many required subjects they are not able to graduate me. They offer me a favor and invite me to voluntarily withdraw from school rather than to suffer official expulsion with all it's nasty records which, I'm told, will follow me around for a lifetime. I have used up all my Get-Out-Of-Jail Free cards and won't be graduating with my class or receiving a yearbook. I am officially a failure.

Worse, It's too late to have my face removed from the yearbook. It still sits among the gallery of real graduates. The one saving grace is three of my friends, as is the custom, ask me to autograph my photo in their copies. Because I don't have a personal copy of the yearbook, this is a one-way exchange and a bittersweet compliment.

Here are some of the things that my classmates will probably remember about me when they look at my picture.

They will recall that I never walked across the flag-draped oak stage at the commencement ceremony. They will remember it was I that became famous as the first recipient of the legendary silent ejection gesture, fabricated by Mr. Ross, our math teacher. My class disruptions included the clever vine-grapple maneuver. This exercise happens while Mr. Ross is chalking a math solution on the board with his back to the class. In that short time, from my rear window seat, I manipulate the long, hook-ended window pole, capturing a stem of the ivy vine growing around the open classroom windows and yank about four feet of green leaves into the classroom. The associated stifled giggles always causes Mr. Ross, in mid-equation, to make the imposing, "Get out of here, now" gesture.

Without interrupting his explanation, he sweeps his hand away from the blackboard and points directly at me.

While tucking the chalk inside his closed fingers, extends his thumb and jerks it twice toward the door. He does not wait for a response and just continues chatting about his formula. I rise, silently, walk with my books to the door and leave for his unspoken destination, the office of the assistant principal. It is all so smooth and well-orchestrated that I always think of Mr. Ross and me as a team in this awkward dance.

Another thing by which I will be remembered, is the day my fellow cut-up, Dave Johnson, and I are in the boy's lavatory. I have a tube of lipstick, found in the hall, and decide to execute my one and only true skill, sign lettering, by drawing a well-crafted graffiti on the wall. Dave is cheering me on and chuckling as I beautifully letter this sign mentioning the school's Principal, at eye level over the urinal: "YOU ARE NOW HOLDING DEAN OLIVER W. MELCHIOR BY THE NECK"

Now, I'm chuckling and snorting with laughter, and so is Dave.

As the sign painting continues, I notice that Dave becomes uncharacteristically silent as I'm drawing the punch line "...BY THE NECK." I finish the masterpiece and turn to see why Dave's not laughing anymore.

I'm staring directly into the pin-stripe vest of Principal Oliver W. Melchior who says, "Nice work, Gary. I'll see you in my office immediately."

My usual destination, when tossed out of a class, is the office of Assistant Principal R. Bruce McGill. We spend so much time together that we develop a nice chatting relationship. He says, "I saw the electric sign you made for Stuart Updike's campaign for student president. It was nice. How did you get it to flash on and off?" I smile and mumble, "Thanks, I found a bulb flasher button at the hardware store." I like that he treats me like a person, not just a problem.

One day, while he is talking with me standing on the staircase to the second floor during the boisterous between-class stampede, Mr. McGill's back is turned to the hallway below. I am standing on the next highest step and ^{looking} over his head notice my buddies, Mike and Dave, tip-toeing out of the boy's bathroom in exaggerated cartoon fashion, only ten feet behind Mr. McGill's back.

Suddenly, there is a booming cannon-like cherry-bomb explosion followed by a square cloud of smoke puffing out the swinging bathroom door. People scream and stop. Mr. McGill turns to look at the smoke and in the same motion, turns his head back and looks bewildered and says, with a straight face, "I give up, Gary. How did you do that?"

Fifty-five years later I will be asked the same question by my high school Alumni Association, when they call to ask if I will write a story for the Alumni magazine about my photography and publishing career. They ask that I please include something about how the High School influenced my path to success.

I feel slightly angry from the irony of this request and bristle with the temptation to get even by saying that the school's biggest contribution to my success as a visual journalist is that they threw me out, in my senior year, so I could enjoy an early start at finding my own way in the real world.

However, I do the grownup thing and just say something nice about the support I had from an assistant Principal. It seems funny that after fifty-five years, they still ask, "I give up, Gary. How did you do that?"

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