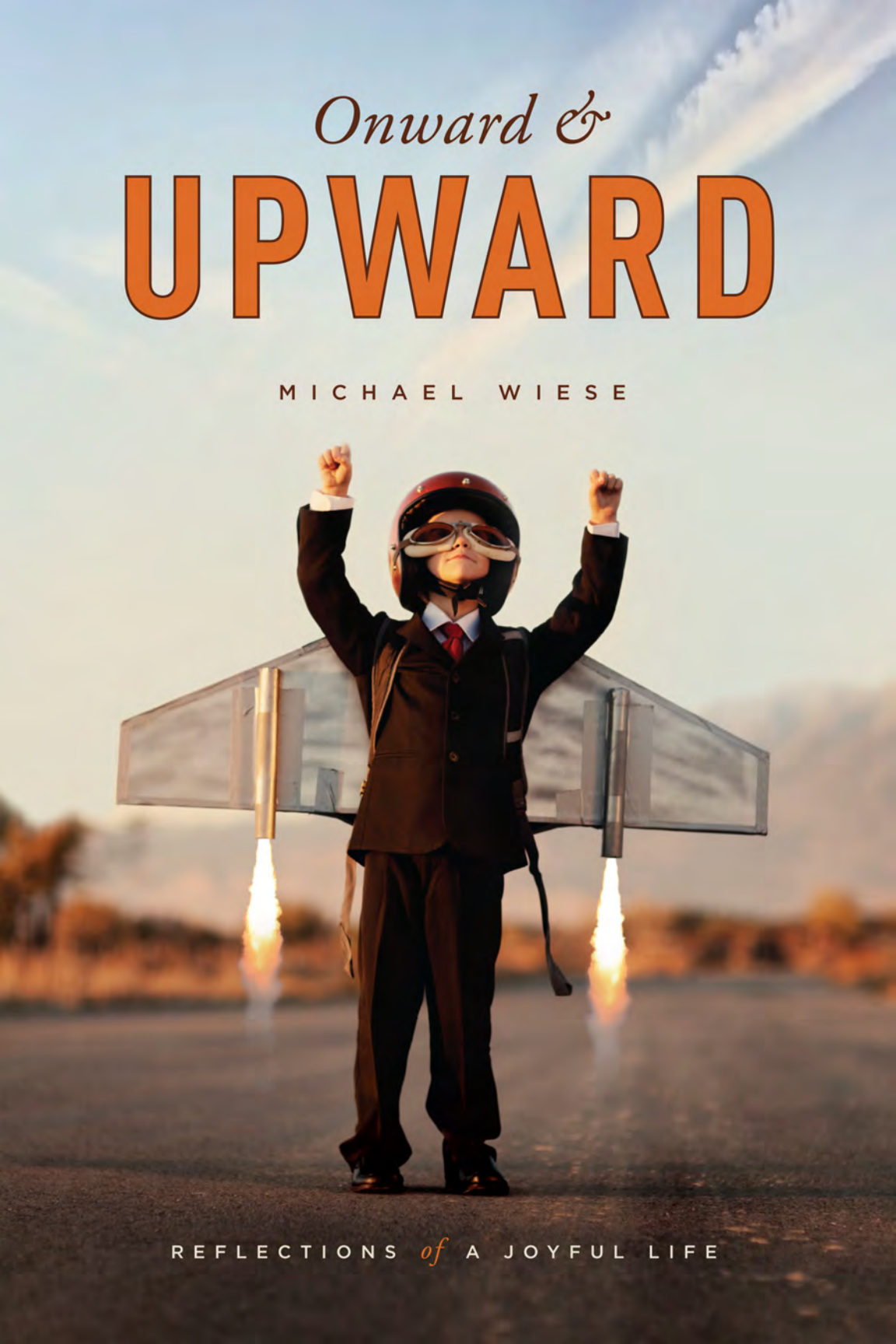
Onward &
UPWARD

MICHAEL WIESE



REFLECTIONS *of* A JOYFUL LIFE

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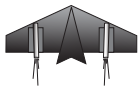
Prologue



Before sleep comes and as you recall the passing day, you'll find that it's made up of stories, many stories, some free floating, some interconnected, some strands of other stories, some complete, and some incomplete. Some will carry great urgency but no clue to content, like the one-sentence postcard home to my parents that I sent after my first week at summer camp: "Dear Mom & Dad, I was almost killed twice yesterday."

This book contains stories that hold meaning for me. These are stories I tell about myself. The stories may honor teachers, lovers, or friends who traveled with me for so brief a moment before our stories veered off into divergent directions. These are stories that make up a life, but are not that life. They may make up my becoming, but they are not who I've become. They are beautiful snake skins left behind as my spirit passes through them and then vanishes.

The stories do, for a moment, make someone real. That eight-year-old Michael still exists, trying to build a wooden raft that will carry him, like Huck Finn, down a great river. I honor him, acknowledge who he was and what he was learning, and send him along, not to follow me into adulthood, but to live out his eight-year old life in another dimension of time. In these fragments of stories, like the brooms in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, I send out a myriad of Michaels, each one struggling to find the "secret of life" that I so hoped my Rabbi would tell me, but didn't.

Our stories weave and criss-cross like the crust on Grandma Wiese's rhubarb pie. They carry personal remembrances, teachings, insights, and transmissions about what it means to be human. From these infinite lives I've selected some that I've been storing in a silver box, waiting for the right time to tell them.

As a human being, now in my 65th year, I turn and suddenly I've become an elder, and it's my responsibility, and perhaps even my duty, to share my experiences on earth. May they bring some enjoyment and inspiration for you in a celebration of life.

Onward and Upward,

Michael Wiese
Cornwall, August 2012

Observing Champaign

1947 *1965*

"A little boy was asked how he learned to skate. 'By getting up every time I fell down,' he answered."

— David Seabury

Time exposure self-portrait with City of New Orleans train.

BRIGHT LIGHTS

My skin presses on a metal slab. It's very cold. I shiver. Eyes peer down at me. Rough meaty hands poke me. Something big carries me and sets me down with a clunk on a hard surface and wraps me in something scratchy. Bright lights. There is much space. Soft forms move around and shade me from the light. I am glad to be out. I am ready to start my mission. It's then I notice that my arms and legs don't work yet.

I am new born... with double pneumonia. It's a miracle I survive.

TOES

Every night Mom and Dad fool around with my feet. They wrap gauze around my overlapping toes to force them apart. It doesn't hurt. I enjoy the attention. This is always fun for me. I can walk.

BABY JEFF

No longer do my feet need wrapping. But someone else is in a crib in my room. It's baby Jeff. He fusses and everybody gathers round him. What about me? I forget how to go potty.

WABBITS

In first grade I have special classes with Mrs. Meeker, a speech therapist. She's pretty and kind. Those dern R's. I can't make that sound. I stare at the printed yellow flowers on her dress as I practice pushing air by curling my tongue. "Wun, wabbit, wun." "Wun, wabbit, wun." After many months I learn to do it! Christmas comes and with my new-found confidence I belt out my favorite song, "Wudolph da wed-nose waindee."

DOUGH BOY

I am four. Mother is out for lunch. Dad is at the store. Maddie, a once-a-week maid, watches after me and Jeff. She is down in the basement ironing and smoking Kools, the ones with the penguin cartoon on them. I carry Jeff, who is almost two, and put him gently on the changing table as I'd seen my mother do. I lock the door to the room. I am going to change the baby all by myself.

Jeff sits there like a little naked Buddha, I rub baby oil all over him. I finish him off with a heavy sprinkle of talcum powder. He looks funny, like the Pillsbury Doughboy or a small snowman.

Maddie bangs on the door. I ignore her. She calls my Dad because soon I see his face through the window. He is huffing and puffing. His face is red. He pounds on the locked door shouting, "Michael! Michael! Let me in!" I reply, "Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!"

ELM STREET

We live at 1108 S. Elm Street in Champaign, Illinois. It's a two-bedroom, one-bath, pre-fabricated house popular with returning WWII vets. It costs $7,000. It's like a trailer, only better. It's rectangular with concrete steps that lead up to it. Open the door and you walk immediately into the living room, which is connected to a dining room. Straight ahead, past a small bathroom, are two bedrooms.

Some days a horse-drawn white wagon brings us cold bottles of milk packed in ice. I run outside to see the horse or to see the ice cream man who rides a bicycle with a big white box in front filled with dry ice and cold treats. His handlebar has a row of silver bells that I can hear from many blocks away. Someday when I am bigger I want to be an ice cream man.

Lots of friends live in my neighborhood. During the warm summer nights we run wild under huge elm trees chasing lightning bugs as they magically blink on and off. I catch them and keep them in jars with holes punched in the lids. They die by morning and leave a funny smell. Now when I catch them, I let them go.

ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH

We have a parakeet. He's "Keety," my favorite pet. He's a beautiful blue. One day I am home sick with not much to do. I think I'll go hunting. I take the rubber end off the arrow and sharpen it in a pencil sharpener. I sneak up on my prey with my bow and arrow. I put the arrow through the slots of the cage and let loose. I don't think about what will happen until it's too late. I am terrified when the arrow pins Keety to the back of the cage. He flutters and dies quickly. I throw up.

THE PADDLE

One afternoon Jeff and I build our own swimming pool in front of the driveway. We dig a big hole. Then we put down newspaper and fill the hole to the top with lots of water, just in time to show Dad as he drives up. He's not happy. He sends us inside while he fills up the hole and cleans up the mess.

When we got older and pulled these kinds of stunts we would get "the paddle." The number of solid, well-connected swats to the backside depended on the severity of the crime and the anger of the paddler. Once I saw it coming, so I grabbed a Golden Book and crammed it down my pants. The first whack didn't hurt, but the book was quickly discovered and it just made Dad even madder. Better to take it like a man.

BIG CHIEF AL'S

The best time is summer. Hot, muggy Illinois summer. The heat drifts into Champaign from the surrounding cornfields. During the day Jeff and I go to Big Chief Al's Indian Day Camp where we play games and then cool off in the over-chlorinated pool. At night we run around our neighbor's house playing war or hide-and-seek. For a real treat, Dad would drive Mom and us boys out on the new highway to the Dairy Queen for butterscotch sundaes. We'd wear our pyjamas. Magic times.

JOHNNY DISAPPEARS

My best friend is Johnny Mercer. He lives a block away. In his backyard is a huge willow tree where we hide and hold club meetings until our parents ring bells and strike triangles to signal dinner time. One day I hear whispers, "He has leukemia." I don't know what that is, but it must be real bad because I never see him again.

FIRST GRADE CANDY

Mom walks me the three blocks to South Side School, which is a large red brick building on a hill. At the bottom of the hill is a baseball diamond and a little store across the street. I pinch nickels and pennies from my Mom's purse. She

has plenty. I buy erasers and tiny wax bottles filled with brightly colored sugar water. One afternoon she catches me red-handed. No paddle, but a very serious talk about right and wrong.

THE CHEATER

One warm summer evening Dad takes Jeff and me to the County Fair. This is a very big deal for kids in Champaign. There is something dangerous and edgy about the whole atmosphere. Hundreds of farm families drift up and down the rows of the carnival midway. There is a tent with a freak show: a bearded lady and a snake-man with two heads. I am not allowed to see them. I bet they aren't real. Dad gives us our choice to play "just one" game of chance, so we look at them all. Most are run by greasy looking guys with gold teeth and lots of tattoos who shout "Hurry, hurry! Everyone's a winner!"

I pick a game with the mouse and the roulette wheel. Dad holds Jeff up to watch and I stand on my tiptoes to see the spinning wheel and the numbered holes. We bet on 6 because that's how old I am. The man drops a little mouse onto the spinning wheel. Drunkenly, it spins around, then runs right into hole number 6. "We won! We won!" I scream. But the fairground man with the lazy eye says "Nope" as he tucks Dad's money into the pocket of his torn shirt. "No, we did win, we did, I saw it!" The man leers at Dad as I start shouting louder and louder. Dad looks at the man then back at us, and then says, "Let's go, boys." I can't believe it. My Dad backs down! The man cheated us. "That's not fair, Dad!"

A CLOSE ONE

That summer we drive to Kentucky Lake. Dad gets a special deal in a hotel across from an amusement park. I can hear the music and noise in my room. It's exciting. Outside our window you can see the games of chance and hear people scream as the rusty roller coaster ratchets up and down. Jeff and I wear ourselves out playing miniature golf and trying to get nickels to land on slippery plates so we can win a big stuffed bear. Jeff falls asleep before he even gets into bed. In the middle of the night, Dad shakes me awake and carries me through the halls of the hotel that are filling with smoke. Everyone is coughing. Outside, we shiver in our pyjamas and watch as the flames eat the old wooden hotel. The

fire, cracking and popping, casts shadows on the darkened amusement park. Someone had been smoking in bed.

MIAMI

It's Christmas school break. We go to Miami Beach. I am six. We play on the beach and chase crabs into their sandy holes. When it's too hot, I stay in the room with Mom and we read books. Once, when Jeff and I wake up from our naps, Mom and Dad are gone. We look on the beach and at the side of the pool, but they are really gone. I decide to take Jeff back home. We get dressed and I find some money in the top dresser drawer. But before we look for the train station, Jeff gets hungry and wants to eat. I take him to the café and get him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I spend all the money except for a few pennies. We wander out into the parking lot next to a busy highway. The asphalt under my shoes is hot. This isn't going to be easy. Just then Mom and Dad run up to us and hug us. We are happy to be together again.

When we really do leave Miami we catch a taxi back to the train station. On the way we cross one of the many drawbridges. I see a sparkle from a ring on the side of the bridge. I start screaming, "Stop! Stop! I see a ring!" They don't believe me, so I yell louder, "Stop! Stop! There's a ring!" Dad gets out. "Sure enough, just like I said." He picks up a Masonic ring, encrusted with twelve cut diamonds. Probably a fisherman took it off and forgot it. Dad scours the newspapers and even calls the Florida police but never finds the owner. A year later he designs a ring for my mother. He buys the diamonds from me and the money goes into my savings account. Years later I use it to buy my first drum set. Today, my wife Geraldine wears the ring.

READING CLUB

By the second grade I am a pretty good student. I love reading *The Weekly Reader*. I start a Reading Club with Jeff and four or five of the kids in the neighborhood. Of course, I appoint myself president and make it official by writing it on the front of the Club's notebook. I make each member read a page from a storybook just like we do in school. Everyone except Jeff as he is too young, but he is allowed to sit there. The club meets only once.

KING OF THE WILD FRONTIER

We are the second people on our block to get a television set. It has a tiny circular black-and-white screen. My parents watch variety shows. I watch Davy Crockett. All us kids watch Davy Crockett. It's a big craze. He is a great explorer and "King of the wild frontier." He is always fighting Indians and he "Killed him a b'ar when he was only three." I crave a Davy Crockett coon-skin cap. It has magic powers to make you strong. And I like the word "Coon" because my middle name, Kuhn, sounds the same. Maybe we are related. I can feel there is a great hero lurking somewhere inside of me too. I renew my campaign of endless begging and eventually get a coon-skin cap. It has a raccoon tail running down the back that tickles my neck when I run or have to fight Indians. Sometimes I wear it with the tail on the side. I also have the official Davy Crockett shirt. I imagine what it feels like to be Davy Crockett — strong, brave, and loved by all. I want to sleep in the cap, but mom won't let me.

One day some workmen are laying a new concrete driveway across the street. I go over to watch. Before they can pour the concrete, they have to unroll and hammer down a heavy wire mesh. As they cut a section from a huge roll, the end springs up and a sharp metal rod about the size of a pencil penetrates my temple. It doesn't hurt. The workmen look at me in horror. From their faces I know something very bad has happened. I say, "Bye. I have to go now," and walk across the street, brave as I can, blood spilling everywhere.

I knock on our door and wait. I know if I go in the living room all messy I will get told off. I hear Mom's footsteps. "Michael is that you?" She opens the screen door and then freezes as the color drains from her face. Then she quickly kneels and throws her arms around me. The blood ruins my Davy Crockett shirt but I knew from somewhere deep down that wearing the shirt magically saved my life. I didn't play Davy Crockett any more after that. Someone else can be "King of the wild frontier."

LAKE OF THE WEEDS

During the summer Dad drives us across the tracks to Grandma and Granddad Wiese's house on the North side of town. Grandma always makes us lunch and

then gives Dad and Jeff rhubarb pie. I don't like it so she gives me my special plate of just pie crust with sugar and cinnamon. Then just "us men" would drive the ten miles or so to The Lake of the Woods (we call it "Lake of the Weeds"). It takes forever. When I had grown up and returned for a look around, the place was small and tacky but as kids it was a magic jungle filled with adventure. Dad rents a rowboat and Jeff and I row until we roast or get tired, which isn't very long. We sneak up on painted turtles as they sun themselves on lily pads. Grandad shows us how to put worms on the hooks. Yuck. It's easy to catch bluegills, a feisty little fish, which once caught we'd throw back, 'cause I don't think you can eat them. Once I catch a catfish with long whiskers. They are scary. We take the turtles home and keep them until the end of summer in an aluminium tub with a rock island in the center and then return the turtles to the lake in the fall.

KILLING

It's freezing cold. The ground is frozen solid in the farm fields. My Dad takes me pheasant hunting. Jeff's too little. Dad shows me how to use a small-gauge shotgun. He was in the Navy during the war. Maybe that's how he learned. When a pheasant flies out of the hedge, I swing around and blast it, nearly getting knocked over by the recoil. We run up to the pheasant flapping on the ground. It doesn't die immediately. I don't like killing and never go again.

COMEDY

Fourth grade has the best teacher ever. Mrs. Clifford gets my humor. She thinks I am very funny. The principal, Mr. Hollingshead ("Mr. Hollow Head") doesn't. I love Mrs. Clifford's lively classes. She makes learning fun and encourages me. I participate in everything and get straight A's. She says I should be a comedian when I grow up. They think everything is funny, just like me. I am sorry when fourth grade ends.

TREASURE

I study an ad for a metal detector on the back of a Quaker Oats cereal box. There's a drawing of a man finding treasure in the sand. I get Mom to order one for my birthday. I dream about traveling all over the world finding treasure.

It takes forever to arrive. I tear open the box and Dad sets it up. Nothing happens. It doesn't work. I put nickels and dimes under it and there is no sound or flashing light. My dream career as a treasure hunter comes to an abrupt end before it starts.

SOFTIES

Mary lives next door. I stretch a string from my bedroom window to hers with a tin can at each end. We shout "Hello" to each other and it works. She is twelve, about four years older than me. One afternoon she crawls under her bed so I can't see her, takes my hand and has me touch her breasts. That, I think, is a weird thing to do.

NEW HOUSE

It won't be long before we move to a new house that is being built for us in Mayfair, a subdivision a few miles out of town near the Champaign County Country Club. It's nothing yet, but Dad says it will be. Fields that just a year ago grew corn are divided and paved with curvy concrete lanes waiting for houses to be built. Ours, at 1205 Waverly Drive, is the second house being built there. It's fun going out to the house. Jeff and I explore the framed rooms without walls and climb all around and imagine what it will be like when it's finished.

We move in when I am in the fifth grade. I change schools to Westview, which is only a few blocks away. In the beginning of the school year there are cows in some of the fields and corn and alfalfa in others, but soon there are new houses springing up like wooden mushrooms everywhere. Even during school I can hear the hammering and sawing. Once the workers leave, Jeff and I explore every new house and climb on the tractors. We know when it's dinner time: Mom rings a bell.

The Champaign County Country Club borders Mayfair. My folks join so they can play golf and party with their wide circle of friends. We swim in the pool and eat sticky buns in the formal dining room on special occasions. Black waiters in white jackets serve the food. They are especially polite. On the fourth of July, the Dads throw silver dollars in the pool and us kids almost drown each other trying to snatch the coins from the bottom.

Melissa is my first love but no one knows. I fall in love with her when I spot her on the diving board dripping wet in her black silk bathing suit. She looks like a mermaid with long blonde hair turned green by the chlorine in the pool. She is on the swimming team and is always winning ribbons. I am an okay swimmer but nowhere as good as Melissa. But it doesn't stop me from fantasizing that one day I will save Melissa from drowning and, in my arms, she will fall in love with me. But maybe she won't because the other kids tease me about having a big nose.

THE BIG BANG

I am ten when I get a chemistry set for Christmas. Perfect timing because I'd just found a book at the library on how to make fireworks. The chemistry set doesn't have the good stuff I need for explosives, so on Saturday I go to the pharmacy and buy saltpeter, sulphur, charcoal, potassium chlorate, and metal filings. I set up a secret lab in the basement. With the book propped open, I mix the chemicals, make a fuse and light it. It fizzes, then ignites, then explodes, burning a big hole in the ping-pong table and filling the basement with toxic smoke. Out comes the paddle.

Another time, on a school field trip to *The News-Gazette*'s printing press, I collect cold type lead letters. I get a saucepan and melt down the lead and pour it into a mold that I have for making lead soldiers. I spill the hot lead accidentally on the new kitchen Formica workspace. Another meeting with the paddle.

Bikes, archery sets, and BB guns are just some of the treasures pictured on the backs of comic books. All you have to do is sell some corny greeting cards from the American Youth Association and you can win it all. I fill out the form and in a few weeks boxes of greeting cards arrive. I immediately canvas the neighborhood knocking on doors and selling boxes of cards. It goes really well. "I am Michael from down the street and I am selling cards for the American Yow-th Association," I proudly declare. Big smiles all around as hands reach into their purses and wallets. The boxes sell quickly. This is easy. When I get home the neighbors have already reported in to my Mom. She lovingly tells me, you pronounce it "yoo-th" not "yow-th."

I've got to get a go-cart! I have turned down the pages in all the magazines with pictures of the best ones. Dad finally caves and buys one. But I see right away that he didn't buy a fast one. It has a governor on the engine so its top speed is only two miles an hour. "Heck, Dad, I can walk faster than that. The good ones go 60 mph." I drive it in wimpy baby circles around the driveway. Bor-ing. One day I get out the toolbox and figure out how to take the governor off. I also take off the muffler so it roars like a real go-cart. I ROAR down Waverly Drive at 10 mph. The need for speed! Yes, the paddle. But worth it.

When I got older (and bigger) and Mom came at me with the paddle, I just grab it out of her hand. (I don't mean to suggest that we were beaten or abused because we weren't. But back in the day, before political correctness and children's rights, this is how kids were raised in Central Illinois.)

THE SECRET OF LIFE

I am twelve years old. I go to Sinai Temple on Sunday mornings, then afterwards Sunday school. I study Hebrew and Jewish history. We are reformed Jewish and since Dad is Methodist we celebrate Christmas and Easter; just the presents bit and egg hunting, not the going to church bit. We go to temple instead.

I don't mind the Sunday School but sometimes the teacher's feelings show when they talk about the Holocaust. It makes me feel uneasy or even guilty but I don't know why. I didn't do anything. I wasn't even there. Worse is the scratchy woollen suit which is almost too much to bear. What I like about going to the Jewish High Holy Days at temple is the canting, that magical and mysterious voice that comes from an ancient past. The adults sit so straight in the wooden pews. Each family has its own section and always sits there. I am sure that adults know the secret of life and if I can just stick it out — both the study and woollen suit — until confirmation, I too will learn what life is all about.

Confirmation Day arrives. I recite the prayers in Hebrew and do all the things I am suppose to do. All us kids stand facing the congregation. The jewel-encrusted cover is taken off the Torah. I stand behind the Rabbi and can see the hand-written holy Hebrew letters on the scroll. I am terribly excited. Today's the day everything is going to fall into place and be clear. I'll become

an adult. The Rabbi makes his way to each child, one at a time. As a "W" "Wiese" I am the very last. Each child is handed a rolled-up certificate and then the Rabbi whispers something. The tension is unbearable. I am minutes away from learning the secret of life! He stands before me, hands me a certificate, shakes my hand, then bends down to ear level. Here it comes! "Good luck, Mike," he says. He turns to leave. I grab his arm. "What? That's it? That's it?!" I plead. I am not going to learn the secret of life here. I quit going to temple. I never go back.

ALL-DAY PARKING

My first job is selling programs at the Illini football games. Parking lots on all sides of the stadium are already full. I stand alongside an empty farmer's field and sell programs to the drivers of cars who are creeping along looking for a place to park. One of the drivers asks me if he can park in the field. I say, "Sure, why not?" He hands me a dollar and turns in. All the cars behind follow him, stopping only briefly to hand me a dollar. In about twenty minutes I am holding nearly $200 in dollar bills!! Dad does not celebrate my victory. I get a lecture.

The next weekend I sneak back to the field but the farmer has put up a temporary fence and is standing nearby. So I find another location to sell my programs. It's November and brutally cold. It starts to snow. I have a blanket with me. It's near game time and people are rushing by, anxious to get in the stadium for the kickoff. I am selling programs like crazy. I drop a fifty-cent piece and kneel down to find it, all the while selling programs. People grab programs off the stack and throw money on the blanket that I've wrapped around my waist and knees. After it's all over and I count up the money, I have about $100 more than I expect. I count it again. I can't figure it out... unless... no?!... They don't think I am crippled, do they?! I don't tell Dad this story.

THE KUHNS AND THE WIESES

My Dad is the general manager at Joseph Kuhn and Co. at 45 Main Street in downtown Champaign. It's owned by the Kuhns, my mother's side of the family, and named after my great grandfather, who founded the business in 1865. My Granddad Kuhn joined the business in 1888 and now my Dad is the boss. It's

one of the longest continuously operated businesses in all of Central Illinois. It's the best men's clothing store — "unmatched in 118-½ miles." I know this because it is printed on the store's promotional matchboxes and glass ashtrays and on the outside wall of the store in big letters. But what is better and 118-½ miles away? There is a bigger clothing store in Indianapolis.

The store is across the street from *The News-Gazette* and about 100 yards from the train station. Kuhns is four stories high, has 35,000 square feet, and has an atrium that extends from the first to the fourth floor. I can stand in the shoe department on the first floor and look up past the men's and ladies' floors to a stained glass ceiling. It's like a great cathedral. Looking up is always the first thing I do when dragged to the store to buy new clothes the week before school starts. All those reds, blues, and golds. I almost have a religious experience. Years later the store is remodelled and the atrium boarded over to make more floor space. The stained glass dome is moved to the new store at the shopping center. Dad gives me a few pieces of stained glass as a souvenir, but it's not the same. Nothing can make up for the loss of that magnificent stained glass ceiling.

My whole universe is this little town in Illinois. I don't know how people get in or out of the town, or if they ever did. I hear some people talk about the big city, Chicago. I think, if there is any escape, it must be north to Chicago on the tracks that shuttle the train called "The City of New Orleans" from New Orleans to Chicago. At night I lay in bed and hear the train's horn announce its brief passing as it comes out of the surrounding cornfields, slips through Champaign-Urbana, and then disappears out through the other side, like a snake in tall grass. There is something mysterious about it. The train to me is as magical as the Orient Express I'd read about in my boy's adventure books. I imagine the wonderful places the train must go. Our little town is an oasis in a sea of cornfields and the train is the only escape. But only a few trains ever stop in Champaign.

When I become a teenager, I set up a camera on a time exposure, lean against a post, and make a self-portrait as "The City of New Orleans" streaks past. You can see my silhouette and the train passing through my transparent body. It's one of my most treasured photographs as it is loaded with meaning for me.

It's like an image in a crystal ball that suggests escape, flight, spirits, and other dimensions — a portent of my future.

Grandfather (Isaac) and Grandmother (Rose) Kuhn are highly respected in the community. Grandfather carries on his father's retail clothing business, gives scholarships to foreign students at the University of Illinois, and contributes to building Sinai Temple. They live in one of the grand Victorian houses on University Avenue, which was lined with big elm trees before elm disease killed most of them. Grandfather is much older than Grandmother. She is his second wife. He dies when I am six. I was in awe of him, maybe because all the adults around him treated him with such reverence. I remember eating a bowl of vanilla ice cream with him and he told me not to eat too fast. I still wrap his favorite blanket around me when I meditate on cold days. He warmed himself with it when he wrote letters in the sitting room. I can still hear the scratchy sounds his ink pen made.

Grandma (Marie) and Granddad (Ellis) Wiese live on the other side of the tracks in a rambling, creaky old clapboard house. Grandma is a big jovial woman with several prominent moles and beauty marks on her face. I love to follow her up the two flights of stairs to the attic where she thrills me and Jeff by opening cigar boxes full of Dad's old treasures: war medals, foreign coins, bottle openers, and carved *netsuke* that Dad brought back from his wartime tour of Yokohama. (Today, on my meditation altar, I have a Buddhist bracelet made of twenty-one tiny hand-carved ivory skulls from that cherished cigar box.)

Granddad is the strong silent type. He had been a motorcycle policeman and received newspaper headlines for apprehending some Chicago bootleggers. He is a hero. Now he is retired. He murmurs "Hi boys" when we come to the house and then dozes off in front of a TV Western undisturbed by the shooting, yelling, and clomping of hooves. It's Grandma Wiese, with her big blue Irish eyes, who likes to play with us boys and make us laugh.

Going to Grandmother and Grandfather Kuhn's (we never called them Grandma or Grandpa) is a more formal affair. Their Victorian house is large, the stairs squeak, and the closets smell of cedar. Everything is antique and very clean

and has its exact place. I am not allowed to touch anything. We always have to wear our very best clothes when we visit them, which means something itchy.

My mother is always tense and nervous during those infrequent times when both grandparents come to a holiday dinner at our house. The Wieses are farm people, simple, unpretentious, and uneducated. You could imagine Grandma Wiese on a farm. Grandmother Kuhn is more like the Queen. She wears white gloves at the dinner table, when she drives her Buick, and at the store when she goes to inspect it. The sets of grandparents never really had much to say to each other. Grandma and Grandpa Wiese were very poor. They never went beyond the 7th grade and their parents were not educated at all except by hard work on the farm. While Grandmother Kuhn wears a string of pearls, Grandma Wiese wears her one party dress. I poke my fork between the small oil bubbles in the gravy so they will make one big oil bubble.

MAGIC IN THE DARK

One afternoon my dentist, Ford Hausermann, takes me into a dark room illuminated by only a red light. In front of him is an enlarger on a metal stand and three trays filled with smelly chemicals. He puts a negative in the enlarger, takes out a piece of photographic paper, puts it in a frame under the enlarger, turns on its light for a few seconds, then immerses the paper in the first tray of developing solution. In a minute an image starts to emerge, faint at first, then darker. Wow! It's magical. It's a picture of a fence in a snowdrift. It's beautiful. That moment, right there, hooks me forever on photography.

A DIME A DANCE

Dad's passion is his trumpet. He would occasionally open the storage closet, reach up to a top shelf and pull down an old battered case and take out a faded golden trumpet. He'd played in big bands. A dime a dance. He lights up when he plays and looks like a different person with no worries. As he gets older he plays less. He encourages me to take up an instrument.

Okay — drums. Drums are cool. No, my folks want me to select a "musical" instrument. I like Bill Haley's "Yakety Sax" and pick the saxophone. For a year I take lessons and play it in band, but I don't like the squeaky sound I get from it

or the way the reed feels in my mouth. Next I take piano lessons, but the piano teacher gives me such awful songs to play that I abandon it. I eventually get my way: drums. I play in several school bands. It's horrible. We read sheet music and about every eight bars I get to wallop a kettledrum or tap a triangle. Bor-ing.

PUNY UNI

My mother says that I should take the entrance exam to see if I can get into the University of Illinois High School. It's a small experimental laboratory school for the brainy sons and daughters of the University professors. I am not very interested until I hear that if I go to Uni I can graduate in five years instead of the usual six because 7th and 8th grades are combined. I like that. It means I can graduate at sixteen! My escape plans from Champaign are already being hatched. The entrance exam is really tough, so I am surprised when I am offered a place to enter the school as a sub-freshman.

There are only 50 kids in our year, 250 in the whole school. They are very eccentric. Nerds. You know how you see some kids and their 12-year-old faces look like fully formed adults? These kids may be socially immature, but mentally they are intellectual giants. They are very competitive and can easily handle mountains of advanced homework assignments. I am an outsider, and a "Townie" besides. My grade average — for the five years I was there — must have been at the bottom of the bell-shaped curve. Later I discover that I was at the top of the lower third and there were actually sixteen kids below me! All through high school I felt intellectually inferior and hence developed outside interests.

Moving to Uni High put a greater distance between Jeff and me. From then on we lived in very different worlds. The year I skip a grade is the year he is held back. He has dyslexia, but no one calls it that at the time. Although we are only two years apart by age our social groups are now four years apart and we are at different schools. People can't understand how we are so different. We don't even look like brothers. Mom and Dad treat us exactly alike. Whatever birthday or Christmas gift I get, Jeff gets the exact same thing. Until I leave high school we share the same bedroom. I try to get attention by being clever or seeking approval for my photographs. Jeff gets his attention through failing at school.

I like English class but the exercises are usually monotonous. The tables in the room are put in a big square. We each take turns reading a stanza of some romantic poet. I count ahead to see what I will read. I notice the word "bosom" a few stanzas before my turn. Everyone else has picked up on this too. We all know exactly whose turn it will fall on: Helen Manner's. The tension in the room mounts as the countdown begins. Her face turning bright red, she reads it: "...*bosom*." The class explodes with laughter.

But mostly it's dull and I don't really enjoy school that much. I prefer my extracurricular activities, drumming and photography, which I practice every day. I also like writing reports. I don't know why. Maybe the act of bringing something from nothing onto a blank page and then having someone read it and react. I like researching and going to the huge University of Illinois library as if on a treasure hunt, finding quotes of what people said. Plus I can type fast and that's a plus.

I use the *World Book* encyclopedia and research King John of England and the Magna Carta. I find out that he is left-handed, but an illustration shows him signing with his right hand. I write *World Book*, "What gives?" Two months later a big envelope arrives from the *World Book* editorial office. It's extensive research on my question. They apologize for the oversight and promise to fix it in the next edition. Yes!

I write a biography on World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle, whose life fascinates me. He is from Dana, Indiana, just on the other side of the Illinois border. He had a real folksy writing style, and a huge readership. I put months into this project and am really proud when I hand it in. My teacher gives me a "D." Although she can't prove it, she says it is "too good" to be my work. I "must have copied it from someone else." This is devastating for me.

In shop class we learn to use table saws, drills, and lathes. All the boys are making shelves or pencil holders or coat racks. Bor-ing. I take some clay and make a prehistoric Venus with large breasts and hips. I don't know why. I hadn't even seen a Venus before. It just seems to come to me. The shop teacher grabs

it and holds it up. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" "I am making a paperweight."

What I do like about the school is that there are kids from India and Kenya in our class. They fascinate me with their musical accents and stories of their homelands. I still remember their magical sounding names: Chandra Rajaratnam and Joel Otieno.

The school takes pride in introducing us to new people and ideas. One Saturday our music class takes a field trip to Harry Partch's studio above the Co-Ed Theater on Green Street, a block from the Champaign-Urbana border. We go into a room filled with overturned artillery shells, weird harps, and big glass bowls which hang from the ceiling. Percussive instruments tuned to ancient Greek scales? The other kids are too intimidated to say anything, but I am a drummer so I ask a lot of questions. Harry enthusiastically shows me each instrument and lets me bang on them endlessly. A few weeks later, on my own, I go back and climb the stairs into that fascinating world of sound. Harry is a very kind man. I learn later that he is a great and innovative composer who builds all of his own instruments. It's a fortuitous meeting. I have no idea until years later how much this brief encounter with a supportive mentor would influence me. Here was a portal for me to non-Western forms of musical percussion.

The first day of typing class I sit next to Gregory T. White, a tall, alert black boy. Being a drummer I can't resist tapping out a rhythm when I type. Tak-a-tak-a, tak-a-tak-a, ritditdit, DING (as the manual carriage comes to its end and the bell rings). Greg responds with his own riff. We keep this up throughout the class and through every class for a whole year. The teacher can't make us stop because we hardly make any errors. This class becomes a great joy. Greg becomes one of my best friends as well as the fastest typist in the universe. Because he plays organ for his Baptist church choir, he can play snappy gospel piano like Ray Charles. I persuade him a few times to play in our band, but he only performs in public with us a few times and even then he keeps his back turned to the audience. I think he's just shy, but years later he laughed and told me he felt that he was betraying his religious upbringing by playing "the Devil's music."

Gregory comes to our house to practice with our band. My mom is completely open to our friendship and serves cookies or sandwiches whenever he comes over. It's a great gift that she gave me because at the time there was more racism in Champaign than I ever imagined. Years later, Greg told me that the white "Townies" would harass him when he walked home from school through the park. He was my friend throughout my life and the last time I saw him he told me he always appreciated me for defending and protecting him. This came as a surprise because I don't remember ever doing this.

When he grew up Greg joined the Peace Corps in Africa and learned Swahili. Then he took a job with *The San Francisco Chronicle* that he held for several decades. He worked three days a week taking down personal ads over the phone and helping people compose their requests. ("Buffed Tarzan Seeks Adventuresome Jane.") The short work week gave him time to pursue his passion, which was translating archaic poetry. Greg lived in a tiny apartment and kept his needs simple. He was the most contented person I've ever known. When he died unexpectedly a few years ago, I discovered he had hundreds of close friends who all cherished him as much as I did.

INITIATION

It's February. We just had a huge ice storm. I ride the bus across town from Uni High in Urbana and get dropped off near the Country Club. I decide to take a shortcut across the golf course. The snow crunches under my feet. It's freezing and the light is fading fast. I still have a ways to go and won't get home until dark. I walk down the fairways and then head for a cluster of fir trees. I walk into a clearing surrounded by the trees. It's very quiet except for my crunching. I get a chill and feel like I am being watched. I look up and in every tree is an owl! A dozen of them. It feels like I interrupted a conference of elders. Yellow eyes glare down at me. I run like hell, making a crunchy racket, and don't stop until I get home. Today I recognize this as an initiation in the spirit world.

FIRST JOBS

I land a lunchtime job at Mooney's Café, which is only two blocks from Uni High. It's a true "greasy spoon" and the Mooneys are obese people who dish out

hamburgers, fries, and Cokes to workmen and U. of I. students. I am a waiter. I want to save enough money to buy a ring for Laura, a girl who I hope to make my girlfriend. But by the time I save enough money we'd broken up, so I buy a drum.

I don't participate in school clubs like Chess, Latin, Greek, or Calculus, but instead form a band, The Corvairs — "The Compact Group with the Impact Sound" — with my best friend Don Kennedy and some others from Champaign High School. Don's father is a well-known abstract painter. He has a big sandbox in an upstairs bedroom where he props up chicken bones and drapes them with colored crepe paper. From this, he paints abstract and fantasy landscapes. Don's father gives us old tubes of oil paint, which we smear to make paintings and write titles to match what they look like. We fight over who gets to keep the best paintings.

Forming a band with Champaign High kids is difficult because the Champaign kids hate the kids from "Puny Uni" and, conversely, the brainy Uni students have no respect for my dumb friends from Champaign High. People from Champaign put down those from Urbana, and vice versa. University people snub the townies. Blacks vs. whites. Everything is so polarized. Lemme outta here!

The Corvairs' first gig is at the YMCA. We know about five songs, sort of. We are really scared. Rack Jack, an older, tougher, and scar-faced drummer from the best band in town, The Sterlings, comes to our gig. He stands over me, inches from my cymbal, and stares me down as if I am less than nothing. I sweat so much I can barely hang onto the sticks. After playing a ten-minute extended version of "Wipeout," we quickly run out of songs, so we disguise "Yellow Bird" by playing it three times at different speeds: as a rock number, a cha-cha, and a slow dance. Nobody notices. Everyone is too busy making out.

We feel we have entered the big time and are about to get our big break when we play our first out-of-town talent contest at a county fair. A sausage-shaped blonde girl in a homemade sparkly-pink leotard goes on before us. She confidently throws a flaming baton high into the air. We bounce on stage as the newly-named Torquettes and play a blazing guitar rendition of a Ventures' surf

song. The judges dramatically pause, then announce, "And the first place prize... goes to... The Torquettes!" We jump to our feet and are almost on stage when he announces "Oh wait, sorry, read that wrong, The Torquettes are second, the first place winner is... Betty May and her Flaming Baton." We are crushed. I swear, at the next talent contest, I'm going to set my drums on fire!

Bands are what keep me from going stark raving mad throughout high school. Beating on drums lets out a lot of the frustration and anger from being in that uncomfortable netherworld between adolescence and adulthood. I hurry home from school and rush to the basement to practice with Bo Diddley, Little Richard, Ray Charles, and James Brown. Mom turns on and off the basement lights when it's time for dinner.

Besides making money in the bands, my Dad gives me a job making boxes at Kuhns. "Everyone starts at the bottom," he reassures me. Ancestral eyes peer down from the huge oil paintings of Joseph and Isaac Kuhn, which to this day have the place of honor on the first floor landing. My workstation is below the ancestral altar, down in the Dickens-dark and musty basement where I hopelessly try to avoid slow death by paper cut. After a week I quit. A few summers later Dad tries again to engage my talents and find a place for me in the family store. This time he shows me how to do newspaper layouts for the store's Florsheim shoe advertisements in *The News-Gazette* and *The Courier*. I am pretty good at it and very proud when I see my first layout in print. I am an ad man. My brother Jeff, having much more stick-to-it-ness than I have, starts at the bottom making boxes, then works his way up to shoe salesmen, then manager of the new Joseph Kuhn out in the mall off the new Interstate. Today the mall store is long gone, but the original Kuhn's by the railroad tracks, a faint shadow of its former self, carries on for the Big and Tall.

MY FIRST DEAL

Summer is coming to an end in two weeks and I have a plan. I make an appointment to meet with the directors of the Champaign High School Board after their monthly meeting. I tell them I have a great band (we know dozens of songs now) and we want to play "The Howdy Hop." This is Champaign High's first dance of the new school year. If we can play at that event, everyone will

know who we are. The School Board asks our price. I say, "$75." They negotiate by saying that this is too much. I say, "That's our standard rate." They rebut, "Anyway, we don't expect a big turnout." I say, "All right then, we'll play for free and if anyone shows up we'll take 75% of the gate." They agree. My Dad, who has a law degree but never practiced, always says to "write it down." So I get their promise in writing.

On the night of "The Howdy Hop" the gymnasium is jammed packed with 1,000 kids, so many that the fire marshall will not let everyone in. The gym is like a sauna. After a killer rendition of a Beach Boys song, we take a break. I am dripping with sweat. I go into the cafeteria, grab a drink, and go over to meet with the School Board. They hand me an envelope. In it is $75. Shaking, I hand it back to them. "That's not our deal." They say, "Take it or leave it." I hold my ground, pulling the crinkled "contract" from my dress pants. The trio of very large men stare me down. I am not going to back down because I know I have the last card. I play it. "Maybe you want to go out and explain to the kids why the band is going home? Or do you want to honor our deal?" Out comes the cash box and they count out our 75% share which is nearly $700. After the gig the band members are expecting the usual $10 or maybe $20. I give them $150 each! They can't believe it. After that, I am like Champaign's Nelson Riddle or Benny Goodman — everyone wants to play in my band. I'd successfully negotiated my first percentage deal.

When Uni High's "Vice-Versa Dance" rolls around, pretty Sally Smith invites me to be her date. I agree, but then a few days before the dance I get a call from The Sterlings! Wow. The Sterlings! They called me. They are the best band in town. They want me to fill in for Rack Jack, their drummer, who has once again mysteriously gone missing. It's a gig playing for a big fraternity party at the U. of I. I call Sally and break the news. She's very unhappy. Of course, I invite her to come to the gig instead. Her father grabs the phone and gives me a piece of his mind. Her mother has made her a new dress and I had better show up. I am sorry, Sally, please understand. This could be my big break.

THE STERLINGS

The Sterlings are hands-down the hottest local band and I had desperately wanted to play with them for years. The musicians are mostly eight years older than me. I can't even drive yet! They are a six- to ten-member blues band depending on who shows up. Besides Mike Stoner, the singer, there is the basic four (two guitars, bass, and drum), there is a three-piece horn section, a Wurlitzer organist, and Paula and Nancy, two ya-ya girl backup singers. I am fifteen and they are ancient: maybe mid-twenties. I have a serious crush on Paula, the thin blonde backup singer, whose microphone is right in front of my drums. Once she invited me to her apartment. Imagine the fantasies going through my mind as I rode my bike to her apartment deep in Urbana. But the only thing that ever happens stayed in my mind.

Rack Jack is a much better drummer. His roll is tight: cool. As much as I practice, I am never able to fully master it. But he is slightly crazy and impulsive and completely irresponsible, which results in me eventually replacing him. One thing I do well — which he doesn't — is show up. My Dad has to drive me out to Route 45 when we play the roadhouses. (It's remarkable to think about it now: a fifteen-year-old playing in these dives with country drunks whose main source of fun is starting fistfights and throwing beer at the band. Watching adults behave like this is probably what turned me off forever from drinking.) I never asked him, but I suppose my Dad understood the music world and felt it okay for me to be initiated in this way. After all, drumming was a real passion of mine. I am underage to be in these roadside bars, but then I am pretty hidden behind massive Zildjian cymbals and my oversized Roy Orbison-inspired sunglasses. The band does covers of all the best Rhythm & Blues tunes and each night I get a real workout.

The older guys all have developed signature ways to be cool. Gary Wright, the bass player, is closest to me in age. He is missing an upper front tooth. This is where he sticks his cigarette when he plays. When he smiles at the girls, he waves the cigarette through his teeth. He is the wildest kid I know. Imagine my surprise when years later he becomes a detective in Champaign's police department in charge of narcotics investigations! He shows me a cabinet full of guns

and knives he has confiscated. "Mike, you wouldn't believe how many criminals there are in Champaign and how many I've put away," he boasts. His fifteen minutes of fame come in an interview on national news. He witnesses, "I was in the examining room at the morgue when this corpse comes to life. It sat up!" He tells *The New York Times*, "I've seen dead people a hundred times in my life. She was friggin' dead. What I saw was a resurrection, a miracle, man."

Tim Stillwell (school teacher by day, Sterling's lead guitarist by night) has a mahogany Gibson and plays sweet jazz riffs like Kenny Burrell. He is far too good to be in this band. He is lightning fast. His signature look is to play without moving his head so that his cigarette ash will burn out an inch or two. How cool is that? Should I tire during a fast number, or not play slightly ahead of the driving beat for even a second, he'll turn back at me and scowl. And that hurts. But if that ash should fall, I will be in deep shit the entire night.

Francis is a smooth, handsome black guy who coaxes silky sounds from his tenor sax. Between sets (we play five a night), I go out back to get some fresh air. He is sharing a strange smelling cigarette with Dennis, another horn player. They both get all weird and put their hands behind their backs when I walk over.

Unlike most of the local drummers, I do show up, so it's easy to get jobs with one band or another every weekend. Fine with me, because I don't play basketball or have any interest in engaging in other Uni High activities.

When I am about sixteen, I get a job with a real R&B band, not just a bunch of white guys playing the blues. I forget the band's name, but its lead guitarist's real name is James Brown. True. I am the only white guy in the band and am excited to be "touring" to an out-of-state gig in Missouri. I ride in James' big old Cadillac which pulls a trailer with our sparkly suits and guitar amps. The rest of the guys follow in a station wagon. By late afternoon we enter a very poor farming town. It's like going back in time or entering a Faulkner novel: dusty roads, cotton fields, bib overalls, and wooden shacks. About a mile before we find the town hall we start seeing the posters that our shady promoter has plastered on barns along the road announcing "ONE NIGHT ONLY: JAMES BROWN & HIS BAND." This makes our James Brown very nervous.

We go in, set up, and start to play. There are a few hundred people inside, but outside hundreds more. We can hear them cheering and yelling. Everyone has already cashed and spent their welfare checks three days earlier. Few are buying tickets, so most crowd around outside. On the stage, behind my drum kit, is a window. I can see them running around, jumping and dancing through bonfires, kicking up sparks and waving whiskey bottles in the air. We play some James Brown instrumentals which are part of our repertoire, but that only gets people outside shouting, "James Brown!! James Brown!!"

We take a break to figure out what to do. We can't keep the charade going. It's only a matter of time. Do they really, for a moment, think we are James Brown's band? Maybe we haven't been strung up yet because most people are outside. We go backstage during a break. Our James Brown has gone AWOL. Bluesman Junior Wells appears in our dressing room. As fate would have it, he is in town for a funeral. We tell him what has happened and he has a good laugh. A gold-capped tooth shines as he says, "Yeah, that's some bad luck."

We go back on stage. Junior Wells steps up to the mike. People start shouting because they recognize him. He says, "You know you can't trust nobody these days. These boys had a bad-ass promoter telling ya'll James Brown is coming. Don't matter. These boys gonna play real good and ya'll going to have a good time." He counts down, "1, 2, 3..." and brings a harmonica to his mouth.

When it's time to pack up, the trailer is gone. James Brown has taken his Cadillac and the trailer and headed for the hills. No one ever heard from him again.

BAD ART

If I am not rehearsing or playing in a band, I am photographing everything. I had a plastic Kodak box camera when I was six but now have saved enough to buy a Miranda C 35mm single lens reflex. I love that camera and polish the lens incessantly. I show the principal of Uni High my photos and he asks me to join the school yearbook called *The Gargoyle* to document every boring thing that occurs in that medieval school. That is until I extended my role to include art critic.

I am on the third floor of the school in the art room. Lined up against the open windows are some really bad plaster sculptures. I mean really bad. I can't stand bad art. Hmm, just a little nudge would cleanse the world of bad art. I make sure no one is walking three stories below. Then... Crash! Crash! Crash! White plaster explosions everywhere. That stunt gets me thrown off the yearbook for a year.

Since I am not taking photos at school anymore I set up a studio in my basement. I buy a seamless roll and some cheap lights. I start with still-lifes of gears and shadows, then graduate to dressing up a friend like a beatnik and photographing him with a beret and a painted-on moustache. Then I try some fancy lighting and shoot portraits of anyone I can get to sit for me. I shoot a model's portfolio for one girl. I get another older girl to pose nude by telling her that "the Greeks sculpted everybody naked." My hands are shaking when she takes off her clothes and strikes a pose in front of me while my mother vacuums upstairs. I can hardly work the camera. The photos? They are dreadful.

FASTER AND FASTER

I finally get a drivers license. The first place I drive to is my girlfriend Marcia's house. Marcia tells her parents that she doesn't want to go out with them to dinner because she doesn't feel well. Then she calls me as soon as they are gone. I park a few houses away. We are in her bedroom listening to Johnny Mathis and making out when we hear the key in the front door. Her parents! I am out the back window in milliseconds and into my mom's Rambler Convertible, the one with the push-button gears. (Can you believe my mom actually traded her bright yellow 1957 Chevy convertible for a Rambler?!) I speed along a county road bordered by cornfields. When I look in the rear-view mirror a car is gaining on me. Her dad?! I go faster and faster. I come to a T-junction and make a hard left, skidding out of control in the gravel. The car veers off the road, down a five-foot embankment, rolls over and crashes to a stop in a cornfield. My face hits the steering wheel, glass flies everywhere, and the steering wheel crushes my leg.

I crawl out of the car and climb up onto the road above. I am bleeding from my mouth, face, head, and shoulder, but feel no pain. I know I need to get to a hospital. I try to flag down a car but no one will stop. I guess they don't want to get their seats bloody. Finally some servicemen from the local airbase stop and

drop me off at a phone booth in a near-by gas station. "Dad, I've good news and bad news: I am not dead but Mom's car is totalled."

THE NEWS-GAZETTE

That summer I get a job at *The News-Gazette*, across Main Street from Joseph Kuhn & Co. I work there for two summers, first as a darkroom assistant (goodbye bright summer days) and later as a photographer. I get the assignments that the other photographers don't want to do, like women's club meetings or elderly citizen awards. Roger Ebert is also there as a cub reporter. We cover the county fair together and the 4-H awards. I take a picture of the fat girl with the fat heifer and then he interviews her before we move on to the skinny girl with the scrawny chicken. After we complete our assignment, we are magnetically drawn to the carnival midway, to the forbidden fruit: the striptease tent. We try to peek into the tent when the curtain is pulled back, but as Roger reminded me recently, "We felt the eyes of the church elders upon us."

The next day I am back at the county fair to photograph the stock car races. I stand in the middle of the circular course with my heavy 3¼ x 4¼ Speed Graphic press camera. I have to anticipate when the cars would crash into each other so I can get the ultimate shot. Two cars spin out of control in front of me. No matter which way I try to run, they skid closer to me. The crowds in the stands cheer in the hopes that I'll be run over. They want to see blood.

After the stock car races, I photograph country singer Roy Orbison, who sings "Oh, Pretty Woman." My first celebrity portrait.

CAPTIONS

Today is the hottest day in Illinois history. I break an egg on the sidewalk so I can take a picture. I've already written the caption: "So hot you can fry an egg on the sidewalk." The editor is always encouraging me to write captions for my photos. Only it wasn't hot enough on the sidewalk and the egg made a real mess. Somebody told me that it would be hotter on something black. So I broke an egg over a black car hood. It fried up real fast and I got my shot, but the editor wouldn't publish it.

A few weeks later, Illinois has a cricket invasion. The biggest cricket invasion since the 1880s. So I find some dead crickets, line them up, make a little flag, and caption it, "Onward Cricket Soldiers." I am sure this will garner a front-page photo and by-line: "Photo by Mike Wiese." Nope. Every time I walk by the editor's desk, the picture is still languishing in his "In" box. I can't bug him anymore about it, but I can feel my hot story getting cold. Realizing this is a fast-breaking story, I take the photo over to *The Courier*, the competing newspaper in town. The next day they publish it with my name and address, so there would be no mistake, knowing full well that I work for *The Gazette*. Suddenly I get a lot of attention from the editor. "And who writes your pay check?" Can't they understand? Publish or perish.

One afternoon I walk through the park and see a boxer dog standing up on two legs taking a drink from a drinking fountain. I shoot it and caption it, "The Paws That Refreshes" (a pun on Coca-Cola's tag line — "The Pause That Refreshes" — for those too young to remember). My paper in all their wisdom did publish it. But it's a really great shot and deserves wider exposure.

One of my jobs is to run the Associated Press wire photo machine. We receive images but never send them. I develop a fascination for John Glenn, who is the third person to go into space and the first American to orbit the Earth. Whenever any news photos about Glenn or NASA come out of the machine, I paste them into a scrapbook. I know history is being made. I want to make history too — with my dog shot.

The wire photo machine looks like a lathe and has a red hot needle that burns dots across a piece of blue plastic, resulting in a photo plate that is inked and put on the press. It takes about thirty minutes to receive one photo. (Think of it as a really slow fax machine.) The machine can only send one photo to newspapers throughout the whole country at a time. You call the operator's number that is written on a scrap of paper near the machine, and then you schedule your send so as to not interfere with another send. I have never sent one before so I didn't know this when I put my dog photo on the machine and hit "send." On hundreds of wire photo machines in large and small newspapers all over

America, a dog at a water fountain appears instead of a NASA missile launch. Sor-ry.

I enter the Illinois Press High School Photographer of the Year contest. My portfolio consists of a portrait of a young woman, a clown putting on make up, a rotting wooden boat, my paws-that-refreshes dog, and some other *Popular Photography* inspired clichés. I win second place. Yes! (My mother frames each photo and hangs them down the long hallway in our house. They hang there in their glory for nearly forty years.)

FILM BUG

Back at Uni High I am selected to be in a "New Math" class conducted by its creator, the formidable Max Beberman. The government has given Max a grant of $2 million to create a series of films to teach educators how to introduce New Math. Our class is filmed every day for nearly a year in a specially built studio/classroom. I can see the microphone that hangs over my head. I can see the red light that signals that "we are rolling." There is a camera booth a few feet above the blackboard, another off to the side, and another behind me. At the end of the class, I persuade the cameraman to let me look through the zoom lens. That does it for me. I am hooked on filming.

New math gave me super mental powers and intellectual confidence. My pal Rich Leng and I go to a nearby drug store where they have a "guess how many pills" contest going. A tall glass canister is crammed full of pills, all colors and sizes. We are currently studying how to calculate volumes so we each take measurements and try to figure out the volume of the canister and the volume of the average pill and subtract the volume of air where the pills are not touching. We promise each other that if either of us wins, we'll split the prize with the other. Well, we did win. This time not second place, but first place. My luck is changing. I am coming up in the world.

First place is a 200-cup coffee percolator! What are two teenagers going to do with a 200-cup coffee percolator? I don't even know 200 people. It's about the size of a small grain silo! We couldn't split it, so we try to give it to a church, but

the pastor lectures us about stealing things. "You boys won that thing? Sure ya did." So we take it to another church that were believers. Hallelujah. I feel good.

DOCUMENTARY UNIT

A few years after learning New Math I get a summer job at the University of Illinois documentary unit. One of my first tasks is to throw away some films they had shot in order to liberate the expensive metal reels. There are a dozen reels of exposed 16mm film they want removed. Since I already have mounted them on rewinds, I thought I'd better see what's on these babies. I run them through a viewer. Hey, that's our math class! Hey, that's me! Can't throw these out. This is valuable historical stuff. All 47 hours of film are archived at the University of Texas Austin in the Max Beberman Film Collection. Anyone up for a New Math Film Festival?

My next assignment is a "shoot." Well, sort of. I shoot animated cells of concentric circles, one frame at a time, resulting in a kind of vortexing bull's-eye. It takes weeks to shoot. The two-minute film is part of a navigation experiment and will only be shown to pigeons. My first film is for the birds! This'll look good on my résumé.

I love filmmaking. The images move, and breathe, and are more engaging than stills. I find that my sense of timing from playing drums informs how to edit moving images. All summer, whenever I can, I work at night on my own little films.

That same summer I discover foreign films at The Art Theater. (This theatre, formerly called The Park, was for a brief time owned by my grandfather Isaac Kuhn, who helped finance it in 1913.) The films are mostly "new wave" French and Italian films. They open me up to the sights and sounds of other cultures, and different lifestyles that I'd not imagined. They are shot in a more intimate and realistic way than Hollywood films and are about life, not fantasy. The mere fact that films made in other parts of the world can be about something meaningful makes a very powerful impact on me.

My summer is jam-packed. I go into the newspaper's darkroom at 7 a.m., work until 4 or 5, catch a foreign film at 7, then hurry to a band gig at 9 and play until midnight. I do this all summer long. The hard part is that after a gig my ears keep ringing. I can't get to sleep until I go through the entire evening in my mind. I hear all the songs in order, the mistakes and even the breaks. It's like listening to a tape played back except it's my brain. Weird. I don't fall asleep until 3 or 4 in the morning.

ROCHESTER

High school has been five gruelling, miserable, confusing, and repressive years. I'm glad it's over. I know exactly what I want to do. I want to be a fashion photographer like Richard Avedon because I'd seen his iconic model and elephant photo and loved it. I figured being a fashion photographer would be a good way to meet beautiful women.

At last I catapult off to Rochester Institute of Technology to study photography. My Mom and Dad fill up the station wagon with my stuff and drive me up. When I arrive, the school registrar says I may have my choice to study Illustration, Professional, or Science. I say "Illustration. I'll do fine art photography." He says, "You should have registered earlier, all filled up." "Okay, Professional, I'll shoot for weddings or magazines." "Filled up." He says, "You can either be a Scientist or go home."

Being a Scientist means I have to study the physics of light and lenses, densitometry, calculus, chemistry, photo science, and laboratory. No picture taking. Our instructor is one of the inventors of the photographic emulsion that was used in a camera in the first moon shot. They don't let me take real pictures. Instead it's all pictures of test tubes and grey scales in order to measure the gamma of the image. Snore.

R.I.T. doesn't have a single class in filmmaking. I befriend a producer at the local TV station who lets me use their editing room after class to edit a short film I shoot on the weekends. It's called *The Gift* and is a simple Zen study. (Not that I knew what Zen is, but it seemed like it could be a Zen film.) A young bearded man sits under a tree that has just one leaf. He waits for it to fall. We hear the

melody of a flute. The leaf falls, he jumps up and, in slow motion, catches it in mid-air in his teeth and, landing, he smiles. I am very proud of that little film, but I can't get any of my teachers to let me show it in class. "Remember, we're Scientists here." But Kodak likes it and awards it a prize in their Student Film Competition and encourages me by sending me two new rolls of film.

At Thanksgiving I fly home for the holiday. Dad gives me the family station wagon so I can drive back with my drums. I join Rochester's most popular band, The Invictas. (Not my fault that all bands in those days are named after cars.) They too had an unreliable drummer. They are a greasy gang that wears Beatles boots. I put a micro-switch under the foot pedal so every time I hit the bass drum a light flashes inside. Who's cool now? The band records an original tune that becomes a local hit. It's called "The Hump" and starts a dirty-dancing dance craze.

Rochester, New York, is cold, dark, and gloomy. The word "depressing" was invented here. Everyone on the street has pale green skin, or maybe it's just all that fluorescent lighting. The school is very institutional and located in the Third Ward ghetto (it has since moved) where race riots break out later that summer of '65.

I share a dorm room with four other guys. Jake, from Schenectady, disappears from the room around midnight and does not return for hours. A few weeks later the police show up and go through his chest of drawers. It's filled with stolen car parts. We'd been living with a professional thief stealing his way through photography school.

I join Sigma Pi fraternity after enduring weeks of sadistic freshmen razing. Humiliating stuff. I wasn't really that into it, but I put up with it because I figure this is what you do if you want a social life. Besides, they promised security for my future: I'd have sixty fraternity brothers who'd give me jobs for the rest of my life.

I survive the first year at R.I.T. and am finally able to transfer into Illustration. I have classes in portraiture, lighting, graphic design, and the more aesthetic aspects of photography. I meet a whole different kind of student: artists. I encounter freer ways of thinking. I like that.

I am walking down the hall in the photography department. A classroom door is ajar. Inside graduate students are sitting on the floor with their eyes closed, meditating. They are taught by Minor White, creator of the Zone System, a technique for previsualizing the grey tones in a scene before making a photograph. I hope someday to study with him. Something is going on here that intrigues me.

One day I catch a glimpse of someone, maybe an apparition or a spirit, walking through a wooded area on campus. A petite woman with long dark blonde hair that falls below her waist, turns and looks back at me. She has big, koala bear eyes best suited for night vision, and an extraordinarily beautiful mouth. She speaks in whispers, if at all. Looking at her you wouldn't think she is a big fan of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lead Belly, or John Lee Hooker. I am captivated. Bonnie is a weaver in R.I.T.'s School for American Crafts — the exclusive domain of the real artists. She is light years ahead of me in everything: music (Miles Davis, Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan), art, religious studies, and psychology (Carl Jung). Whenever I spend time with her she turns me on to something new. Quickly I realize that I don't know zip.

But by now I am deeply entrenched in my classes, the fraternity, and my greaser band, which Bonnie calls "the hoods." Well, she's right. Everything in my world is well beneath her and she keeps no secret of it. Somehow she tolerates me, but very soon I have to put all that behind me and prove myself to her as an artist, a photographer, a musician, an awake human being, anything. I start by buying some retro gold-frame glasses, thinking this might help. I also enter a poetry contest and win second prize. She is not impressed. I am in the shallow end of the pool in this relationship.

Another weekend arrives, which can only mean another fraternity beer blast party. This one is off-campus at a private house rented by one of the brothers. It's my second date with Pat. A week earlier we'd rolled in the hay on a slow, horse-drawn hayride. Boy, did things start to heat up. The brothers say she has a reputation for being "fast" and give me winks. Pat and I are in the back bedroom and within five minutes she has stripped off all her clothes and emerges like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. She wants me. I stumble backward

like a frightened deer. Whoa, this is happening way too very fast. What about Bonnie? Shouldn't I save myself for someone I really care about? It's fish or cut bait time. I panic and head for the exit. She comes after me and presses herself against me. I don't know what to do. I kick open the door and throw her out. Suddenly my "brothers" are all over me, punching and screaming. I nearly fall down a flight of stairs. Someone shoves me into a snow drift.

The next day I tell Bonnie what has happened. She comforts me. But this is not the end of it by any means. To my "forever loyal" fraternity brothers I become an untouchable. Only Paul LaBarbera, an art student, stays my friend. Worse yet, word of the incident spreads like wildfire. I am called in to see the school psychiatrist who is convinced I am on drugs. I've never touched drugs. I can't explain it. "I just freaked, okay? Please tell Pat I'm sorry."

The school sets up its first student court and I am its first case. I am never called before the court to tell my side of the story. Justice comes quickly: I am expelled. My parents come and pack me up. It's a very long and silent drive back to Illinois.

Back in Champaign I apply to Southern Illinois University, which at the time had a good film program. (Somewhere in the back of my brain I knew Buckminster Fuller taught and lived there.) My application is rejected. They don't want any troublemakers. I apply to a dozen other schools, but once they read the report of my expulsion they quickly reject me. Every place except The San Francisco Art Institute. I tell them about what has happened and they say "no problem, we have lots of crazy artists here, come on out!"