

CHAPTER

43

EACH YEAR ON MY BIRTHDAY, I take inventory of my life and reminisce. I turned forty-three in the spring of 2003, thirty years from the summer that forever defined my life. Thinking about the summer of 1973, when I was a thirteen-year-old, has taken on greater meaning as my own son was now the same age. I often wonder how different life might be had I not left the neighborhood that so many felt tethered to.

Not too many boys make it out of Little Kentucky. Most follow their fathers' footsteps into jobs at the mills and factories in town, work at gas stations, tire dealerships, trash hauling, junk dealing, or go into the military. Of the Greasy River Gang, I was the only one to go to college. Tubs and Sully went to work at the General Motors plant. Radish and Hickey both joined the marines. Hickey made the military his career and moved frequently, finally settling in the San Diego area. When Radish came home, he found nothing but trouble, having numerous run-ins with the law—DUIs and domestic violence. Rumor was he moved out of state with a woman and everyone lost touch with him. I don't even know if he's alive. Sully moved to Canada to live

with his brother, who never came back to the States after he left to avoid the draft during the Vietnam war.

The summer of 1973 caused a split with Billy and me we never recovered from, ignoring each other all the way through school from that point on. His family moved to Florida before he started high school, and I couldn't tell you where he has ended up. I hope he's in a good place. What happened was the fault of neither of us; we were victims of circumstance. I understand the pressure from his family to support his brother, and I don't think he held any personal grudges against me because of my family's relationship with Hank Cummings. I hope not.

That summer took away our innocence. It should have been the best summer of our lives. I've often wondered how things would have been if Hank Cummings had never moved into that house with his sister. Would the gang have remained tight to this day? Would Billy and I still be best friends? Would I have ever gotten out of Little Kentucky and gone to college? One thing is certain. I would have never met Hank Cummings.

People often talk of those who most influenced their lives. Parents, a teacher, a coach, a spiritual guide. For me, that person has never been in doubt since the time I spent alone with Hank Cummings in Ed Klein's study that August evening. He taught me about love, kindness, and compassion; taught me about forgiveness; about healing; about acceptance. He taught me about the arc of a journey and the role of fate. He was kind. He was gentle. He was engaging. He moved slowly. Breathed deeply. Spoke softly. He listened intently, though I had little to say. This man who at one time I was prohibited from seeing, opened his soul to me. He told me to surround myself with good people. I have. He told me to be a good son. I have. He told me to get my education. I did. He told me to never lose hope in my fellow man. I've tried not to. He told me to never take anything for granted. I've tried not to. He told me to never stop writing. I haven't. And to use my words responsibly and respectfully. I try.

He told me to read *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I did. He told me to read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Melville, Harper Lee, and Saul Bellow. I've tried.

Hemingway, check. Twain, check, Virginia Woolf, check.

He told me to get an education. He told me to be clear about my dreams and to follow them. He told me to have courage. He told me to never lose my passion for life, for it is precious.

He read by heart Rudyard Kipling's poem, *If*:

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;*

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you*

Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!';

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run—
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

He told me to memorize it. I did.

I spent over an hour with Hank Cummings on that Saturday afternoon in Ed Klein's study. This was no chance meeting. He was prepared for me. He had respectfully crafted a sermon and delivered it with such weight I was rendered in awe and could only revere the man. And of all he told me, I am certain only a fraction of it stuck. But what stuck became my gospel for life as if it were spoken by God himself.

The mystery and the guarded nature of his existence, so protected by those who cared for him that we were prohibited from even sneaking a glance at him, made this meeting monumental. It would have been impossible to anticipate how our relationship might unfold.

Hank Cummings was a noble man. A peaceful man. A good, caring, wholesome person who gave so much of himself for his country. He deserved a better fate. How many people walk into fire, risking their life to save the lives of others? How many people would persevere through the injuries he sustained? How could any man overcome his fate without anger, victimhood, and resentment?

They say God never gives you more than you can handle. That those who bear tragedies so great are the chosen ones. For they will survive and make something good out of themselves.

There were three words he told me as we said goodbye that day that I'll never forget. As I stood in the doorway, ready to rejoin my mom and dad, he said to me, "Jonny, if you remember just one thing from our conversation, remember this. Don't waste it."

The gravity of my meeting with Hank Cummings was not lost on my parents, who remained quiet on the ride home. As if they didn't want to dilute the value of what I was working to process. They could see it in my eyes, in my face. When we got home, my mom just smiled at me. We didn't speak. I went straight to my room and opened up my writing notebook and began to document the lessons learned. I feverishly wrote everything I could remember. At the top of the page, I wrote, *Don't waste it*. The next day, I asked my mom to take me to the bookstore and with money I planned to spend on a model car, I instead bought a book: *Poems of Rudyard Kipling*. It was \$1.99.

All my mom said to me about Hank Cummings after we met was, "I told you."

The next day, he left Ohio and moved to California. Ed Klein drove him out in his Cadillac. He hired a couple of men to follow them in a truck with the few possessions Hank held onto.

In the fall of 1973, his property was purchased by the same developer that owned the rest of the farm. The house was knocked down, flattened by a bulldozer. I don't know how many times the property was sold to various developers, but finally, the fears of the Yoder family ghosts were overcome. Today on that property stands a Home Depot, a Walmart, a Walgreens, an Applebee's, a nail salon, tanning bed franchise, and, ironically, a hobby shop that specializes in model cars. Every time I return home to visit my folks, it pains me to drive down Yoder Road.

Upon graduating from Mansfield High School in 1978, I went to Ohio State with help from academic scholarships and grants for being a first generation student. I majored in English and literature with dreams of becoming a novelist, a pursuit that continues. In the meantime, to put bread on the table, I found a career in the advertising business, writing copy for print, radio, and

TV ads. I've never strayed far from home, working for agencies in Toledo and Cleveland, before settling in Columbus. I wouldn't call my career overly fulfilling, but it has provided me with the means to comfortably support my family. My fulfillment comes from my work late in the evenings and early mornings, when I seclude myself in my home office to write what I want, not what the clients of my day job demand. I've written three manuscripts, none yet published. I've learned to overcome my frustration by writing for myself and finding value in the process. I've gotten better. I've kept the faith.