



I'm sure I'm not the only one who wishes to go back for just one day, just one hour. Let me finish up watching Sky King and run downstairs, grab a box of cheerios and some milk from the refrigerator, pass my parents at the kitchen table reading the paper and drinking coffee. Let my mother tell me to put slippers on, and my dad look up briefly from the paper. Let it be just the blandest of days, let nothing happen at all except all of us be together again. Just for a few minutes.

A Great Hill

(Growing Up in 1950's Darien, CT)

Chapter 1: The photograph

For most of us, there is a shoebox of old photos.

Perched high on the shelf of a closet, lying dormant till we pull it down and rediscover the pieces of a childhood that awaken powerful emotions. For me these are overwhelmingly good memories, if not tinged with the predictable sadness of loss of all kinds.

A 1954 photo of me standing in the dirt of what will become the driveway of our new house in Darien was taken by my paternal grandfather. I am dressed in a plaid coat and leggings, and cupping a mound of earth in my hands while facing the camera. I was not into dirt, so I assume he coached me to pick this up and pose for him.

While my parents were busy living and building the American dream of owning their first home in the suburbs, my grandfather would have been the one to capture this moment for posterity. That picture inspired me to finally put on paper this memoir that has traced its way through my consciousness for years.

As any of my classmates who know me will attest, I have a remarkable long-term memory — I guess photographic. I can remember images down to the smallest detail.

Since my mother died last year, I find myself back in my childhood often. Time bends and I'm in my bedroom listening to the birds with the scent of the dogwood tree below my window. It is sunny — it was always sunny in the summer.

Around noon I would lie stretched out in my bed preparing to get up and make coffee and then go outside and work on my tan. Between my junior and senior year I worked at Bloomingdales so this was earlier than that. I, of course, had no appreciation then at how beautiful the surroundings were — but somewhere it embedded in my memory, as potent now as it was then.

In 1953 my parents (Kitty and Russ) and I were living in a two bedroom apartment in White Plains, New York. Bryant Gardens was a sprawling complex of nineteen buildings, and it still stands today. There were many such complexes built in New York at that time; eighteen to twenty identical self-replicating buildings in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, and even Manhattan.

We had waited in anticipation for its completion so we could move in (from the Bronx where I was born, two blocks from Yankee Stadium).

Almost from the beginning my mother hated Bryant Gardens. Mostly she was terrified that I would contract polio from living among such a large concentration of people.

This was not an irrational fear back then. In fact, I had secretly visited the apartment of a friend whose dad was in an iron lung which took up the majority of their living room. This huge silver tube seemed to be their only piece of furniture. I looked at the image of her father in the little mirror above his head and listened to the whoosh of the machine in fascination. I was four years old.

This incident pushed my mother over the edge and we were looking for a house in the suburbs in no time.

The suburbs were the place to be in the '50's if you were a young family with children; that's what everyone said. The schools were better, it was safer, you would have a backyard and garage, an instant social life, and lots of children to play with. If you were

white, educated, and had a decent job it was unthinkable to live any place else. So my parents and I set out to research where we would find/build our new home.

My mother's childhood friend, Helen Keyes, lived in Darien in a very old house with her husband Charlie and their two daughters. What sold my mother on Darien was the water. My mother adored the ocean and she actually swam every day in the summer till she left Darien 30 years later.

Arthur Olson was a household name back then; he had a reputation for building the best quality houses in Fairfield County. I visited his office with them several times as we narrowed in on a house he was building at 204 Tokeneke Road, so adjacent to Great Hill Road that we were always considered a part of that neighborhood.

We were one of the first families to look at all the lots on that hill (and it WAS a great hill) and so my mother zeroed in our lot, which was up at the top of two large mounds of earth and surrounded by nice strips of woods on the sides and back. The front of the house was to face Tokeneke, but it was rather far removed from the road. They were right, it would be one of the nicest places to live in the neighborhood.

Recently neighbor Ben Gifford told me he was paid handsomely to mow our lawn, the front was so steep nobody else wanted to do it.

In Arthur Olson's office the three of us inspected paint and tile swatches. My parents seemed leery of color and so everything they chose was gray. Gray paint, gray carpet, gray everything. The kitchen linoleum samples came in several different background colors – all randomly decorated with paint splotches of primary colors that resembled Jackson Pollock paintings.

When you later visited other houses in the neighborhood, they all had the same kitchen flooring but different background colors of beige, brown, red, blue or gray. I remember the Byrnes had brown. The Conroy's had beige. We had gray. When it came time to pick a color for the unfinished side of the basement floor and my parents chose gray again, my mother said I piped up "No, that floor needs to be red!" So tomato red it was, for over thirty years.

Darien was in a post war building boom then — an upscale Levittown with houses being built exponentially everywhere. With the returning GI's and the resultant baby boom, homes were required across the country like never before. These suburbs were all united by a "town center", like ours next to the train station on the Post Road.

At the time I was only aware of our own small turf and the surrounding skeleton of homes that were all in a similar state of construction. There was no grass, only rough ground, and I would always return to the White Plains with rings of mud on my shoes.

The houses on Great Hill had no doors on them so we could walk right in and view the building progress from our last visit. There are photos of me sitting in empty doorways of many of them. My parents felt very territorial about our home, and for a while there was no way to enter it except through the garage about seven feet up to the kitchen. The garage stairs had not been built yet.

We had a ladder that we used to prop up in the doorway and we would each climb it — first me, then my mother, and then my dad. Later we would bury the ladder in the woods in back so that no one else could enter our home but us. I felt very privileged and conspiratorial to be a part of this family ritual.

The week prior to our moving in I was sent to my grandparents in Holyoke, MA so my parents could accomplish the move. My first image of my parents in our new home was like a scene out of a Hollywood movie. The living room was completely furnished. There was a new leather hob-nailed bar in the corner (which would later move down to our finished basement).

My mother was making vodka tonics. My parents looked like movie stars: Kitty in a cashmere short-sleeved sweater, a slim pencil skirt and pumps. My dad, slim and handsome in a check shirt and khakis, chatting with my grandparents. I can see this scene vividly.

The joy and excitement in the air was palpable — I almost felt like an outsider, they were so happy. After trying unsuccessfully to have another child for almost four years, my mother soon found out she was pregnant and their dream was complete.

Babies were sprouting up on Great Hill Road as fast as the houses. In 1955 alone I remember six babies being born — all in the winter to the couples who had moved into their new houses in the spring. Most of them would grow up there and not leave, like myself, until they went to college.

My brother, Rusty, appeared one day in a basket in our dining room completely surrounded by candy. This was my first introduction to him. The baby nurse (a mandatory figure in those days) had told my parents that it would help me adjust to no longer being an only child if this basket was filled with treats, and, only incidentally, Rusty was in the middle.

I remember staring at this odd “manger” of Chiclets and Dots with my infant brother in the center, and knowing with certainty that this was not my parents’ idea.

Chapter 2: The Neighborhood

The illusion of perfect families in a perfect setting had some ring of truth to it. It was,

after all, exactly what these young parents had strived for. They were a particularly grown-up generation, having experienced the Depression and WWII – realities that had forced them to confront loss early and harshly.

Like so many families, my mother's father lost his business. Her family of two parents and five children ambled through a large Tudor home in MA that had a leaking roof, with no money to fix it. As young newlyweds, like so many others, my parents were separated for four years when my father was stationed in China during the war. It must have seemed like an interminable amount of time to a couple of twenty-somethings.

By the time they had built their house and had achieved the dream of two children (a girl and a boy), a lovely home, a brand-new grammar school across the street, a good job as VP of a paper company and Long Island Sound a mere one mile away, they were seasoned and strengthened by hardship, and grown up way beyond their years.

They budgeted, they rarely bought on impulse and they ate at home almost every night. They grilled all summer long. My dad cooked burgers the size of baseballs and we toasted marshmallows on metal skewers, always letting them catch fire so that they would turn crispy black and bubbly.

We had a ping pong table in the basement and the hard smack of the paddle in syncopation became a familiar sound all Saturday as my dad and the neighborhood men played, laughed heartily, drank Pabst Blue Ribbon, and filled ashtrays to overflowing.

In the evening my dad sat on an antique stool in front of our Hi-Fi in the living room and played good music till almost midnight. Miles Davis and Dave Brubeck seeped into my dreams at night and subconsciously inspired a life-long love of jazz.

My father said very little to me when I was growing up — something that became harder after his sudden death at age 52 in 1967. I cannot remember us having any real conversations about anything important, and since I remember almost everything from the past, it was probably true. I think he saw no need as my mother certainly talked to us and was in charge of child rearing. (Neighbor Alison Byrne (Westerman) recently told me that she thought this lack of communication was typical of most of the fathers in the neighborhood).

The fact that he brought me things from Times Square (near his office) whenever I asked for them has always held tangible proof that he cared about me — the first Almond Joy (new to the market), a French dictionary the size of an eraser and shoe roller skates with pom-poms. He also would wordlessly grab me when I was little and wrestle me till my fake screams filled the house. He sometimes threw a ball to me in our backyard, and taught me how to swing a golf club.

My mother said that my father had no siblings so this made it difficult for him to relate

to children. But my own theory was that he did not find me particularly interesting. It wasn't personal. Ballgames, ping pong, jazz and especially golf were his world. He also probably believed he had many more years ahead to relate to me. Sadly, that proved not to be the case.

Chapter 3: The Secrets

("It is in telling our own stories that we truly find ourselves." Edward Grinnan)

Every family has its secrets, and so does every neighborhood. The picture perfect facade of 1950's suburbia was isolating, and undoubtedly damaging to some of its inhabitants. There were cracks of course in the surface, but they were virtually invisible. The perpetuating myth was that every couple was happily married, every man and woman was heterosexual, every family was financially secure if not affluent, all children were good students, and on and on.

This burden of perfection was a staple of the neighborhood, and one never wanted to fall outside its parameter. The TV shows were model families with no problems larger than Beaver getting a bad haircut or Bud telling a small fib. When we found out years later that "Father Knows Best" actor Robert Young was an alcoholic who suffered from depression, and the father of the "Brady Bunch" was gay we instantly recognized real life — not the TV reality that they wanted us to believe.

Many years later I started to obsess about the somewhat *Stepford* quality (a movie that was partly filmed in Darien) of the neighborhood. The mothers in madras shorts, the glasses of lemonade, the dads coming home from New York in their grey felt hats - what was the reality behind this curtain of perfection? These were good people and undoubtedly many were very happy, but nobody had any real problems - those were secrets they could not discuss. It would have been taboo.

The only family that I remember getting a divorce on Great Hill Road in the early years was the Barkers. That was a secret that blew sky high. In the last few years, Gary Barker and I have exchanged many emails about this and many other subjects. He once emailed me "I just wish somebody could tell me why my parents decided to bring home a monkey".

This query cracked me up because it really did seem that if he knew the answer to that it would explain a lot.

My family's secret was that we never had enough money. Actually, to be accurate, we had some amazing years when we took vacations and bought cars, and others where my mother stayed awake long into the night trying to figure out how to pay the mortgage. Exasperated, she once said to me "Unless you really love him, never marry a man in commission sales". Of course that's exactly what I did, and, yes, I do love him.

Some of these years were very difficult. Once at one of the neighborhood parties, my father sensed my dentist was acting strangely. My dad went over to my mother and asked, "Do we owe Bob Ashcroft money?" My mother said we did. My dad said "Find a way to pay him". My parents had a lot of pride, this was very hard.

I think many of the wives were taking care of the finances, and my mother worried so much over those years that sometimes I'm amazed that she lived to be 90. I guess she was young enough then that it didn't take its toll.

My parents were college educated, but my father was the only child of a rather domineering successful paper executive in Massachusetts who my mother said "always told him what to do." Supposedly this made my dad unsure of himself and unable to find his "niche".

He started off as a vice president of a paper company in NYC, but by the time of his death, for some reason, he was a paper salesman. I was very surprised to learn many years later from my mother that he actually loved sales and that explained why I am a born salesperson above anything else. I love to close on a sale (I manage a large art gallery), and I never knew why. But the upshot was we could barely make ends meet so in 1965 my mother had to do the one thing that was the most shameful of all — she went to work.

It was okay if a woman was a substitute teacher. Teaching was an acceptable and honorable profession for a woman. But anything else to help support your family was akin to being Hester Prynne with a capital "P" for poor. My mother did the right thing, the only thing she could do, but it filled my father with shame.

The irony, of course, is that my mother actually loved working. She did all the books for a private school and was actually able to use her mind. She seemed happier and had more energy, and for the first time in my pampered teenage existence I was required to do some housework.

The private school she worked for was The Long Ridge School in Stamford, CT. Since the children of several celebrities were in attendance, my mother had a few hilarious run-ins with celebs.

Paul Newman showed up one day to pick up his daughters dressed in jeans and a jean jacket. My mother looked at him and assumed he was there to fix the broken furnace,

until her glance met those legendary blue eyes of his. He laughed at the misunderstanding, and probably her mortified expression.

Meatloaf's daughter Pearl also attended Long Ridge and my mother had to call him one day. She accidentally addressed him as "Meatball" and he was offended and told her so, and that he had legally changed his name to Meatloaf. My mother tripping over herself in apologies to him was a story Rusty and I asked her to tell us over and over again.

In the opening scene of *Mad Men*, the actor is falling down the side of a building in silhouette passing actual advertisements from the '60's. There is one that always makes me cringe. It is of a handsome family with the housewife in front wearing madras pedal-pushers, smiling with her arms crossed with her family behind her. The message is clear. She has the power and the confidence and is the decision-maker in the family. But power over what? Real choices and power were off limits to these smart and college educated women.

I started to dig for other secrets on Great Hill Road and of course they were all there. Infidelity, homosexuality and throw in a little cross-dressing — just the stuff of real life that rears its head when you're looking at the law of probability in any given population. I came to find out, and as one would expect, that some of these secrets had disastrous effects on the families. Secrets never seem to be very healthy in the long run. It takes too much energy to keep the lid on.

Chapter 4: The Parties

("If Ashtrays Could Talk..." Graham Greene (1951))

A scenario that I suspect was playing out in many Darien neighborhoods in the 50's and 60's was the Saturday night party. My recollection is that each Great Hill Road neighbor took turns hosting a party once a month. There were several days of preparation for this - lots of cooking of light fare and appetizers, and I was required to vacuum the living room rug and then basically stay out of my parents' way as they stepped into high gear.

The bar was replenished and fully outfitted for every conceivable kind of mixed drink. Highballs and vodka tonics were the typical fare - beer was reserved for when just the men got together. No less than a dozen ashtrays were spotless and ready for the chain-smoking of Marlboros, Winstons and Tareyton.

In the early '60's I would do my mother's hair and makeup - her lipstick and loose powder was no longer fashionable enough in the Kennedy era. I would put rollers on the

top of her head and apply eyeliner and mascara, but she always scoffed at my suggestion of false eyelashes.

My father would go through his extensive record collection and stack the right jazz LP's for the evening, and in what sequence. My mother would polish all the furniture till it gleamed and I always marveled at how nice it all looked. She would say before a party, "I hope nobody sits on the part of the couch with the loose spring". I would remind her there were several wayward springs. But it didn't matter, it was smoothed down and plumped up and looked surprisingly good.

They also had some nice antiques that they had bought in local antique shops early on (a "dry" sink, a corner cabinet that once belonged to a famous CT citizen, a three legged milking stool that had a permanent place by the HI-FI).

When the guests started arriving there were squeals of greetings and high-pitched laughter. Today I marvel at how much they all seemed to enjoy each other, and how excited they were to be partying together.

Some of the partying neighbors from the beginning were Owen and Ruth Conroy (daughter Janet, class of '66), Jim and Margaret Baker (Jay, class of '69), the Barkers (Gary, class of '67), Jack and Doris Haskell (Jack was lead singer and announcer on the Jack Paar show, son was Tommy), Grant and Ruth Tinker (Grant was head of NBC, Mark (class of '69) John, Jody and Mike, Bob (my dentist) and Marcy Ashcroft (Bobby, class of '65(?) and Wendy '69), Pax and Emmie Gifford (Ben, class of '66), Paul and Jean Byrne (Allison, class of '68, Karen '65, Deido '72) Horace (Woody) and Phyllis Woods (Bobby, class of '65, Judy '62). Later, Anita and Jack Lillis (Pat, class of '67).

These were true cocktail parties, and there was never any dancing. Just lots of grown-ups dressed in high-heels and nice dresses and sports jackets; all talking at once, sharing stories, and telling lots of jokes – many were dirty ones which I would try to overhear from upstairs, to where I was exiled for the evening.

My brother and I were told we could come downstairs to "make an appearance" but the party was for the adults. I don't remember being bothered by this.

As the night wore on and the drinking progressed, it seemed that all you could hear was bursts of laughter. There was no hope of getting any sleep. Other background sounds were the music, glasses clinking, and footsteps round and round the circular floor plan of our downstairs, and then more footsteps up and down our finished basement that had a speaker hooked into the HI-FI. No one stayed in one place for very long - everyone making "the rounds". The hard partiers would stay till one or two in the morning - sometimes making eggs and coffee in the pre-dawn hours.

The conversation was light, sophomoric and funny. Possibly some sports, politics and juicy gossip - but nothing heavy. Although the majority were college educated, the fifties was not known as a very intellectually stimulating decade. Furthermore, it was their time to unwind from all the responsibilities, of which there were many.

The party was like an extended "rat pack" that definitely included the women as equals in the equation. The ethnic and religious humor would be considered inappropriate today.

There were always a couple of neighbors who never went to the parties. They were considered "odd". One couple was very academic and sort of kept to themselves, and probably thought chain-smoking, boozing the night away, and telling off-color jokes was not their idea of a good time. But they were definitely in the minority.

There were social boundaries that all the participants seemed to adhere to. All the couples were very "married". I have no recollection of any real flirtation between any individuals outside their coupledness; although I found out later there was some - human nature being what it is.

(Note: since writing the above (about the "social boundaries", etc) - that there was no dancing, and no real flirtation - I have discovered by accident that I was very wrong.

Janet Conroy sent me a DVD of home movies of her family's vacations, etc. and sandwiched in between them were other fascinating snippets. One was a five or six minute footage of a New Year's Eve party at her parent's house in the late fifties.

This party was wild. Besides the streamers and party hats, a few of the wives are sitting on the laps of men other than their husbands. One of the neighbors had slinkies (with eyeballs) on his glasses, a bow tie, and is playing the drums with a woman on his lap.

One of the neighborhood wives, dressed in a red strapless cocktail dress, is dancing a sexy dance in the living room with a can of beer balanced on her head! The camera follows her up and down her body, until she falls down from having a few too many. Another husband grabs one of the neighbor wives and lifts her high in the air before planting a big kiss on her. All of this is very entertaining! They were all young and having a great time - no wonder I was supposed to stay upstairs during the parties.)

The kids in the neighborhood were often the subject of funny anecdotes, and everyone would roar with laughter at the latest escapade. There were several times when I thought my mother commiserated with me on something that was very important to me, only to hear it woven into some witty story that made me feel betrayed and the laughing stock.

One such incident was when my Brownie troop visited the local farm (near Pear Tree Point Beach) for an outing. I was about ten and had little red shoes on that I was very fond of. I stepped in a huge, soft cow dung and completely lost my shoe - it was gone. I was very upset when the troop leader refused to dig it out for me and so I limped home in my white sock on one foot. My mother nodded, and sympathized – but of course this made instant fodder for the next party, and sure enough the neighbors were laughing at ME.

There was only one divorcee on Great Hill Road: a very attractive, well-endowed brunette named Ann Odell. The men of course loved her, and mock fought over who would walk her home after the party. They referred to her affectionately as the "Widow Odell". The women liked her very much too because, as my mother said, "Ann knew better than to ever flirt with any of the neighborhood men". So she was always invited to the parties.

By the end of the evening, all ashtrays would be overflowing. There would be half-empty glasses everywhere (Rusty said my mom called them "dead soldiers") and basically I would never have seen such a mess - until the next time. My parents would sleep until noon and we knew not to disturb them. I would tiptoe into their room and they would be in a dead sleep - my mother's arm draped over my father's shoulder, while he was snoring loudly. A bloody Mary would be the later predictable antidote, and then strong coffee and a big breakfast.

When they commenced the clean-up - which took all Sunday - everything returned to the way it was.

Chapter 5: The Holidays

Trick or Treating was serious business in our neighborhood. Nothing less than a large white pillowcase would do for the serious amount of candy we were going to collect. Maybe a second one if you were also collecting for a "sick sibling". After hitting all the houses on Great Hill Road, we would head for Driftway Lane or Silver Lake Drive at eight or nine at night to get even more candy.

These were not the days of "miniatures" – full-size Baby Ruths, M & M's and Nestles chocolate bars were the typical fare. These were also not the days of people not being home, everyone was home and had a pumpkin – the plug-in variety had not yet been invented. If you were not home, you would have run the risk of being "tricked".

Jack-o-lanterns were lit with real candles all over the neighborhood, and gave just the right spooky and illuminated effect. They usually burned till about midnight or later on the front outdoor steps or screened-in porches, till they went out by themselves.

Most of us made our own costumes. A man's shirt, a blackened cork and an old tie made a nifty hobo, etc. Shaving cream and toilet paper were standard, and the older boys would douse each other with both.

We were used to this, but one year a visitor to the neighborhood was not. Kirk Douglas's son (Peter?) went to private school with neighbor Allen Freeman. According to my mother, Peter showed up with Allen at our house in tears. Peter was wearing a \$500 Indian costume his father had given him from a movie set, and now it was covered with shaving cream.

My mother took him into the kitchen and wiped each feather of his headdress down with a paper towel. She did the best she could with the rest of his costume, but he was not happy.

An annual event was the neighborhood Halloween party given by the Barkers. All the children of all ages were invited. It seemed like the whole house was lit, and haunted for the evening. Dr. Barker (Gary's dad) would dress up in a very realistic gorilla costume and stand outside on his front lawn under a tree. The first time I saw this at around age six I was terrified. Then we would go inside and guess what everyone's costume was, and pass bowls around in the dark that were supposed to contain human eyeballs and intestines.

One year there was a costume party for the adults – the only one I can remember and I don't know who hosted it.

Having no faith in her creative ability, my mother had actually rented an excellent clown costume for the evening. It was a poufy pink and blue satin one-piece suit with huge pom-pom buttons, a big accordion collar and a pointy hat. In a bad mood, she was hurriedly making spaghetti for my brother and me before the party and trying to keep her pom-poms out of the sauce. A silly clown was the absolute antithesis of my sophisticated mother, so this scene was very funny.

My father and Mr. Conroy made their own costumes and went as pirates. I can see them now with their pants tucked in their boots, a metal shower ring in one ear, belts with big buckles, and a couple of Rusty's swords.

(Note: Neighbor Karen Byrne (Barrett) recently told me that her dad went as "a fantastic shiny silver robot creature", and her mother as a flapper. I actually have some recollection of this. It may have been that their costumes were so impressive that my parents told me about them the next day. This is probably what happened.

There must have been more than one costume party because my brother informed me that my dad once wore a suit and carried an empty bottle of gin filled with cotton. He was Eli Whitney (inventor of the cotton gin). At the party he would say: "Get your

cotton pickin' hands off my gin". If I could pick out one anecdote that would correctly sum up Russ's humor, this would be it.)

At Christmas there was an understanding that if your tree was lit, no matter what time of night it was, a neighbor could stop by to socialize and have a beer. My dad, being somewhat of a night owl, more than once woke up an entire family because they had accidentally left their tree on.

There was great comraderie among the men, and the Christmas holidays were the perfect excuse to step up the socializing. I loved hearing them downstairs late at night, with jazzy Christmas carols on the HI-FI, laughing and sharing stories, getting tipsy from beer or eggnog.

I mostly remember Mr. Conroy (who was almost as funny as my dad), and Mr. Gifford (who was definitely as funny as my dad), and Mr. Baker, Mr. Byrne and Mr. Wood ("Woody" - he was one of my dad's best friends and golf partners).

The men loved telling jokes. I heard Owen tell the men more than once that Jeff was conceived fifteen minutes after he returned from the war; I wasn't exactly sure what he meant by that. Mr. Gifford could act out a funny story with his body language too, and that made the men roar. They liked practical jokes too.

One memorable one for me was a New Years Eve party that was being held in the neighborhood. We had balloons in the house that day and before my mother put on her fur stole my dad took a balloon, rubbed it on his head and put it on my mother's back so it stuck with static-electricity. The stole was loose so she did not notice the balloon when she put it on. As they left the house and headed down the driveway, I caught a glimpse of my mother out the window as Quasimodo in high-heels and mink

Another one of my dad's favorite stories was when he helped a co-worker from Amsterdam get his driver's license in New York City. The co-worker turned his vehicle without putting on his signal, and got penalized for it by the driving instructor. When Dad's friend said "that's the way they do it in Holland" the instructor (obviously a born New Yorker) said "Well Buddy, you ain't in Holland anymore". Dad thought this was hilarious and actually I do too.

Russ also thought it was hilarious that Rusty called Ivanho (which was on TV), Ivan Ho, as if it was his first and last name. This was all subtle humor, and not everybody "got" it, but I loved it.

Once my dad unknowingly dropped a friend and me off at the Darien Theatre to see "Dumbo", but, ironically, a Bridget Bardot ("Bimbo"?) movie was playing instead. These were the days before ratings for children so we happily sauntered in (I was about seven). When Dad picked us up he asked me how I liked the movie. I said I liked it very

much but wondered why the girl was cooking in the kitchen with only a tiny apron on and the rest of her was “all bare”, as I had never seen mommy do that. Far from being upset when he realized his mistake, he thought it was the funniest thing on earth.

My dad could have a bawdy, ribald sense of humor – like most of the neighborhood men of the fifties. He once took down a little cardboard box from his closet and showed it to me; I was about ten. He had gotten a pair of Venus de Milo salt and pepper shakers from Time Square. The white one had salt that you could shake out of her tits and the black one had pepper. I found this quite humorous but my mother did not, at least the part about him showing them to me.

Like his own father, dad loved gadgets and Times Square was the perfect place to find them. A little Japanese camera the size of an egg, a tiny transistor radio (something new in the fifties) with a little leather case, a real little cuckoo clock, and a little metal and filament device that was supposed to “throw” my voice because I wanted to be a ventriloquist. I wanted a ventriloquist’s dummy too, but all he could find was Charlie McCarthy, and I wanted a girl.

Chapter 6 : Falling Silent

My mother seemed to be born grown-up, and always did the right thing. She would never lie for me like some of my friends’ mothers did; I could never stay home from school if I was not sick.

I guess I wanted her to be a more “playful” mother, but in retrospect she was always there for me and very solid. I felt so safe growing up.

Once she caddied for me while I was playing in a golf tournament at Silvermine Golf Club. I was twelve, and my parents hoped that I would become a golfer like them. I was in a sand trap and kept unsuccessfully swinging at the ball, and she counted every stroke.

I said “Mom, nobody is around, you don’t have to put down six strokes”, but she said she did because those were the rules. So I started flailing the club in the air in a sort of tantrum and she kept counting, and I ended up with about twelve strokes. I was so mad at her, and she genuinely looked sorry for me. She was so scrupulously honest, but I guess she was just trying to be a good role model. I’m sure it wasn’t easy for her to always take the high road, however, I never did pursue golf.

My father, on the other hand, was a superb golfer and he achieved five holes-in-one in his lifetime. While my mother went to church on Sunday, my father’s devotional choice was golf.

None of the men in the neighborhood could ever beat him. I remember “Woody” (Horace) Woods coming home shaking his head after a game with my father, saying he was impossible to beat. Most of his friends and neighbors would come home shaking their heads after playing golf with my father.

After several professional set-backs that diminished his self-esteem, it is nice to know that he was so good at something that others envied him. I have several trophies marking his golf career – among them, a silver bowl with “Russ Madden, Tournament Champion, 1964” engraved on it and a wooden ashtray with his hole-in-one golf ball adhered to it.

Once while playing at Silvermine in the rain, he and the other players heard a loud crack of thunder, so close they went running for the clubhouse. Lightening had struck the post on a green, zig-zagged across it, and then shot up the club of an eighteen year old boy, killing him instantly. This unnerved my father and he did what he usually did when he witnessed something very disturbing, he came home and fell silent.

When I would ask my mother what was wrong with my father, she would tell me for him. The day after the boy was killed by lightning, I had my weekly “I’m the youngest and worst in the class” golf lesson. We were on the green where the lightening had hit, which was macabre to say the least.

The grass was burned in a perfect zig-zag pattern and I put my club where it started and then looked at where it ended - at the pole, where I knew it had struck first. I remember thinking it looked just like in the cartoons, when lightening struck Daffy Duck it made a clean, crooked pattern in the air just like this. The teacher/pro tried to distract us, but I was riveted. It was a beautiful putting green, and then this scary burned scar seared right through it.

Another time my dad “fell silent” was when one of his friends was hit by a train and killed at the Darien station. Jack Harkins lived in another part of town, and often took the commuter train with my father. He was probably ten years older than dad, and had a young wife and daughter who came to visit us once. I talked my parents into letting their daughter spend the night. They were all very nice.

According to my mother, Mr. Harkins was killed doing something all the commuters, including my father, did often. When they were dropped off by their wives and running late, they would sprint to the train and jump on as it was moving.

Jack Harkins slipped and fell under the train. I remember thinking he was older than my dad and probably shouldn’t have been doing this. But, in truth, none of them should have been doing this because it was so dangerous. They took the risk because I think the trains to New York only ran once an hour.

They also took the risk because they were young, and agile. I don't believe my father ever jumped on a moving train again after what happened to Mr. Harkins.

Chapter 7: The Hurricanes

In August of 1955, the summer after my brother was born, two major hurricanes slammed into the coast of Connecticut only a week apart, causing major flooding. Hurricane Connie produced about five inches of rain between August 11 and 12th, and a week later Hurricane Diane dealt nearly 20 inches of rain also over a two day period.

Although I don't remember the actual hurricanes (we may have left for our relatives in Massachusetts, to be further inland), I vividly remember the aftermath.

There was soft sod everywhere, and much of the grass was gone. You had to wear rubber boots because you sank right into the ground. There were fallen tree branches but fortunately no damage to our house. I was only six, but what I remember most is how eerily everything glistened., You couldn't trust the ground you walked on, and something ominous was in the air.

There was a definite "after the storm" feel and a ghostly quiet . I remember thinking how different everything looked, and then later, how it never looked like that again. You could feel the dampness in the air for weeks.

While doing research on these hurricanes that I remember, but did not know the names of, nor did I know there were two, I came across the following: "While these hurricanes affected the entire Atlantic coast, the state of Connecticut suffered the most damage. Of the 180 lives that were lost, 77 were in Connecticut."

Chapter 8: "The Pulley"

When I was nine and my next door neighbor, Janet Conroy, was ten, we devised a way to communicate clandestinely at night after we were supposed to be in bed.

We rigged up a "pulley" between our bedroom windows, which faced each other. We each hammered two nails into our respective window sills and fastened a string all the way from my window to hers and back again, through a strip of woods between our two houses. It was summer.

I would write a note on a piece of paper, fold it up and attach it to the string by a clothespin. When I was ready to send the note I would "hoot" like an owl and that was the signal to start guiding the "pulley".

Then we would start the process of pulling the string counter clockwise to send the note over to her house. It would take a few minutes to get to her, she would unclip the paper, respond to it in writing, clip it back on the string and “hoot” to signal me to start pulling again. I don’t remember the contents of the notes, probably because that was not the important part. What was important was this totally ingenious contraption we had envisioned as little kids, and then created.

It was exciting to see the note emerge from the woods and the darkness, and inch toward my windowsill.

This all worked surprisingly well; miraculously the string stayed in place and we kept it up for about three weeks till we were on to other things. We became convinced that we had attracted some owls over from across Tokeneke Road because there seemed to be a lot more “hooting” going on in the woods between our houses.

We eventually had a falling out and Janet announced that she and Karen Byrne were going to create a pulley. How the string was going to go through the woods, up our backyard path and through the Fischers’ house was not addressed. It was never attempted; the proximity of our houses was what made this endeavor possible.

I was reminded of all of this when I recently got in touch with Janet to get some of her feedback and impressions of the beginning of Great Hill Road for my memoir. Her parents and mine moved into our newly built houses about the same time. Our parents were also best friends, we shared a common side of our yards, and we were both there from the beginning (1954).

We had been emailing with reminiscences for a while when I realized I looked forward to her emails with excitement and anticipation, just like the little childhood notes that we pulled across the woods on a string more than fifty years ago. There was so much to share and so many more notes to write.

Of course it was impossible to believe it had been that long ago. We both remember this vividly because it was so ingenious. Before computers, and not allowed to make phone calls after bed time, we had invented a way to silently and secretly communicate. Best of all, at first our parents knew nothing about it.

Chapter 9: New Cars

I know 1956 and 1957 were good commission years for my father because we bought two brand new cars in quick succession. Like the rest of Great Hill Road, with all the new interstates being built, we became a two-car family.

The day my dad brought home the Hudson, I looked over the railing at it in my pajamas from our perch in the garage, out the kitchen door. It had a red body with a black top, and sparkled with newness. We were very excited. We all got in the car, including Rusty, and went for a drive. A new house, a new baby, a new car – it just didn't get any better than this.

A year later we got another new car, and the styles had changed dramatically. The space age was here, and everything seemed to reflect the rapidly advancing technology. Our bark cloth curtains in the kitchen had little boomerangs and sputniks on them, and sort of TV antennas. Now our new car, the Desoto 4- door Fireflite, looked like a genuine spaceship.

It was a subtle two tone blue and very long. It had huge fins with three bright red "flames" (tail lights) projecting out of them. It had a push button transmission – nine buttons on the dash board – looking just like it was ready to blast-off at any minute. It was so big that when my mother sat in the driver's seat she seemed to disappear.

It was deemed so beautiful that my parents went to the extra expense of having the seats custom-covered with thick plastic. We waited in anticipation for the car to come back and were devastated when it returned with little gold stars all over the see-thru seat covers– something we definitely had not ordered. In those days you didn't run back to the store and ask for a refund, that was too embarrassing, so we lived with the little gold stars, hundreds of them, for as long as we had the car.

The thick plastic covers also emitted a strong, unhealthy odor. My parents were always on the alert when we traveled because I suffered from "car sickness", a common malady in those days. We would not be on the road for more than a few miles before I would complain of being nauseous.

My dad would always light up a Winston as soon as he got behind the wheel and it would waft to the backseat, where I was sitting. No wonder the combination of the fumes from the plastic and the second- hand smoke made me queasy. They would look at each other and shake their heads – my dad puffing away and me feeling like I would be sick at any moment. Ironically my mother would say "good thing we got the seats covered".

Those were the last two cars we bought for a long time. My dad's job as VP for a paper company was somehow cut short, and he went to straight commission sales. He liked sales but the company he worked for did not keep up with the changing industry and could not keep their costs competitive. It became an uphill battle for him.

I think a slight depression hung over him after that – all his friends and neighbors were becoming more and more successful (or so we thought). He had not found his "niche".

He was fascinated by words and their meaning (something I share with him), and had scored the highest score in the state of CT in Latin when he was at Loomis prep school.

He wrote beautifully, and was an excellent athlete. He had won the national amateur like golf tournament more than once. He was a very funny man. My mother always said he should have been a golf pro – he would have been a good instructor, he was very calm and patient, and he played better than the pro at Silvermine.

My dad was a very gentle soul. While writing about him it dawned on me that I never once heard him raise his voice to me, my mother, my brother or anybody else. Although this is hard to believe it is absolutely true. Once we parked on the street in Rowayton and he opened his driver's side wide for a bit too long and a car hit his open door. I started to rant and blame the driver in my eight year-old way. My dad turned to me and calmly said, "That was my fault".

I had hoped in writing about him I would learn more about him and of course this is the case. In so many ways this is about celebrating the life of my parents, and the life they made for me, and celebrating the other amazing couples who shared in this experience. The close-knit bond of the neighbors and the truly wonderful people they were as couples and individuals is something I have only fully appreciated in hindsight.

The Desoto became one of my greatest embarrassments. It was completely out of style within three years. The extreme and radical space age fins peaked in 1957 – even the ads called them the biggest fins ever – and that dated the car forever. When my mother would drive me to a party or dancing class, I would ask her to drop me off a block away so no one would see our car.

She dutifully complied – she was probably embarrassed by it too. Recently I noticed that the 1957 Desoto is selling on secondary market for about \$32,000.00 – if you can find one.

In the mid-sixties we traded the Hudson in for a Hillman Super Minx - cream with red leather seats. It was a British compact and adorable with a great name, but drove roughly almost from the beginning. At fifty miles an hour it would start to shimmy badly, and nobody could figure out how to fix it. We just always drove it that way.

One of the traumatic events in my teen years happened in the Hillman. My two best friends, Nancy Knowlton, and Bev Schreiner, and I drove to Port Chester to buy some beer for a party. We were 18 – the drinking age in CT was 20 – and Port Chester, NY was a mere 15 miles away.

I discovered that you could completely remove the backseat of the Hillman, hide the beer, and then replace the seat on top of it. It was a brilliant idea in theory except that

when Nancy and Bev sat on the seat, and we bounced along in the shimmying car, the seat springs punctured the cans and beer started spraying. We were cursing and there was a fair amount of beer. When I got home I tried wiping it down but the smell was unmistakable and lingered in the interior for a long time after that.

(I hesitated to use their real names because Nancy and Bev are now so professionally successful. Bev is an artist/teacher in Vienna, and Nancy is a world renowned marine biologist. I would not want to do anything to jeopardize their professional reputations so I won't be bringing up a childhood shoplifting "incident" where a very large bag of M&M's accidentally made its way into our pockets at the Grand Union. Two men in white coats (butchers) chased us up the street and terrified us).

I don't think my father said much to me about the incident with the beer. My parents had a way of bringing my attention to the day-to-day gaffes, but they sometimes did not confront me with my really big mistakes.

Like the time Nancy and I went to Bradlees on the very same day I got my drivers license. I side swiped a parked car while I was trying to park. We both surveyed the damage and decided, since it was just a scrape, it was not really a big deal at all and so we went into the store.

About five people wrote down my license plate. As I later walked into the house my father was on the phone with the owner. My dad agreed to pay for the damage and not contact the insurance company. I don't remember him saying anything much about this to me either.

I suspect that in his teenage years in Holyoke, MA there was a similar anecdote in his past. Some bootleg alcohol, or a little car accident swept under the rug. He knew how badly I felt, and perhaps thought this was punishment enough. He also might have thought that he had not taught me how to park adequately when he was teaching me to drive.

It is funny how totally responsible I felt for my own actions when I was young, when in truth my parents bore some of the responsibility. I think this was typical of the 50's, we were not mommy-coddled in any way.

An example of this was what happened to an amazing gold ring I had inherited from my paternal grandmother. It had a lion's head on a gold band with a small diamond in its teeth (mount). I was about nine years old and I loved this ring, and would look at it often on my hand.

I wore it to the beach one day and went swimming. I watched while it slipped off my finger into the black water, and disappeared. I desperately tried to catch it, but it was

gone. I dove to the bottom but it was impossible to find. I was so upset and really mourned its loss, because it was valuable and had belonged to a grandmother I loved who was now gone.

Many years later, over a glass of wine, I mentioned this incident to my mother. I wondered aloud if it had ever washed up and was ever found.

My mother said for the first time, “I felt so badly about that. I never should have let you wear it all the time - you were so young – and especially to the beach”.

It had never occurred to me that she bore any responsibility for this incident at all, because she had never taken any responsibility for it when it happened. Today, I’m not sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

My mother’s own childhood had been so much more difficult. She was the one sent to the door to face creditors during the Depression, being naturally shy this must have been doubly hard for her. She never mentioned to me that her parents might have felt very badly about this, I’m not sure it would have been verbalized because every one – young and old – took some of the weight.

So when I lost the ring, she let me take the full burden of guilt, probably thinking it was just all part of the experience.

Chapter 10: Biking

Like most of the neighborhood kids, I spent the summer on my bike. Our driveway was a fairly steep hill, so I would start from the garage, tear down the hill and take a left toward Rowayton. That route was downhill all the way and a great ride. After a zooming start you could coast the whole way for almost a mile. I didn’t ride on the street; I don’t know anyone who did. We rode on the smooth tarred sidewalk, and you almost never encountered a pedestrian.

At the bottom of Tokeneke – near the entrance to Rowayton straight ahead, or the beginning of Five Mile River Road to your right, there was a little old fashioned store called Brown’s.

For a dime you could get a bottle of soda, and for a quarter a Table Talk pie. Mr. Brown had an accent and had some trouble counting back change, which usually worked in our favor. Brown’s shared the building with another little store right next to it, possibly a liquor store.

Sometimes I would meet my friend Katy Green there. She lived on Five Mile River Road and it was about halfway for both of us to meet. My house might have been farther away, but I could fly down there in less than ten minutes.

If I wanted to visit Robin Risque or Nancy Knowlton, who lived near the Tokeneke Club, I would bike down my driveway and take a left, and then shoot down Driftway Lane on my right, then a quick left over a bridge, then a right onto Arrowhead Way.

If I visited Bev Schreiner I would ride down past Tokeneke School and take a really steep hill to Old King's Highway South. She lived pretty far down, past an underpass, and then up another really steep hill. That ride took a lot of effort.

Before Bev's house, there was Brushy Hill Road on the left, where I could visit Linda Jones or Margie Warren (a good friend who died too young from complications of diabetes).

I loved my bike and it was all I needed to get around and meet my friends.

One day it was stolen out of our garage, and the insurance company replaced it. Instead of the old blue English bike with the tan seat, I got a sleek and beautiful new black bike that rode like the wind. I was happy.

I came home from school about a month later, and my mother had a strange expression on her face. She gestured for me to look in the garage. I became afraid because I could tell that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

I looked in the garage and there was my old bike, with my new bike nowhere in sight. My mother told me that the police had found my stolen bike about a mile away in the woods. It looked worse than ever to me because it had obviously been outside in the elements. The insurance company had already retrieved the new one.

I had a real lump in my throat that day, and tried hard not to cry. It was such a disappointment.

I didn't understand why I couldn't keep the new bike, and I guess I still don't.

Chapter 11: Ernie's

There wasn't a man in the neighborhood that was not familiar with Ernie's Bar, always referred to as just "Ernie's". It was the local, and possibly the only, watering hole in the center of Darien. Just a small place sandwiched in between other businesses.

Ernie's was established at midnight on Dec. 5, 1933, ending prohibition. It actually still stands and with the same name.

It was located in the small strip of local businesses on one side of Tokeneke that included the Toolbox (a hardware store that was once the original one-room school), and the Darien News Store, Theodore's (possibly the worst hairdresser on the face of the earth, well documented in some of my school pictures), and a little drugstore on the very corner with kindly druggist Mr. Munson. Across from this strip was the train station.

When the commuters deboarded the train in the evening, it was almost mandatory that they stopped for a "quick drink" at Ernie's. It didn't matter that it was already past 6:00 and their children were probably already eating dinner, and their wives had spent the whole day taking care of the house – it was an unchallenged ritual that was accepted and condoned.

I know some of the neighbors my dad socialized with at Ernie's were Mr. Byrne, Mr. Baker, Mr. Tinker, Mr. Freeman, Mr. Conroy, Mr. Woods, and Mr. Gifford. They never took too long, knowing they were expected home and realizing this was a coveted privilege. My dad would often come home with a funny story or joke that he'd heard there.

Sometimes in the evening, if my dad felt restless or if he had run out of cigarettes, he would announce to my mother he was "going to Ernie's". Usually there would be another restless neighbor or two there as well.

I think Ernie's had a good reputation. I don't remember my dad ever coming home drunk, and the wives seemed to think it was an okay place for their husbands to meet and socialize.

There really was an "Ernie". His name was Ernie Harris, a Jewish businessman from Norwalk. He was supposedly an excellent piano player and had a small piano in the corner of the bar that he would play often. The upstairs neighbors complained about the noise and took him to court.

The story goes that his brother-in-law was an attorney and the two of them hauled the piano into court so he could play for the judge. He proved that the "noise" was just beautiful music.

I've learned all of this recently from a longtime patron who is now 83. She claims to have known my father. "Russ Madden, of course I remember him!", but she was quite drunk when she said it. I never saw the inside of Ernie's, nor did any of the wives from the neighborhood, I knew nothing about the piano – this was a "man's bar". If the

occasional woman showed up there she would probably have been deemed a “floozie” by the neighborhood wives.

“Floozyies” were not commonplace in Darien. The only one I ever came close to showed up at our doorstep one night with the father of one of my friends. He was a sculptor, and I know the family was going through things that were tumultuous and foreign to my world. Mostly separations and a lot of alcohol.

It was late, past my bedtime, but I was not asleep and I recognized his voice and thought it strange that he and his wife should just show up. They were not friends of my parents – only acquaintances through me.

I sat at the top of the stairs and soon realized it was not my friend’s mother at all but a different woman’s voice. Not only that but her speech was slurred and giddy.

They chitchatted for a while and then the man came to what I suppose was the real reason for the visit. He asked my dad if he could borrow some money.

I remember thinking at the time that he had definitely come to the wrong house, we were barely making ends meet, but of course that wasn’t common knowledge. With our lovely home we simply blended in with the rest of the affluent community of Darien. After my dad declined, he escorted them very nicely and gently to the front door, that was his nature.

I sat at the top of the stairs for a while absolutely stunned. My world was so sheltered and orderly that this incident was out of context and peculiar. A friend’s drunken father showing up at our house in the middle of the night with a girlfriend looking for money was as likely as Charles Lindbergh (who also lived in Darien) appearing at my house with the Spirit of St. Louis. I really couldn’t believe it, these things just didn’t happen.

I never mentioned this to my friend until years later, and then she filled me in on the details of a difficult home life, with both her parents being alcoholics. Of course this too had been a well hidden secret that none of her friends knew of, only adding to her sense of isolation. Our problems were all so trivial in comparison.

Once in our grade school during recess I saw her sitting on the ground, tracing a stick in the dirt, lost in her thoughts. I asked her if something was wrong and she gave me no eye contact, and barely spoke.

When I brought this up years later, she did not remember the incident but did remember the emotional toll her home life had racked on her childhood.

Chapter 12: The Seasons

Summers stretched out blissfully. Each day running into the next.

I could spend whole days catching tiny frogs, fuzzy caterpillars, brown crickets and creating little nests for them out of grass in glass jars with holes punched in their lids.

I could spend other days in the Woods looking for natural forts that nobody had discovered yet. Branches that meshed together to create a little shelter, or rock formations in a circle that served as nifty benches. Large trees with hollowed out places that I could crawl into. Wet pungent leaves that I could form into a hill for jumping. Just looking for treasures in general.

Since we lived on land once owned by the Tokeneke tribe, it was not unusual to find rocks in the shape of arrowheads. Whether they really were arrowheads I don't know, but we always assumed they were. My brother once found a small bird made out of iron with bits of blue paint on it that was definitely very old. He brought it to school for "show and tell" and it unfortunately disappeared.

I once saw a two-inch fat florescent green worm that was sitting on top of a leaf. It had two rows of a dozen legs and huge eyes that were looking at me. It looked just like the bookworm in the cartoons. I was so unnerved that I went home and asked my mother to come take a look at it. It was gone by the time we got back. Years later it occurred to me that these "eyes" (big white ovals with black "pupils") were markings. But it remains the oddest looking insect I ever saw.

Often in the summer, I would make my way up to the top of "the hill" through a path in our backyard that was originally a small construction road to get to the upper houses, before Great Hill was paved. The path originally had tire tracks that eventually flattened out and became grown over with all the neighborhood kids that used our backyard as a shortcut. You could start out at the Conroys, cut through their yard and through the woods, cut through our yard, and then up the construction path to the Fischers' driveway which led out into the top of Great Hill Road, or vice-versa.

If I ventured out of our yard and into the neighborhood I could always find a collection of a few kids who were doing things – playing ball, using hoola hoops, playing jacks, jumping rope or just generally hanging out. We all wandered around unsupervised with no thoughts of it being unsafe.

The big draw, of course, were the beaches. There was Pear Tree Point and Weed. We usually went to Weed, and in the summer, almost every day. My mother loved this, I only remember once or twice that my dad joined us – he and the other guys were usually golfing at every opportunity.

My frugal mother always went to the beach with the requisite “thermos”. There was no point in ever asking to buy a soda because the thermos, she would point out, had “iced tea”. My mother’s version of iced tea was half brewed tea and half lemonade, which tasted very good. At the concession stand there were always burgers on the grill and lots of other stuff we never bought.

Often she gave me change to get us a treat. She would get an ice cream sandwich and I would purchase these popcorn “bricks” that came in three striated colors: tan, chocolate and strawberry. They were hard and kind of stale, but I liked the way they tasted and they took a long time to eat.

We swam and played in the sand, and it was so hot you could literally burn your feet walking to your car so you always wore flip flops. We slathered on sunscreen. We swam to the “float” and back and as I write this I can hear the drone of the background noise of kids squealing and splashing and generally having a lot of fun. There was a very distinctive sound to it. The beach was always noisy. We tracked sand home everywhere although we tried to contain it. But in the summer our cars, our clothes, our suits, our towels, our sneakers, our bathrooms were always covered with a fine, gritty layer.

The water (on Long Island sound) was always murky, cold and harbored tons of seaweed that we could pop between our fingers. There was sometimes broken glass so a trip to the beach first aid area was a common occurrence. I found the water so cold and dark that I never liked it as much as my mother. She loved the refreshing cold of it, said it always woke her up, which makes a lot of sense.

I once had swimming lessons at Pear Tree that started extremely early in the morning. I hated getting up so early and I especially hated going in the water before the sun warmed it and it was freezing cold. I was probably 7 or 8, and pretty miserable. The instructor Mr. Darnell (who Ali Byrne recently said we called “Mr. Damn-Hell”) loved my blonde hair and called me his “yellow rose of Texas”, so that tended to make me smile and cheer me up a little.

Every winter with a new snowfall we saw what appeared to be huge bird “footprints” across the front lawn. It looked like Big Bird had walked across the lawn while we were sleeping and the rest of the snow was untouched. For years we observed this odd phenomenon, and once my mother said she was going to call the Audubon society. Again, years later, I figured out that these were rabbit prints, two legs up front and two together in the back – creating the appearance of giant bird tracks.

I’m glad we never knew that. The explanation seems so simple that probably one or both of my parents really knew the source all along – although my mother seemed genuinely perplexed by it. It created a mystery with each snowfall that was ours alone.

The idea that in the early hours of a snowfall, a huge sasquatch- type bird was walking across our front yard, completely unseen by anyone, was quite thrilling.

One wonderful thing about Great Hill being such a big hill was that the middle of the cul-de-sac made for amazing sledding. You could start at the top by the Wood's house and go so fast down the hill that you could whiz by the Gifford's front yard and almost end up in the street (or definitely end up in the street). It was so fun and thrilling that you never noticed that your mittens had frozen balls of ice on them, and there was no feeling in your toes. Everyone stood in line and patiently waited their turn, there was no pushing or shoving, and the older boys were always nice to the younger kids (at least that's what I remember).

There was never any parental supervision during the sledding, although I suspect many mothers were peeking out their curtains. There were many houses on the perimeter that comprised the circle.

Chapter 13: The Quiz Show

My father literally did have his proverbial 15 minutes of fame.

Everyday on his morning and evening commute to and from NYC he worked diligently on the New York Times crossword puzzle and usually completed it. Our neighbor Jack Haskell (announcer and singer on the Jack Paar show) took note of this as he had just been invited to be the celebrity guest on a new game show called "Crosswords". (I think that was the name, but it was on TV for such a short period of time that I can't be sure).

Although Russ was extroverted, like so many funny men, he was inherently shy so I'm sure he was less than enthusiastic about being on television. But Jack somehow talked him into it. This was obviously such a big deal that it is the one time I got to stay home from school when I wasn't sick.

What happened next was so unlikely as to still be amazing to me.

My mother, brother and I sat down at the TV to see my dad emerge from the obligatory curtain and be introduced by the announcer. He was Russ Madden, a paper vice-president, who lived in Darien with his wife and two children. So far so good.

Then the power went out in the neighborhood. I almost never remember the power going out in the neighborhood. Possibly in the night during a bad storm, but this was a sunny afternoon. We were frantic as we jumped in the car to head to our friends the Coombs who lived across town. We got there just in time to see that Jack and Russ had

been creamed by the Champion opponents and would not be coming back next week. The consolation prize, it was announced, was a box of black and white polka-dot dishes which arrived a month later in a hundred broken pieces.

I loved seeing my dad on a quiz show because it had been my fervent wish that we would go on TV as a team on "Play Your Hunch" hosted by Merv Griffin. The answers to the questions were easy, and between us I knew we would take home the \$10,000 prize. I even called down to my dad when I couldn't answer a question and he would come in the room and answer it every time. We were a cinch to win, but that would involve trying to get on the show which I don't think we ever did.

Chapter 14: Food in the Fifties

Sometimes I wonder whatever happened to lima beans.

You never see them today, but in the fifties they made their way onto my dinner plate a couple of times a week. Other almost "extinct" foods were creamed chipped beef (on toast), and "cube" steak" (particularly tough meat that was pummeled into being chewable).

There was a wave of putting soup on food, like cream of mushroom soup on chicken, and then cornflakes on green beans. Lipton Onion Soup was used in sour cream for a dip (still very good today). Potato sticks were sprinkled on most anything to make a casserole.

Other favorites of the times were fish sticks shaped in long rectangles and served with a little packet of tartar sauce. Chun King Chow Mein came in three adjoining cans. The bottom can had chow mein "slop" (all the same texture), then dry, tasteless, crisp floury noodles, and then soy sauce. When it was all mixed together it was very salty so it tasted rather good.

It seemed as though pizza had not yet been invented, at least we never had it nor did any of the neighborhood kids. Tater Tots emerged around this time, as did Stouffers garlic bread. A personal favorite was chopped hot dogs in baked beans.

We tried TV dinners once but they were inedible, especially the mashed potatoes which were grayish and had holes in them. The chopped mixed vegetables tasted bad enough out of the can, but in a TV dinner they were revolting. The chicken was both dry and greasy. The only thing good about a TV dinner was the cool little box it came in that looked like the front of a television set (with knobs and antenna), and the tin tray with three separate compartments.

Each night I had a bit of protein on my plate, a starch and a vegetable. Baked potatoes were a regular with a pat of butter, and beans (lima or green) were standard. Sometimes we had fresh flounder with paprika sprinkled on it that that was so tender and delicious it would fall apart on the fork (my mother was big into paprika, probably more for color than anything else). Swordfish was commonplace at that time, and very delicious. Both species have been since overfished and are not readily available anymore.

If my grandmother was visiting us she would make little rabbit salads with a pear body, carrot stick ears, raisins for eyes and a cottage cheese tail. Otherwise, I think salad was not that big in the fifties. Tomato and lettuce would only show up in a BLT on white toast. Another sandwich my mother made that was completely delicious was baloney and American cheese with sliced pickles on white toast. Sardine sandwiches were pretty good, with the bread made thinner in a bread slicer. Cream cheese and olive sandwiches were another favorite.

Marshmallow fluff was invented in the 1920's but took off like a shot in 1956. Peanut butter and marshmallow fluff on Pepperidge farm bread ("the fluffernutter") was my favorite lunchbox sandwich all through grade school. I preferred two parts fluff to one part peanut butter. All bread was white.

I think berries were quite expensive, but bing cherries were wonderful and plentiful and plums and peaches were a summer staple. I don't think I've ever had peaches as juicy since my childhood. Watermelon was a given. We'd have to eat it outside and let the juice run down our arms, and spit the seeds into the grass.

I have a vivid memory of my mother often snapping fresh green beans into a big pot on our patio.

We made our own OJ popsicles in plastic receptacles with washable sticks, this was new in the fifties. The trouble with these was you would suck out all the juice at once, and then all that was left was ice on a stick.

My mother was an excellent cook and baker. She made some wonderful casseroles: turkey tetrazini (a recipe from Ruth Conroy), and a tuna casserole with peas that was delicious (with potato sticks again).

When I got home from school usually the house was filled with the scent of something baking. She made a "chocolate surprise" cookie, mixing meringue and chocolate chips together. During the baking process the weight of the chocolate chips made them fall into the center of the meringue, thus the "surprise" part. She made incredible fudge which was her own secret recipe. As a teenager she was able to buy her family their first radio from selling her fudge door to door.

Like most of the dads in the neighborhood, Russ barbequed on the grill several times a week in the summer. There were big utensils and an apron for this activity. My parents loved shish-kebobs. They were so good, with beef (or lamb), onions and green peppers, and so tender they never stayed on the skewer. The smoke and scent would drift up to my bedroom window, and I would get so hungry.

After we were fed in the evening, my mother would often get out the deep fat fryer because my dad adored fried food (little did we know how unhealthy that was). His favorite was fried veal and fried eggplant. The fryer spattered a greasy mist, and the smell was pretty cloying.

My mother had all the cookbooks of the times, "Joy of Cooking," "Better Homes" and "Fannie Farmer." They all looked like they were 100 years old, yellowed with the spine and backing falling apart. Just like my cookbooks look now.

Each Christmas Kitty would pull out a mold for a Christmas cake house. It was an inverted house that came in 4 metal parts that you had to put together. It took several boxes of batter, but when done and inverted onto a plate it was a perfect little house that we could frost and decorate. Better than a gingerbread house, we could slice and eat it. This was a holiday ritual for many years until it all came to an abrupt halt.

One holiday when the cake house was in the oven I heard my mother yelling and actually swearing, something I had never heard before. The cake form had collapsed spilling quarts of batter everywhere, all over the inside of the oven, down the sides and behind it, and into the drawer below the oven that held all our pots and pans. It was a terrific mess. The cake form became "lost" after that, and we never found it again.

I had a child's Betty Crocker cookbook that was popular in the day. I made a coffee cake from a recipe and it called for Bisquick. You rolled balls of Bisquick and fit them in a cake ring, each ball covered with a glaze and a maraschino cherry. It came out looking like a coffee cake Christmas wreath, and very nice. My mother took one look at this, and put me to work churning out these coffee cakes for Christmas presents for all my relatives. I made about a dozen coffee cakes in all.

One Mother's Day I decided I wanted to make my mother a surprise cake, but being only ten I was not allowed to use the oven. I asked Mrs. Conroy if she would bake the cake after I got all the ingredients together and she agreed. I mixed it all together in a big bowl and set off across the small woods to the Conroys.

On the way I tripped on a root and all the contents of the bowl fell on the ground. I scooped all the batter back into the bowl, now seasoned with twigs and dirt and leaves. Mrs. Conroy helped pick out the roughage and we baked it anyway. Then I decorated it with pink marshmallow fluff and M & M's that spelled out "Happy Mothers Day".

Chapter 15: Bark Cloth Curtains

To me, one of the most fascinating trademarks of an era is the fabric designs and wall coverings. My grandparents' home in Holyoke, MA was decorated in the 1920's and each room was wallpapered. My father's boyhood room was papered in a design of large repeated plumed feathers with ribbons. This theme was very common at that time and echoed the popularity of the Ziegfeld follies.

In the '40's, heavy bark cloth (a nubby 2-ply cotton weave) curtains became popular with loud colorful, Gauguin-like flowers. This continued into the 1950's. Both the Conroys and the Maddens had heavy, flowered curtains in their living rooms that show up in lots of photos. Typically, many yards of these fabrics draped over the windows. Almost overnight in the early 1960's these curtains went out of style. I even remember the day they came down in our living room.

The fifties décor was also influenced by popular art movements. Our linoleum flooring was a random splattered Jackson Pollock design, and our school (Tokeneke) was built in 1957 in a sprawling, contemporary design with doors to the outside that were each painted a different primary color. The grid-like design with squares of bright color was directly influenced by artist Piet Mondrian. (When I visited Tokeneke during the weekend of my HS reunion in 2007, I could have sworn the same curtains from my school days in the '50's were hanging in the library!).

Mid-century Americans embraced a new modernity, and often curtains were like an ink-blot test of the arrival of new innovations. Cell structures, atoms, satellites, cars, TV sets, and space ships were stylized designs on curtains in kitchens and bathrooms. While living rooms sported the large cabbage-like flowers that were considered more formal.

In the sixties, when a new stripped down, no-curtain décor became popular, these curtains came down and were generally discarded. When I come across these vintage fabrics in antique stores I am amazed at how beautiful, colorful and textural they are. Certainly contemporary designers like Ralph Lauren were heavily influenced by the fabric designs of the fifties.

Chapter 16: Childhood emotions

I had wanted a sister so I sometimes dressed my brother up as a girl, and put him in a baby carriage. I put him in dresses, and a Halloween wig to give him long hair. I would wheel him around Great Hill Road and introduce him as my new sister. Nobody seemed

to notice that his hair was bright orange and made out of something resembling cotton candy. I did some other mean things to my brother that I am not very proud of and he has since forgiven me for (hopefully). The age difference of six years was great enough for me to have both loved and resented him at the same time.

When I was an only child I frequently went to NYC with my parents and grandparents, and we would go out to dinner and then to a club and listen to music. All that changed when Rusty came along, and I blamed him for the string of teenage babysitters we had after that. As a child I felt entitled, and was self-centered.

Rusty was the “baby” and I didn’t really know how to feel about him, but one day it became incredibly clear. We were at a garden store, I think it was “Ring’s End”. There was a little coin-operated merry-go-round in the center of the store, and Rusty, who was about three, wanted to ride it. My parents were busy and in a hurry, and would not let him. So he stood on the sidelines, this little figure just looking longingly at the merry-go-round and the couple of other kids that were lucky enough to be on it.

For some reason, at that moment my heart broke. He wanted so much to ride, but he was taking it “like a man”. Watching him gazing up with his hands behind his back, I fought the tears back hard, and was awestruck by my response, unprepared for the flow of love I felt for him.

This emotional response blind-sided me. It was one of those surprising moments in childhood when you are just first discovering your emotional life, and the feelings take you completely by surprise because they are so new and foreign.

Another time I was blind-sided by new and different emotions was when neighbor Brucie Freeman died of leukemia. My dad had taken Rusty and me out to breakfast without my mother, which was unusual. We were going to stop at the Darien News on the way home for me to buy a little stuffed animal that I had saved my money for, and I was very excited.

When my dad told me Brucie had died and my mother was at his funeral, the desire for anything tangible or material left me instantly. It just didn’t matter to me anymore and I told my dad not to stop at the Darien News. This reaction, that nothing mattered other than the fact that this eight year old boy who I had known had died, was a totally new and unfamiliar feeling. Material goods could not bring any pleasure in the face of this very sad news. Nice lesson. I remember wondering why did nothing else matter? It would take several more years before I figured that out.

Days later my mother told me that Brucie had been taken to the New York hospital one last time. As usual, his parents, Betty and Allen, had talked to him by his bedside about all the wonderful things they would do together when he got out. Betty told my mother that Brucie looked steadily at them and said, “No, I’m not going home. I’m going to die

tonight". All the pretense was gone, and they saw him relieved and calm. This conversation was a comfort to his parents.

I remember mom drove Betty home once, and she didn't really want to get out of the car. I was in the back seat. She touched on a few things that I don't remember, but they were tinged with sadness. She always wore saddle shoes, unlike the other mothers, and her hair and outfits were a little out of style.

In her overwhelming circumstances, sadness and depression would have been expected, especially in an era when people didn't talk about such things openly. I remember my mother seemed at a loss for words. Perhaps that was just because I was in the car. My parents sheltered me from things like this.

The neighborhood circled the wagons and supported the Freemans. When Brucie was frequently in the hospital, my parents took in Allen and Debbie several evenings and my dad helped Allen with his spelling. Ruth Conroy, who had been in the WACS as a nurse, gave him injections when needed (probably some of his chemotherapy). I'm sure there were other instances of support from neighbors that I am unaware of, that was the kind of neighborhood it was.

The Freemans had two other older kids, Allen and Debbie, and a boxer named Chrissie that was very smart and reminded me of the dog on the Little Rascals.

When Brucie died his parents created a shrine to him in their finished basement. Glass cabinets housed all his toys, games, and stuffed animals. His checker board was arranged with red and black checkers, as if he had just left the room for a moment while in the middle of a game, soon to return. His objects were arranged with great care.

My mother found this morbid, but I didn't. It was the Freemans own way of dealing with their loss, and it resonated with me as being their way of keeping him close. I know nothing of Brucie's burial, but I'm sure it was very difficult for our parents to attend the funeral of an eight year old neighbor. His small life was a big part of the beginning of Great Hill Road.

Chapter 17: The Movie

Janet Conroy has just sent me a home movie (on DVD) that includes a short segment of my family in 1956 at Christmas in our living room. It is a gift that is invaluable to me. I know for certain now why we know nothing of the future, it would be impossible to purely enjoy how blissfully sweet a slice of time like this is if we knew anything that was to lie ahead.

At the start of this approximately 60 second clip, my almost two year-old brother is standing in front of our Christmas tree. My father (who would have been forty) is sitting to the left of him. My brother, seeing the lights of Owen Conroy filming, runs over to my mother (who is 35) and puts his hand on her knee and when their eyes meet the connection between them overwhelms me.

My mother's statuesque dark haired beauty in photos has always taken my breath away, but on film it is so real. Janet and I are singing "Silent Night. The sight of my father (healthy, young and handsome) is both painful and exhilarating. I keep rewinding the DVD to look at him over and over. I had never thought of him as conventionally handsome but this clip proves me wrong – he is very handsome, in a Leonardo DiCaprio sort of way. I can see why Kitty was so taken with him.

Since my mother died over a year ago it has surprised me that I have never dreamed about her. But I think I was wrong about that. Recently a thunderstorm woke me out of a very deep sleep. I immediately remembered that I had been talking to my mother who was sitting across from me. She was about the same age that I am now; her hair was still dark.

She said to me, "Your father says 'insouciant'". I said "okay" – perplexed. Then she said. "No, he says 'insouciant'." I immediately took a pen from my nightstand and wrote the word down. My father and I shared a love of words and their meaning, but I did not know what this one meant. In the morning I looked up insouciant, and found that it meant "lighthearted unconcern". This delighted me. My father was telling me not to worry so much (like my mother), and enjoy life more.

At the time of waking up from the dream I thought my mother was channeling my dead father. It took me a few minutes to remember that she was dead too. My mother used to take out a picture of me sitting on our patio when I was about six, looking intently at the camera. Even when I was much older she would always say "look at the intelligence".

I think that is one of the difficult things about our parents dying – nobody else will ever think we were the most nifty, creative, intelligent person on the planet.

Chapter 18: "On the Street Where You Live" (Broadway, 1956)

I have a mental snapshot of a beautiful summer's day. I am walking behind a woman I barely know. I am small so I am looking up and registering every detail of her. She has medium-length red hair that shines in the sun and when she turns her head I can see freckles on her cheeks and nose. She has a solid body with bare arms and muscular legs. She is wearing a pale blue cotton sleeveless housedress with a matching belt.

The woman is carrying an infant in a blanket while she walks, and says in a raspy voice “When they told me I had a girl – I said prove it” and then she laughs, a hoarse smokers laugh. She delivers this line several times to various people around her and I hear it every time because I continue to walk behind her.

She is walking up a hill with a small group of children. She takes no notice of us. Her name is Fliva Clark (real name Flavia), the mother of future serial killer Hadden Clark Jr.

That is where the snapshot ends, but I do remember the circumstances. Where we ended up and what we did I do not remember. I do know the neighbors were hosting a going-away party, possibly a barbeque, for the Clarks because they were moving out of the neighborhood. Little did our parents know how much they had to celebrate with the departure of the Clarks.

The Clark house had a manicured lawn and a perfect suburban façade that incubated such evil that it is difficult to write about. The house and the inhabitants did not match up.

The Clarks generally blended into Great Hill Road, but there were signs. One of the drawbacks of the fifties was the insularity of the family, a unit so sacred that others were inclined not to get involved – it was none of their business, so some bad things could happen and people looked the other way.

Their next door neighbor said that Hadden and his brother used to smash live frogs against rocks and torture other small animals. He said; “Even at that young age I knew it was wrong”.

I only went into the Clark home once. I was a little older than the boys so I had no interest in playing with them, but they had a nice swing set and after swinging for a while I knocked on their door.

Hadden Sr. let me in. The boys were playing on the breezeway. There was a large toybox and I helped myself to a toy to play with when Hadden Sr. kneeled down and looked me in the eye. He had a long thin face with glasses and he was inches from me.

He said “put that down, Hadden might want to play with it”. I picked up another one, and he said the same thing “put that down, Hadden might want to play with that”. This was shocking because all the other parents on Great Hill Road were so nice.

I immediately put down the toy and fled.

Another neighbor remembers that the boys looked “dirty and unkempt”, and that she had heard an odd story from her mother about Fliva. Apparently Mrs. Clark talked incessantly. Once when a couple was pulling out of her driveway she had her head in

the car window and would not stop talking. The driver grew so impatient that he began to drive off, injuring her badly enough to put her in the hospital.

There has been much written about Hadden Jr. and his brother, both in jail for murder (with Hadden being the more prolific serial killer) so my intent is not to rehash the details. Moreover, I wanted to place them in the context of the beginnings of the neighborhood since there is barely a mention of their childhood in Darien. (Historians do note that it is unusual for a serial killer to have come from such a privileged background.)

My intent was simply to include this dark chapter for historical accuracy, not to draw attention and unwittingly glorify them in any way.

The Clarks moved often – Hadden Sr. was a chemist and job-hopped frequently out of restlessness. There is no mention in the media of them being one of the original inhabitants of Great Hill Road, but we know they were.

Chapter 19: Famous People

There were two quite famous people who lived on Great Hill Road from the beginning.

One was Jack Haskell. Jack had sung in Benny Goodman's band with Doris Day before the war, and had the hit single "I guess I'll take the paper and go home" – which I gave to my mother years ago on a CD. He went on to be the lead singer and announcer on the Jack Paar show. He had a beautiful baritone voice and was very handsome. He starred on Broadway too. His wife Doris played bridge on a weekly basis with my mother and the other wives. They had one son named Tommy who was a good friend of Jeff Conroy's.

Jack was very down to earth and my dad liked him a lot, and the two of them went on a quiz show together (see quiz show chapter). When he died years ago my mother sent me his obit from People magazine. He isn't even mentioned in Wikipedia for the town of Darien so someone needs to correct that. Later, his house was bought by the Lillis' (good friend Pat Lillis).

Grant Tinker and his wife and four children lived right behind our house, separated by a strip of woods. My mother and Ruth were close. They were pregnant with Rusty and Jody (respectively) at the same time.

Grant was head of NBC and some years later, after he and Ruth divorced, would marry Mary Tyler Moore. Son Mark Tinker became a successful producer and director of TV shows such as “St. Elsewhere” and “Deadwood”.

Everybody liked Ruth Tinker, she was a petite pretty blond and very nice. My brother Rusty, Jody Tinker and Deido Byrne were a constant threesome. They were almost exactly the same age, and there are pictures of them together – at about three years old.

I once had a “bonding experience” with Ruth Tinker at Bloomingdales.

Three nights a week in my senior year of High school, Bev Schreiner and I worked at Bloomingdales in Stamford, CT. We drove in together, taking turns borrowing our parents’ cars. Unlike Bev, who was a “floater”, and usually ended up in the unfortunate station of men’s underwear, I lucked out on two great gigs. First, I was hostess of their restaurant where, best of all, I could eat free food, and then I was placed in cosmetics.

I think they put me in cosmetics one night, and liked my “confidence” so I stayed there. They must have forgotten they had never given me any training. That was fine with me, I hated homework anyway so why would I ask for more?

I soon realized that when you work at a cosmetics counter people expect you to know something about “skin”. I was frequently asked “What skin type do you think I have?” I found I could answer this without lying by telling “clients” they had “combination skin”. Since most faces are dry in some places and oily in others, this reply satisfied both of us.

There was a little tub of cream behind the counter that I soon discovered was the most magical, delicious smelling stuff that had ever been invented. It was an orange frothy-looking fluff that smelled like a combination of fresh oranges and a vanilla creamsicle. I loved this stuff so much that the moment I started my shift I would open it and inhale deeply, and then several times during the evening I would open it again so I could experience some more direct “hits”.

I hid this little tub behind a lot of other boxes, so no one else could see it or buy it. I had seriously considered purchasing it with my employee discount, but I knew that would not be the same. It was like hearing a great song on the radio; that was an accidental thing made more sweet and enjoyable by the randomness of it. When I actually bought the 45,

I never enjoyed it as much because now I owned it and could play it anytime. That took some of the joy out of it. It was the same thing with the orange cream. I knew if I actually owned the cream it could not rival the anticipation I felt about thinking about it.

A few days before I quit Bloomingdales to leave for college, Mrs. Tinker came to my counter. She was a frequent Bloomingdales client. She chitchatted with me for a while and then I let her in on my secret.

I said “Mrs. Tinker, I want you to smell this cream.”

I carefully removed it from its hiding place and unscrewed the cap and put it under her nose.

At once her face lit up.

She asked, “What’s it for?”

I said, “Combination skin.”

Then she said, “Do you have one in a box?”

I said , “No, this is the only one. I think it’s very rare”.

She inhaled one more time, not even asking the price.

As she left my counter, swinging the little Bloomindales bag and heading for the door, I felt happy. I started to wonder how many times my nose had actually touched the top of the cream (probably about a thousand), and knew, in the larger scheme of the big picture, it didn’t really matter. My secret stash had gone to a good home, and I had another satisfied customer.

Chapter 20: The Blue Moon

A few nights before my father died, my entire family had dinner out at the Blue Moon.

This was unusual, my parents generally went there alone and bribed me to baby sit for Rusty with a “tortoni”. It was well worth it because a tortoni from the restaurant was a cup of delicious ice cream with finely crushed almonds on top.

The Blue Moon was a little” hole in the wall” restaurant in South Norwalk that served good, cheap Italian food. You could get a large plate of spaghetti and meatballs for \$1.50.

It was a rather dark, old restaurant with wooden booths and not a lot of atmosphere. There was a blue neon sign of a little crescent moon in the window, and lots of pictures of Reingold (beer) girls on the wall. One of the Reingold girls looked exactly like my

mother. Customers would actually come up to her and say, pointing to the picture: "You look exactly like that girl".

That night I was wearing a burgundy pull-over sweater, an A-line floral skirt and a small bow on the side of my perfect blond flip. We ran into neighbors Jim and Bev McArthur at another table. Mr. McArthur told my dad, right in front of me, how pretty I had become. That pleased me quite a bit.

The reason we all went out together that night was because I had just gotten paid from Bloomingdales (\$18.00 for two weeks work, three nights each week) and had announced to my family that I was treating everyone for dinner. I found out after my dad died that he was very impressed that I had decided to use my paycheck for this reason.

I was a typical teenager who used her future paychecks and employee discount for clothes and make up. Why had I decided to unselfishly treat my family to dinner? Did I have some subconscious premonition that it would be the last time we would all be out together?

The Friday after we went to the Blue Moon my father got a telegram from his employer (at the paper company) that he had been let go. I have never written those words before and this is the most difficult chapter to write, and I have put it off for a long time.

It is not so difficult for me to remember the events, but somehow in writing it down I begin to feel how he must have felt in the days leading up to his death and during the attack itself. That is the hard part, and how it affected my mother and brother.

I didn't know that he had lost his job. My mother told me about that, and the events that followed, sometime later.

According to Kitty, my father sat in a chair by their bed smoking for almost 48 hours. I'm sure he was terrified. He was 52, an age considered "over the hill" for re-employment in sales. This was April 1967, and I was leaving for college in September. They were already pretty strapped for money, living paycheck to paycheck.

On Sunday in the predawn hours, my mother told my father to get into bed, they "would figure something out". As soon as he lay down he went into cardiac arrest. At first my mother thought the noise he was making was a joke, he was such a kidder. When she realized he was in actual distress she knocked over two lamps trying to get a light on. I heard the crashing, and then I could hear the noise my father made – probably what they call the "death rattle".

I think my mother yelled for me to call an ambulance. I never entered their room. I was half asleep, but I took the entire length of stairs from the upstairs to the downstairs in

two steps. I almost “flew down the stairs”. I hit the halfway point on one foot, and hit the bottom of the stairs with the other. I picked up the kitchen phone and dialed the operator. I don’t think there was 911 back then, but I could be wrong.

It seems that our physician, Dr. Felder, got there very quickly, as did the ambulance. The rest is a bit of a haze, but I remember Dr. Felder coming down the stairs, where I was at the bottom, saying “I’m sorry”.

My mother curled up in a ball on our living room floor in her bathrobe, and said, “I can’t bear it.” That was the only time I ever saw her “brought to her knees” by Russ’s death. She was very strong for Rusty and me, but I know she suffered. They were very happy together.

She didn’t grieve in front of the neighbors because she wanted to be included in future social events, which she was. She said a few times to me “a weeping willow stands alone”. She was 47.

(Note: When his boss found out Russ died, he called and offered my mother a small amount of money. He had taken the cowardly way out by sending a telegram, and I’m sure he carried that knowledge for a long time. Like everyone else, he had liked my dad very much. My mother accepted his offer but she would not talk to him, giving the phone to her brother, my Uncle Bobby).

Many years later, Rusty told me that he saw the paramedics bring my dad down the stairs and out the door in a body bag. He was twelve. I am glad I did not see that (although it pains me to think that my brother did) as it would have been my undoing. It was hard enough to see the coffin at the funeral and know he was inside it.

It is amazing to think that back then there was no considered correlation between stress and heart attacks. I’m sure the job loss and subsequent terrible anxiety triggered his death. He also smoked about a pack of cigarettes a day, was somewhat overweight, and loved fried food.

He had been diagnosed with high blood pressure, but my mother later found most of his medication untouched in his top dresser drawer. I know that blood pressure medication back then had some nasty side effects, not the least of which was impotence, so he probably made a conscious decision not to take them. As far as we know, he had no symptoms. But Kitty said for some reason he was afraid of dying.

Over the many years since Russ’s death I have tried to reconstruct the short time we had together. I feel cheated to have not really known him when I was an adult. To not have learned his thoughts, his ideas, basically his personality. To have not known what he really cared about, in his own words.

There is a moment in Janet's home movies where my dad is standing by their kitchen door and he is talking to Pax Gifford. Some other man leaves (possibly Mr. Baker) and my father is amused by him in some way and moves his head up in an arc and says something, while laughing, to Mr. Gifford.

I don't remember that body language at all so I watch it over and over to try to discern some clue, some other piece of the puzzle, as to who he was. He looks relaxed and somewhat animated, and I simultaneously crave more, and am grateful for, what we have of him on film.

I look at that movie and see them all so young, and having fun and acting crazy and silly. I realize they are just like us in our thirties, embracing life to its fullest and some are driven to "act out".

It occurs to me now that these couples probably never thought they would be as old as I am now, and then older. They never thought they would get so old that they could not walk or think. Oh, they knew it intellectually, but it must have been an abstraction to the point of having little impact. I know that's the way I feel, and the way most of us feel. It probably has something to do with the "survival mechanism". You just don't overthink your own mortality.

My mother warned me that nothing would change for me in my mind as I got older. She said "I still think of myself as that 16 year old girl and then I look in the mirror and can't believe it's me".

Never have I faced the concept of my mortality more than I did when I saw my parents in the DVD. There they are younger than me; now they are dead, and I am next.

I asked my physician, "Is it normal to be thinking about death? Some of my classmates have died, and I'm starting to fear it some. I guess mostly for my grandson. I'm so involved in his life, but the "unknown" is kind of scary."

He said it was totally normal, he sees it all the time. And then of course there's that history of heart disease, although I don't smoke, which counts for a lot.

My mother went on to live to age 90. She outlived her husband by 43 years. She had a house in South Carolina for a while, but missed New England. Rusty and his wife Janet bought a 200 year old duplex in Merrimac, MA and my mother lived in one side of it for many years. It was easy for them to live with Kitty, she was always so independent.

When she got older, Janet loved her and cared for her as if she was her own mother. Kitty had a long-term boyfriend and played bridge everyday, and very much enjoyed her life. She was also back by the ocean, which she loved.

She never remarried however. Throughout her life she repeatedly said: “There was always only one man for me, and that was Russ.”

Chapter 21: Mr. Annand

Tucked in the woods next to Great Hill Road, on Tokeneke behind the Bakers’ house, was a little white bungalow that was barely visible from the road. It was overgrown with weeds and trees; old and in disrepair.

This little house was built long before the 1950’s building boom. It stood unchanged and dated and plunked in the middle of Ozzie and Harriet-ville. Of course, the very idea of a little “Hansel and Gretel” type home that was out of place and kind of creepy created intense fascination for the neighborhood children. What added to the allure was our parents’ admonition not to go there.

The dweller of the house was an artist named George Annand. Many of us remembered the man and we knew his name sounded something like “Ammon”. If you knocked on his door he always let you in, and then sort of ignored you while he worked intensely and energetically on his craft. What his craft was, we were not sure, but we knew it involved lots of pencils, and drawing and painting and paper. Janet Conroy said her mother Ruth told her Mr. Annand was a New Yorker cartoonist.

Janet remembered he wore rumpled khakis and I remember white tee shirts. She thought he was a little stooped over, but it may have been that he was always posed over desks and drafting tables.

I was only five or six, but I can totally picture the interior. Two large windows with trees pressed against the panes across the room, with some shelving below. His desk was free-standing. We never went alone there, always in a small group, and I think he enjoyed the company. If he talked at all it was more to himself, and he treated us as small interested people – not little children. He may have drawn a little something for us, but I’m not sure. There was no décor at all, just art stuff everywhere. Whatever world he was in, he was solitarily immersed in it.

Our dads were so unlike him. They barbequed, socialized, golfed and mowed their lawns. George’s lawn looked like it had not been mowed in decades, in fact there were so many twisted trees and dried weeds that I don’t remember seeing any grass at all. I don’t think he ever interacted with any of our parents. He was not a part of their world at all so this probably added to their paranoia. He was a hermit, a recluse, and his house would have been an embarrassment.

Our parents were too educated and civilized to actually say that to us, but that was probably what they were thinking. Also, why would an old man be entertaining little

girls? It's a valid question, but he was harmless and kind and we secretly visited him anyway. When Karen Byrne and Janet Conroy asked if they could do some of his laundry because they cared about him –this was just too weird for their parents, and may have put a stop to the visits.

After half a century he still holds fascination for us. When we grew up and evolved and realized there was more to life than the slavish consumerism of the fifties, we wondered about him. He not only escaped the materialistic trappings, he obviously was never a part of them. Like so many other very good artists, his creative life was all he seemed to need. But we didn't know that for sure because we knew so little about him, and he told us nothing about himself.

I wanted to fill in the blanks on Mr. Annand so I started to research him. He was born in Detroit in 1890. That would have made him about 65 years old when we knew him.

He went to art school there. He married a fellow art student and they moved to Darien. He may have been a widower in the mid fifties because there was no sign that he lived with anyone. In the 1920's he had a little stepdaughter who became the model for the Nabisco logo of the child in a yellow slicker which Annand created (this is noted in numerous bios);

He did some cartooning (for the New Yorker, July 12, 1952, that we know of – which I now have) but mostly he was known for his beautiful maps. He illustrated several books with his maps (including Shelby Foote's book on the Civil War – made famous by Ken Burns) and several prints of his color maps are selling on line for up to a thousand dollars. They are true works of art. One of the first things Jay Baker said to me when I asked him if he remembered Mr. Annand was "I remember his treasure maps". This confirmed for me that the cartoonist and the map artist were the same man. (Note: I actually just purchased one of his maps on ebay and framed it)

According to Deido Byrne, Annand's house was blown up as a test by the Darien Fire Department in the early '70's. The town had neglected to inform the neighbors however, and they fled down the street in terror to find out what the explosion was. I find it humorous that this quiet, unassuming man's house made its exit with a "bang" – he had the last laugh, whether he wanted it or not.

The most amazing discovery for me was a poem that he wrote that I found recently. It is on the opening page of a story by a writer named Jennifer Rose. It is a wonderful poem that says a great deal about his childhood in just a few lines. It was a bygone era that he came from, obviously far removed from our own. (Scroll down):

Jennifer Rose

George Annand, 1890-

"More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors."

— Elizabeth Bishop

"We were crazy, me and Red,
Used to take rifles to the fields and shoot at animals,
Squirrels and rabbits mostly.
My old mother was sure we'd kill somebody —

"My father was the only doctor
In the whole place, for hundreds of miles.
We were living in Michigan.
He's in this book about Michigan.

"I used to get him up every morning.
One morning when I called him
He didn't get up.
He died the next day.

"I liked to draw,
I was good at it.
I went to the art school they had then in Detroit.
I needed money
So another boy at the school got me this job
Being a messenger boy for the gangsters up there.
They couldn't use the regular mails, you know,
And they needed the stuff delivered quick anyways.
I rode a bicycle around the city.