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## Good Vibrations

### Early Memories

Evansville is situated at the horseshoe bend of the Ohio River, where Hugh McGary established a flatboat landing and then expanded it into a town, which he named after General Evans, who helped him buy the land. The massive river shaped the character of the town as well as the people who lived there. Robert Owen's "Boatload of Knowledge" sailed right past on its way to establish the utopian New Harmony in 1826, and quite obviously didn't stop.

The river kept Evansville culturally separated from Kentucky until 1932, when the first bridge span was built. Its twin didn't arrive until 1965. Believe me when I tell you that two radically different accents developed between Evansville and Henderson, and they have yet to converge.

The mighty Ohio River overshadowed everything we did in Evansville. It was the reason we were all born because it brought our ancestors to the city to work in factories making bullets, P-47 airplane wings, and LST ships for World War II. Even when it stayed within its bounds, it took the lives of boaters every year, and even a sledger when we were young. We watched fireworks at the levee every summer. We could sometimes hear the barges from our yard. We drove over the bridges to get to Audubon Park, to visit relatives in Madisonville or Nashville, and to go on road trips to Florida.

The gallery of rogues that crossed the river northbound and coalesced into my DNA included farmers and millers, misanthropes, alcoholics, one-legged bartenders, and conspirators in plots, both Popish and Gunpowder. They landed on both sides of the US Civil War, and the worst things you can imagine about them were probably true. The long-suffering mothers bore up to 20 children, one every 18 months, and many of those babies died young.

They came mainly from western Europe, drifting over by boat starting in the 1600s. The English and Irish kin settled in coastal states like the Carolinas and Virginia before subsequent generations moved farther inland to Tennessee and Kentucky to stay ahead of advancing civilization. With each generation the farms were divided further, and finally when the Great Depression hit, many of the farmers lost their land. All of their compasses pointed toward Evansville, across the Ohio River, which was a wartime manufacturing hub.

The Cates family came from Colyton, Devon, which they left between 1669 and 1700. They lived many decades in Slaughters (formerly Slaughtersville) in western Kentucky by way of Albemarle Sound, North Carolina. Another branch on my dad's side of the family hailed from

Lincolnshire. One of my direct ancestors was actually born in Grantham, a fact I didn't discover until decades after I lived and studied there.

The Furgersons (spelling changed from *Ferguson* after a feud) and their kin came from Northern Ireland: County Antrim and County Armagh, very close to Scotland.

Bringing up the rear from the British Isles were the Rustons in 1849, who gave up their hereditary positions as supervisors of the Chatteris workhouse in Cambridgeshire, loaded up their babies (and even had another one along the way), sailed to New Orleans and then steamed up to Evansville, and joined the English settlement at Inglefield on Christmas Eve. The Rustons married into the Shelton family, which could supposedly trace their family back to the court of Henry VIII (but had devolved into, as my grandmother freely proclaimed, "poor white trash"). As a young woman I once contemplated emigrating to England. But it seemed like a slap in the face to all of my ancestors who worked so hard to get our genes out of there, for me to just go back. Besides, the food sucked.

The people responsible for my German genes sailed over from Freising and Streilitz around 1868, starting in Southern Illinois before spending a few years in Evansville, then going to Larned, Kansas, for opportunities at the head of the Santa Fe Trail. While a second-great aunt married a Civil War veteran and became a benefactress of the community, my branch turned around in 1900 and went back to Evansville, where their generation (and the one that followed) was more or less ended by malaria and tuberculosis by 1930.

## **Born Free**

A mere 36 years later, I made my own arrival in Evansville, at St. Mary's on Washington Avenue. At this time, the city's population was around 134,000, and it's been on a downward trend ever since. My mom was in a room with another lady, who two days later gave birth to Chris, a fact we discovered in high school. Few people are as lucky as I am, to still be in contact with my first roommate.

For at least a decade I gave no thought to "where we came from." We just were. White bread, American cheese, and our brick ranch. In school a teacher mentioned that most people in Evansville were German and Irish, so I accepted that as the truth it was and went on. A high school biology assignment (and the Alex Haley miniseries) sent me asking after my own roots. I've been digging ever since, the self-designated historian of my generation.

My parents met at Hartke Pool and married in 1964 when they were 19 and 23. Their wedding was just a few weeks after the sudden accidental death of my father's father, who ran his own roofing business so that he'd be able to take off and go fishing whenever he wanted. He was

working on a building where the power lines were too close, and electricity jumped to him and knocked him off the roof. He made an initial recovery, and was awake and talking, but then his kidneys failed and medicine had not yet advanced to the point that they could save him. His death threw a pall over the wedding. That same summer my Uncle Larry also married, and my Uncle Julian joined the National Guard, so my grandmother was suddenly left to fend for herself financially and emotionally.

The Vietnam War was in full swing and, despite having a steel plate in his leg from a terrible car accident a few years earlier, my dad passed the physical. I was conceived, in more ways than one, to keep Dad out of the war.

I spent my earliest years in the 1966 brick ranch my parents moved into two months before I was born (after having lived in a small duplex on MacArthur Circle). The rest of the neighborhood was built in 1956, so I was marinated in midcentury sensibilities: each house we managed to barge into on our street contained a different tableau of beehives, carpeted kitchens, and giant glass grapes. There was Doris Day parking at Schears department store downtown, going to the fabric store with Mom and Grandma, standing in line at Peoples Savings Bank before there was a drive-up window. Delighting in a trip through the Robo-Wash. Watching Mom wax the kitchen floor and Pledge the faux-wood end tables. Being told a new baby was coming and begging the universe for it to be a girl. Doling out Mom's morning-sickness advice to a pregnant neighbor: Zesta saltines.

One of my earliest memories was laying on a blanket in the dappled sunshine of our backyard. Our lot was nestled between the old farmhouse and the barn of the Eichlers' chicken farm, which were occupied by the Finks and the Boyles, respectively. Two massive catalpa trees and a huge sweet gum ensured that we always had mowing hazards and the occasional giant limb after a storm.

## **I'll Take You There**

I don't remember going out to eat much with my parents in those early days (or ever, really), but they sometimes took me to the Duble-R drive-in that they used to hang out at as teenagers. I had a slightly overdone grilled cheese that was cooked on the grill with the onions, and I can still taste it. Sometimes we'd have lunch when shopping with Grandma, at the Woolworth or Kmart lunch counter. I also recall a dinner at the Farmer's Daughter on north Green River Road, when my baby sister cried and my parents had to take turns walking her up and down the street while the rest of us ate. I had spaghetti, and I also ate the parsley garnish.

When I was 5, my parents gave me a Mickey Mouse AM radio with a clock. The dial was Mickey's head. I was fascinated with flipping around and hearing various broadcasts. One

afternoon an older neighborhood girl came into my room and saw it. "This is what you need to be listening to," she said, as she tuned in to local pop radio station WJPS. Striving to be cool even then, I listened regularly and tried to make sense of what I was hearing. Paul McCartney's "Live and Let Die" was on the charts, and it was my first "favorite song." Except I couldn't decipher the words, so when I made a list of my favorites from the radio, it became "Liver Man Die." How peculiar, I thought. Also among the heavy airplay then was Cher's "Half-Breed." Afreid? Also very odd, and the lyrics went right over my head.

We spent year after year playing outside with neighborhood kids. We'd play sports in the lot next to our house, swing on swing sets, play in sandboxes, make mud pies, pick flowers, eat mulberries and crabapples from the trees, and ride our bikes all over the area bordered by Pollack on the south, Covert on the north, Vann on the west, and Dalehaven (a dead end) on the east. We'd pick up aluminum cans to cash them in, visit friends, and flee stray dogs. We'd set up Kool-Aid stands and charge 5 cents per Dixie cup. In later years we'd watch the older boys whiz by on 10-speeds and mopeds, which we were forbidden to ride.

Next-door neighbor Lu and I even worked to master the green tandem bike their family had. I usually made Lu steer. One time we tried to go over a pile of gravel at the point where Joyce Avenue became a bean field bisected by "the path" that led toward McGary School. We fell and my handlebars twisted and hit me in the chest, with the terrifying sensation of knocking the wind out of me. But we always got up and tried again, even if sometimes we limped home in tears.

On the other side of us was the Nativity Catholic Church rectory, so we had a succession of priests for neighbors. They weren't usually disruptive (except for that one morning when we were eating breakfast in front of the picture window and paramedics came and wheeled one of them out, deceased). It was interesting seeing behind the scenes of the church. Before Palm Sunday, a large package of palm fronds would be delivered to the rectory. And despite living so close, I never attended a mass there. Now, the 1980 Friday-night dances in the church basement were another story.

## **Get Back**

There was no question that I was precocious. I was also prescient. As just a toddler, I would run around and sing Beatles songs, especially "Get Back," with the butchered lyrics of "Get back to where you once to b'long." The greatest rock and roll band of all time was still together, if in name only, but they had stopped touring a few months before I was born.

### **Flash-Forward: The Beatles**

*In 1990 I was still living in Evansville but found out that Paul McCartney would be playing at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis. I never dreamed that I might get to see him in concert. He was and is my very favorite musician of all time. He truly wrote the soundtrack of my life. A friend had a connection with Ticketmaster, so our seats were pretty darn good. It was pure ecstasy to see and hear the great man himself in person. I was familiar enough with Flowers in the Dirt that I enjoyed the new songs. But how could they compare with the Wings songs I grew up with and the Beatles classics like "Yesterday" and "Let It Be"? I screamed so much that eventually Linda had to give me a dirty look. During "Live and Let Die," there were some pretty low-tech pyrotechnics (compared to future concerts) set up behind the performers. One of the fireworks set the red velvet drape behind Linda on fire. "I'm going to die!" I thought. But wait: "I'm going to die with Paul McCartney!" The curtain was fire-retardant, apparently, and the fire burned itself out before it got halfway to the ceiling. Crisis averted, and the show went on.*

*The next morning Paul was all over the front page of the Indianapolis Star, with a review written by Marc Allan. Little did I know that one day I'd work on a project with Marc and consider him a friend.*

*He still waves me off whenever I retroactively fangirl him.*

*Paul returned to Indianapolis in 2002, this time at Conseco Fieldhouse and with his worst wife in tow. We could see her up in a suite, dancing with the stars. I got floor seats for my mom, my mother-in-law, and myself. We were in the front row of the second section, so there was nobody to try and see over. But it was a long way to the stage. Before the concert, there were a dozen or so costumed people wandering about the floor seats. I think they were supposed to represent different songs and eras, but they were abstract enough that I couldn't be sure. One genie-type guy with a blue face came right up to me and stared into my eyes. In the distance I spotted someone dressed like 18th century French royalty:*

*Could be, Louis?*

*Conseco once again hosted Paul and his kick-ass band in 2013. I had debated whether I would even go, having seen him twice already. But seriously, how could I miss it? I brought along Sue, after Jason said he wasn't a big enough fan to be worthy of it. Our seats were low but far opposite the stage. It was another swinging great time, and he premiered the hidden classic "All Together Now" as well as the elevating platform for "Here Today," his ode to John Lennon. I could detect a decline in Paul's vocal quality since the last time I saw him, but it didn't diminish the sheer awesomeness of the performance.*

*Paul launched another US tour in 2016 but it didn't stop here. So I decided to go through a scalper company to get four really great seats to the Cincinnati show for \$1,000. I insisted that Jason and Cate join me and Jason's mom. Cate didn't think she would enjoy it, but I promised her one day she would be glad that she could say she had been there. This time there were some new songs from New, and I knew them all. And when it came time for "Live and Let Die," the pyro was out of this world. We were close enough to feel the heat, and Cate screamed at the first explosion. Combined with amazing graphics and Rusty Anderson's theatrics, it was unforgettable.*

*Paul came to Fort Wayne in 2019 but I just couldn't figure out a way to swing it, even though Stella, our exchange student from Germany, really wanted to go. And now I wonder whether I've seen him live for the last time. The other shows were so amazing that I guess I can be content with that. This isn't to say that I don't creep around his office in Soho Square when I'm in London and imagine what I might say to him. And as much as the "future" sucks, one thing about it is an upgrade: McCartney Mondays on the Beatles Channel on Sirius XM.*

*Let's not forget Ringo. For whatever reason, I had never made an effort to see him in concert. But as he moved into his 80s, I realized that my window of opportunity was growing infinitesimally small. I kept an eagle eye on his tour dates, and when he finally scheduled the Murat in Indianapolis in 2023, I pounced. Cate, now in college, had begun to appreciate having seen a Beatle, and agreed to go with me to see the other surviving member of the greatest band of all time.*

*As has been his modus operandi, Ringo was touring with his All-Starr Band, the roster of which varies from tour to tour. This time there were some pretty great names: Colin Hay (Men at Work), Steve Lukather (Toto), Edgar Winter, Hamish Stuart (of Average White Band, but who also toured with Paul in 1990), Gregg Bissonette (a great studio drummer), and Warren Ham of Kansas and Toto (the jokes, they write themselves).*

*We had pretty good orchestra seats on the aisle, and just couldn't believe we were about to see Ringo. He came on and wowed us with "Matchbox," "It Don't Come Easy," and "What Goes On?" before letting Edgar take it away with "Free Ride." Edgar was a real trip, a great musician and showman, and I am old enough to remember when his band was on the charts. Then Steve Lukather launched into "Rosanna." Holy cow, so great. The group then gave us "Pick Up the Pieces," and then, omg, Colin gave us "Down Under," complete with the original flutist. Ringo came back with "Boys," one of my Beatle favorites, "I'm the Greatest," and, omg, "Yellow Submarine." While the band kept giving us more amazing songs, including "Frankenstein," "Octopus's Garden," "Africa," "I Wanna Be Your Man," "Johnny B. Goode" (at which point we all just became a bunch of dancing fools, marveling at our good luck to be there in that moment), "Who Can It Be Now?", and "Hold the Line." Ahhhhhh! Then Ringo came back from his self-reported juice break to close out the show with "Photograph," "Act Naturally," and "With a Little Help from My Friends." Cate and I decided to hit the exit as the last song finished, to beat the crowds.*

*As we neared the outside doors, a guy next to us yelled, "Luke!" It took a second for us to realize he was yelling at Steve Lukather, who was boarding a van out front. We followed this enthusiastic guy to find the rest of the band (minus Ringo) piling into their hotel transport. So we joined in yelling to them what an amazing show it was and how much we loved them. "Colin!" I yelled. He looked at me with an amazed smile. "Thank you so much! We love you!"*

*Oh, and I also got a tour shirt. Rock on, Ringo.*

One of Mom's favorite stories to tell was that same summer, when we stopped at a drive-in restaurant that had the menu on the outside of the building in big letters. I, sitting in my car seat in the back, began ruminating: "Let's see, hamburger, cheeseburger, French fries..." My parents grew wide-eyed when they realized what was happening. "Are you...reading the menu?!" they gaped. Well duh. Being read to, watching Sesame Street, and just being an all-around neuro-freak enabled me to read before I was three.

## **You Wear It Well**

Lu's family had an apartment (where her dad taught trumpet lessons to all the boys we had crushes on) separated from their house by a raised concrete porch. This became the stage for our all-day rock 'n' roll shows. We'd pull the phonograph out onto the porch and play all of her older brothers' records: the Beatles; the Jackson 5; the Osmond Brothers; Blood, Sweat, & Tears; Badfinger; R. Dean Taylor; B.J. Thomas; the Pipkins; and many more. We'd sing. We'd dance. We'd set up chairs and demand our parents come be the audience.

## **Suspicious Minds**

Our family lore includes a few "horror" stories. The first was when I was very small, and Mom had a hair appointment, so Dad took me with him to look at a roofing job in Kentucky. The lady who owned the house refurbished old dolls, and she gave me one baby in a purple dress who had been the victim of a brutal haircut. I named her Justine, heaven knows why, and I loved her so much. We headed back home past cornfields and split-rail fences. As we approached the house, Dad realized he was suddenly quite ill. As soon as he hit the driveway, he bailed out of the truck and into the house, leaving me to continue pulling at loose threads on my woven silk shirt, slowly unraveling it like a cartoon character. Suddenly I realized both that I was going to be in trouble for destroying my shirt, and that I had been abandoned. So I began to cry.

Enter Mom. First she sees the open truck door, me still strapped in but with ripped clothing, and wailing like a banshee. Then she goes into the house and encounters a foul stench. She put two and two together and got five: Dad must have been murdered and his entrails exposed to the air. I think it was years before they could laugh about it.

A few years later, when my sister Kelli was a toddler, one stormless night the lights went out. I woke up and realized I was in pitch-blackness—the nightlight, the streetlights and house lights outside my window, and all else was out. I had never experienced total darkness before, so my unnatural conclusion (after perhaps a little too much reading about Helen Keller and Mary Ingalls) was that I had lost my eyesight somehow.

"I've gone blind!" I screamed. "I can't see a thing!" I always did have a flair for the dramatic. My parents awoke to the conclusion that someone had broken into the house and somehow blinded me, and also cut power to the house. So Dad grabbed his loaded shotgun from the closet and headed the eight steps over to our room. As he was trying to determine my condition, Mom crept up behind him. Thinking she was the intruder, he drew back to either punch or shoot her. Thankfully she caught his attention in time. Meanwhile, hello, I'm still blind over here. Once they'd gathered their wits, they explained that the electricity was out. And since it wasn't storming, the next logical conclusion was "squirrel in the transformer."

And on the lighter side, one Saturday morning when I was about 10, Dad was planning to insulate our house with urea formaldehyde foam, a material he had been using in his commercial roofing and insulation business. He drilled holes through the brick all the way around the house, and then was pumping the insulation into the walls. Kelli and I were watching cartoons in the living room when we heard something plastic hit the floor in the kitchen. We shrugged and went back to watching *Fat Albert*. A few minutes later I went to the kitchen for more Froot Loops, and I saw it: a five-foot-high (and rapidly growing) pile of white, hardening foam. A four-foot-square section of the drywall had blown out. The sound we heard was the plastic outlet cover hitting the kitchen floor. I stuck my head out the door and told Mom she'd better come look. She got Dad stopped. Later he patched the hole, but we still always knew it was there.

## **Monster Mash**

When I was very young, Dad ran his roofing business out of our house. Somehow Mom managed to run the business side of it and take care of two kids. We just had to be quiet when she was on the phone. They rented warehouse space elsewhere, but as the business grew, Dad decided to build his own building. And I don't mean that in a literal sense. The man got out there and built the concrete-block building himself, on a vacant lot just one house down from where he grew up on New York Street. When the red plastic letters he'd ordered for the sign on the building arrived, they were packed in actual popcorn, which I wanted to eat. My great joy was finding iron pyrite in the rocks he'd hauled in for the lot area.

It was here that the visual artists from UE came to experiment with the medium of urethane foam. They carved a small elephant out of block of the stuff. Dad brought home a giant "toadstool" that was a byproduct of the project, and we played with it outside for years. But the biggest project was the creation of a giant King Kong figure, which was to be hoisted onto the side of the 1891 Beaux-Arts former Vanderburgh County Courthouse as an advertisement for the JayCees haunted house down in the tunnel between the courthouse and the old jail. I watched the progress on Kong as they created his various segments: arms, legs, body, and giant head. Urethane foam in its natural state was a golden color, so the appendages were then painted a flat black. The crowning touch was the red translucent film behind his eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Add lights and a recording of gorilla growls and he was formidable indeed.

King Kong came back for several years, but nobody seems to know exactly what ultimately happened to him. There were reports that the top half of him became an attention-getting novelty on the roof of Raben Tire, and that he adorned the entrance to Mesker Park Zoo for a time. The people of Evansville remember him fondly, along with the giant Santa that Dad also helped make. Santa was made to advertise a Christmas-themed group of displays at the courthouse, called "The Enchantment of Christmas." I liked that much better than the

haunted house. One display I remember in particular was “Christmas on the Moon.” Santa ended up at Holiday World, which is just exactly where he belonged.

## **Strawberry Letter 23**

On a warm summer night, there was nothing we liked better than loading up the Oldsmobile and going to Lloyd’s Ice Cream Shop on Lincoln Avenue just west of Green River. The shop was mostly white with some black accents, with an old-timey font on the signs. They made all their own ice cream and it was wonderful. Dad would take our orders and then walk up to the window to get us sugar cones. He’d come back with an aluminum holder full of cones and a pile of flimsy napkins. I usually went for vanilla (still the best flavor, IMO), or sometimes peach. One time Dad teased me that he had dropped my cone on the sidewalk, and that was why it was full of little black dots. And that’s how I learned about vanilla bean.

Dad was a misanthrope and generally suspicious of the hippie teens in the city. But he remarked that at Lloyd’s, nobody was there to make trouble. Everyone was just there to eat ice cream. And he liked that.

Lloyd’s was also the scene of my biggest crime against Uncle Larry. He’d bought a new car and picked us up for a ride. Fatally, he took us through the Lloyd’s drive-thru. I was sitting on someone’s lap in the back seat with a vanilla cone in my hand. I was jostled, and my hand went straight up to the headliner, plastering ice cream on the interior of his new car.

In the ’80s, Lloyd’s rebranded as “Lics,” and as Paul Harvey would say, “Now you know...the rest of the story.”

## **Boogie Fever**

Was it just me, or was everyone else sick as a dog all the time in the ’70s? My sister and I brought home virus after ass-kicking virus. When that happened, Mom turned the living room into a hospital ward. She’d make us each a bed on the perpendicular couch and loveseat, where we’d toss and moan with searing fevers and world-rocking gastrointestinal symptoms. Mom would inevitably get sick too, and then Grandma, who by then had immunity to most things, would come tend to us. I’d had one too many trips to the bathroom, and I wailed to Grandma that I thought I had cancer of the butthole. Luckily she had a good sense of humor. She had to turn her head to keep from laughing in my face.

All those memes touting the magic formula of *The Price Is Right*, Sprite, and saltines for grade-school convalescence? They tell no lies.

## Shop Around

Before Eastland Mall opened in 1981, our primary shopping center was Washington Square Mall. It opened in 1963 and was the first enclosed mall in the state. The marquee advertised that it was always 72 degrees inside, which was a boon in our harsh winters and muggy summers. A multi-level fountain at the center of the mall had red and blue lights that alternated on and off. We always threw in a penny and made a wish. Unseen speakers played indiscernible songs. All we could hear were the annoyingly slow bass lines.

It was anchored on the ends by Sears and Stewart's (later L.S. Ayres). There were a few restaurants near the middle of the mall (before the atrocious "big top" food court was added in the late '80s). I have only the vaguest memory of the Round Table, a mid-century sit-down restaurant. Orange Julius had a walk-up counter with stools, and on nights when we needed an emotional lift, Mom would take us there for hot dogs (with diagonal cheese), Juliuses, and barbecued Ruffles. In the late '70s, Burger Farm opened a short-lived branch next door. And down the mall a little ways, Swiss Colony kept its slushy machine up front and at the ready. Last but certainly not least was the pristine Libs candy shop, from which we got Easter chocolate lollipops in the shape of bunny heads, kiss-shaped pastel mints with nonpareil-crusted bottoms, and the glorious pecan flipovers (aka turtles). A box of assorted chocolates was always a good last-minute gift, too.

The mall branch of the Baby Shop was down toward Sears. As advertised, it had baby needs and kids' clothes downstairs, and girls and teens clothes on the open balcony. The clerks wore crisp white uniforms, which scared the shit out of all of us babies because we thought they were going to give us a shot. Most kids in town got a birthday card from the store every year, signed by "Uncle Bob." I was in double digits before I realized that he was not, in fact, part of our family.

The Main Thing was a teen clothing store that was accessed via extended rock archways, so it always seemed spooky and mysterious. Across from it was the Paper Tiger, which sold books and stationery. Nearby was a branch of Baynham's shoes, which kept literal monkeys in the display windows. I liked to shop for clothes at the Sycamore Shop and Brooks, where I got a pink satin dress for junior prom (theme: Almost Paradise).

At the end of the '70s, they opened an arcade near the southeast corner of the mall. But the thing was, video games as we know them weren't introduced until a few years later. So what they had was Pong, Space Invaders, and a bunch of pinball machines. The coveted one was Gorgar, which had images of a demon and made scary talking noises.

Decades ago we started calling it “the sad mall.” The stores dwindled and were replaced by an odd assortment of off-brand clothing shops, antiques stores, and the valiant surviving Noble Roman’s. Today it’s primarily offices.

## **Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey**

My family of origin expanded to include my dad’s two brothers and their wives: Julian and Holly, and Larry and Carol. I liked Carol a lot when she started dating Uncle Larry. She was a gentle, kind person, and she would bring me pink Lance wintergreen mints and tickle my arms until I fell asleep on her lap on Grandma Cates’ couch on Sundays. One night in the early ’70s they dropped by and told us they had just gotten married. I played “Here Comes the Bride” for them on Grandma’s Magnus chord organ, which I had convinced Mom to let me borrow for a while.

We spent every Christmas Eve with Dad’s family, exchanging gifts, playing games, and in later years eating a massive buffet of Cantonese food since Aunt Holly worked at House of Chong. I have particularly happy memories of summer evenings when Dad would come home with a long, light green, seeded watermelon, and we’d call the aunts and uncles to come have some with us. Mom passed out the aluminum cake tins and forks and everyone got a circular slice. I went through a phase where I followed Dad’s suggestion to salt my watermelon, but that seems like anathema to me now.

Uncle Larry had a barber shop on Riverside Drive for his whole career, right next to Nina’s Pizza. Across the street was a tiny, ancient diner, Mutt and Mert’s. There were no tables; only barstools at the counter, which I thought was cool as heck. One time Dad took me there and we sat at the counter and had cheeseburgers and Ski before playing some pinball.

Around the corner was the neighborhood where Dad and his siblings grew up, and it was a scary place even then. A trailer park lay between Riverside and their house, which was built before WWII. Originally it didn’t have indoor plumbing, and they used the Sears catalog for toilet paper. Despite the stories he told, I never quite realized how good we had it back on Joyce Avenue.

## **On the Radio**

I discovered Casey Kasem and American Top 40 in the middle of the ’70s. Every Sunday he’d count down the top hits of the week, with touching long-distance dedications and some of the stories behind the songs. If I had my way, I’d spend hours with my ear against the radio, trying to guess which songs would be at the top, or using Dad’s cassette player/radio to tape my

favorite songs. But we usually spent Sundays at Grandma Cates' house, so it was always a power struggle to get to listen to as much of it as I could. I was obsessed, I will admit. But I can't imagine a better foundation for a lifetime as a pop music fanatic.