

Growing Up in Norman Rockwell's America

—A MEMOIR—

James J. Asher

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To protect personal privacy, some names, places and events have been altered to disguise the identity of people described in this book. Episodes about the Korean War are based on my personal experiences and those of other veterans. Other details about public figures are well-documented in many books written about the "forgotten war."

The 1930's, 40's, and 50's in America was the age of innocence. You can see all of us who lived then in Norman Rockwell's sentimental paintings on the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

In those days we had the leisure to enjoy each other, trust our leaders, and in school rooms across the nation, recite the pledge of allegiance every morning with our hand over our heart and a warm feeling of pride in that "grand old flag." It was a joyful experience recreating my childhood memories with all the marvelous grown-ups and playmates, most of whom are gone, who lived in my neighborhood in Detroit.

Men, women and children, working together, faced the greatest challenge to the nation since the Civil War. It was World War II. Our adversaries underestimated our strength and our courage, and we prevailed to help rebuild, not only our allies, but our enemies. What a tribute to the generous character of the American people.

I witnessed character again in the young soldiers I served with in the Army during the Korean War. It takes character to serve your nation with honor when there are no crowds

of well-wishers cheering and applauding as soldiers board the gangplank of ships that will take them to war. And, then coming home on those ships to silent docks, empty of people.

Acknowledgments long overdue

To Sister Alice Terese for showing me how to read about the adventures of Dick and Jane. And to all the other nuns in our elementary school—I think I can recite every name—who were perhaps one of the last generation of nuns to dress in religious costumes.

The nuns civilized me by showing me how to be courteous and respectful of others, especially adults. With their guidance, I discovered that for only five cents, I could board the city bus for a circuitous ride through Detroit streets to that gothic palace called the Detroit Public Library where I first found a literary treasure inside a locked glass cabinet.

It was a book—or rather a manuscript in galley form—opened to a page at random and I could read through the beveled glass, a sample of John Steinbeck’s *The Red Pony* with corrections for the typesetter in the author’s own handwriting. I could not bear to read more than a paragraph or two because I was overcome with envy. I ached to write like that but that voice in my brain said, “You can’t do it. You’re only a little kid. Besides, no one can create—no other human being—can put words on paper to create pictures like Steinbeck, no one.”

And across Woodward Avenue facing the Detroit Library was another huge gothic structure, the Detroit Art Museum where, as you ascended the wide marble staircase to the upper floor, towering murals on the walls in what seemed to be three-dimensional color flowed with you with each step, telling the poignant story of labor’s struggle for economic justice and dignity. The gold plate explained that the murals were created during the Great Depression by artists subsidized by the federal government’s WPA—an agency created to put people to work by the only president I ever knew growing up, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

What amazed me was that, for absolutely no fee, you could enter these magical places, the Detroit Public Library and the Detroit Art Museum, and be entertained for hours by browsing through books and paintings and sculpture—and by signing a paper, even a little elementary school person like myself could take some of the books home with me if I promised to return them in three weeks. They even gave me a small brown passbook to record the date for the return of the books.

The Detroit Public Library

I think I mentioned that the The Detroit Public Library was located directly across Woodward Avenue from the Detroit Art Museum. All I know is that for five cents, I could board a city bus and twenty minutes later, exit on the corner of the splendid marble mansion. Every time I ascended the tier of steps that sweep up majestically to the front entrance of the library in the main rotunda, there was another taunting display under glass, another priceless literary treasure, a galley proof with the author's hand written corrections. This one by Faulkner.

The manuscript was open, seemingly at random, and each time I would read a paragraph or two. It was so lovely and so moving that I was overcome with a strange emotion. I wanted to be a writer. But, how could anyone hope to write anything that approached the elegance of those words on that paper in that locked glass case?

Once on one of my frequent visits to the library, I happened into a side room where a professor from Wayne State University was delivering a lecture on archeology as he showed the students fossils displayed under glass. As I listened, I was stunned by the professor's vocabulary. Most of the technical words were alien to me. I wondered how anyone is able to cope with college if they have to decipher that strange language.

Another section of the library that fascinated me was books on drawing, especially cartooning. I envied people

who could capture Americana the way Norman Rockwell did. The painting that jumps into my memory is a big, burly traffic officer wearing white gloves and a whistle in his mouth, holding out his arms to stop traffic. The officer is looking down protectively as kittens in single file march behind their mother to cross the street.

As I inspected the Rockwell drawings, I marveled at the richness of the detail. I thought "This is something I might excel at. You work alone. No one bothers you, and you create something interesting." I also admired those cartoonists who captured some political event in a newspaper drawing. But drawing takes talent. I did not think the talent was there.

My dad tried to help

Once I mentioned drawing was of interest, he arranged for me to visit a mechanical engineer who was a customer in Dad's corner grocery store. He wanted me to witness first-hand what a mechanical engineer did. The gentleman was meticulously working on a three-dimensional drawing of a mechanical part. It was interesting, but not quite what I wanted.

Another customer taught cartooning at night to adults in the local public school. My dad introduced me to the gentleman, who invited me to join his class. I was scared. This was public school, and attending public school was "terrifying" for a parochial school kid. Looking back, that fear was absolutely unfounded and debilitating. Who knows the result of attending that class?

Years later, I heard an art instructor inspire his students with this comment, "I taught my grandmother to draw over the phone. If I can do that, think what I can do for you." Gee, anything is possible. I could have been another Charles Schulz.

Somewhere in my left brain a voice was whispering, "Cartooning. You can't do it! If you *could* do it, drawing would be easy." Maybe not. In a trip a few years ago to

Santa Rosa, California, my wife and I visited the studio of the Peanuts creator, Charles Schulz. I discovered that the most famous cartoonist of children got all "As" in art school except in a class focused on drawing children where he got his only "C" grade. If Charles Schultz had to work to develop skill in drawing children, perhaps there is hope for anyone interested in cartooning.

Making a living was my dad's greatest concern

My dad reminded me often, "You have to be able to talk to earn a living. You have to be able to sell by talking to people. Everybody is selling something, even the preacher, the politician, and the professor. When men and women are talking to each other, someone is buying and someone is selling, although it is often not clear which is which." I think he was really concerned that I would never be able to earn a living. I was quiet and scared and nervous.

It never occurred to me in my wildest fantasies that I would someday enjoy public speaking for large audiences of educators around the world or I would so thoroughly enjoy speaking to classes of college students that I would be the Number 1 professor in a field of 1,800 Ph.Ds.

One on one, I am still nervous speaking unless it is with good friends or family, but gather people in a large group and I can mesmerize them; I can sell them on any idea. I never thought I could ever match my dad as a storyteller, but my wife says, "Your dad was a fine storyteller but when you tell a story, it is magical."

The only clue to this was as an assignment in the 8th grade to write about an incident in your life. I wrote about Junior Asher, a distant cousin, younger than I who, while still in elementary school, played football with the high school students. Later he would go on to be captain of the University of Detroit football team and a prominent labor attorney. I don't know what I wrote. I wish I could retrieve the paper.

All I know is, the nun asked each of us to read our story in front of the class. I was so nervous, I held the paper I was reading and my tie to keep my hand from trembling. As I read, the class convulsed with so much laughter, they were falling out of their desks.

My poor father was so concerned about my future, which he implied was not bright "...unless you talk. People cannot figure out what you are about unless you talk." He was right, of course.

His other wise advice, which I could not, but absolutely should have followed, was, "Go to them; talk to them; win them over." Why do I want to win over a person I do not intend to talk to for the rest of my life? Once someone disappoints me, I can make them disappear. I understand Bing Crosby had the same screwball ability. That, I discovered, is a costly handicap.

When I started college his solution was to send me out with George Hamrah, who sold linens door-to-door from the trunk of his gray Ford coupe. The linens were neatly folded into two large brown scuffed-up suitcases. I was not scared. I was terrified.

As a boy, if my mother asked me to buy a few items in the corner grocery store or meat market, I wrote down what I was going to say so that my speech was not garbled. Now I was the sidekick to a guy who knocks on doors and invites himself in to sell linens.

George had swarthy complexion with steel gray hair with a widow's peak and uneven front teeth. George looked like a suave Sicilian gangster in one of those Martin Scorsese movies.

"George, " my father said, "Take the boy with you this weekend and show him how to go door-to-door and sell a product." My father did not realize that he had a kid with a librarian's personality forced to take on a job that I would select only if it was the last job on earth.

George was afraid of no one

George loved to talk and he would absolutely not take “no” for an answer. When he got past the front door, he would display a magnificent lace linen table cloth on a woman’s dining room table. “Is this beautiful?”

“Yes, George, it is beautiful.”

“Well, then. Buy it. Can you write me out a check for a hundred dollars?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts. Sit down and write out the check. You and your family will enjoy this table cloth for a lifetime. I want you to have it.”

I thought: *If I am forced to do this for a living, just shoot me.*

Chapter 1

Growing up in the 1930s

My father never did like FDR, which was how the newspapers liked to call President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I never understood why except that my father was a small business owner and I guess he identified with big business owners like Henry Ford. I suppose my father believed—in fact, I know he believed that perhaps someday, he too would join Mr. Ford and his family in the exclusive Grosse Point area where everybody was Republican and lived behind wrought iron gates and fences with spikes on top that cloistered the residents in acres of privacy.

More about Henry Ford

Henry Ford, as everyone knows, was the revolutionary inventor who created the world's first assembly line. Each worker on the assembly line specialized in handling only one part of a metal tinker toy for adults called the Model T car. You could order the car in any color you wanted as long as it was black. When my father first immigrated to Detroit, he worked for a short time at the Ford factory. He described the assembly line like it was a prison, except that when a whistle blew at the end of a shift, heavy doors slowly opened and you could go home for the evening.

There was a designated time for a rest room break in a lavatory with the windows wide open to the frigid winter weather encouraging workers to hurry up and return to the assembly floor. If one dallied too long, someone with a wooden baton would rap on the toilet door to remind you that your time was up. I don't know which job was more desirable: being on the assembly floor or patrolling the inside of the lavatory all day long holding a baton.

I don't want you to get the impression that Mr. Ford was a tight-fisted conservative. In those days, workers were

paid 25 cents an hour and everyone was aghast when banner headlines in all the Detroit newspapers announced that Mr. Ford would pay the astronomical wage of five dollars a day. In fact, this was the headline in newspapers around the world. In any event, getting back to President Roosevelt, because my father did not care for FDR, I felt it was my duty not to care for him either.

The grown-ups—a remembrance

Body Snatchers is Jack Finney's classic 1954 tale of familiar people around us disappearing and being replaced by people who look familiar, but are strangers. That timeless story that has been made and remade into movies is a metaphor for growing up. As children, adults are the grown-ups – the one's who run the show, tell us what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Then, imperceptibly and without a sound, they disappear, one by one, until all the grown-ups are gone. We look in the mirror one day and realize that we are now the grown-ups.

The grown-ups I knew lived in Detroit circa 1930's and 40's. The men went to work each day wearing hats, suits with a white Arrow shirt and tie, never a baseball cap, plaid shirt or Levis. Every weekday morning they boarded the trolley (called "streetcars") that clickety-clacked along the tracks on 12th Street and hissed to a stop on every block with the sound of metal on metal. The streetcar was fitted with comfortable wicker seats and a conductor up front who operated the vehicle by rotating a tarnished, gold-plated lever behind a leather curtain.

Another person in the black outfit of a train conductor with a gold pocket watch was stationed toward the rear door to collect the three cent fee and punch transfers. For a penny you could get a transfer that connected you to a network of streetcars that crisscrossed the city. The interior of the streetcar was clean and fun to ride as they swayed hypnotically back and forth down the track. Colorful ads above the inside

windows lined the length of the car and were graffiti-free. In fact, there was no word called "graffiti" in our vocabulary.

Other men in business suits clambered on the city buses and they too vanished for the day. I don't recall anyone backing out of their driveway in an automobile. Many families owned perhaps one automobile, but rarely two. A new car was an object of attention. "Where did they get the money?"

The grown-up women wore dresses, stayed home, did their housework in high heels and prepared meals as they listened to Aunt Jenny tell a heart-warming story on the radio to Seymore, her announcer and confidant with the mellifluous voice.

Each morning there was the clop-clop of a horse-drawn milk truck stopping in the street as the driver in white coveralls and white cap with a black bill exited. He leaned to one side as he carried a steel-tray of milk and cream bottles up driveways, depositing his products in a small door located towards the top of the side entrance of each house. The horse peered from side to side trying to see around leather blinders, exhaling and stamping its hoofs from time to time, patiently waiting for the driver's return.

In the 30's, I remember the ice man also in a horse-drawn truck with water dripping on the street from beneath a canvas flap on the back. The driver in a graceful, feline motion would flip back the leather flap and clutch a block of ice in steel tongs. He then lugged the ice resting on a leather pad upon his shoulder to the outside entrance of each house to be deposited in the top compartment of an ice box.

12th Street

I mentioned that the street car moved back and forth on 12th Street. Every product or service you wanted was located on 12th Street. On the west side was the parochial school with a fenced playground, and attached to the school was the church, and behind that a convent for the teaching nuns.

On the other side of the street were the shops and stores starting with a drug store where I was dispatched to fetch

R. G. Dunn cigars for my dad. I am surprised that I had no trouble buying the cigars. The druggist never insisted upon an ID to verify my age, although it was obvious that I was a kid. I'm glad I did not have to show ID because I never carried ID. No one did.

Next to the drug store was a small grocery store run by a middle-aged Jewish couple, and next was a small Chinese laundry where the workers still wore queues. My dad liked to have his white Arrow shirts cleaned there with light starch. (My dad insisted that every male clerk in his grocery store wear a white shirt and a tie.) Then there was an alley and the rest of the block was a high, red-brick wall enclosing an exclusive Catholic girls' boarding school.

In the next block was a supermarket (undersized by today's standards), and a barber shop where I went for haircuts. While I waited for my turn I sat in one of the captain's chairs that lined the long wall facing the three barbers working on customers. Along the top half of the wall behind me was a long mirror. Next to the first barber's station was a table-size Zenith radio with walnut veneer. It was always tuned to the baseball game with our home team, the Detroit Tigers.

What intrigued me was men reclining backward in the barber chairs, covered with a striped sheet, their faces hidden under a steaming hot towel. The barber stood along side, looking down protectively at his customer, and stirring a brush in a cup overflowing with white creamy foam. After removing the hot towel and applying a generous slather of shaving cream, the barber sharpened his straight-edge razor on a long, brown strap that dangled from the side of the barber chair.

There was something hypnotic about watching the quick, graceful movement of the barber's hand as it blurred back and forth, and up and down on the strap, and the distinctive sound of that long, glistening blade being sharpened. I wondered how many more years I would have to wait to

experience that shaving ritual, perhaps the working man's psychiatric therapy of the 1930's and 40's.

I never experienced a shave by a barber. By the time I was of age, the safety razor was the way to get a shave at home and then came the electric razor. I did see the shaving ritual a few years ago on a trip to China or perhaps it was Turkey. As our bus moved along the side streets, there on the sidewalk, a barber had his chair tilted back with a striped sheet on a reclining customer whose face was hidden under a hot towel in preparation for a relaxing old-fashioned shave with a straight-edge razor.

Boesky's Delicatessen

Further on down 12th Street near Hazelwood Avenue was a Jewish delicatessen with the most delicious corned beef sandwiches in the world. When you walked in the place, the aroma was intoxicating. It was a long, narrow, noisy restaurant with the counter and display cases in the front with meat dangling down on hooks from the ceiling. People wearing immaculate white aprons were busy taking orders, making those mouth-watering sandwiches, and kvetching with the customers.

In the back, there were tables scattered along the walls, almost hidden in the dim lighting. The rumor was that the Purple Gang, the children of Russian immigrants, liked to hang out at Boesky's. If I had been a member of the gang, I certainly would have selected this joint as the top of my list of hangouts. Some of the gang liked to play pool at a Moe's pool room a block or two away on Blaine Avenue, and then walk to Boesky's for something to eat.

The Purple Gang

From old Detroit newspapers I discovered where the name may have originated. There were several theories: One was that the gang liked to wear purple swim trunks when they

took a break from crime to swim at Lake St. Clair. Another involved their protection racket with Detroit Cleaners and Dyers. Since the Phoenician period, purple dye has been an important component for dyers. Still another explanation: During the taxi-cab war in Detroit, one line of cabs, known as the "purple line," was "protected" by a group of toughs.

When I say a "group of toughs," most people visualize big scary guys with scars from their hairlines to their chins, carrying baseball bats. The picture is reinforced with nicknames as "Abe the Agent," "Two Gun Harry," "The Professor," "One Arm Mike," "Uncle Izzy," and "Fat Sammy." But, in reality, their mug shots reveal men smallish in stature and light weight. The smallest was the dainty Sam Davies, barely five feet and weighing a hundred pounds. He was known as "The Gorilla" with a long rap sheet of armed robbery and suspicion of murder. There were almost no convictions for murder for gang members. Witnesses either disappeared or had a problem with their memory.

As teenagers, we never sat down at a table. We ordered one of those never-to-be forgotten sandwiches to go, got a chocolate malt at Cunningham's drug store fountain nearby, and sat on a park bench across the street to savor the dining experience. Inside Boesky's, I remember glancing in the periphery of my vision at figures huddled at tables in the back and wondering whether they were gangsters.

But I never stared or dallied long enough to identify anyone. What they did back there was their business. My business was to take that exquisite, sliced razor-thin corned beef sandwich on black Russian Rye with a crisp kosher pickle outside the establishment. I certainly did not want to be inside the place if a rival gang decided to settle a business argument with machine guns and sawed-off shotguns like the fast-moving action scenes we witnessed in those black-and-white Warner Brother's movies with James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson.

Chapter 2

The movie gangsters

I was fascinated to discover that movie gangsters like Cagney and Robinson were the exact opposite of the infamous roles they played in the movies. James Cagney started in show business by answering a small ad for background dancers in a Broadway production and he was thrilled that, without any dancing experience, he was hired. It was the 30's when jobs were scarce. Cagney was thrilled to be working doing anything. He discovered he had a talent for dancing as did another Hollywood movie "tough guy," George Raft.

Although audiences enjoyed Cagney's performances as a "tough guy" in those B movies, he considered himself a song-and-dance man. We are fortunate that he was finally able to showcase his enormous skill and talent singing and dancing as George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. When an interviewer once asked Cagney what he thought of his performances as a gangster, he replied, "Don't ask me. Ask the guy who buys a ticket to see the movies." When a writer wanted to chronicle his life story, Cagney responded, "My life is ordinary and boring. Nobody wants to read about it."

Cagney's biggest fan may have been his loyal and outspoken wife, Billie. When she was once asked her occupation, she answered without missing a beat, "Taking care of James Cagney." Their devotion to each other is evident when he won the Academy Award, came home, and said to his wife, "Billie, I couldn't have done it without you." She said, "Boy, you're damn right you couldn't have done it without me!"

Cagney must have been tempted many times by the seductive women around him, but he was true to Billie, except once. His leading lady at the time was perhaps the most gorgeous woman on earth, Merle Oberon. They were on a train going to a movie location and Cagney accepted an invitation to join the lady in her compartment. He was partly undressed, when he was flooded by the unbearable feeling that he was about to do something he would regret. He dressed, apologized, and hastily departed for his own quarters.

Edward G. Robinson

With the wealth from his movie acting, Edward G. Robinson was a collector and connoisseur of fine art. I think Edward G. Robinson would have preferred to be a mild-mannered college professor specializing in art history.

He abhorred guns so much that he would reflexively flinch every time he was required in a movie to discharge a firearm. In desperation, the studio taped his eyelids open so he would not blink when a gun went off.

I met Edward G. Robinson face-to face. It was a peculiar meeting. I was on my way to work in heavy traffic. On a side street, the light turned red, but a long, shiny Cadillac was stopped along side my yellow convertible Volkswagen. I turned and found myself looking into the face of the driver in an overcoat and black homburg hat. It was Edward G. Robinson. The encounter lasted only a few seconds but the expression of his face told me:

“Yes, I am the person you think I am.”

“ No, we can’t go and have a cup of coffee and discuss my movies.”

“I appreciate that you are a fan, but in a moment I will be gone.”

Humphrey Bogart

Humphrey Bogart was in real life the opposite of the thugs he played in the movies. As the son of a prominent surgeon and socialite mother, he posed as a child model in magazine ads. Later on Broadway, he played the good-looking but naughty ivy-league playboy who popped into scenes with a stylish sweater tied around his neck and a tennis racket on his shoulder as he inquired, “Tennis anyone?” Almost by chance, he got the role on Broadway of the notorious Duke Mantee in Sherwood Anderson’s *The Petrified Forest*.

When Hollywood decided to make the play into a movie, the only person they wanted in the movie from the Broadway

production was the star, Leslie Howard, who played a professor. Howard insisted that he would only take the role in the movie version if Humphrey Bogart played Duke Mantee on the screen. After that success, Bogart became another tough guy for every “B” movie on the Warner Brothers lot. Being something of a matinee idol amused the down-to-earth, hard-drinking Bogart who liked to make fun of producers who took seriously the work of making forgettable pot-boilers.

Young Stanley Kramer was assigned as a producer on one of Bogart’s many talk-from-the-side-of-your-mouth prison films. Years later, Kramer would go on to produce critically-acclaimed, prize-winning motion pictures such as *High Noon* with Gary Cooper and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* with Spencer Tracy. Bogie met Kramer for the first time with a cynical smile and the inquiry: “Another producer? Tell me, what does a producer do on this film?”

Bogart expected the boyish Kramer to be a sycophant cowering in fear before the star of the movie. But without missing a beat, Kramer responded, “I look after a sawed-off, balding little guy who makes faces at the camera.” A stunned Bogart roared with laughter as he tumbled out of his canvas-backed chair onto the floor.

Ahhh, the movies

They tell us now that it was the “golden age” of motion pictures and music. As Helen O’Connell, a popular big band singer of the 1940’s, who topped the charts with *Green Eyes*, once remarked, “If I had known it was a ‘golden age,’ I would have paid more attention.”

On a Sunday afternoon or better yet, Saturday afternoon was the time to walk five blocks to the neighborhood theater, the Tuxedo. For fifteen cents, the Saturday matinee was your best buy. You got a serial: Tom Mix, Buck Rogers. Flash Gordon, the Lone Ranger, or Dick Tracy – followed by those slam-bang Warner Brothers films with Bogart, Cagney, Robinson, or Flynn.

Next to the theater was a small confectionery shop where kids bought penny candy (Milk Duds at five cents were my favorite) or a box of pop corn to take into the movie next door. The pop corn box was so small, many boxes would fit into the pop corn tub sold in modern movie theaters. But, everything was small: pop corn, candy bars, soda pop—everything. Maybe that is why there were no overweight people in the 1930's and 40's; at least, I can't remember seeing them.

The confectionery shop was run by an Armenian man in a gray waist-length warehouse coat. It seemed to me he carried change in his pocket to close a sale quickly since kids wanted to get inside the theater before the previews of coming attractions flashed on the screen. He was rather tall with a pleasant face, dark complexion, and coal-black hair. He looked like he immigrated from some country around Syria.

No one in the theater tried to forbid kids or anyone from entering with popcorn or candy, which is surprising since there was a counter inside with a variety of candy for sale. I could be wrong, but I don't believe soft drinks of any kind were allowed in the theater. When the show was over, there was no debris anywhere in the theater. The place was neat and clean when you walked in, and neat and clean when you walked out.

Every movie theater had an usher in a uniform wearing white gloves and carrying a flashlight. If you entered late, it was the job of the usher to find you seats and guide you along the dark aisle with his or her flashlight.

Before the main features, there was a cartoon and the newsreel. I remember the noise was deafening when the American flag flashed on the screen. The audience went crazy, with cheering, whistling and applause.

It was the age of innocence. I think we may have had a psychotic episode if we had any inkling about the private lives of our heroes. It was unthinkable that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the only president we knew growing up in America, could have a mistress. It was unthinkable that

movie idol, Tyrone Power, could be homosexual or that Errol Flynn was perhaps bisexual and a Nazi sympathizer. We had never heard the expression, "bisexual." I never knew anyone who was divorced. No one on the street ever mentioned to me that there were cross-dressers or transvestites in the world. I don't think you could find the word, "pedophile" in the dictionary. It is unbelievable now that the computer screen of anyone's neighborhood is apt to show a scatter of red dots for registered sex offenders living nearby.

Special people

Certainly none of those aberrant terms applied to nuns or priests, who were to us, special people, who not only did not have sexual urges, but may have been able to dispense with other bodily functions of ordinary people. For example, once a side door in the school cafeteria was slightly ajar and inside were the nuns eating their lunch at a long narrow table. The sight only lasted for a few seconds before someone shut the door, but the word flashed through the school: "Kid claims he actually saw nuns eating."

In the movies, a man and a woman were never seen in the same bed. Always twin beds. Language was sanitized. When people found out that the words, virgin, mistress, pregnant, and seduction were used in the *Moon is Blue*, they lined up around the block to see that audacious film. They could not believe that someone would utter a taboo word in a motion picture. The movie was banned by the Catholic Church.

In our cloistered world, we pretended that sex did not exist. I can still hear a friend, Jimmy Sharkey, quietly whisper to another friend, "You know. You shouldn't say 'nookie' out loud where people can hear you. When you say that you got some nookie last night, people may think the wrong thing. They don't know you were just necking."

Only wealthy people attended night clubs, got divorces, had children out-of-wedlock, took cruises to Europe, traveled by airplane, and smoked marijuana.

Chapter 3

Radio

The Lone Ranger

A national program produced in Detroit was *The Lone Ranger*. He was a mysterious loner who wore a black mask over his eyes, rode a huge white stallion named Silver, and conversed with his faithful Indian companion, Tonto, who spoke in short telegraphic utterances to the man he called, "Kimosabe."

The Lone Ranger was an ex-Texas Ranger who was nursed back to life by Tonto after a near fatal shoot out. The Lone Ranger fought crime in the frontier and brought criminals to justice without harming them. He was lightning-fast on the draw and had the skill of shooting the gun from a bad guy's hand.

Each episode ended with one of the grateful victims saying, "Who was that masked man?" Someone else replies, "I don't know, but he left this silver bullet." I think the small black mask that covered his eyes and nose would have given away his identity.

The Green Hornet

Another Detroit radio original was *The Green Hornet*, a wealthy gentleman who wore a full-face green mask at night and fought crime from the back seat of his powerful, slick limo named, *The Black Beauty*, driven by his faithful chauffeur and crime-fighting assistant, Kato.

The Green Hornet never used fire arms, but a non-lethal gas, when necessary, to subdue an adversary. This never occurred to me as a kid listening to the program: Once he stepped out of his limousine wearing a full-face green mask, I think it would be difficult to blend unnoticed into a crowd on the street.

The Shadow

One of my favorite radio dramas was the Blue Network's *The Shadow*, Lamont Cranston in real life, who discovered a

secret in the Orient for clouding men's minds so that he was almost invisible except for a shadow on the wall. The program opened with, "Who knows the evil that lurks in the minds of men? The Shadow knows. Heh, heh, heh!" The opening alone was worth the entire episode.

Another Sunday night radio favorite was *Sam Spade*, Dashiell Hammett's, hard-boiled detective played by Howard Duff. In the 1930's, Hammett actually was a private detective working for the Pickerton Detective Agency in San Francisco. Their slogan, "The eye that never sleeps."

The sponsor of *Sam Spade* was Wildroot Cream Oil for well-groomed hair. The announcer, Dick Joy, suggested with boyish enthusiasm, "Get Wildroot Cream Oil, Charlie! The non-alcoholic hair tonic with lanolin. Again, again the choice of men who put good grooming first." It is strange that I don't see hair-grooming products advertised anymore.

Spade started the program with a report to Lieutenant Dundee of the San Francisco Police Department. He would dictate the report to his secretary, Effie Perrine, played by Lurene Tuttle, whom he called, "Sweetheart."

He would identify himself and recite his private detective license number 137596, and then narrate an exciting adventure with terse, clipped dialogue with actors "stepping on" each others lines for realism.

Always, in each episode, Spade would be "sand bagged" in some alley or hotel room by the criminals he was investigating. You can count on Sam being hit with a "sap," pistol-whipped, nearly drowned, cut, poisoned, or strangled. Effie sympathized with him as he described his numerous contusions and hematomas.

To off-set the trauma of being a private detective, Sam encountered some of the most gorgeous women in San Francisco. The plot had twists and turns and many characters, but in the end, Sam prevailed to take on the dark underbelly of the city next week, and dictate still another report to Lt. Dundee.

Sam's first-person descriptions were colorful pictures such as, "The town was located in a corkscrew Arizona canyon with a dusty main street. Parked cars on either side of the street were broiling in the sun. I could see through the fly-specked windows that this was the Last Chance Saloon. I made my way carefully up some rickety wooden steps, and stepped through a screen door that banged shut behind me..."

Jack the Bell Boy

A popular disc jockey was Jack the Bell Boy who broadcast from a sound-proof glass kiosk in a downtown radio studio. Somehow (or maybe it was a publicity stunt) Jack got into a feud with a famous band leader, Vaughn Monroe. Jack refused to play any of Monroe's records, the most memorable of which was *Let it Snow! Let it Snow! Let it Snow!* Teenagers wrote hundreds of protest letters.

I squirm when I think about all the dumb things we did as kids. I was five or six and a fan of the radio program, *Tom Mix*. The other radio program I liked was *Little Orphan Annie* with the baritone voice of the announcer, Pierre Andre who convinced us that we absolutely must mail in the tin from the top of Ovaltine and 25 cents for Annie's Secret Decoder Ring.

After every episode, we would gather around the radio with a fat pencil and paper as Pierre uttered each letter and number in the secret message. I remember after one episode, I got this secret message when I twisted the dial on the ring click-by-click to get: B-e s-u-r-e t-o d-r-i-n-k y-o-u-r o-v-a-l-t-i-n-e.

The *Tom Mix* announcer in mellifluous tones made this irresistible offer: For a box top from a package of Ralston cereal and 25 cents, you can have the same make-up kit that Tom Mix uses to disguise himself so that he is not recognized by the criminals he is investigating. Well, why not? I refused

to eat the cereal, which was served hot and lumpy like oat meal, but I needed that box top. I thought it would be fun to disguise myself from my friends and family just like my hero, Tom Mix.

I was thrilled to get a package in the mail with a return address from Tom Mix. I tore it open and found several fake mustaches and beards, some brown-looking salve in a small round tin. That was to cover your face in case you wanted to disguise yourself as an Indian. I think they included a head band with a colorful feather. Now I was ready to move around the neighborhood incognito.

I remember playing Tom Mix with my friend, Jimmy, who was a year or two older than me. I was the criminal and Jimmy was playing Tom. My nose and mouth were covered with a red and white polka dot kerchief. Jimmy tied my hands behind my back, with a rope around my neck attached to an iron bar that held up the awning on our front porch. I was standing on a chair, waiting for him to kick the chair from under me when my mother appeared from nowhere and shrieked, "Stop!" We were startled. What's wrong?

My mother's face was a ghost-white and her hand was trembling. "Jimmy, please go home! Go home, now!" I had no idea this episode would end my friendship with Jimmy until I walked over to his house the next day and sang, "Jimmy! Jimmy." Nobody rang doorbells in those days. Every kid just went up to the friend's house and called out, "Jimm-me! Jimm-me." I was hurt when his mother appeared on the porch and said, "Go home! Don't come back!"

I liked Jimmy and his younger brother, Ralph, even though they were Protestants. We were not supposed to associate with Protestants. I never knew why, but that was the rule. I think it was alright to associate with Jews, maybe because Jesus was a Jew before He became a Christian. We were not aware of any other religions.

It was fun playing at Jimmy and Ralph's house. I was fascinated with the array of painted lead soldiers the boys

had in their bedroom along with souvenirs of World War I that their dad brought back from the trenches. I was particularly impressed with a bayonet and an allied helmet called a “tin hat” that looked like an inverted soup dish with a wide brim.

Their father was a tall, handsome man, always impeccably dressed in a suit, tie, overcoat and hat. He suffered without complaint from the poison gas that was used for the first time in warfare by the Germans, and is now outlawed in modern warfare.

Both Jimmy and Ralph grew into very tall, handsome young men, one becoming a professional chemist and the other a geologist. We passed each other on the sidewalk through the years without speaking. I regret not reaching out to them to make amends, but what exactly did I do wrong?

I mentioned the public school that Jimmy and Ralph attended. I often said that it was a mistake that my parents did not send me to that public school located only six or eight blocks from our house. That school was equipped with state-of-the-art in everything. There was at least one Olympic-size swimming pool, maybe two. There was a track, a stadium for baseball and football. The huge buildings were surrounded with acres of well-manicured lawns.

Inside, the classrooms were immaculate and students were orderly. They offered every course you can imagine from science with real science labs to industrial arts to music to... you name it. The teachers were smiling, friendly and ready to help any student who reached out to them. As I look back, I think I would have flourished in that milieu with a range of subjects to explore, especially botany. Now, I am thrilled to be growing in huge blue ceramic pots on my sun-drenched deck in Northern California, oranges, grapefruits, peaches, cherries, lemons and limes.

Since I was curious and open to discovery, compliant and able to follow directions, who knows? Being a student in that rich environment of the well-equipped public school, I may have won a Nobel Prize, a Pulitzer Prize, an Oscar, or a Toni.

Chapter 4

Summer in Detroit

In the summer, I often awoke hearing another horse-drawn wagon and the sound of a man's voice singing an aria to the neighborhood, "Strawberries, red raspberries. Four quarts for a quarter." At a school reunion, one of my classmates commented, "It couldn't be 'four quarts for a quarter'. Times were tough, but I don't see how anyone could make a living with that price." Maybe he is right, but I can still hear the musical announcement from fruit vendors, who always wore cloth caps and aprons, signaling that summer was here.

No school. Time to play baseball in the corner lot and read comic books—a new kind of entertainment at ten cents a copy. Each week, there was a brand-new hero at the magazine stand: *Superman*, *Batman*, *The Spirit*, and *Aqua Man*, all dedicated to fighting the "vermin and scum" that were somewhere in the city, but certainly not in our neighborhood.

Popular Mechanics

It was fun to send for free things advertised in the classified section of *Popular Mechanics*. It was strange that we had a subscription to *Popular Mechanics* since no one in the family had a trace of mechanical aptitude or interest. I always wished that someone in the family could build those marvelous things. My friends and I settled for the free stuff such as samples of medicines that came in small cardboard boxes. The promoters of these products would curse us if they knew that we immediately removed the sample pills, ran outside to the sidewalk and smashed them on the cement with our heels. We giggled as the green and brown fluids oozed in all directions.

The classified ads in the back of *Popular Mechanics* were another source of entertainment. One ad in particular fascinated me. It showed a sketch of a man bent over carrying a box on his back. A voice coming from the box said, "Hey, be careful! I'm inside the box!" The ad read: "Impress your