

## Chapter 1

### *Once upon a time in 1962*

In another classic film, *American Graffiti* – the question was asked: “*Where were you in ‘62?*” I remember vividly – and that’s not only a good a time and place to begin this story – it’s actually where it did, in fact, begin.

I was living with my father and his wife in Mt. Arlington, New Jersey, on Lake Hopatcong. Our house on Lakeview Terrace sat across from a magnificent mansion that was once the home of Lotta Crabtree – a prolific star of grand vaudeville shows in the late 19th century. Our little house was once the home of people who (doubtless) could ill afford a ticket to attend a vaudeville show.

The old Crabtree mansion was empty back then, only to be purchased years later by a local contractor who meticulously restored it to its turn-of-the-20th-century glory days. I wrote a screenplay a while ago where the “Mancini family” lives in that house. A gala family party takes place on its sweeping lakeside lawn. I’ve entertained fantasies of commiserating with the current owner so as to be able to shoot a few key scenes there. Someday, perhaps. First I have to sell that script. But I digress.

Ours was a relatively happy home, although I had to share in with a gray long-haired cat aptly named, “Beethoven” (a “longhair” get it?) I detested that beast. And he – me. Now and then, when I was enduring one of dad’s tongue-lashings for a disappointing report card or some other infraction, I swear I could hear that cat laughing under the couch. One day, the creature dragged a dead bird it’d found into the house, and proudly dropped it on the kitchen floor. You’d think with all the fuss that was made of the cat’s prowess, it had found the dead sea scrolls or unearthed Jimmy Hoffa’s union thumb, therefore solving the mysterious whereabouts of the teamster boss’s remains.

Dad owned and operated the Cloverleaf Luncheonette down in what was the town of Landing on the southernmost tip of the lake. In its heyday, trains from New York and elsewhere en route to Hopatcong would disembark vacationers to be transported by boat to various residences and hotels. Lake folks in the 50’s and 60’s would still boat

down to Landing, have lunch, and maybe pick up some groceries or a pizza. There was a small pizzeria in Landing where they'd twirl the dough high in the air with stunning grace and dexterity. Slices were 25¢. Choices included plain or sausage – small or large. No cornucopia of “toppings” back then. One day, some out-of-town bumpkin dared to request pineapple on a pizza. They laughed, and shot him dead.

Another popular attraction on Lake Hopatcong was Bertrand's Island – an amusement park that for years featured games, rides and in the 40 and 50's various entertainers. Dean Martin was rumored to have performed there, pre-Jerry Lewis. I recall “Nickel Night” where all the rides and attractions were only 5¢. Great fun to arrive by “sea” in dad's small boat, which of course he sold the summer before I became old enough to use it to entertain scantily clothed members of the opposite sex.

Bertrand's Island featured a classic wooden roller coaster. The slow clack-click-clack of the coaster's wheels warned of the precipice when suddenly it lurched downward causing death-defying screams that were heard throughout the evening, echoing over the lake. In 1985, the park was featured in Woody Allen's film *Purple Rose of Cairo*. Today Bertrand's Island is a blanket of condominiums. But I'm grateful to say I was there in its wild and woolly heyday – and fearlessly rode that old roller-coaster!

The Cloverleaf and had a lunch counter with chrome stools topped in red leatherette. Fly fans would auger not only the flies, but the euphoric aroma of grilled peppers n' onions for our “Philly cheese steaks” and other delights we'd whip up behind the counter. The best cheeseburgers in New Jersey – or Paradise for that matter (Jimmy Buffett would've been very, very impressed).

I began my retail apprenticeship there by unpacking boxes of beach toys and novelties that arrived weekly in big cardboard boxes. My charge and challenge was to count the inventory and compare it to the shipment's manifest.

Typically included in the delivery were Revelle plastic model car kits. They were “must-haves” for a pre-teen boys in the 50's and 60's. It was a *huge perk* when your dad owned a store that sold model car kits! I stacked and re-stocked shelves, and eventually earned an opportunity work behind the lunch counter – where the real action was!

An older gent, our fry cook – was a older mensch named Harry Bernstein. When he was out of earshot, we called him “Hairy Bernstein”, because the poor guy should have been wearing a hair net on his forearms. Nicest man in the world though. ‘Taught me

how to flip eggs-over-easy without breaking the yolk. Nothing worse than trying to “dip” toast into a broken, flat, light-yellow and tasteless yolk. They simply don’t “dip”.

I’d don my apron, and hone the technique of flipping those eggs over easy. Harry would watch me, and wink when I’d do it just right. I’d grill onions for the burgers – always maintaining the intact, fried *slice* – never chopped or separated rings. I rinsed and loaded the stainless steel Hobart dishwasher, and periodically cleaned the dreaded “grease trap”. I’d describe it – but you might be trying to eat while reading this.

A must-have on the menu was Taylor Ham. Or Taylor “Pork Roll”, if you will. A staple of spicy breakfast meat well-known to, and sacred to anyone from New Jersey. If you didn’t have Taylor Ham on your menu, the Board of Health would shut you down for insubordination. To this day, it’s a mandatory sandwich – on a hard roll with egg n’ cheese during any pilgrimage down to the Garden State. Nothing like noticing poppy seeds lodged between your teeth in your rear-view mirror.

I mastered the art of “egg creams” – a popular fountain drink. Rumor had it egg creams originated in Brooklyn. My father’s wife hailed from the Bay Ridge neighborhood, so we had a little “connection” there. Many of our customers were vacationing New Yorkers – or had roots in the city. An egg cream consisted of milk, carbonated water and chocolate syrup. Ironically, there were no eggs – or cream in the recipe. A delicious concoction, nonetheless! I mention this to bolster book sales in Brooklyn.

We employed the classic lime-green colored Hamilton Beach milkshake blender. A vanilla malt was my shake-of-choice. There was a fancy glass jar for maraschino cherries – a must to top-off any ice cream sundae. We offered “crullers” – twisted pastry made with French “choux pastry” – lighter and just altogether different than run-of-the-mill donuts. With a little cinnamon sugar ... *c’est si bon, mon amis!*

Eventually, I graduated to commandeering the cash register. I was only 13 – but I could “make change”. A skill that, later in life, is completely useless. As mentioned, many of the store’s customers had summer homes on Lake Hopatcong, and would commute to New York City on the Lakeland Bus Line. We’d open at 6 AM, and, like the old Billy Joel tune, “the regular crowd would shuffle in”. Commuting businessmen would pick up “the pape-ahs” an a pack a’ smokes – Kent, Lucky Strike, and of course Camels (Joe Camel wasn’t even born yet) were popular brands along with White Owl and Tiparillo cigars. For old Italian guys, “rum-soaked” Crooks or DiNobli’s. We sold

cough drops – Smith Brothers and Luden’s Honey and Wild Cherry.

I was an observant little chap who took pride in politely pointing out to a gent that he’d forgotten to button the buttons on his button-down shirt. Button-down shirts were the new 60’s fashion rage in the 60’s. Comedian Bob Newhart had a album titled; *The Button-down Mind of Bob Newhart*. On Ed Sullivan or late night TV, Newhart would sit on a stool, hand to ear, and feign a conversation with an (obviously) unheard voice on the other end. He’d set the joke up by repeating; “You say – you say Mr. Smith you’re wife’s out of town ...? Or “Well sir, nothing – nothing wrong with that ...” – and then launch into an elaborate monologue. Funny stuff! As was Mort Saul, Shelly Berman and later good ol’ Bill Cosby, “America’s Favorite Dad” and closet degenerate.

Other dress shirts had a little snaps on the collars that would hold them taught under the tie knot. Still others had plastic “stays” inserted in the collar – or collar pins. Sinatra loved collar pins. I took great pride in calling attention to a guy’s unbuttoned collar before he got to the office where colleagues might make fun of his sartorial slight. ‘Same thing reminding a guy to zip up his fly. It was “a service” (that later in life would be extended to me if you’ve been paying attention). It was the least I could do. Many were grateful for the “heads-up” or “fly’s down” as it were. Others would storm out in a grouchy huff. Then outside at the bus stop, I’d see them light up a cigarette, button down their collar – or zip up their pants. Again – funny stuff.

On Sunday, we’d show up early to “do the papers”. Back then, newspapers had various sections that were delivered in separate bundles. There was the *New York Times*, *The Daily News*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Newark Star-Ledger* and the local *Morris County Daily Record*. There was a Jewish population on the lake, so we offered them the *Daily Forward* written in the Hebrew alphabet’s “square script”. There was an Italian language newspaper as well. It was delivered with a wrapped-up dead fish (nah –just kidding!). We’d arrive at the storefront to see the bundles piled up in front of the store, thrown off the “bobtail” trucks in the early, pre-dawn hours.

“Let’s get to it, boys!” Dad would command, laying out a box of jelly donuts. There’s nothing quite like Jersey jelly donuts – or even better ones “down the shore”.

We’d snap the 6-gauge wires that were used to bind the bundles. Each section would be set up on the counter’s row of stools. Then you’d walk from one end of the count-

er to the other collating sections until the paper was complete. The *New York Times* topped the list with maybe 7 or 8 sections. Completed, it was 6+ inches thick. Maybe 20 pounds of journalism back when there were journalists to write stories and newspapers could afford to pay them. Columnists like Jimmy Breslin and Pete Hamill were just beginning to “make their bones” (i.e., getting their careers underway). It wasn’t until later in life I became aware of, and a devotee of their genius. As I write this, the ink is barely dry on Pete Hamill’s obituary. The title of his memoir, *The Drinking Life* forced me to change mine to *Musical Chairs*.

I vividly recall snapping the wire one Sunday morning in August of 1962 to see a picture of Marilyn Monroe – and the shocking headline announcing her death. She’d apparently died of an overdose of barbiturates in Los Angeles. It’d been well known that Marilyn had been struggling with the “burden” of fame and fortune. A pall of silence fell over the luncheonette that morning. Years later, Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind” would eulogize her death – noting that she was found in the nude. Compelling imagery. Nothing visually alluring or interesting about a fully-clad corpse.

Detective: “Uh-oh! Hey Frank – here’s the body ... “

Detective’s partner: “Is it naked?”

Detective: “Nah, fully dressed ... shirt collar’s even buttoned.”

Detective’s partner: “Damn! Jus’ call it in, an’ let’s get a cup a’ caffee.”

Regardless, Marilyn’s passing was surely more than the death of an actress, but larger-than-life sexual icon who’s “candle certainly burned out – long before her legend ever did”. Her ex-husband and (our) Yankee hero, Joe DiMaggio, was reported to have arranged the funeral service.

I have such fond memories of that store. Not the least of which were two sisters who, in winter would skate down to Landing, walk across the street, and enter dad’s store on skates – or, more to the point – on Dad’s linoleum floor with their sharp, steely skate blades.

“Get those kids out of here!”, Dad would bark.

“But Dad, they’re kinda cute ...”

“Get ‘em OUT!”

Today, those sisters are still friends. I sold my ‘62 Red Corvair to one of them when I fled New Jersey in order to seek fame and fortune in California. I’m unsure if she still

skates ... I'll have to ask her. But I'm sure by now she sold the Corvair.

Dad hired a waitress that summer. Vincenza Romano, or "Vinnie". I adored Vinnie. I tried, wherever she showed up for her counter shift, to act cool. I began to cultivate a pompadour, using massive gobs of Pomade. I quoted Fabian at every opportunity. Every move I made was intended to attract attention – any slight notice at all – from this Sicilian siren. No matter if her brothers came into the store, speaking Italian with shot-guns slung on their shoulders, quoting Al Capone. Everyone was welcome. Alas, Vinnie was older ... maybe even 18! But she was surely the first of my life-long pathetic penchant for, and attraction to older women.

Along the counter-top, were little mini-juke boxes. You'd flip the charts pages and push the buttons choosing "A-5" or "D-7". Each song selection would set you back 10¢ per song – or 3 tunes for a quarter. The Tokens' *"The Lion Sleeps Tonight"* was a hot hit. *"A-wheem-a-wet, a wheem-a-wet"* ... drove ol' Harry Bernstein stir crazy. "That song's meshuganah!" he'd decree.

Having a jukebox in the luncheonette was another perk of one's father owning a store. Every other week or so, a slick character named Dominic – our juke box guy – came in with new records to install. The juke box was down in the cellar. There was no room for it up in the store. After all, we had those counter-top mini-jukes that were happy to ingest your quarter. The juke a huge, multi-colored-light monstrosity that sat glowing in the corner of the dark cellar. It was reminiscent of a character in a Stephen King story where a sinister juke box eats teenagers who dared to venture down there. A week or so later, it would spit out a hit record about a missing teen; *"Ob where-ob-where could my ba-by be – the Lord took her away from me .."* 'Had nothin' to do with the Lord – it was a satanic jukebox! The music was piped from the cellar to speakers mounted upstairs in the luncheonette.

Dominick claimed to have been a member of the Dovells, who had a hit that summer with *The Bristol Stomp*. *"The kids in Bristol are sharp as a pistol When they do the Bristol Stomp – whoa-ob-ob!"* ... Dominic could do "whoa-ob-ob" spot-on. Well enough to impress a 13-year old. I often wondered how come he was still loading records with a top hit on the charts. I didn't ask – it was more prestigious to know (and tell Vinnie) he was a member of the Dovells. Good ol' Dom would give me the 45 rpm records he'd remove from the juke box so as to install the latest hits. "Hits" back then had a shelf life

of about 2 weeks. No matter – I was amassed an awesome collection.

It truly was a great year for music. *Sherry* was the phenomenal (and inaugural) smash hit for The Four Seasons. Most especially where we lived, as Frankie Valli, Bob Gaudio, Tommy DeVito and Nick Massi were “Jersey Boys”. Other music we listened to in the summer was Chubby Checker’s *The Twist*, Shelley Fabares’ *Johnny Angel*, Dee Dee Sharp’s *Mashed Potatoes*, Gene Chandler’s *The Duke Of Earl* – and my grandfather’s favorite: Nat King Cole’s *Ramblin’ Rose*. From California, the Beachboys’ immortal *Surfin’ Safari*, *Surfin’ USA* – and surfin’ just about everywhere else was the rage. It was the West Coast Sound “sound” we couldn’t get enough of. The Beatles were not yet a twinkle in Ed Sullivan’s eye – but it would not take long before the “British Invasion” would be upon us – and pop music would never be the same.

All too soon, Labor Day was upon us, and summer was gone. Leaves began to fall upon the lake. Vinnie left for college. Harry left for a well-deserved position in a swanky restaurant. Even the Dovell’s broke up and went their separate ways.

That’s where I was in ‘62. I would not have wanted to have been anywhere else. Moreover, I would not have wanted to *be* anyone else – other than maybe a Dovell.

My only option was to get ready for high school. But first I had to dismantle my prodigious pompadour and assume the far less cool, Catholic-school “preppy” look. If not, my dad was gonna kill me. Even if I survived my father’s thrashing, a nun would no doubt finish me off. Not even Vinnie’s tough-guy brothers would challenge a nun. It would be a hoot to imagine, if this memoir were ever published, that either Harry, Dominick or Vinnie might read this and say; “Wait ... 1962? Landing, New Jersey?

The Cloverleaf Luncheonette – *THAT Buddy Doyle?*

Aye – t’was I!

The Dovells: Arnie, Len, Jerry and Mike.  
(Apparently Dominick was busy loading records when they took the picture)

