

"Once Upon a Time in the Catskills - A Memoir of Summer, 1958"

by Phil Ratzer

Not too long ago, there was a faraway place, so far from the steamy streets of Brooklyn or The Bronx, that a kid like me was barely able to imagine getting there. Yet, each year, with the onset of summer, a trip to this place would be undertaken by my family and its destination ultimately achieved. In it were towns and villages that to me had magical names; they were places that even today still suggest a certain fairy tale quality when I see or hear their names: Monticello, Woodridge, Mountain Dale, Fallsburg, Liberty, Loch Sheldrake: it was the realm of Sullivan County, N.Y. In it were sun-filled green meadows and dark, mysterious woods; wonderful lakes and streams for endless summer fun; enough frogs, fish, snakes, salamanders and turtles to keep any kid deliriously happy; there were cool, starry nights and dewy mornings; and there was the special charm of a childhood summer romance. It was The Country.

Or, as some would have it, The Mountains. No matter. What mattered was that it existed somewhere out there beyond the George Washington Bridge. I remember being a kid of distinction in my school, looked upon with unconcealed envy when I brought that important document, the note from my mother, to class, requesting that I be allowed to leave school weeks before the school year actually ended so that I might travel upstate with my family to spend the summer in The Country. Just send my report card to Pesekow's Bungalow Colony, Loch Sheldrake, N.Y. Thus the first step would have been taken. The journey was almost underway.

Getting the car ready was something that occurred in the world of my father. At the time, I had no idea, but looking back on it, he must have had the car checked and rechecked from bumper to bumper. After all, we were talking about a trip of well over a hundred miles. But on the night before actually getting underway, the car was ready, gleaming and spotless inside and out. Packing the car was my mother's domain, and woe to anyone who got in her way. Think of it: the very survival of the family, far from the haunts of civilization, was her responsibility. She had to insure that we had everything we might need for the next two and a half to three months – all the clothing, kitchen utensils, bedding, bathroom supplies, swimming paraphernalia, and food for when we got there, not to mention some food for the trip itself, for relying on road food, as far as she was concerned, was like playing with fire – far too dangerous to even contemplate. Somehow, amid all the excitement, yelling, arguing about what can and can't be brought along, my father convinced that it won't all fit in the trunk and the back seat around me and my sister, occasional tears from all parties concerned, somehow, the job is completed and we're ready to go, with stern warnings that it will be an early departure in the morning.

Which it absolutely would be. After a quick breakfast in the kitchen, we started our morning ritual. With the sun low on the horizon, the street of apartment houses was in dark shadows. Since it was Saturday, we were the only sign of life on the entire block. A row of parked cars stretched along both sides of the street; only ours had all the doors and the trunk opened, the four of us rapidly carrying out last minute items to be somehow stuffed into the few remaining air pockets left inside. Later, my friends would be congregating across the street in the playground to determine the course of action for the day – movies, basketball, stick ball, punch ball, or just hanging out. Except that today would be different. It would all happen without me. I was on my way to nirvana. I would keep in touch with them by way of occasional letters and postcards, but as I looked out the back window of the car at the rapidly receding street, I knew that we would be worlds apart.

For me, this first leg of the trip was generally characterized by an attempted return to slumber, not easy when a third of the back seat, that area between me and my sister, was occupied by a short stack of cartons topped by a noisy birdcage containing our parakeet, Peppy. If I did nod off, I would usually awaken to the sound of the car crossing the George Washington Bridge. There was a different sound to the pavement, or maybe it was the height of the bridge above the Hudson River, or the way sound played through the suspension cables. Somehow, it was different. Maybe it was the difference of New Jersey. As we'd pass through the toll booths and pay the twenty-five cent toll, we knew we were in a foreign land. The signs were different. The roadsides were different. Crowded apartment buildings quickly gave way to a monotonous succession of gas stations, diners, tourist cabins, motels, and drive-up stores of every description. Some that defied description. Even the road itself had a different look. It was Route 17, one concrete lane in each direction that we would follow for the next few hours, all the way to the Promised Land.

I remember that around this point in the trip, it used to be time for our first on-the-road meal. I was just a little kid then, and I would announce that I was hungry. My mother would break out the fresh rye bread, and make sandwiches for everyone. At that time in my life, my diet consisted entirely of rye bread and grape jelly. It took just a moment for the sandwich to be handed over the seat back to my anxious hands. Drinks came from a large canister with a spigot at the bottom, and was usually a sweet red fruit punch. My mother had what amounted to a small kitchenette at her seat. I don't know how she managed it, but she did. It wouldn't take long for my next announcement to be made, which was that I had to go to the bathroom. My father's response would usually be, "Okay. We'll be at the Red Apple soon, so hold it in." I'd respond, "I'll try", which always carried the suggestion that I might make it, but then again, I might not. I always

felt, and still do, that it didn't hurt to negotiate from a position of at least perceived power.

For miles along this section of Route 17, we were seeing huge billboards along the road proclaiming "RED APPLE REST – 25 MILES", shortly followed by "RED APPLE REST – 22 MILES", and so on. The Red Apple, in Southfields, New York, was known far and wide by all those heading to or from The Country, as THE place to stop, and probably the only place to stop, on the entire trip. We never ate there. In fact, the only thing we ever did there was go to the bathroom. Those who ran the place were well aware that that was the main attraction, painting a gigantic sign, in huge blue letters on a white background, "REST ROOMS", with an equally huge arrow pointing directly to the way in. Even this early in the season, hundreds of people milled about the acres of parking lots, some anxiously following that huge arrow, others heading for the restaurant itself, which had both indoor seating and outdoor service windows for hungry travelers. Above all, a giant red rooftop apple gleamed in the mid-morning sun. Before long, relieved and refreshed, we'd be once again back on Route 17, quickly approaching and just as quickly leaving such places as Harriman, Monroe, and Goshen.

Somewhere in the rural farm country beyond Middletown, Route 17 began a long, slow, steady climb up the Shawangunk Mountains which separated the relatively mundane world of Orange County from the paradise found in neighboring Sullivan County. It was known as the Bloomingburg Hill. There was no way around it. A new road was being built nearby that would soon change all this, but for now, it had to be climbed. My father was currently driving a 1957 Mercury, and with its V-8 engine, the hill was a snap. But how well I recall driving up the same hill a few years before, in our 1950 Oldsmobile, which was already old when we bought it. We never knew for sure if the car would get to the top or not. My father would add to the drama by letting us know every few minutes that the temperature gauge needle was going up. Would the car make it without overheating? Tension built as the Oldsmobile struggled up the miles-long incline. My sister and I were absolutely silent, knowing that this was not a time to ask questions, complain, or make comments of any kind. As we ultimately approached the hamlet of Bloomingburg, we knew we were just about at the summit, and as far as the car was concerned, we were apparently okay. But the worst was yet to come. At the very top of the hill, the road seemed to lead directly over a cliff and out into the admittedly rarified air of Sullivan County. But what good would it be if we didn't survive to enjoy it? Our very lives were in the hands of my father, holding the steering wheel in a death grip, making sure to take the sharp right turn just before the precipice at a slow enough speed, so that nothing unexpected would take place. My sister and I were so scared here that since simply closing our eyes wasn't sufficient enough to shield us from potential disaster, we'd actually scrunch down onto the floor for extra protection. Finally, after an eternity of terror on the floor of the car, my father would sound the all clear. Another trip over that mountain was successfully accomplished. My father didn't drive the Olds

over the cliff after all. We would then be able to get up off the floor and open our eyes. We were in Sullivan County at last, and we would live to tell about it.

I smiled at the recollection, feeling quite self-satisfied that this year, I wasn't afraid of the Bloomingburg Hill at all. As we slowly drove down the other side of the mountain, I looked out into the valley below to see the village of Wurtsboro shimmering in the early June sunshine. This was one of the first actual crossroads we'd pass through. Here, some travelers would turn off onto Route 209 and drive toward Ellenville, in nearby Ulster County, to seek their particular haven. But not us. With Wurtsboro and the mountain behind us, we continued on Route 17 to Monticello, the nexus of the county, and its largest city. Even this early in the season, the city was bustling with activity. The sidewalks were crowded with people, the streets filled with drivers looking for parking spaces; here was every kind of store and service imaginable; the Rialto theatre, its marquee proudly proclaiming to passersby that "Gigi" is now playing; beneath the marquee dangled a blue banner announcing the presence of air conditioning inside. At the Short Line bus depot nearby, crowds of people, most toting luggage, waited for the next bus to their destination. Not everyone had the luxury of traveling in their own car. At this time, we were searching the streets for a sign pointing the way to Route 42, for at Monticello, we left Route 17, which continued on to Liberty, location of the fabled Grossinger's Resort. Monticello, of course, was the home of the nearby Concord Hotel, beloved by millions over the years, but not our style. Having found Route 42, we turned away from the crowds, and continued on our way.

Route 42 meandered over the countryside and found its way to South Fallsburg, not nearly as large as Monticello, but busy with people nevertheless. Stores and restaurants lined both sides of the street. My father pointed out Frank and Bob's, his favorite restaurant, where he'd like to "grab a meal" sometime soon, maybe even tonight. Passing over the railroad tracks and the nearby train station, we soon left South Fallsburg behind us. It didn't take long for my mother to point out a sign by the right side of the road that said simply, "Green's Cottages". This was a small bungalow colony where we used to stay, and where I spent the first summers of my life. I happened to be deep into thumb sucking as a baby and toddler, which was a delightful, absorbing activity that for me actually involved both thumbs – one, of course, was planted firmly in my mouth; the other, however, was carefully stroking a soft, smooth, special piece of fabric that might have been part of a shirt, or a pair of pants. Now it just so happened that Mr. Green himself owned and wore a pair of khaki trousers that suited my needs perfectly, and as my mother told the story, I was attached to Mr. Green's pants wherever he went.

In a little while, we passed the Flagler Hotel, at the time ranked quite high in the world of luxury Catskill resorts. This meant we were approaching Fallsburg, just a little

crossroads town named after the spectacular bouldered falls of the Neversink River. Oretsky's Garage was on the right, and my father never failed to look to see if he could spot his old buddy Moe Oretsky, the owner, and honk as he passed. But not this time. Crossing the intersection, we could see the Crossroads Restaurant, perched right above the falls so that its patrons could enjoy the view. Just down the side road near the old stone bridge over the Neversink was one of the more infamous local night spots, The Wonder Bar, known throughout the area for its incredibly wicked reputation and goings-on. However, of more interest to me was a dirt road just past the Wonder Bar and a sign indicating "Schiekowitz's Bungalow Colony", with a red arrow pointing the way.

Schiekowitz's was where we stayed for a few summers after we outgrew Green's. The dirt road led off the highway through corn fields and then crossed a small brook with a wooden, white washed bridge. If we kids were on the bridge when a car, or better, a truck was coming from, or going to the colony, we would hold on to the railing and "go for a ride", for the bridge trembled and shook under the weight of various vehicles. As a five or six year old, it was a lot of fun. That dirt road then went up a small hill into the colony itself. We started out at Schiekowitz's in a single, crowded room in a large rooming house with a deep wrap around porch, then moved up to a modest bungalow.

What I remember best about Schiekowitz's was the forest and the river. What was remarkable about the forest, other than its incredible depth, was the number of gigantic, glacial boulders found within its confines. They were famous among the kids: Mother Rock (pretty big), Father Rock (even bigger), and Whale Rock (biggest of all, and a real challenge to climb up on). The woods were great; always dark, kind of spooky, full of adventure. A well-worn path led from the colony down to the Neversink River, where we'd swim and fish for sunnies and perch from the large, flat boulders that lined the riverbank. As time progressed into the modern world of the 1950's, however, river swimming became passé; consequently, the Schiekowitzes added the wonder of an in-ground swimming pool. But with the pool came a long list of rules and regulations for use that caused considerable friction between the residents, my mother included, and Mrs. Schiekowitz, the chief rule enforcer. As a result, their first summer with a pool was our last summer as residents. We moved on.

As we did this morning, leaving Fallsburg and its memories in our wake. It was now just a few miles to Woodbourne, where we'd turn off 42 and onto Route 52, going up the hill toward Loch Sheldrake. Woodbourne was a nice little town settled along both sides of the same Neversink River. It was, however, dominated by the overbearing presence of the Woodbourne Correctional Facility, a somber regional prison whose presence on the

hillside could not be ignored. Prisoners were often seen out in the fields around the prison tending various crops in the hot summer sun. It was always astonishing to see them out there, always hard at work, always watched over by mounted police with rifles across their saddles. One time, when we were driving by, I saw a group of prisoners standing by a barn with their hands raised high in the air, and several mounted officers pointing their rifles directly at them. I didn't know what was going on, but I never forgot the sight.

The turn onto Route 52 was actually just before the village proper. The landmark was a Shell station right at the intersection at the bottom of the hill. We made the sharp left and drove away from Woodbourne and its prison. Persistent loud static on the radio that prevented us from listening to William B. Williams on WNEW told us that we were both very far from home, and very close to our destination. Soon we'd be passing the New Roxy Hotel on the right, and on the left, a glimpse of Lake Evans and the Evans Hotel beyond the lake in the distance. A black and white state highway marker read in bold print, "LOCH SHELDRAKE", and in smaller print underneath, "Liberty, 5". We had arrived.

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We slowly drove through town, each of us anxiously looking around to see if anything had changed since last year. We saw that Herbie's Restaurant, Joe's Deli, Sekofsky's Department Store, and the Strand theatre (now playing: "Tammy and the Bachelor"; coming soon: "Gigi") were right where we left them. Across the street, Pesekow's Barber Shop and Beauty Parlor, painted a light blue that tourists couldn't miss, still occupied the busy corner where the other road came in from nearby Hurleyville. And just up from that corner we could see that Kove's General Store was still there and open for business. Continuing along Route 52, I spotted Fried's Drug Store – important to me, for it was the best source of comic books, especially Classics Illustrated, in the area. Town and Country Fashions, the path to the boathouse, and Rosenblatt's Car Service and Esso station were all there. All that was left was to drive the short distance to the bungalow colony.

Pesekow's had two driveways, and our bungalow was up by the road, right next to the first driveway. My father parked the car half on the grass facing down hill. We all got out and went inside, eager to look around. Freshly painted and spotlessly clean, all was in place. Bungalow 19 was roughly L-shaped, part of it being the kitchen and my sister's sleeping area, the other part being the bedroom, with one double and one single bed, a

dresser, a closet, and a small bathroom. After a dozen or so trips to the car, all was unloaded with the unpacking process well underway.

After a quick lunch, I was allowed to take off and do whatever I wanted. I grabbed my basketball and headed downhill through the colony. Our bungalow was one of three on what was called “the hill”. Just below were the remaining dozen or so bungalows, sheltered under a grove of massive pine trees. Still further down the hill toward the lake was the casino, the social center of the colony. It had a deck that wrapped completely around the lake side of the building, and inside was a large room with some booths, a small store, pinball machines, and a Wurlitzer Rock-ola juke box. An attached room was reserved for card playing and occasional bingo.

Not many people were around, which I was more or less glad about. It was always a bit uncomfortable and unsettling the first few days back, not knowing who you’d see, what they’d look like, if they’d remember you. I headed over to the handball court and its adjacent basketball hoop. Next to it was a children’s playground. As I looked around, I noticed some new additions I didn’t quite approve of. One was a four foot chain link fence that ran all along the lake front to the edge of the property. I thought it ugly, but concluded that it was probably installed for safety reasons, and necessary to keep little kids away from the lake. Then there was this tall steel pole set into the ground in concrete, with a yellow soccer style ball suspended from the top by a rope reaching about half way to the ground. I had no idea what it was or how it was played. I would soon find out.

Shortly, a kid came down the hill from the bungalows to join me. Since he was a few years younger, naturally I didn’t acknowledge his existence, but continued to shoot baskets just as if he wasn’t there. Undeterred, he suddenly shouted, “Remember last year?” Not to encourage him too much, I just said, “Yeah.” “It was great, wasn’t it?” “Yeah.” “I’m Mark. Remember me?” Okay, I decided to give the kid a break. “Sure,” I said. “I’m Philip.” “I know.” “Want to shoot a few?” “Yeah!” So we both shot a few baskets, and after a while he decided that he’d better head back home, so off he went, saying “See ya,” as he trotted off.

I continued shooting on my own, and had become quite absorbed in an imaginary championship game when I heard someone approaching from behind. I turned, and saw that it was my friend and sometime girlfriend, Melanie. She was the Pesekow’s daughter, and lived in Florida in the off-season. As a result, she was deeply tanned, and smiled broadly as she approached.

“Hi, Philip! How are you?”

“Hi, Mel. I’m good. How are you?”

“Great. My mother told me you were coming today. When’d you get here?”

“A couple of hours ago. How about you? How long have you been here?”

“About two weeks.”

“Two weeks! How come?”

“In Florida, school ends before Memorial Day, and besides, I get permission to leave early.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Did you see the tetherball?”

“The what?”

“Tetherball. Over there. Everybody’s playing it in Florida. We even play it in gym.”

So that’s what it was. Melanie went on to explain how to play tetherball, which involved two people hitting the ball in opposite directions. She thought it was a wonderful game. I thought it was a game for morons, but I didn’t let on. Girls like Melanie had come to play an increasingly important role in my life lately. Just the other day, back in the Bronx, I had said good-bye to Rona, my girlfriend from school, and I was anxious to have someone fill the void. Just then, the colony’s P.A. system came on, with an announcement we would hear at least fifty times over the course of the summer. The Pesekows had a microphone in their little casino store, and usually employed it either to call someone down to the colony’s only phone booth to take a call, or to call Melanie:

“Melanie! Melanie come down to the casino. Melanie come down.”

So Melanie said she had to go, and we both said that we’d see each other later.

I went back up the hill to our bungalow to learn that we were eating out, and as my father had suggested, at Frank & Bob’s in South Fallsburg. I don’t recall much about that particular meal, other than the fact that my father had franks and beans. I know this because of what occurred after dinner. Starting up the car, he made a quick U-turn, something that summer traffic would render impossible in a few weeks. Almost immediately, he began to make some strange noises. At first, I thought he was just humming, but soon realized it was something far more sinister. My mother said he

didn't look too good. Sure enough, my father made a quick right turn just before the railroad tracks and sped toward the now vacant train station. Stopping in a cloud of dust, he desperately ran out of the car and around the back of the building, where his stomach violently rejected Frank & Bob's franks and beans. When he returned to the car, he was visibly pale and shaken. My mother worried about him being able to drive home, but he was the only one there who could. As he slowly pulled away, my mother helpfully suggested that he not drive too fast, and that he should avoid any bumps in the road. He stared silently ahead, too weak to respond.

Later on, as I climbed into my bed for the first time since last September, I thought that there couldn't be too many feelings better than this. It was the beginning of summer vacation in the country. My sister was in her bed in the other room listening to Connie Francis softly singing "Who's Sorry Now?" on the radio. My parents were in the kitchen, my father having his second glass of Alka-Seltzer. It was so quiet. No cars going by on the road, no crickets yet. Our neighbors, the Schultzes, who had arrived a few days earlier, had similarly turned in. It had been a long, eventful day, and I couldn't wait to see what tomorrow would bring.

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Sunday was always a bad day for my father, for it meant he'd be leaving soon to return to the city. Many fathers, up for the weekend, wouldn't leave until Sunday night, but not him. It was a question of beating the traffic, and just getting the departure over with. However, it was a different story for me. I was settling into a wonderful routine. It turned out to be a cool and mostly sunny week during which time I went into town a few times to check on the comic book situation at Fried's, and fishing tackle at Sekofsky's. When I wasn't fishing, I would be shooting baskets or playing handball, usually alone, sometimes with someone I didn't know that well, or somebody new. None of my old friends would be coming up until the weekend. I played some pinball and sat on the casino patio with Melanie for a while. In truth, I was occasionally bored. I was almost tempted to complain to my mother that I had "nothing to do", but I knew that would mean huge trouble, and held my tongue.

Friday night meant the return of my father, and by Saturday, I saw that there were quite a few more cars around, several with doors and trunks open as people were unloading. My father was arguing with another man about who knew the fastest way to get here and who

drove to Pesekow's in the fastest time. As I went by, I only heard "Two hours from the bridge? You're crazy. Even without traffic..." And the other man saying, "I'm telling you, I timed it! I was in Loch Sheldrake exactly two hours after I left the bridge." "No way in hell. You better get your watch looked at. It's screwed up," concluded my father, as I continued on my way. I was heading down to the casino to see if I would run into anyone I knew. A couple of teenagers were sitting in a booth, but no one else. I backed out onto the deck before they could give me any trouble. Outside, I looked over the patio railing into the water below, where a few little kids were playing in the shallows with their mothers close at hand. I was watching a few ducks going by farther out in the lake when suddenly, lightning struck.

I heard Melanie's voice calling out, "Philip! Guess who's here!" I turned around to see Melanie coming up the patio steps with Sarah Steinway, my other romantic interest from summers gone by. Here was a vision of feminine beauty waving at me as she walked across the deck. I waved back, trying to figure out what there was about Sarah that had changed so much since last year. As she drew closer, it hit me. She was wearing lipstick. Lipstick! My mother wore lipstick. But certainly no eleven year old girl I ever knew. Until now. Melanie was giving me one of her elfin girlish grins which clearly meant "Do you see what I see?" Did I ever. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, but I couldn't take my eyes off her lips, and she knew it. If Sarah intended to make a major first impression, she certainly succeeded. I didn't even notice what she was wearing – just the lipstick. I don't even know what I said. The girls soon turned away, saying they'll see me later, but all I could do was nod and perhaps mumble "Okay." Something of great importance had happened there, though what it was and what it meant I didn't exactly know. It left me stunned. What I was pretty certain about, however, was that whatever it was, it meant a heck of a lot more than just lipstick.

The next day turned out to be one of the warmest so far, definitely good for swimming after lunch. Always paying heed to the dictum that one never went swimming right after a meal, I spent an hour or so playing pinball in the casino. When enough time had elapsed, I left the casino intending to go up the hill to the bungalow, but I thought I heard some voices that I recognized coming from the lakeside pier. I went over to the patio railing, and looked down to see not only Melanie and Sarah, but Marty and Ray as well! They must have come last night. "Hey Ray! Marty!" I yelled. "Philip!" they yelled back. "You want to go swimming?" "Sure", I replied. Marty yelled, "Well go get changed! We'll wait for you! And hurry up!" "Okay! I'll be right back!" I answered, and took off.

I was thrilled. Like Melanie and Sarah, I had known Marty and Ray ever since we were little kids. It was so good to see them again. I ran up the hill, my excitement barely in

control. Inside the bungalow, my mother was doing some ironing. I ran past her into the bedroom, took off my clothes, and told her that Marty and Ray were here and that I was going swimming. "Oh, that's nice," she said, adding as I left the bungalow in my swim trunks and flip-flops, "Just be careful!" Why are mothers always saying "be careful?" "Okay," I replied, as I threw a towel over my shoulder and ran outside, grabbing my inner tube from under the bungalow and proceeding down hill to the lake on the run.

The sidewalk leading down the hill to the pier was at a fairly steep angle, and any kid excitedly running down that hill would pick up some pretty good speed on the way. As I ran down hill, I saw Marty, Ray, Sarah and Melanie waiting for me on the pier, but I never saw the raised crack in the sidewalk that caught my right flip-flop and sent me sprawling. I crashed into the sidewalk and slid several feet, my inner tube flying. All the adults on the pier immediately got up and came running. My friends were horrified. I was in shock. I tried to pick myself up, and looked at my palms, which at first were chalk white, but then turned red with blood. I was bleeding from both knees and had scrapes along both arms. The worst seemed to be a gash in my right ankle that was bleeding terribly. Someone's father got to me first. He looked at my injuries and asked me where my mother was. I told him, and he offered to carry me home, but I couldn't let that happen no matter what. Not in front of my friends. I was so embarrassed. Melanie looked like she was crying. Sarah's hands were over her mouth in horror. Marty and Ray just stared, incredulous. "What bungalow?" I heard the man say. "19", I replied. "Okay, come on."

We walked slowly up the hill away from the water, through the shade under the pines, then up towards the road and bungalow 19. When I was within shouting range, I couldn't help but call out, "Ma! Maaaa!" My mother knew that didn't sound good, and came running. "Oh, my God! What happened?" He told her, and I limped into the bungalow and onto my sister's bed. My mother ran cold water on some kitchen towels and proceeded to clean the wounds and try to stop the bleeding. Mrs. Schultz, who heard all the commotion, came from next door with bandages and an offer to take us to the hospital in Liberty where she felt I could get some stitches for the ankle. My mother saw my frightened reaction to that and said that wouldn't be necessary. Not yet.

My friends were looking in through the screen door and Mrs. Schultz told them that I'll be fine, I just needed to rest. So they left, saying things like they hoped I'll be feeling better soon, I'll be okay, they'll see me tomorrow, and so on. I just let my head sink back onto the pillow, totally humiliated. My mother thanked the man who brought me up to the bungalow, and he left. All I remember was Mrs. Schultz and my mother cleaning the injuries with lots of cold water and applying bandages and band-aids all over.

By the next day I was more or less up and around, though limping a bit, sometimes because I had to, sometimes for dramatic effect. It depended on who was watching. The bad news was that my mother said there'll be no swimming until some good hard scabs formed over those cuts and scrapes, especially the ankle, which continued to bleed and ooze for days. That was a blow. It would be a good two weeks with no swimming. When I told Marty that, he looked off in thought for a minute, then declared that until I was ready to go swimming again, he won't go in the water either. If I can't swim, neither will he. I was shocked and surprised by the gesture. I told him no way, but he meant it. Marty was a rough-edged kid, but I saw now that there was something else there as well, that I had never seen before. What a sacrifice! I didn't know what else to say. Once again, a very significant moment occurred and shook me. There was no lipstick involved this time, but there was a realization that somehow, the relationships that we had been nurturing for the past few summers had been imperceptibly altered, in a way that would have full meaning not now, but perhaps at some later point in time.

For a good two weeks I was not able to go swimming, and Marty stayed true to his word. He did not go in the water once that entire time. Marty hovered around me like he was some sort of protector. I thought at times that maybe he thought it was all his fault, because he was the one who told me to go get changed and to hurry up. That was ridiculous, of course, but I thought about it just the same. Sometimes we sat on the patio watching everyone else in the lake having fun, and feeling good and sorry for ourselves. Other times we played pinball, cards, some board games, or went into town. A trip to Sekofsky's fishing counter got us onto the idea of going fishing over at Lake Evans. Somehow the belief existed that every other lake in the region had bigger and better fish than Loch Sheldrake. Lake Evans was about a mile away, and was an easy walk, even for the walking wounded.

I had at the time an excellent rod and spinning reel, and more fishing tackle than I could possibly use. It all looked and sounded great, though, like when I placed my tackle in my cargo pants pockets in their plastic boxes. I made a wonderful racket when I walked. Marty, on the other hand, used a bamboo pole, no reel, and some green string. I never understood that. He couldn't be poor, spending whole summers at Pesekow's like he did each year. I even had to let him use one of my hooks, a sinker, and replaced his cork float with one of my red and white plastic bobbers. So Philip the Fisherman and Huckleberry Finn walked through town and down Route 52 a ways to fish in Lake Evans.

Lake Evans was slightly smaller than Loch Sheldrake and a bit on the weedy side. Both lakes were actually connected by a small stream that drained water from Loch Sheldrake

and carried it to Lake Evans. Marty and I once followed that stream to discover where it went. The route we took to go fishing took us past a farm house that had a working hand operated water pump in the yard. We always stopped to pump up some delicious ice cold water. Once at the lake, we baited our hooks with worms we dug up the previous day and kept moist and fresh in a dirt filled coffee can. With my spinning reel, I was able to cast my line far out into the lake. Marty, however, could only cast his line as far as the amount of line he had, which wasn't all that much. It didn't take but fifteen minutes for Marty's bobber to be suddenly pulled under the surface and disappear in the murky water.

Marty pulled back on the rod, and said it felt like he was stuck on a submerged log. He pulled and pulled, but the hook was stuck tight. We thought for a while that we'd have to cut the line. But then something strange happened. The line began to move. Marty pulled again. That log was alive. Meanwhile, my bobber floated lazily on the surface in the midday sun. Marty, however, was in a major struggle. He was afraid his bamboo pole would break. We set the pole on the ground, and the two of us slowly pulled the line into shore. Fortunately, the string he was using was so thick it could have doubled as clothes line. We soon realized that the log was indeed a fish, and that the fish was huge. Ten minutes of pulling and we finally hauled the fish out of the water and onto the bank. We both stared in shocked disbelief as the fish, not too happy about the whole incident, flopped around in the dirt for a while as he took his final breaths. Marty had caught a sucker, a fish that looked something like a catfish without whiskers. It had a dark brown back, tan sides, and a white belly. It was a true bottom feeder, with a mouth underneath its face, not in front. It had to be three feet long and must have weighed fifteen pounds. We were both screaming with excitement. Marty put the fish back in the water to clean it off, then hoisted it out to begin the walk back home.

Going through Loch Sheldrake village caused a sensation. There was Marty with his bamboo pole, no reel, green string, and the catch of the year. I walked alongside with all my fishing tackle in sheepish silence. People stopped us to ask questions about how it was done, where it was caught, what kind of fish it was, etc. Perfect strangers took pictures. The fish turned out to be so big that Marty's mother, who cleaned it and cut its snow white flesh into sections, had enough to feed several colony families. I remember that the cut up fish filled an entire shelf in his refrigerator. Marty became a hero, the fish, a legend. I decided to give up fishing, at least for a while.

Time eventually worked its magic on my various cuts and scrapes, and my scabs became an object of wonderment for friends and family alike. Marty may have had his fish, but I had my scabs. As far as our celebrity status was concerned, I'd say we were just about

equal. Before long, we were both back in the water, and our summertime lives resumed their normal course.

Then there came a cool sunny day, not really fit for swimming, when we decided to head over to the lake's only real swamp, an area known locally as Chinaman's Alley (why it was so named I have no idea), just to see what we could find. It all sounded innocent enough, but little did we know that our actions over the next hour or two would lead to what came to be known as the Great Frog Festival.

The swamp was on the other side of the lake, and getting there was a matter of walking across the Lakeside Hotel's lawns (the colony's next door neighbor) and then through about a half mile of woods, eventually coming out in an open picnic area with a covered pavilion, barbeque pit, volleyball court, a rowboat, and the swamp. Chinaman's Alley was an area of slow moving water flowing into the lake, and was marked by bleached silver dead trees, lily pads, and shocks of tall grass growing up out of the muck. As Marty and I approached the swamp, we were both taken by the amazing number of frogs jumping into the water just ahead of every step we took. They were all fairly small, about two inches, and they were literally everywhere. A few days ago, they were probably about a million black wiggly tadpoles. In a few days, if they ventured into the lake, they would be snack food for the bass and pickerel. As for now, thousands of frogs. We had never seen anything like it. We caught a few, let them go, then caught some more. Then Marty said he had an idea. Back at the pavilion, he remembered seeing a large white plastic bucket overturned on the ground. It would suit our needs perfectly, he said, and ran back to get it. Exactly what our needs were I was about to find out. Marty returned with the bucket and a look on his face that I knew meant trouble.

"Let's catch a whole bunch of frogs, put them in this bucket, and bring them back to the colony," he said.

"What for?" I replied.

"We'll sell them! To little kids! They're too small to go catching frogs by themselves, so we'll bring the frogs to them!"

"Yeah! That sounds great! But how much do we sell them for?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well how about two cents each, three for a nickel. Like pretzels," I suggested, adding, "Two cents isn't that much, even for a little kid. There's always a couple of pennies lying around. They won't even have to ask their mothers!"

Marty agreed. It was a stroke of business acumen rarely seen in two eleven year olds. We started the frog harvest right away, but found that it was going too slowly. Another plan needed to be enacted, and it didn't take long. We went over to the picnic area, turned over the rowboat that was stored there, and rowed out into the swamp. The frogs were totally out-manuevered. It seemed like it was only a matter of minutes before the bucket was three quarters full of hysterical jumping and squirming frogs. We put plenty of water in the bucket, added some grass for good measure, and rowed back, leaving the boat just the way we found it. Between the frogs and the water, the bucket was really heavy, so we took turns carrying it as we trekked back to the colony.

No more than ten minutes elapsed between the time we entered the colony and the time that every little kid was running off to get their pennies. There was absolute mayhem, with each kid not wanting to miss out on this great opportunity. Kids soon came running toward us with their pennies from all directions. Some just cupped their hands to carry their purchase away. Others brought water glasses, coffee cups, mixing bowls, and pots of various types and sizes. One kid had what I recognized as a pressure cooker. Some savvy six year olds, knowing a bargain when they saw one, bought six frogs for a dime. Other kids, who could only get a penny, were not turned away empty handed. Everybody left with at least one frog. Many got extras. Before long, though, the customers petered out, and we looked at each other with supreme satisfaction, knowing that we not only made almost three dollars, but that there were now a good number of frogs in every bungalow in Pesekow's. Looking back on that day, I now realize that it must have been parental hell. But no matter. Business is business. We still had quite a few frogs left in the bucket, so we went down to the lake behind the handball court and let them go in the water. We stood there watching them joyously swim off in all directions, happy to have their freedom back. Marty and I shook hands on a job well done. Our work for the day was finished.

* * *

When evening came to Pesekow's Bungalow Colony, it generally found us pursuing one of a handful of activities. One was going to the movies. The Strand would get its films from the Rivoli in South Fallsburg, which in turn, got its films from Monticello. "Tammy and the Bachelor", a leftover from the previous summer, was not high on the list of movies we absolutely had to see, but the girls wanted to go, and since we were of late a couple of rich businessmen, off we went. This particular summer found me more or

less attaching myself to Sarah, though exclusivity was certainly not part of any arrangement. Maybe it was the lipstick, which, by the way, was never seen again after that first fateful encounter on the patio. Maybe once was enough. Marty, for now, was paired up with Melanie.

Once the summer season shifted into high gear, usually around the last week in June, the theatre had two showings nightly. We always went to the early show, as we did this night. After coming attractions (“Gigi”), and the Merry Melodies cartoon (Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd), “Tammy” came on screen, with Debbie Reynolds singing her lilting love song. It had its desired effect. Both Marty and I were madly in love with Debbie Reynolds before half the movie was over. The immediate effect on us though, was to provide us with the emotional confidence to place our arms around the shoulders of our girls. This was always a suspenseful moment, but tonight our efforts were rewarded with not only no resistance, but with what might have been a little encouragement as well.

When the movie was over, tradition had us stopping by Fried’s soda fountain for ice cream sodas, a malted, or the like. Then it was a slow walk back to the colony, preferably holding hands. Tonight, we happened to find our way down to the casino. A few adults were sitting out on the patio, which was lit by a single spotlight over the door. Inside, some teenagers were at the pinball machine, the juke box playing Danny and the Juniors’ “At the Hop” in the background. We decided to take a look around the back of the casino, as it was called, to see if it was currently occupied. Once our eyes became accustomed to the darkness, we saw that there was no one there. The highly coveted romantic spot was currently ours.

The casino had one window facing the back, and tonight it allowed no more than a few feeble rays from inside to shine onto the deck. But in the far corner, darkness reigned supreme. We occupied a wooden bench facing the water. The lake was absolutely black, and the houses and cottages spread out on the opposite shore had their illuminated windows and outside lights reflecting long lines of liquid light across the water. Stars filled the sky from horizon to horizon, a source of wonderment for a group of city kids, who never beheld such a sight back home. Occasionally, there’d be the sound of an airplane, its location made evident by a slowly moving dot of light across the heavens. Inside the casino, we could hear The Platters singing “Twilight Time.” A slight breeze off the lake resulted in a comment by the girls that it was chilly back there tonight, which was all we needed to edge just a little bit closer. Some held hands, arms around the shoulders, and a few soft kisses made the evening blissfully complete.

On weekends, the Lakeside Hotel, just up the road, would have a live band playing in the Gold Room, their entertainment venue. It was strictly for hotel guests, but that never stopped us. This sort of an evening called for dressing up, which for me meant a shower and a higher level of clothes than jeans, tee shirt and sneakers. The girls, too, always rose to the occasion by wearing a pretty dress, appropriately held aloft by layers of crinoline underneath. Somehow, we never entered the Gold Room without several guests commenting about how “cute” we were, and what “adorable” couples we made. Maybe because the average Lakeside guest was about 75. Or maybe, it could have been that we really were cute. Who knows?

Dancing was a major part of our social lives then. The girls were always teaching us the latest dances and the latest moves. Somehow, they always knew. We never did. Latin music and the cha-cha were very big that summer, so it was no surprise that the band got underway with “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White”, after a while followed by the “Tea for Two Cha-Cha”. Any dance that even had the slightest chance of getting anyone winded was always followed by something slower so that the guests could recover their breath. They didn’t want any medical emergencies on the dance floor. So “Volare” was next, which accomplished that purpose. After every few songs or so, the band leader, who often doubled as a vocalist and comedian, would talk to the crowd, and tell a few bad jokes (often involving the management and owners of the hotel, who were always present), all in good fun. Some of the jokes we just didn’t get. That was our signal to buy some sodas and take a break ourselves, sitting a few out to watch the people dance and to tell a few private jokes of our own. Sometimes we’d step out onto the porch and watch the comings and goings in front of the Gold Room. We never stayed late, so after an hour or so we’d walk up the hill to the road and head back. There was an old stone wall that curved along part of the driveway and paralleled the road. The girls, just for fun, jumped up onto the wall and walked along its top, with us holding their hands to keep them steady. The wall ended at the colony’s property line, and each girl turned toward us to be helped down. I held Sarah’s waist and eased her down off the wall, as did Marty for Melanie. I’ll never forget that. I thought that was the most romantically mature thing we had ever done. The thank you kiss on the cheek was absolutely wonderful. Walking back along the road, one couldn’t help but think that life couldn’t get much better.

More often than not, we’d gravitate toward the casino on a given evening, especially if it was raining. A lot of dancing went on there as well. The juke box played 78’s, and was well stocked with a combination of current rock and roll hits, dance tunes, and golden oldies. A quarter played five records. Some nights it seemed as though the whole bungalow colony was there. Lots of adults would be playing cards in the next room, which was very brightly lit and always filled with lots of cigarette smoke. In the casino itself, we’d be dancing or just hanging out. Little kids liked to watch the bubbles rising through the yellow tubes on the front of the juke box. If we had enough people, we’d be

sure to play “The Stroll”, by the Diamonds, with two parallel lines of dancers “strolling” through the room. Once, the teenagers, who were usually our bitter enemies, called a temporary truce so that we could all join forces and have enough people to “stroll across the floor.”

Peaceful coexistence with the teenagers also occurred, if conditions were right, in the back of the casino for some scary story telling. It was there, for example, that I first learned the terrifying truth about the monster living in the depths of the lake, the creature known only as Krepsi. Somehow, the teenagers felt it was their responsibility and obligation to teach us about certain subject areas in which they were experts, like the real meaning of a few choice four letter words, what women really want, and of course, Krepsi. As the story was told, no one had actually ever seen Krepsi and lived to tell about it. But the legend persisted, probably having its foundation in the notion that Loch Sheldrake itself was known, at least among the kids, as a body of water of unknown depth. So the story would once again be told, with a group of us sitting in rapt attention in the darkness of the back of the casino on a particularly appropriate night: “...and the lake is so deep that no one knows for sure what’s actually down there. They’ve run tests. They’ve never hit bottom! But this much is known. On certain dark nights, especially during the first week of July (or whatever week it happened to be), Krepsi would come out of the depths and crawl onto the land looking for victims to eat. Its appetite is incredible. It could eat two, three kids a night, if it’s lucky. That’s why the Pesekows built that fence along the shore line. Did you happen to see it? It’s to help keep Krepsi out. So they think. It loves young kids the best. You know why? They’re still soft and juicy. Remember that kid who was here last year, Charlie something? Did you notice that he’s not back this year? You know why? Krepsi got him! Last year, July 2nd. What? That’s tonight?” And so on. If the story was told with enough embellishments, it really got the girls going, and if there were younger kids present, they might actually have run off crying. If the truth be known, I may have looked over my shoulder a few extra times as I walked back home in the night. Maybe.

Sometimes we’d be sucked into the casino’s major vice, the pinball machine. There were actually two, but one was really popular. And incredibly addictive. It was a horse racing game. When you inserted your nickel, the game came alive with ringing bells and flashing lights, choosing at random which horse in a field of nine would be yours for this particular race. As you pulled back the plunger and sent your silver ball up the chute into the game itself, it was your job to hit as many of your horse’s bumpers as possible to get your horse to win. Each bumper hit sent your horse moving forward. If your horse happened to come in first, you won a free game. Sometimes five free games, sometimes fifty, depending on the horse, the odds, track conditions, etc. A fifty game winner always had a crowd of admirers around him, as if it was the high stakes poker table at Monte Carlo. Games would be given out to favorites in the crowd. It often would take an entire evening to play down the fifty games. Not that it happened that often. More than once,

Mr. Pesekow had to pull the plug on the machine at 11:00 or so to get everyone to get out and go home. Amid groans of protest, we'd all reluctantly leave, ever so slowly, to try our luck another day.

Sometimes, money became an issue. Playing pinball cost a nickel a game, the juke box a quarter, movies thirty-five cents a person in the evening. Going out on a date could easily top a dollar. That was real money, and we couldn't count on a Great Frog Festival more than once a summer. Both Marty and I were on many a parent's hit list over that event. So when all else failed, we got down on our hands and knees and crawled into the cool darkness underneath the casino's patio to look for money. The decking making up the patio's floor had pretty wide spaces in between the boards. Gin rummy, poker, mah-jong, and such were usually played for money, and coins were always falling off the tables onto the floor, often slipping through the cracks and disappearing below. That's where we came in. If we were lucky enough to be under there when it hadn't been mined in a while, we sometimes would find a good handful of nickels, dimes, and the occasional quarter. But it wasn't without its perils. In addition to just getting filthy, never a real problem for any of us, or encountering beetles and spiders of all shapes and sizes, there was the time that my young friend Mark, from the basketball court, was creeping around down there doing some mining of his own, and came across Stanley, the colony's handyman, sleeping one off. That was the last time Mark crawled under the patio looking for anything, and it was warning enough for us.

* * *

Populating the colony was an interesting cast of characters, who every now and then provided their own sort of entertainment for whatever audience happened to be gathered around. An example of this might be the time that Monica Black, mother of Mitchell Black, teenager gone bad, started parading around the colony wearing her underwear as outerwear. I'll never forget the time I was hanging around the pier with my buddies and she came walking down the sidewalk. She was wearing a black bra and panties. And flip-flops. Nothing else. Everybody stared, amazed, at the display. She, however, was completely carefree and unconcerned; less self-conscious than a two year old. I stared in disbelief, finding this to be very interesting. She had her pack of Pall-Malls and a book of matches stuck into her bra. After all, she had no pockets. Women playing mah-jong up on the deck stopped in mid-play, their tiles momentarily silent. Of note is the fact that it was mid-week, meaning that most men, her husband included, were away until the

weekend. The only men present in the colony were a few retirees, one or two husbands on vacation, and an occasional delivery man. So no doubt Mrs. Black felt that such attire (or lack of it) was fitting and proper for whatever she had in mind. If this had occurred once, it might have been attributed to sun stroke, or some sort of mental instability. But such was not the case. This became her regular lakeside attire, and our regular lakeside entertainment, for quite some time. Besides, everyone knew that Mrs. Black was about as mentally unstable as a hungry shark.

Also of interest, though not a colony resident as such, was a man known as Ruby the Knish Man, who visited the colony a few times a week, selling Mom's Knishes out of the back of his station wagon yelling, "Hey, Knishes! Get your hot Knishes! Buy a bagful and help send my wife to Florida! Hey, Knishes!" People would come running, getting a taste of far away Brooklyn right there in Loch Sheldrake. But Ruby had a falling out with the Pesekows, who apparently wanted a fee to allow him to continue selling on their property. Ruby would have no part of that. So the next time he came around, he parked his car on the shoulder of Route 52, on public property, and shouted all the more loudly, "Hey Knishes! Get your hot knishes! Potato or kasha – you want 'em, I got 'em! Hey Knishes!" A little increase in volume easily overcame the increase in distance. It was business as usual for Ruby for the remainder of the season.

Then there was my father, a man whose vocabulary did not contain the word "shy." He was the type of man who might have been described as quirky, one of the very few people, young or old, who wore shoulder length hair as far back as 1958. On July 4 of that year, just to help in the celebration of our nation's birthday, he dressed up like an Indian, bare-chested, war paint and all, stood up in the back of Arnie Schultz's convertible, and was driven around the colony and then right through busy Loch Sheldrake, arms folded across his chest, occasionally raising his right hand and saying "How!" to the fascinated on-lookers. Marty and I witnessed this first-hand, having gone into town to see if we could buy some more sparklers at Fried's or Sekofsky's. "Isn't that your father?" Marty asked, incredulous. "Yeah, that's my dad," I said, with an unlikely combination of embarrassment and pride.

Arnie Schultz and his wife were our neighbors up on the hill, and they happened to have three Mexican Chihuahuas, Ricky, Impy, and ChiChi, as different from each other as day is from night. Whenever Mrs. Schultz was walking around the colony, the three little dogs were always right behind her, though she often carried ChiChi, who was bloated by excess weight and had trouble walking farther than ten feet. Impy was generally aloof and non-committal; he didn't care what was going on. Ricky, however, would just as soon rip your face off as look at you. Innocent people who bent down to pet Ricky usually did this only once, then learned their lesson. We often brought Ricky into a

conversation about South American piranhas, like what would happen if Ricky was tossed into a river infested with hungry piranhas? Who would win? It was generally conceded that it would be a close call, but that Ricky would eventually emerge picking his teeth clean with a fish bone.

Finally, there was Bart Sheridan, man among men. He was a burly young man in his twenties, who had his name hand tooled into the back of the wide leather belt he always wore. The fact that “Bart” wasn’t his real name didn’t really matter. Quite the contrary. The very fact that he was actually known by a name he himself had adopted was something we found to be very impressive. When Bart arrived at the colony to visit his parents and sister, everyone knew it, for no one was out of earshot of the roar of his blue and white Harley Davidson motorcycle, its chrome gleaming in the summer sun. Dark sunglasses, black military style cap, black leather jacket and black boots completed the picture. Revving the engine just for effect, we all knew Bart had arrived. Unlike fathers, who would be colony residents only on weekends and vacations, Bart seemed to live on his own schedule; he came and went according to the whims of his nature, which only added to his mystique. Occasionally, we’d actually get permission to sit on his motorcycle, which for us was a thrill beyond words. Still, there was more to the man known as Bart. He actually owned his own horse, Chief, which he boarded at the nearby riding stables of the Hotel Evans. Every so often, Bart, his motorcycle boots traded for cowboy boots, would ride his horse through Loch Sheldrake to the colony, where those of us still recovering from the wonder of his motorcycle would be awestruck by his horse, a lustrous chestnut with a beautiful saddle and leather harness with brass appointments. Here was the whole embodiment of romantic adventure amidst our humble Catskill Mountain bungalows. Unfortunately, Bart’s visits were as brief as they were unpredictable. Before long, just as mysteriously as he had arrived, Bart Sheridan would be gone, though certainly not gone from our impressionable imaginations, where we would see him riding off into the sunset, a true legend in his own time.

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Without anyone really noticing, July would soon turn into August, and before long it would be time for blueberry picking up on the hills across the road. On a given day in mid-August, we decided to raid our kitchens of the largest pots available, and head across the road and up the hill. The particular path we took was of little consequence. The idea was to get up there, where the entire hilltop was covered with high bush blueberries, fat

and juicy, just ripening in the sun and waiting for us to begin the harvest. I remember sitting in the grass up there, eating blueberries, taking in the view. The lake was an azure jewel almost entirely surrounded by green forest. Only right below us was there human activity – the town, the colony, the Lakeside Hotel. Across the lake we could just make out Chinaman’s Alley, and occasional speed boats and water skiers leaving white curving wakes across the water. Sometimes the sound of a car horn would reach us, but little else. Before long, we’d make the trek back down, careful not to spill anything from our filled to the brim pots. My mother made the most delicious blueberry jam. I can still recall the taste, the texture, the aroma of that dark purple jam on a piece of fresh Wonder Bread. Absolutely nothing like it exists today in any jar on any shelf in any store. And nothing like it ever will.

Two events occurred in August that made the month extra special. One was the Annual Fireman’s Ball, and the other was my birthday, this year, my twelfth. I was never one for subtle hints about an appropriate gift for a person whose qualities and attainments were well documented, so I went straight for the bottom line – I wanted a Gilbert combination chemistry set and microscope kit. I even had a picture of it that I tore out of a magazine, and handed to my father. After an initial sarcastic comment like, “What are you gonna do, blow the place up?” he took the picture and said he’ll see what he could do.

Sure enough, on the Friday night before my birthday, my father, just up from the city for the weekend, came into the bungalow carrying a metal box by its built-in handle that I recognized immediately. Not only was it the precise set I wanted, but it came with the added bonus of live shrimp eggs that I could nurture until they hatched, then watch develop and grow, all under the microscope. It was almost too exciting to imagine. By the next morning, I created the proper liquid environment for the tiny tan shrimp eggs, poured some into the little dish provided, and sat back and waited. Part of the kit was a log, so I could record the hour by hour changes taking place. I even woke myself up in the middle of the night and quietly crept into the kitchen to view and record the momentous events: 2 AM – no change; 5 AM – eggs rounder, swelling; 11 AM – some eggs showing movement inside; 3 PM – baby shrimp struggling to emerge from eggs; 7 PM – I’m a father! Baby shrimp swimming around all over the dish!

Every now and then, friends of my parents would stop by, take a look in the microscope, and want to know when they’ll be invited over for shrimp dinner. My own friends dropped by as well, showing remarkable interest in watching the tiny shrimp swimming around their little dish. News about my shrimp apparently spread throughout the colony. The interest shown was occasionally startling. Like the time I looked out the kitchen

window to see three kids standing there, looking a bit self-conscious, kicking at their own shoes. I recognized one by reputation, not to mention appearance. He was probably only 17, but he looked 30. I only knew him as Big Gene. He never before this spoke to me, or even acknowledged my existence, for which I was grateful. I wished my mother was there, or even my sister, but I was alone. Finally, I summoned up the courage to ask in a quavering voice, "What are you doing?" The two other kids looked at Big Gene, who promptly answered, "Nothin.'" The adrenaline had kicked in by now, so I followed up with, "What do you want?" Once again, all eyes went to Big Gene, whose major skill apparently wasn't oratory: "Um, uh, well, could we see the shrimp?" I couldn't believe my ears. Immediately shifting gears, I pretended it was a huge inconvenience to let them into my laboratory, but told them "okay" anyway, and in they came. I should have charged admission. With a little assistance from my business associate, Marty, perhaps we could have made another fortune. But no. I let this opportunity go by. Sometimes, we scientists have to put personal gain aside in the interest of the betterment of mankind.

Of far greater importance than my birthday was the Annual Fireman's Ball, held every August at the Hotel Evans. Its major attraction was a big-name orchestra and Hollywood level entertainment. Tickets had to be purchased far in advance. I even had a special outfit hanging in the closet that wouldn't be touched all summer until that particular evening.

Since walking along the road was unacceptable for the Fireman's Ball, we always got a ride from our parents. The girls would have their best dresses on, and would have spent a good part of the day in the Pesekow's Beauty Parlor getting their hair done. I thought I even detected a hint of perfume as we sat together in the back seat of the car. The event itself was in a cavernous ballroom easily five times larger than the Gold Room. All the members of the orchestra were wearing the same red jackets and black trousers; the band leader's jacket, though, was white, and he had a special spotlight just on him that would follow his every move. The dance floor was crowded with people, and we often found ourselves bumping into other dancers as we moved around the floor.

The highlight of the evening would be the appearance of the show's star, who usually didn't come on stage until 10:00 or so. In earlier years, we were never able to stay long enough to be there that late, and would be driven home. But not tonight. After all, I was twelve now. I could hear people murmuring that they had seen him on the Ed Sullivan Show, and one person sitting in the row in front of us said that the star had just come from an appearance in Las Vegas. I for one, didn't know who he was, and can't even remember his name, but the adults in the crowd were suitably impressed. He sang quite a few songs, holding a microphone in his hand and walking around the stage as he did so. Every now and then he'd talk to the crowd, ask the hushed audience if they were having a

good time, tell a few jokes, and then start singing again. When his time was up, he left the stage accompanied by thunderous applause, waving, bowing, and smiling at the crowd. Then, it was back on the dance floor for just a little while, after which everyone went home, excitedly talking about what a great show and wonderful evening it was. Just getting into bed when it was past midnight made it extra special for me.

* * *

Before long, my mother tore another page from the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall, and it was September. Labor Day weekend traditionally marked the end of summer, and all around the colony were people carrying all sorts of items out of their bungalows and into their cars. My father parked the Mercury right up next to our bungalow, half on the grass, the first time he did so since early June. I spent the night before at the casino, saying good-bye to my good friends. Marty and I manfully shook hands, and I exchanged hugs with the girls. We all wished each other good luck in junior high, where we were all headed, and promised to write, even to Melanie in far away Florida. We had, of course, lived through this scene before, but never at age twelve, which made it all the more meaningful, and in some strange, mysterious way, different. We all looked forward to seeing each other next year, and said our good-byes. There was no sadness. I just walked back up the hill to Bungalow 19, with absolutely no idea that I would never see any of them ever again.

Not too long ago, there was a faraway place, so far from the steamy streets of Brooklyn or the Bronx, that a kid like me was barely able to imagine getting there. The point, though, is that for a precious moment in time, that special place did indeed exist. However, as the world slowly revolved from the 1950's into the 1960's, many of the families who packed up their cars in September and drove back to the city didn't return the following June. So it was with my family. Despite my fervent belief in the notion that sometimes, things should just stay the way they are, time proved itself to be an unstoppable, unopposable force of determined change. Virtually nothing was staying the same. Everything around me, including myself, was being altered. We were encountering changes in our lives that together conspired to push the idea of summer in The Country far out of reach. We had a new apartment in a new borough; I had a new school and some new friends. That first summer in the city was extremely difficult, if not heartbreaking. I couldn't stop thinking about Marty, Melanie, Sarah and Ray, about Pesekow's and Loch Sheldrake. I had experienced paradise, and now it was lost.

In The Country, changes were also taking place. With each passing season, the number of vacant bungalows and hotel rooms slowly grew, as did the For Rent signs in store windows, and weeds in lawns and playing fields. Soon, those who were not returning far outnumbered those who were. The blueberries ripened on the hill above Loch Sheldrake, and there was no one there to pick them. It didn't take long for the For Sale signs to appear. Today, if one would return to that once magical land, and listen very carefully and intently, one might still hear the voices of the families in the abandoned bungalows, the deserted hotels, the empty casinos. But they would only be echoes, slowly fading into the misty distance.

Time, that unstoppable force of change, continued its relentless work. For me, the unimaginable loss slowly became more manageable. As the summers went by, what was once the focus of my life eventually was relegated to the realm of memory. Perhaps that is as it was meant to be. For though the experience may have ended, the memory stayed forever. And that will never change.