

The Guy in The Tie

Part IV: The Order of a Young Life - 3116 Wenz Ave.



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Upon the explication of my origins and two preceding generations of my ancestry I move now to the foundations upon which my life was built. What gave order, meaning, boundaries, accountability and solidity to the life about to be erected.

The nation of Israel had ancestry in the Fathers and law in Moses. The cosmos made sense. Days began and ended in sacrifice at the Tabernacle. Weeks ended in an ordained Sabbath worship. Each

new moon or month had a sacrifice. The seasons had feasts. The religious birthday of the nation was at Passover. Yom Kippur was for national cleansing. Moral law was taught by Levites. Ceremony established heavenly forms and realities. The narrative of the Bible gave the meaning of history. Kings and judges were ordained to rule . . . one nation under God.

Israel was governed by divine truth just as were the sun, moon, stars, and planets. There was order. It's why dysfunctional kids are attracted to sports and the military. Why frustrated Protestants become Catholics. They want order.

I had order providentially conferred upon me. In the home, church, school, and sports. These were my foundations. My family had order. Up at seven. Breakfast, always. Fried eggs and bacon. Make your bed. Right, mind you. Comb your hair. Unblocked hair tapered in the back – short, off the ears, not like Elvis or the Beatles or any other pervert or Communist. Combed with Vaseline Petroleum Jelly. (Bill Flynn, our barber, once gave me a “long look.” I was promptly made to walk 3 miles to “Flynn’s” and re-do the “long look.”)

Dinner at 6:00 after Walter Cronkite. Monday: salmon croquettes with crumbs all over and onions (mama’s favorite fruit). Tuesday: round steak that one of us had to beat flat with a metal mallet. Wednesday: meatloaf with onions. Thursday: fried chicken. Friday: hamburgers. Still today I must have a hamburger on Friday night. Saturday: The worst frozen pizza ever. Cheese. We were allowed to watch “Flipper” during pizza. Sunday: left-overs from the previous week. Then Lawrence Welk and the The Walt Disney Wonderful World of Color as seen on our black and white with two channels, 10 and 6.

Daddy sat on one end of the table, the southern, Momma, northern most like the point of the compass. To her left was Jimmy then me. To her right Bobby then Billy. Daddy was always rebuked for eating his favorite part of round steak – the fat.

“Herbert!!” On Sundays nothing was scheduled. We usually attended Sunday School and every so often church afterwards. Coat and tie. Clip on. I would completely disrobe on the ride home save for pants.

I would get Sunday behind me because it was time for the Cowboys and the voice of Frank Glibber. Daddy would take his shirt off and lay on his back on the tile floor and go to sleep. One of us, usually Jimmy, would comb Daddy’s hair with a comb while he would moan, pontificate on life and lie. All picked up their plates and took them to the sink.

We had duties. The oldest cut the grass. The next cut the hedges – that was usually me. The next hand-trimmed around the trees. Jimmy would vacuum. Duties. Set in stone.

The two youngest slept in the double bed. Momma and Daddy slept in a queen size on the back porch. It seems odd now, but their bed . . . the TV and dinner table were in one area. Then it just seemed cozy. About 900 square feet. The one bedroom with a closed door was where Bob and I slept on single beds. Bob got married then Jimmy got the double by himself as Billy moved into my bed and I moved to Bobby’s. Bobby got Nellie. Order. Rules.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter. The same decorations, food, and music on the “hi-fi” – our one luxury. We always had music. We had set stockings, Christmas baskets, and schedules for eating, then going to “Granddaddy’s” where the kids would do this and the adults that. Tradition.

Most adamant were rules of submission to authority. Teachers, adults (“Yes sir, no sir”), law enforcement, lifeguards, clerks in stores, coaches, principals. An infraction or disrespect brought “the gaze” of LaVelle and a “trash” lecture that was far worse than a beating. Beds, yards, tables, foods, days of the week, TV shows. (Andy Griffith, Dick Van Dyke, Rawhide, Disney, Saturday Night at the Movies, Bonanza, Lawrence Welk) All set in stone. Monotony? No, rather rhythm. Orbits. Predictability. Safety. Security. Routine. It defined us. You did not gripe about food. You sure did not talk back. You could wrestle a brother but you could not hit. You did not curse. Only Daddy, but a limited range. Periodically he would drop the “GD” bomb and momma would give him a tongue lashing about Hell where he was sure to go.

Surprisingly though we were totally unsheltered. Mom and Dad raised us rough. Favorite word? “Get up!” We had three huge walnut trees that we scaled like marmosets. Should’ve broken a hundred bones but we were on our own. We had an alley (remember those?). It seemed magical. No man’s land. Ripe for exploring. We were given freedom to go wherever our two legs and Huffy Flyers would take us. Somehow we never feared. We had no curfews. Just “be in before supper.” Lights went out after news. Prior? “Get your homework done.” And you did. Grades were not everything as long as a “D” never showed up. It got the gaze and a trash lecture. A “lazy trash” lecture. “F’s?” No one ever made one. Rumor was there was a 5th Nelson boy who made one. Rules. But freedom, within responsibilities and expectations.

I liked leaping off of anything high and sailing to the ground. First sofas then dressers then fences then off the roof then trees. Problem was by the time I was 5 I had a double hernia. Momma said, "we've got to get you an operation or your guts will fall into your crotch." No argument here. My sailing was over though.

The greatest tradition though was Saturday morning. Cartoons came on at 7 and I was waiting. I've never needed an alarm clock. Mornings always excited me. A new day. A day of achievement at my own pace. I've always loved the quiet and newness of mornings. Because "attainment" was everything to a Nelson boy to make something of his life - not just to be a success but for the pride of attainment. Mornings were the starting gun for a new day. But, back to cartoons. Saturdays were doughnuts. Momma did her shopping on Fridays. She came back from Piggly Wiggly with a trunk load of sacks. First you looked for the cookies. Hopefully, Oreos. Dipped in milk of course. After Oreos there were Keebler's fudge cookies, then Chips Ahoy. She went to Mrs. Baird's "day old bakery" so she always got a mess o' cookies. Also cinnamon rolls in those cellophane packages and other delights known only by sight. Also, Hershey's to mix with milk. And, ah yes - Dr. Peppers. In the bottles. Soon to be chilled. We were well fed. Indulged and not overly healthy. So far no Nelson male has lived past 68! But we die "happy and full of days." But all of us boys were waiting for Saturday morning. The TV was by our parent's bed so you had to turn it down low. But we four were connoisseurs of cartoons. Bugs Bunny, Looney Tunes, and Merry Melodies. True cartoons. Made in the 40's for adults before the movie started. You had to know history and current events to understand them. Bugs, Daffy, Yosemite, Tweety, Sylvester, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd, Foghorn Leghorn, Coyote, Road Runner. Mighty Mouse was OK- after all - all the lines were in Opera. The Ant and Anteater were a take off of Dean Martin and Joey Bishop. Top Cat was a take off on Sergeant Bilco and The Flintstones on the Honeymooners. Once they got in to super-heroes though they became moral dramas instead of the absurd and just plain slapstick funny, and these were scorned by the true cartoon lover. We watched them with chocolate milk and cinnamon rolls washed down with Dr. Pepper. Somehow after an hour or so you were trembling with energy!

My greatest fascination though was books. They were instant transport. Doors to all destinations. From Friday afternoons until Sunday nights I was free to perfect myself as a quarterback (more on that later) and to expand my mind. The universe, history and people always held a fascination for me. I never hung out "with the gang" because "the gang" always appeared fruitless and useless. I would have brief trysts with hedonism, but never long term, because, quite simply evil was a waste of time.. . dissipation' as Paul said. (Eph. 5:18) It was counter productive to a Nelson's chief end - to develop oneself into "somebody" (a noble philosophy as long as you know what "somebody" should be). I loved to read The World Books. I skimmed them all, A to Z, looking for anything of interest. And I discovered at Lake Waco Elementary on our library day the fascination of biographies. Small blue-bound books on everyone from Davy Crockett and Zachary Taylor to Molly Pitcher. I read all I could and in so doing established a standard that would float above the vanity of the coming 60's I was about to embark upon. My favorites were the Jim Thorpe Story, I read it twelve times (I counted them), and the Knute Rockne Story. I also

loved to read of the history of the players in baseball's Hall of Fame. Days of ancient yore became my delight. I was never without a book. I remember a "duck and cover" drill where I read a book on baseball greats by Tom Meany while under my desk (never understanding why). I read "The Yankee Clipper" about Joe DiMaggio.

It's funny but I have three distinct memories of three thoughts that crossed my mind there in my early days. First, that there was something in my day terribly wrong. Secondly, I felt intuitively that the error began long before in the 1600's or somewhere (otherwise called the Enlightenment.) And thirdly that the Bible was infinitely distinctive from every other book and that by knowing it would enable me to evaluate all other knowledge. I was sitting behind the piano bench in my Grandmother Perry's house when that idea went through my mind as clear as a bell. I began reading voraciously in Genesis 1. I may have made it ten verses. But the thought was there. It would be picked up again about ten years later.

This was my home. It was all the cold, lying, chaotic, dangerous world was not.

But in one day it trembled.

It was at Christmas. Christmas could be dangerous because it involved the spending of money on "the boys." Money we didn't have. I found out later that Mama would get a loan for Christmas. Daddy's retort was that all he got "was an apple and harmonica" when he was a boy. One thing Daddy was scared of was want. He never forgot it. Mama was indulged. Daddy went hungry. Granddad Perry had a job and profession. Grandpaw Nelson did not. Christmas could throw gasoline on that spark of disparity. *His* claim of her being wasteful. *Her* use of the word, "Bosqueville!"

All I remember is the sight of Daddy out of control with pent-up anger and the frustration of a wife that had become his mother. His right hand was raised up and trembling to strike. She faced him with those blue eyes that could be as cold as icicles hanging from a power line. "Just hit me! And I'll be down to that divorce court." The "D" word had come to our house.

I remember myself saying over and over "quit yelling!" I remember Bobby throwing himself between them saying "Daddy! Daddy!" It quieted. It went away. Underground. Things were quiet. I was nervous about Christmas ever after.

I went to the backyard. I climbed the fence and went to the alley. Alone in no man's land. It was where I would go after reading a biography of Daniel Boone or the like. I crawled deep into the underbrush beneath a huge 30 foot shrub. I crawled back where I could not be seen. I crawled back where the sun did not shine. Where I knew no human had ever been. I sat in silence far from anger. My world was shaken. As when Grandmother's death violated my world, something had violated my home, the home on Wenz. But I discovered something. I could pray. I could ask for miraculous things. And I discovered something else. Nothing and no one finite could be fully rested upon. Not then, not ever.