

## CHAPTER TWO - Delmar

My father, John Eric Lake, was born in 1930 in Albany, New York. His father, Eric John Lake, a serious and formal man, was a lawyer at the time, later to become a district attorney and then deputy attorney general for the State of New York.

E.J. Lake came from a long line of farmers in upstate New York, and was the first ever in his family to attend college, a graduate of both Potsdam Normal College in New York and Colorado College. After receiving his law degree from Colorado University, he returned to New York and practiced law in Brooklyn. He moved to the Albany area shortly before he and his wife had children.

He was 53 years old when his first child, my father John, was born.

John's mother was Mary Rodriguez Lake, her husband's junior by 27 years. Mary's father was from Madrid, Spain; her mother was second-generation Irish. She was raised in New York City and had been briefly married there to a man who developed a serious mental illness, prompting a quick divorce. Her attorney for the divorce was E.J. Lake.

The Lake family lived in Delmar, just outside Albany, in a neat white bungalow-style house with a big front porch and yard, similar to the other middle-class homes in the wooded neighborhood, on a pleasant street called Roweland Avenue. Mr. Lake had purchased the two-and-a-half acre lot in the summer of 1929 and had a house built on the land in anticipation of starting a family. He later bought an adjoining parcel of land because he wanted to raise roosters, and he had a chicken coop built out behind the house.

My aunt, Catherine, was born five years after John.

As the children grew, their yard was often a hub of activity for the kids in the neighborhood, although the elder Lakes did not themselves entertain friends and rarely socialized at all. There were no outings or family gatherings, barely any participation in civic groups – one of E.J.'s rare indulgences outside the home or office came as a life-long, 32nd degree Mason – or even their children's activities. No, John and Catherine's parents mostly stayed home.

The family had a car that was kept in the garage, but only E.J. could drive and he seldom did, preferring instead to walk downtown to work or when a visit to the grocery or hardware store was required. My grandmother was insistent about family dinners together and E.J. and the children obliged. The only guests to visit were the occasional classmate or relative from upstate.

Mary always greeted John and Catherine's visiting playmates warmly, but she modeled her husband's reserve within the household, where parental love was a given, but not much expressed, according to my aunt.

"We were all kind of cool and undemonstrative with each other," she said, citing the precedent established by her recalcitrant father. Mary might have had plenty to say, but her observations tended to focus on goings-on outside the household, such as local politics or current events, and not so much about her love for her children. My aunt does not recall her childhood sadly, nor do the photo albums depict a gloomy family. That's just the way they were.

My grandfather's behavior was a product of his life-long temperament, as well as his age. He was an educated, practical man of few words and, when displeased, a withering glare. Similar to his own father, who was known to be terse, E.J.'s work was his focus, and when at home he mostly retreated to a book or newspaper. The thoughts and concerns of this tall, imposing man were inscrutable to the youngsters, each barely passing through the others' periphery, most often at the evening meal, where Mary dominated the conversation and E.J., as often as not, turned down his hearing aid.

"Your grandfather was so reserved, he was out of reach, almost, for us neighborhood kids," remembered one of my dad's childhood friends, Carl Darrow. "John never talked about him. He was a recluse, as far as we were concerned. I remember him walking down the street from the store pulling his groceries behind him in a red wagon, from time to time, but that was the only time I ever saw him."

Despite his reserved nature, however, my grandfather betrayed his affection for his son, by keeping a picture of John on the desk in his study, where Mr. Lake spent much of his time at home.

"Your grandfather was a particularly formal man," said another friend, Steve Olmstead. "I never saw him without a coat and tie." Although he was not the sort to play catch with the kids out in the yard, said Olmstead, Mr. Lake knew enough about his son's interests to have a basketball hoop fixed to a tree next to the house on Roweland Avenue. The hoop was a hit with the neighborhood children, and it got a lot of use from John and his sports-mad buddies, even during the winter.

I studied my dad's high school yearbook and the pictures of my dad and Olmstead, now a retired Marine Corps general, and Darrow, a former forestry professional, and marveled at how their lives had turned out. They stood together in the basketball team picture, best friends on a championship team, their futures bright, the beneficiaries of good families and a safe, small town, as well as a rickety basketball net erected by a man they seldom spoke to and didn't understand.

That man, my grandfather, dutifully recorded the weather each day in small, leather-bound diaries, for no apparent purpose other than documentation of his agrarian instincts. He carefully charted the lineage of each of his prize birds, often inquiring as to a particular rooster's genealogy through pointed correspondence with a prospective seller before agreeing to a purchase price. He was a methodical man whose interests were indicative of his farming roots and demonstrated his scrupulous attention to detail.

"My father loved those roosters," said Catherine, smiling at the memory. "In fact, he would have photographers come over to take pictures of them, and when they were done, he'd say, 'Well, you might as well take a few of the kids, too.'"

When John was old enough, he became responsible for cleaning the chicken house and caring for its inhabitants, some of whom – presumably the ones without sufficient bloodlines – became dinner for the Lakes on certain occasions. My father did not enjoy these chores. In fact, this experience led to his vow never to eat chicken again, and once he moved out of his parents' house, he never did. He must have developed quite a strong and vocal aversion to poultry, because a lot of his friends remembered and told me about it more than 50 years later.

My dad's independence and leadership among his peers became evident early. At a young age, he was known to roam the neighborhood to organize sports contests among the area kids of football, basketball and baseball. (Little Catherine was sometimes allowed to roam right field, despite his friends' protests.) In football, John was the quarterback. In baseball he was the pitcher. Whatever the activity, he provided a running commentary, gently directing

the young ones, lauding the athletic feats of teammates and opponents alike, and making comic observations throughout that amused all within earshot. And he always competed very hard himself.

All his childhood friends that I tracked down told me that my dad seemed to know how to do things intuitively. In sporting endeavors, he had never had the benefit of a doting father who showed him how to throw, catch, shoot or hit. Yet he did all well, with grace and confidence. At home, he managed his schoolwork and his time, even organizing his books and clothes in his room, without being told to do so. He knew how to manage his affairs and arrange his things and did so without any prompting or the need for guidance. Despite being a boy who loved nothing more than to just have fun, John always managed the details of his life with an uncoached maturity.

“John was very independent and self-directed,” observed another schoolmate, Cal Sutliff. “He a lot of did things on his own, like sports writing and cartooning. He had a huge amount of initiative.”

His innate confidence and unconscious comfort with himself emerged at an early age, according to my aunt.

“I gather from bits that my mother let drop that John was not your typical little boy,” said Catherine. “They clearly did not know how to deal with his precociousness. There was no network of parents to share advice because my parents did not socialize. Growing up, I found that I could manipulate most situations to my satisfaction, as the old folks were pretty clueless as to what kids were normally up to.”

On one occasion Mrs. Lake visited John’s second-grade classroom. The class was engaged in a reading and writing project, with the teacher strolling around, advising. John was sitting away from the class, looking out the window. Mrs. Lake asked why John was not working with the class.

“John is so beyond this,” the teacher responded, “when he feels like it he will master this in a few minutes.”

My grandmother was furious and told the teacher that he should be working with the class.

“But I think the teacher really knew better,” Catherine observed, “even though special attitudes toward gifted kids were not common in those days.”

Despite the differences in perspective and some emotional distance from his parents, however, John did not try to float through his early years on potential alone. His parents’ values and emphasis on education clearly sank in. A voracious reader like his father, he was a disciplined student and a determined, hard-working athlete. My dad adopted his parents’ social leanings as Democrats, too, and cared very deeply about politics. He was well liked in school, remembered for his humor and kindness as well as his academic achievement and participation in just about everything. And early on he was cultivating his love for sports – as both participant and observer – as well as his own meticulous approach to his activities.

“One thing that I remember about John is that he kept a fictitious sports league,” said Darrow. “You can’t imagine the number of those black-speckled notebooks he had, to keep track of it all. He would get all excited over who’d win or lose.”

“He was always doing that, rolling dice and writing it down, whatever it meant,” agreed Catherine. “He really enjoyed that.”

John was also taken with comic strips – his favorite was Pogo – and doodling, and he often would draw fictitious sports pages, complete with headlined articles, photos with captions, cartoons and even box scores. His attention to detail and willing effort was impressive, as was his ceaseless energy. Most letters signed by John Lake, beginning as a youngster and throughout his life, included a small, Kilroy-esque caricature of himself at the bottom.

Bob Gardner was a particularly close childhood friend to my father, though they did not live close to each other. Bob's aunt Helen was a cousin of my father's from Richville, in St. Lawrence County, the upstate New York town where E.J. Lake was raised. They met one summer at the family camp on Trout Lake when they were 10 or 11. John was a year older than Bob, but both boys shared a sense of adventure and a deep love of sports.

"From that point on, after that first summer, whenever John's family came to Richville he spent most of his time at our farm," recalled Bob. "Over the years when John's family quit coming (upstate), John continued to visit me in the summer and I went to Delmar to visit him."

Through their teenage years, the boys spent every summer together, including many warm nights camped out on the front porch at the Gardner farm, listening to Red Barber call the Brooklyn Dodger games, the only New York team they could get on the radio. They often played the baseball game with dice that John had invented, updating team standings and player statistics after every contest.

One particular night in 1947, Barber announced that pitcher Ewell Blackwell of the Cincinnati Reds would be going for his nineteenth straight win at Ebbets Field against Brooklyn the following day.

"John said, 'Boy, I'd like to see that game.' So I said, 'Let's go!'" Bob remembered. "We left a note on the kitchen table for my folks and walked down to Route 11 and started hitchhiking. It only took us two rides and we got to the game on time."

During their impromptu visit to New York City, the boys called on John's uncle in Flushing, an early indicator of John's penchant for dropping in on friends or relatives whenever he happened to be passing through. They also visited the Museum of Natural History on their own, determined to soak in as much of the city as possible during the impromptu trip that stretched to two days.

I liked hearing this story as much as Bob liked telling it, and I was impressed that the teenagers' trip to a ball game ended with a visit to a museum. But their curiosity knew no limits, it seems, and Bob is very proud to recount for me what fun they had.

"We were very adventurous and did things most kids wouldn't consider doing," he said. "Neither of us had a car, but our bicycles, feet and thumbs got us where we wanted to go. Our parents allowed us much more freedom than most parents do."

Another quest took them to Albany, where the Pittsburgh Pirates were in town to play an exhibition game against their farm team, the Albany Senators. But when the boys arrived, the game was already sold out. After assessing the situation, they decided to try to sneak in.

"We climbed over the outfield wall and the security guards chased us (onto the field and) right down the line. When we got to the Pirates dugout, the players grabbed us and pulled us in. We watched the game from their dugout," Gardner laughed. "That was the only contact I ever had with major leaguers," he said, indirectly referring to the difference between he and my dad.

My father would later make a living interviewing and writing about athletes. Gardner became a teacher and then an administrator, and was a very successful high school basketball coach.

When the two friends weren't off on an adventure, following sports or reading their beloved *Sporting News* – at the time a statistic-lover's bible – they engaged in their own athletic contests.

“John was an excellent athlete and he was a little better at most things than I was,” Gardner recalled. “If we played three games, he would win two, but all our contests were close. If we were organizing a game, we always made sure we were on opposite sides. He was extremely competitive and played hard, but he was also very sportsmanlike.”

During their teen years, the tall and wiry John was bigger than Bob, a year younger, which allowed Bob the opportunity to inherit some of his friend's outgrown clothing.

“John's mother bought him excellent clothes and passed them on to me. I wore John's clothes for years. My mother had to buy me only shoes, socks and underwear...John was a much more polished suburbanite. I was a farm boy.”

Any socioeconomic differences between the two, however, had no negative effects on their friendship. They rarely saw each other during the school year and never watched each other compete on their respective school teams, but they wrote each other frequently, continuing their correspondence and their comradeship into their adult lives.

“Although we never lived in proximity to each other, John was the friend I had the most in common with and was closest to over a long period of time,” Gardner said. “I suspect he might make the same assessment about me.”

I noticed that Bob and I also have something in common: We both look out the window when we are thinking about my father.

I was beginning to see a pattern as I sought out these people from my father's past. All of them were delighted with my questions and the chance to talk about my dad, even those who weren't particularly close with him, because he affected all of them. Many of them even helped me find other classmates to interview. My dad stood out among all of them back then, and no one doubted that he would become a newspaper man, because that's what he wanted to be. A sportswriter. They all knew it, even in high school.

My father and his closest buddies in Delmar shared that common interest in sports, particularly in track and basketball. At Bethlehem Central High School, my dad was the number-one miler on the track team and Olmstead the top half-miler.

“During the war, especially, cars were almost non-existent, thus we usually ran every place we went,” said Olmstead, who frequently stopped by the Lake house. “We always ran. And if we weren't shooting hoops outside in the yard, we could be found down at the Methodist church gym.”

His neighbors remember frequently seeing my dad jogging along the side of the road, dribbling a basketball with one hand, books in the other, en route to visit his girlfriend, who lived on the far side of the neighborhood. John used Gladys Amos' yard as a shortcut, as many of the neighborhood kids did.

Mrs. Amos remembers letting her young daughter toddle around in the back yard one day as she kept an eye on her through a window in the house. John came strolling through the yard with a handful of books and, noticing the little girl, set down his books and dropped to his knees to tie her shoelaces. After a brief, eye-level conversation, he was on his way.

“I just thought that was so nice of him, for a high-school boy to notice a little girl like that,” said Mrs. Amos. “I always remembered that, and thought highly of him because of it. Most teenaged kids would have just walked on by.”

Steve Olmstead was a frequent roadside companion of my dad, and equally fleet. They’d run from Steve’s to John’s house or keep going toward the school or church for one type of sports contest or another, always on foot, because John’s parents never attended his games or track meets to watch him perform and never drove him to drop him off.

Joined by the tall Darrow, the star of their high school basketball team, the three developed together as mainstays of their basketball squads growing up.

“We played intramural basketball in junior high and on the freshman, jayvee and varsity teams in high school,” recalled Olmstead. “John was a real stickler on defense and had more than his share of skinned knees and elbows.”

Another acquaintance, Alan Knox, recalled meeting my father for the first time in Junior High during a pickup basketball game: “John proved that basketball is not a *contact* sport, it’s a *collision* sport. *Very* competitive – I just wasn’t used to playing that hard.”

Eventually, my dad was given the nickname “Spider,” due to his appearance in Bethlehem Central’s black warm-up suits as well as his approach to sports: He was a “plugger,” a guy that never let up, constantly in motion with a defensive style that made opponents feel as if they were being guarded by an eight-armed opponent.

In their senior year, the Bethlehem Central basketball team, blessed with the talent of the three – John, Olmstead and especially Darrow – among several other skilled players from Delmar, went undefeated throughout the regular season and sectional playoffs until their final, championship game, where they lost by two points. The team compiled a won-lost record of 19-1, a mark that has not since been matched at the school. That season, and particularly that close, nail-biting game, remains fresh in the minds of all my father’s former teammates, more than 50 years later.

It is a phenomenon that is unique to sports: The collective memory that binds the participants and provides context for the events that occurred within the same timeframe. If I ever became a cold-case investigator, I think I’d start my interviews with a sports reference to establish context. “Remember when Joe Namath made the guarantee? Where did you watch that game?”

All the Bethlehem Central teammates have slightly differing views of John Lake and Delmar and their post-war adolescence, seen through their own lenses, but the game itself was recounted with uncanny similarity. It was back and forth, then the opponent began to pull away, and finally Bethlehem Central changed some match-ups and made a run at the end, falling just short. Some of the guys remain bitterly disappointed by the loss to this day; others feel it was a life lesson that continues to serve them well.

I don’t know how my dad felt about it. Although he managed to recall much of his young life in his thoughtful

daily letters to my mother and his family when he was in the Navy a few years later, he never mentioned that fateful game.

In high school, my father did not limit his extracurricular activities solely to participation in sports. He also became a member of the National Honor Society as a junior at Bethlehem Central. He was serious about his studies and approached them with his attentive organizational skills and his steel-trap intellect. It appears that as he matured and began to really enjoy subjects like history and literature, he became closer to his father, because they found they shared a common interest in books and the information found within them.

Like most eccentrics, my grandfather concerned himself only in what interested him, and was oblivious to others' impression of him. E.J. Lake was an extremely well read, informed man, and as a teenager John discovered to his intellectual delight that he had an extremely sober, articulate educational resource in his own living room. Although it took a particularly enlightened inquiry to engage the man in the gray suit seated in the wing-backed chair and induce him, one eyebrow up, to fold down his newspaper, my father's curious persistence was rewarded with long discussions with his knowledgeable old man, who seemed to warm to both subject and the inquisitor.

"You really had to just barge in to his study and sit down if you wanted to get his attention and establish a relationship," my mother's brother, Joe, told me. "When I first met the Lakes, your mother told me, 'Just go in and strike up a conversation.' He wasn't going to make the first move, but if you could wade through the intimidation factor of walking in uninvited, he was really a warm and charming man. And smart as hell."

I suspect that's how it worked for my father. After a childhood of concerning himself with boyish pursuits like sports and games, he probably talked about his high school studies at the dinner table, or asked a question about politics, and got the ball rolling with his father. After that, they were both hooked; my father insatiably curious and E.J. delighted to share a boatload of wisdom with his bright-eyed, receptive son. With the wisdom also came respect, which is clear from their correspondence. By high school, John Lake was discussing and considering issues with his father – one of the foremost legal minds in the state of New York – and it brought both of them happiness, and together.

From his father, John learned not only to back up his opinions, but to stand up for them as well, when E.J. Lake successfully challenged the state to keep his job as deputy attorney general after a gubernatorial election brought in a new, Republican administration. The lesson was clear: It's not enough to be smart; determined study and preparation for every task was the proper way to conduct one's affairs.

"Our group, the guys who hung out together, we were a fairly bright group, but John was the smartest," remembered Lou Dempf, a friend since the third grade. "He was always doing something, and he was very capable, no matter what it was."

"He wasn't the valedictorian, but he was close," agreed Olmstead. "He was always on the honor roll, a list which I personally wasn't familiar with."

Steve Olmstead is humble and direct, and an interesting guy. He enlisted in the Marines right after high school, and fought in the Korean War. He survived some very scary battles as a young private, and was so moved by the heroic leadership of the men in his unit that he decided to make the military his career. He had ascended from Private to Brigadier General by the time he retired. I have no doubt that my father would have been very proud of his old running buddy.

Clearly a guy with a straightforward, military style, Steve was not warm and fuzzy when we first spoke on the phone, nor was he rude. He was brief and to-the-point. He told me that he was going out of town, and that he'd be back in touch. Soon I received a letter – a matter-of-fact recitation of his recollections of my father and his family in Delmar – and dozens of copies of newspaper articles about the Bethlehem sports teams, many of them written by my dad. Steve had kept them all, and he shared them with me, many with a short, handwritten note along the side of the page, like, “This was probably your dad’s best game,” or, “Article by John.”

Every now and then over the next few months, I'd get a phone call or an e-mail from him, suggesting I speak to a particular former classmate, whom he'd already contacted on my behalf. He offered to help me navigate the Naval Records bureaucracy with a delayed Freedom of Information request. He never made a big deal out of it, never chatted for long. If I said, “Wow, Steve, this is a huge help to me,” he'd say simply, “Okay. Good luck.”

When I finally met Steve and Carl and their wives, he was friendly and sharp as we talked and pored through some old photographs. I can't remember his exact words now, but toward the end of our conversation, after I'd explained my research, he paid me a compliment, something like, “You're an impressive young man.”

It feels good to receive praise from a person like Steve Olmstead, who is experienced and accomplished, kind and intelligent. And despite his modesty, he is truly an impressive man.

Post-war Delmar was a happy place for my father and his friends. He began dating Kitty Brumfield in his senior year. The two spent a great deal of time with each other, attending dances and plays, studying together and going for long walks.

“We lived at the right time. We went places we wanted to go, did what we wanted to do,” observed Kitty. “Everybody trusted us, because everybody knew what everyone was up to, anyway. We'd go for walks or picnics, go to the movies, whatever we wanted. Sometimes he would ride me around on the handlebars of his bike. We didn't worry about it being dangerous.”

Although he was known for academic and athletic achievement, I was happy to learn that John Lake was not always a model of decorum. He had a reputation as a quipster, quick with a humorous remark that would often break up his classmates in laughter during school lectures. Most of the time his comments were simply good-natured and timely, delivered in a dry, under-the-breath fashion.

“He would always utter these little, quiet jokes from the back of the classroom,” remembered Mimi Darrow, Carl's wife. “I was always giggling, listening to him. And he had this fun, smirky little grin and laugh.”

“I remember one time in Social Studies when our teacher, Miss Green, was droning on and on, talking about some complicated political situation overseas. She kept mentioning these ‘entangling alliances,’ over and over. Finally, John sang out: ‘Just like spaghetti!’ Of course, everyone rolled on the floor.”

“Whenever I hear his name, I just burst out laughing, because he had such a wonderful sense of humor.”

On one occasion, though, my father's sarcastic sense of humor got him in trouble. Mrs. Earle, the math teacher, was a disheveled, frumpy old bat that always seemed to have a bra strap hanging down to her elbow. John passed her in the hallway one day and remarked, “You're looking particularly lovely today, Mrs. Earle.”

He was kicked out of school for disrespecting a teacher.

“The strange thing is,” observed my aunt, “that I remember no repercussions, no scolding or smacking. He was out for two days and then was reinstated. I think the school was more embarrassed than anything, because he had been inducted into the National Honor Society as a junior the previous week.”

My dad took advantage of the two days off from school, hitchhiking up to and back from Richville to visit his cousins and his buddy Bob Gardner, and appeared thoroughly unaffected by the whole ordeal.

John joined the Hi-Y Service Organization, the Dramatics Club, and was a BCCHS “guide.” And it was in high school that he began to write for publication, first for the school newspaper, *The Star*, and the “Oriole” yearbook, and later for Albany area newspapers covering schoolboy sports. He was also the announcer for Bethlehem Central’s home football games.

“He was sharp – smart as a whip – and he knew the game, you could tell,” said Lou Dempf. “In fact, the other teams used to complain because John would call their plays. He’d say, ‘Looks like they’re gonna pass to the right side,’ or something like that, because he could spot what they were doing and was capable of describing the action as it was happening. We always got a big kick out of it when he’d do that.”

For all his visible and wide-ranging talents, though, Johnny Lake did not fit the “All-American” mold. There was an introspective side of his personality, a thoughtful seriousness that all his friends observed occasionally.

“He could be moody,” remembered Kitty. “Sometimes he’d walk right by me in the hallway; he wouldn’t talk to me for a week at a time. I don’t know if he even saw me.”

Some saw him as aloof; others described him as reserved. It wasn’t a permanent condition, it was simply another aspect of his make-up that those who knew him accepted. They could see it in his face, whether he was walking on the side of the road, down the hall at school or standing back from the group.

“Everyone liked him, but he was a loner in some ways,” said Sutliff. “He wasn’t a rebel, he was just following his own path. I just think he had more going on than was possible to show in that limited environment.”

By the time he was a senior at Bethlehem Central, John was well known in town for his many activities and his achievements. His parents saw his name in the local paper with regularity and sister Catherine – who began calling herself Kitty after meeting and admiring my dad’s girlfriend – was well aware of her big brother’s accomplishments.

“I grew up idolizing Johnny, but from afar,” she said. “It always seems when I look back that we were in different worlds: I in grade school, he in high school; I in high school, he in college, etc. In one respect I was glad of the age difference, because the teachers’ memories tended to fade and not so much was expected of me.”

This is typical Lake humility: A wry, self-deprecating comment while admiring another, this from my Aunt Kitty, an honors student herself who went on to attend Cornell. My father would attend Syracuse University on a scholarship, majoring in journalism and history.

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It was difficult for me to decide where to begin. There was so much to go through, so many questions to consider, so much work involved, and all of it laden with emotion. If I had tried to plan my steps early on, I probably would have given up, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the project. My father's life is a subject I've pushed aside before, but this time at least I thought there might be some answers there, buried in the pile.

So I read my parents' letters, all of them, several times. I tried to organize them chronologically as I went along, and then read them again in the right order. There are some letters I wish I had read before others, but I ended up at the same place, regardless: An admirer. A little bitter. Fatalistic. And still unsatisfied with what I knew about my dad.

I know that I am the man I have become, in part, because of the events earlier in my life. They are unchangeable, and I haven't spent much time imagining what otherwise might have been. I do feel cheated by my father's absence, though, perhaps even more as an adult than I did as a kid, when I often dwelt in a swirl of family crises and slowly dawning introspection. Back then I simply reacted to each event and personal discovery as they occurred, without much thought to the emerging patterns.

Now I look for meaning. I struggle with how to define myself, given my family history. Son, divorced husband, father. And I ponder whether this search for my father, for who he is – or was – is somehow a sign of weakness, an indication of the vulnerability I've tried to disguise. He's been gone a long time. Who am I searching for, anyway, my father or myself? It seems too easy to get philosophical, and I am more interested in accuracy at this point, the facts, not in documenting some 'poor, pitiful me' childhood.

"It's about him, not me," I kept reminding myself. But that's not completely true.

I've often wondered if having a parent disappear has the same impact on a person as having a parent die at a young age. Do I grieve in the same way? And what's it like to be a boy like my dad, whose father was a senior citizen when he was in grammar school? It's impossible to know, even with the insights of those who were there. Only he knows.

One thing is certain, however: Little boys who have lost their fathers, however it may have occurred, wear a slightly stricken look unlike any other human expression. I'm tuned to that face, and to those that wear it. I find it excruciating now, as an adult, when I see them, momentarily lost in thought, trailing behind their mother in a store or standing out amidst a group of other kids, or, like I did so often growing up, walking alone at the side of the road, to and fro to my own activities, mostly unattended by others, just like my dad did.

As a teenager, I noticed that my father's unresolved story affected those to whom I told it in ways I didn't like much. Most would either find it deeply troubling – and I'd sense that they would then study me for signs of my wounds, perhaps noticing my own stricken-boy look, not hidden well enough behind adolescent bravado – or they would be fascinated, and ask me a series of predictable questions.

"You never saw him again? *Ever?*"

"Nope."

"Wow... Do you think he's alive somewhere?"

"Well, it's hard to..."

“Do you think he was murdered?”

“Um, I really...”

“What did your mother do?”

(She fell apart, drank and laid on the couch; thanks for asking.)

After a while, my honesty ceased when that subject came up, for brevity’s sake if no other reason. But there were plenty of other reasons.

“He’s dead.”

He might as well be even if he’s not, I thought, so what’s the difference?

After a while, he was dead in me.

I’ve heard stories about people who felt that something was terribly wrong the instant a loved one died, despite being a great distance away. Not me. If my father did die, it happened in another world, for I felt no sudden change. What I have felt is a constant, low hum, an almost imperceptible emotional static that’s been with me as long as I can remember, the only link between my truncated childhood and my adult life. I’ve been two people in this drama. At first young, struggling along without enough cues to recognize anything but the gaps; the second older now, silently noting every instance in which it would be nice to have a friend like him to consult. Perhaps I should have talked more with the others in the stricken-boy club, but there never seemed to be a good time to get into it. And after a while, I didn’t want to be like them, anyway. It was old news.

By the time I got to college I was sufficiently removed from my family and my childhood. We had moved away from New Jersey after my father was declared legally dead, allowing my mother to sell the house that had been in his name and embark on a geographical cure for the family. After the insulation of a move, new schools and new friends, the ache subsided somewhat. I was fortunate to have coaches, friends and employers to provide some grown-man guidance. The only reminders of my father were my sister and my mom, and I didn’t see them much, especially after going off to school.

As a young man, the one jolting reminder I had of my vanished father was seeing Pete Axthelm on television as an analyst for NBC’s pro football coverage. Axthelm was Newsweek’s sports editor, my father’s successor. He, along with the Boston Globe’s Will McDonough, were the pioneers of the movement by members of the print media into sports broadcasting. They were the “experts,” the “insiders.”

I’ve since learned that Axthelm had his own, very human failings. But at the time I deeply resented him because, in my mind, he had my father’s job and seemed to be on top of the world. He was on television every Sunday to remind me what might have been. It was unreasonable, certainly, for me to dislike him, but I did, and when my letter to him – a fluffy note of feigned admiration in which I mentioned my dad, hoping I might learn something – went unanswered, my opinion of Axthelm was solidified.

It was at that time I stopped talking about my father completely. I thought about how pitiful it would be to announce to the other guys in the room watching football with me that the guy on T.V. would be my dad, if only he hadn’t vanished into the night. I kept my mouth shut.

PINKERTON'S, INC.

CONFIDENTIAL

Locate - John Lake

Report of XVG

Date Friday, January 26, 1968

13 Christopher Street  
N.Y. N.Y.

This address is a red brick, three story walkup apartment building, containing six apartments. The name Lake, appears on one of the mailboxes which was unlocked. No mail was therein. The front door was locked and when I was unable to receive a response from any of the six buzzers, I could not gain admittance to the building.

Mr. Harry I. Kohn  
15 Christopher Street  
N.Y. N.Y.

Stated he is the owner of the premises at 13 Christopher Street and rented an apartment to Mr. Lake for occupancy beginning Dec. 1, 1967. Subject paid one month rent plus one month security and moved in as the sole occupant on Dec. 1, 1967. Mr. Kohn recalled this payment was made by check but he could not remember the name of the bank. The owner did not recall ever seeing Mr. Lake during the month of December and when his rent for the month of Jan. 1968 was not paid, a dispossess summons was obtained and subject's apartment has been rented to new tenants for occupancy as of Feb. 1, 1968. Subject's photograph was shown to the managers and clerks of Howard Johnson's Restaurant, Prexy Coffee Shop and the Donut-Muffin-Coffee Shop all on 6th Ave., one block from the Christopher St. address and all said they did not recognize him as a customer.