

CHAPTER THREE - Syracuse

In the fall of 1947, my father began his college career on scholarship at Syracuse University. His mother, who had also attended Syracuse, arranged that John and Carl Darrow would be roommates their freshman year, thinking that the adjustment to life at a big university from small-town Delmar would be easier with a familiar face nearby.

John enrolled in the standard liberal arts courses necessary as a pre-requisite for a course of study in Journalism. His transcripts reveal that he continued the disciplined approach to his studies that he'd established as a high school student: He received four A's and two B's in each of his first two semesters; the B's came in Philosophy, Citizenship and Geology. He aced his English, Journalism, French and Zoology courses.

Like many graduates from a small-town high school, John had been aching to move up and out, and he relished the opportunity to get out of the house and into the world of a student at a big university. He embraced his new life with the same innate confidence and enthusiasm that served him so well in Delmar.

Although even more serious about his studies in college – the terms of his scholarship required continued academic excellence – he jumped into the buffet of activities available to him, feeding greedily until his schedule was overstuffed. He worked for the Daily Orange, Syracuse's daily newspaper. He played intramural sports in notoriously tough football and basketball leagues that featured many big, rough veterans of World War II returning to school on the G.I. Bill. He participated in student groups and councils, and was rushed by many fraternities on campus, finally pledging Acacia in the spring of his freshman year.

Carl was having a tougher time adjusting to this new life, and John did what he could to help him feel comfortable. My dad had a very detailed system of organizing his notes and his study time, and he shared his ideas with Carl, who managed to get by but was not able to knock down A's and B's with regularity the way my father did. The two had the same freshman English class, and my dad frequently offered advice and encouragement. Carl appreciated the help, but he was peeved by the fact that no matter how hard he worked on his term papers, my father would always get an 'A' and Carl would get a 'C.'

"I told him once, 'Your papers aren't that much better than mine, and I'll prove it to you,'" Carl told me. "So we switched papers the next time, and when we got them back, once again he got an 'A' and I got a 'C.' He laughed and said, 'Carl, you can't win, can you?'"

Apart from that little anecdote, though, the thing that stuck in Carl's memory when we spoke about their freshman year in college together was the fact that he wouldn't have gone out for the freshman basketball team if it hadn't been for my dad. Despite the fact that Carl had been the high-scoring 6'6" horse of his high school team, he was intimidated by the big college atmosphere of Syracuse and didn't think he'd be good enough at that level.

"He encouraged me to go out for the team, and I was reticent to do so," Carl recalled. "But he pushed and pushed and insisted I was good enough, and I say it's thanks to him that I made the team."

By the spring of their freshman year, my father and Carl were starting to go their separate ways. Carl studied forestry and my dad majored in journalism, and each joined a different fraternity. My dad moved into the Acacia house at the end of his freshman year, on the way to creating a whole new slate of friends and acquaintances.

As I researched my dad's college life, I spoke with many kind and helpful people, much like my experience with the Delmar crowd. Once again I was the beneficiary of good luck in finding people, and the generosity of my father's old friends who liked what I was doing and wanted to help out. Ultimately, I obtained and worked through an up-to-date list of Acacia alumni, contacting dozens of former fraternity brothers by either e-mail or phone. My inquiries yielded nice conversations and gratifying information (great student, good athlete, wonderful guy, etc.) but nothing that surprised me. I remain astounded by his apparently ceaseless energy and the multitude of his achievements during those four years, but in my mind, the most significant event of my father's years at Syracuse occurred in 1949. That was when he met my mother.

His brothers at Acacia remember that he was chapter correspondent, then secretary and finally "Venerable Dean," the equivalent of chapter president. They remember that he was sports editor of the Daily Orange. They recall that he put up a basketball hoop and organized countless games in the driveway of the fraternity house, but he ultimately got in trouble with the phone company, because he had attached the backboard to a utility pole. It was John Lake who woke everyone early one morning when there was a fire on the side porch of the old house, and Johnny was one of the guys who spearheaded the purchase of the new fraternity house in 1950. He was active and capable, but not too gung-ho when it came to fraternity life. He played Bing Crosby music in the study rooms, and he dressed up like a dancing girl on the fraternity float one year. He enjoyed his friends and mentored the younger guys. He respected the veterans. He made an impression on people. They all remember Johnny Lake as funny and smart, and a level-headed leader.

My mother's recollections are different.

She remembers him standing outside her door in the rain after their first date, not wanting to leave. She recalls being angry before their second date, because instead of knocking on the door and meeting her parents when he came to pick her up, he introduced himself to her younger brother Joe and his chums in the driveway instead, and proceeded to play a sweaty, shirtless game of basketball with them, forever endearing himself to my very tall uncle, who looked up to him figuratively, if not literally, all his life.

My mother remembers falling in love with my father over one weekend.

The challenge of interviewing my mother about my father was formidable. We hadn't really talked about him for a long time. I stopped asking about him as a young teenager because she always seemed to tell me the same stories whenever I brought him up. I knew all her anecdotes and descriptions by heart and, although I never felt satisfied with what I knew about him, she has always been the only real source of information available to me. But we'd played those old tapes before – now I had new questions to ask.

My mother is ambivalent about my research. Maybe it's a control thing; after all, she's no longer the sole authority on the subject. She is the one that left behind all the stuff I later found in the attic when I bought her house 10 years ago, but I wouldn't call that a conscious decision on her part, because she left behind many family items when she moved out, financially compelled to find more affordable living arrangements, and fast. Her departure from her home was messy and emotional, made worse by the fact that I had to rent the house to pay the mortgage. She moved out, the tenants moved in, and the Lake family heirlooms remained buried in a dark and dusty corner where they'd sat for years, not to be unearthed by me for another decade.

My mother assures me she believes what I'm doing is a worthwhile undertaking. But she's nervous about how she'll be painted, knowing that she was far from her best in the two years leading to my dad's disappearance, and aware that I have always been quick to point out her faults. The simple fact is she annoys me, and she has for a

long, long time. It is as if I never got past that stage where adolescents start to realize their parents are human, and they hold it against them. My mother is wholly human, and I am as aware of her flaws as I am my own, perhaps because we share a few of the same ones. I am too impatient with her, and she is flighty and defensive. I have a few wonderful memories of my mother from my childhood, and some pretty dreadful ones, too. The bottom line, however, is that I lost respect for her a long time ago because of the way she conducts her life, and it has affected our relationship. But she was there, a key player in the life of John Eric Lake. I needed her help, despite our disagreements and her penchant for sentimentality, embellishment and often, outright dishonesty.

My mother doesn't like direct questions. She doesn't want to be pinned down. If I ask, for instance, "Were you ever having an affair with someone else when Daddy disappeared?" I can't expect a straight answer, because she becomes paranoid and evasive. She wants to be viewed as the victim of his disappearance, not seen as a potential instigator, and she simply will not participate in any kind of dialogue that might lead to tough questions or, worse, accusations. But when I ask her about the happier times in their life – Syracuse, Hawaii, or when my sister and I were very little – she'll wax nostalgic for hours.

After several long conversations – some contentious, others interesting, all of them rambling – I finally asked my mom to write to me about my dad, figuring she'd stay more focused on paper without me challenging ridiculous statements or interrupting her for the sake of clarity. I asked her to help me understand him better and to tell me about their life together in the way *she* wanted to, figuring that was better than nothing at all. She's a great writer, albeit a horrible procrastinator, and this gave her the chance to tell me some things in her way, without interjection from her blunt son, who always pushes for troublesome details, facts and context.

I think that the opportunity to write *did* give way to some embellishment – for my mom, accuracy has no chance when it comes head-to-head against an artful bit of phraseology – but I believe the essence is true, because she is talking about good times and the John Lake she admired, not the one with whom she later fell out of love.

To her credit, her letters are insightful and interesting, with a thoroughly unique perspective. Unfortunately, her correspondence came in a flurry the first two weeks, and then a couple more drifted in a week after that, until they stopped altogether. As is her pattern, she was unable to do what she said she would do and finish what she started.

That first date was in early April, 1949. A misty, warmish (for Syracuse) Friday night. We went to the New York road-show of Brigadoon, which was in town for the weekend.

By student standards this was a fairly high-line date, requiring forethought (reservations), expense (the tickets themselves, plus costly refreshments at intermission) and real dressing-up; suits and ties for men, short formal cocktail-type dresses for women. Not a sport coat or day dress in the house.

The students I saw at the theater were very rich, drama majors or "pinned" – engaged to be engaged.

I was surprised by the invitation. We'd never "gone out" at all and didn't know each other that well. (He'd done some checking on me, which I didn't know at the time and won't digress into now.)

The School of Journalism was small, so we were all well-acquainted, sharing a lot

of classes and working together on the Daily Orange. It was hard to get into J-School, harder yet to stay in. You had to maintain a B average over all, B+ or A in J-School courses.

The university required 12 – 15 class hours per semester. With a dual major, we did 16 – 18, sometimes by special permission more. Most classes were graded on a curve, great if you were majoring in business or home economics. In our school, we had a lot of GI Bill war veterans, 28 years old, married, been shot at, worked on Stars & Stripes. The curve was out of sight.

Staying just even took a minimum average of 5 hours study a night. If you took off to go play – which, of course, we did – you made it up over the weekend, after you got home, on vacation, whatever. But you made it up. You had to or you flunked out.

I almost flunked out my first semester. Fortunately, we had mid-term exams, I found that I had to take more careful, organized class notes and book notes, which I had never done. For purposes of review, even if you underlined well, you didn't have time to go through those thick, heavy tomes.

I got a D in Botany – which I liked – by operating on the assumption that if I understood what was said, and what I read, I could bring it all back to mind on demand.

I wasn't the only freshman who found myself in deep shit that first November. A lot of high school geniuses had to sharpen their study skills. In J-School, we banded together, swapping notes, pooling info, covering for each other if we missed a single class. Your father's notebooks were astounding to me – thick and thin writing for emphasis, red underlines and, of course, cartoons. At the end of that first semester, I gave him my new, improved botany notes in exchange for his in geology, which I would take second semester. (You had to have a year of science.) Upper classmen helped, too, contributing last year's notes and the accumulated wisdom of how to arrange your schedule, which professors to seek out, which to avoid, when to take NO-DOZ, and how to conduct a study date.

I knew your father mostly from working nights in the print shop – we were good setting up pages together – and walking from one class to another. He seemed to be more serious than most of the other boys, but funnier too, in swift little underplayed flashes.

He was very much still a boy – didn't get his full growth until he was well into his 20's. He wore a blue-and-black buffalo plaid overshirt and had just the beginnings of the 5 o'clock shadow that later on had him shaving twice a day. I thought even then that God intended him to wear a beard. I pictured what he would look like as a rabbinical scholar – smashing!

One of our weekly walks was long and we took to inventing silly songs – the genesis of the stuff we used to sing in the car when you were small. (Do you remember Hot

Day? Just those two words to the tune of the Seven Dwarfs' Heigh-Ho?)

The very first, as I remember, was dedicated to an infinitely boring graphic arts instructor – Mr. Rich, who put us to sleep at 8 AM twice a week in an overheated room at Yates Castle.

A bit of classical music – I can't readily tell you the tune, but could find it – had been simplified into a popular love song, *Full Moon and Empty Arms*.

Anyhow, your father said, "Mr. Rich is an apple-head."

I loved it. An apple-head. I said it aloud and repeated it. Apple-head. You apple-head!

And out of nowhere I hummed a few bars of "Full Moon."

In an instant, he threw down his books on the pathway – we were in Thornden Park – puffed out his chest, extended his arms (a dead ringer for Mario Lanza) and bel-lowed:

"Mis-ter / Rich is an ap
ple head Mis-ter Rich is an ap
ple head / Mis-ter..."

He burst out laughing. "It won't end right."

But I was chorusing in:

"Rich is an ap-ple head / Mis-ter Rich is..."

I'll spare you, but it ends triumphantly: MIS-TER RICH IS AN AP!

After which, young John Lake picked up his books, resumed a studious expression, and strode off purposefully to class.

The song achieved some brief localized fame, as did the expression, "What an ap!"

He would sing anything, anywhere. Sing-alongs at the movies – which I thought were corny ("Sing! It's good for you.") the Star Spangled Banner at sports events, whatever hymns were on the agenda at whatever church he attended, the University anthems. He had a strong, true voice. He could read music – I couldn't. I had to learn by ear. Later on, he patiently taught me some songs note by note.

ANYHOW – all I knew about him before *Brigadoon* was that he was smart and funny, had meticulous study habits and schedules, liked to sing, worked well with hot type, and would hide his books under bushes – even in people's front yards – rather than lug them long distances. "I'll get 'em later," he'd say.

I don't think he ever lost any. In the end, he taught me to do it, too.

One morning I stayed back after class to talk with a professor. I was surprised to see that blue and black shirt on the sidewalk out by the street. We had 10 minutes

between most classes and I was already late.

I can see it all in slo-mo. He turned around when I came out the door and walked back across the lawn to meet me, looking serious.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"I want to ask you something."

"Okay..."

"I have tickets for Brigadoon. Friday. Opening Night. Would you go with me?"

I was stunned. There had been no indication that he would ever "ask me out." No flirting, no hanging about, no comradely pats on the back...

"Yes," I said, "I'd love to."

"Good. Great. Thanks. I'll see ya."

And he sprinted off toward the main campus. I'd never seen him run before. I'd never seen anyone run so fast. He would not be late for class.

I was so late I decided to cut and sat down under a tree, feeding my peanut butter sandwich to the resident squirrels.

MORE SOON

I thought that was a great letter. And full of all new stuff, information I'd never heard before.

My mom clearly appreciated his silliness, made even funnier by the fact that it came and went abruptly, book-ended by seriousness. Although she volunteered little about my dad when I was a child, after he disappeared, most of the anecdotes she offered were stories of his delightful irreverence. I have an extremely vague recollection of "Mr. Rich is an apple-head;" not the story, though, just the phrase. My mother might have said it to herself once in a moment of levity. I don't think I asked her who Mr. Rich was, though; I probably just pictured a guy with an apple for a head.

If my mother did one thing well as a parent, it was to cultivate in her children an appreciation for the absurd, as I presume my father did with her and might also have done with his children if he had stayed around. He granted absurd notions equal status with other requisite elements of cultural literacy, such as familiarity with current events, proper usage of the language and good manners. So if you hated Senator McCarthy (and knew why), had read the classics, used complete sentences, charmed your date's parents and were also able to suggest a list of outrageous items that may be hidden beneath a nun's habit, for example, you'd be in good with him. In fact, you'd be just like him.

Irreverence was such a strong part of my father's make-up, as well as my parents' relationship, that my mother briefly thought she'd discovered his whereabouts about 10 years after he vanished, when the cartoonist B. Kliban became popular in the late 1970s. My dad had always drawn little guys with goofy faces at the bottom of his letters, and he was constantly drawing and doodling in notebooks, especially when he was younger. He was a pretty good cartoonist. (I found about 50 pencil sketches of faces alone, among many others, that he did in his scrapbooks as a high-schooler). B. Kliban's simple and exaggerated cartoons, coupled with his preposterous take on the world – "Dirty Fat Man Sits on President's Face," for example – seemed so perfectly John Lake that my mom

thought it had to be him.

One Klivan cartoon in particular convinced my mother that the reclusive cartoonist was indeed her missing husband. A crooning cat, a guitar across his lap, is singing a ballad:

“Love to eat them mousies,
mousies what I love to eat;
Bite they little heads off,
nibble on they tiny feet.”

“When I saw ‘Love to eat them mousies,’ I thought, ‘Jesus, this is obvious,’” my mother told me. She reminded me that my dad had always loved the comic strip Pogo, which was known for bits of dialogue like, “Dey’s a bunch of hoo-dooos what gon’ bop youse on da haid.” The lyrics of *Mousies*, coupled with the attribution of human qualities to a cat and the illustration itself, seemed to be straight from the silly / serious mind of John Lake.

A couple of phone calls to a friend in California asking him to investigate, however, proved to my mother that others were also capable of such lighthearted inspiration, and that B. Klivan was a real guy, thus retiring him back to being merely one of the family’s favorite cartoonists, along with Roz Chast, Gahan Wilson and a few others. My mother never mentioned her suspicions to me at the time, for which I am grateful. I learned of the episode when I called the family friend, Darryl Maddox, as part of my research.

What made my father’s brand of humor endearing to my mother was that while it was often just downright ludicrous, it frequently had an intellectual basis. The idea of a nun with a machine gun or boxing gloves under her habit is silly, and therefore amusing, at least to some. But if one has a true appreciation of the rituals and trappings of the Catholic Church, stemming from one’s educational and religious background, the humor is far richer. Or more offensive – take your pick. John’s lightning quips, obvious intellect and gentle teasing – of everyone, including my grandmother, who would tolerate no such thing from anyone else – earned him a place at the table at Parkside Avenue from the first time he sat down.

My mother’s family loved him right away, and never stopped.

Another segment of a letter from Mom, that rambled into that first date:

I was 19 years old, pushing 20, but I had to be in at a certain time or call home with a damned good reason. They had curfews on campus, too. But one of the (few) advantages to living at home was that I could bring dates inside for a snack, after duly announcing my presence.

We had whole wheat toast and strawberry jam. He loved it! Where had it been while he wasted his time with white bread and grape jelly? We ate a lot of it – then, and for the next 17 years – whenever we came home late together.

That night, bumpings-around upstairs indicated my parents thought it was time for him to go home.

If you think curfews are quaint – and they were universal – get this: Kissing on the first date was a matter of serious concern and debate. Yes, I said kissing. In 1949,

the issue wasn't who's got the condoms, but how to let a boy know you like him, but not let him think you're "fast." Magazine articles, I swear, were written on the subject. Dating strategy. On first dates, most nice boys sort of tried, but most nice girls demurred.

So we're at the side door, still talking. We'd walked home in a misty spring drizzle, but now it's really pouring rain. Thump-bump upstairs. He steps outside, still making a point, I step after him, listening, adding another tidbit, both of us getting drenched. I pull him back inside.

"Alice!" This is my father's no-nonsense voice, which means no more putzing around.

"In a minute," I holler, and then we're out in the driveway, standing in a torrential downpour – wet faces, wet hands, wet hair – kissing and kissing back, hanging on to each other as if it's the end of the world, or at least the guillotine...

"Want an umbrella?" I ask in his ear, coming up for air.

"Nah." He kisses me on the nose and saunters off into the night. (Somehow, that nose kiss brought tears to my eyes, though you couldn't tell with the rain. It's not raining now, and I find that it still does.)

Forgetting to turn out the lights, I wandered sappily upstairs.

"Alice?"

I poked my head into the master bedroom. They had a clock with a fluorescent face: 3:30. No wonder they were fussing.

My mother said, "Having a snack is one thing, but..."

"Don't worry about it. He'll probably drown."

My father said, "You had a nice time."

It wasn't even a question.

Without a cautionary thought, without even meaning to, I said, "Yeah, I think I might marry him."

When I heard myself say it, I knew it was true.

To their everlasting credit, neither of my parents ever mentioned this interchange. Not the next day or ever. Not even to tease or reminisce. My father was a man of few words, but Grandma was very intrusive and I marveled at her tact.

It's nice that my mother was candid about her helplessness at falling in love. I'm grateful she felt comfortable relating such a story to me, and that my father and she came together in such romantic fashion. It also makes me feel sad, because it highlights how bad it ultimately became between them, how far they were from 1949 when he vanished in 1967, and how very long ago both of those times are from today. Lately I find myself measuring the time between significant events to demonstrate to myself how long ago he disappeared: 1967 was closer to the beginning of World War II than to today, and he's been gone now over twice as long as they were together. And

1949? It's a fairy tale, and I just happen to know one of the actors.

One of the things that resonate from my mother's letters is that what they enjoyed about each other was the intellectual stimulation, the long talks on weighty subjects, their mutual delight at verbal sparring when they disagreed. This is a family trait that continues to this day, although much of our verbal sparring has not been delightful. Nor was theirs, at the end. But initially, they enjoyed each other's company and mutual curiosity. They debated religion endlessly. (My mother's family was strict Irish Catholic; my father's mother had left the Catholic Church and became a Unitarian. My father understood the teachings of the church, but he was a firm agnostic.) They shared a sort of arrogance, too, as fellow intellectuals that loved language and culture, pithy news-writing and well laid-out newspapers, and long discussions of matters that seem to hold so much gravity when you're in college.

My father had more of an appreciation for 'everyman,' however. When confronted with the ignorance of others, my mother might have reacted with disdain; my father was more likely to feel – and act upon – sympathy, anger or humor, depending upon the situation. Despite his agnosticism, he viewed people in an almost spiritual way, as a potential source of goodness and hope. I believe that it is when, later on, people began to disappoint him more often than not, that his own faith – in the human race – suffered and he grew terribly depressed.

More on this from another letter from Mom:

... in the truest Jeffersonian sense, he saw human life as sacred. Not just the "life force," but each unique individual life.

It is not a contradiction that he could easily blow his stack and call you a boob or an idiot. It was his exasperation, his deep, despairing frustration that you didn't – wouldn't – get it!

Are some people just so damned stupid they can't grasp the meaning of their own existence? Is it low I.Q. or laziness? Can they be held responsible?

Theology again. The lure of the kitchen table discussions. Is theology religion? Or spirituality? Or just mental exercise – another liberal art.

Webster defines it as "the science that treats of the existence, nature and attributes of God, especially of man's relations to God."

It is my belief – check me out – that we loved theology equally. It was all we talked about on our first date, punctuated by constant small footnotes: things we'd always thought in our heads but never before said aloud. And we'd finish each other's sentences.

I wonder if this was the first time my father fell in love. Probably. My mother is smart, so I'm sure he respected her intellectually, and she was very pretty. She laughs well. And perhaps, as love so often can be, she was unexpected. He was so focused on what he wanted to accomplish, maybe he wasn't actively looking for a girlfriend, certainly not for a mate. But he found her in Syracuse University's Yates Castle – a building that looked to be straight out of the Addams Family – that housed the School of Journalism and the Daily Orange, doing what they both loved to do.

He would have felt hugely fortunate to make such a connection, relieved actually, to find a companion, a kindred spirit that also happened to be quite attractive. When this has happened to me, I realize how much unconscious energy I've been expending, either to another relationship that required too much intellectual reaching, or to the search itself, for a woman who can be my closest friend but still be a woman. When it happens, it's a wonderful, liberating feeling, and it's clear both my parents felt that way at the time.

I wonder also if any alarms went off inside his head. What issue other than religion – which was big enough by itself – might have given him pause as he considered young Alice's suitability as a serious girlfriend? Did he see any, and purposely overlook them because he was so smitten? Did the little things become big things later? Or was it all just unbelievably good back then? It's probably not a fair question now, since I have the benefit of knowing what happens next, but I think often about how much they changed in the years later as the relationship evolved.

Val Pinchbeck, a fraternity brother and close friend of my dad's whom he met at the Daily Orange, told me he was surprised as hell when he heard two years later that my parents were going to get married.

"They were both smart people, no question, but there were things that didn't work from the start," Val told me on the phone. "Alice had all kinds of problems, and he never understood Catholicism... He had strong feelings about issues, about everything. He wasn't going to overlook it."

"The last time I saw him (in late November, 1967) he was saying, 'Alice and I just can't get along,' and 'If I had known this was the way it was gonna be...' So I told him: 'John, I never thought it would work, but I wasn't going to say anything about it, obviously.' He said, 'Well, I wish you had said it then!'"

Val's comments struck me as oversimplified – probably because he, too, has the benefit of hindsight – but valid, nonetheless; after all, my parents did break up while still at Syracuse, before reuniting when my dad proposed from Pearl Harbor after joining the Navy. I suspect that the truth about where my dad fell on religion is somewhere between my mother's "...we loved theology equally..." and Val's "...didn't work from the start..."

But if religion was a problem, it was neither the only one, nor was it significant enough to keep them from staying married for 16 years, eight of them before they had children.

They were both smart and funny and like-minded, but they differed in many ways, too.

After the show, we strode along, swinging hands, him singing more Brigadoon songs. As soon as we get out of downtown and onto a silent, tree-lined residential street, he asks me, without breaking stride, "So. You think if a baby dies and hasn't been baptized, he can't get into heaven?"

"There's supposed to be a state called Limbo, where the babies are happy because they don't know any better."

"A state? Like Texas?"

"No. Like Heaven or Hell."

"A place."

"They aren't places, like up in the sky or down under the earth."

"They're not?"

"They're states of mind – or maybe spirit."
 "Then how come all the great painters..."
 "Symbology. High, low. Exalted. Depraved."
 "What about Purgatory?"
 "What about it?"
 "Can you buy your way out? Or pray your way out? Or just sit there until the small sins burn off?"
 "I'm guessing you know I'm Catholic."
 "I know. My mother was Catholic, too, but she quit."
 I laughed. "With you around, I don't doubt it."
 "Oh, this was long before me. Her brothers think she's going to hell."
 "People told me my father would go to hell for not going to Sunday Mass and eating meat on Friday."
 "Did you believe that?"
 "No. Those are commandments of the Church; they could change at any time (they have) and Jesus said it's not what goes in, it's what comes out of a person that's important. They don't talk about it much, but personal conscience is sovereign – above all the rules and commandments. Even Thomas Aquinas knew that."
 "Free will?"
 "I guess."
 "Does God know everything?"
 "Absolutely."
 "Past, present, future?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, if God knows what I'm going to do, then how can I have free will?"
 "Let's say you're skiing, okay? You're up on top of a hill and I see you, inching toward the edge. I know you're going to jump. Do you jump because I know it? Or do I know it because you're going to?"
 "Ho-ho!" he said.
 "Ho-ho."
 That, interspersed with occasional forays into the strawberry jam, will give you a general idea what we did until 3 AM. Metaphysical games. With great glee.

Apart from the question of religion, what strikes me most about this particular recollection is that my mother can recall a conversation from 1949, but she can never seem to remember where she put her cigarettes.

I woke up late the next morning, sort of dazed with a funny feeling, much like being homesick. It took a few minutes to realize that I was missing Johnny Lake.
 Good God, I thought, he just left... well, maybe he'll call ... I hope he'll call... please

let him call; this is awful..

The telephone finally rang. Finally? It wasn't quite 11 AM.

"Hi," he said. "I know this is bad manners and all – asking on the same day – but can we do something tonight, you and me?"

"Yes," I said immediately, throwing hard-to-get to the winds.

"Here's what I can afford: A long walk and maybe a hot dog. A small one."

"Just a minute." I hollered into the kitchen. "Can Johnny Lake come for supper tonight?"

"Tell him to come early," Grandma hollered back. "We're eating with the Roessers and I don't know what time."

"Come early," I repeated. "You get to eat here and meet the neighbors."

He surprised me again. "How early?"

"Early as you want."

"Soon then. To tell you the truth, I'm not accomplishing very much here."

"Me, either. I'll see you soon."

I wandered back to the table, staring off into space, absently nibbling at the food.

"You're eating my salad," my father observed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to," and then I ate my brother's salad, with mine sitting right in front of me.

My father: "Tell me, where did this young man come from?"

"Albany, I think, some place over that way."

"I mean, on to the scene, so to speak."

"This is the boy I went out with last night."

"You just met him?"

"I know him almost two years."

My mother, not without sympathy: "You've been waiting that long?"

"Ye Gods! I wasn't waiting! May I be excused?"

My brother: "Can I eat your salad?"

I went and washed my hair.

Next thing I hear is bomp-bomp-bomp out in the driveway. I don't know how it happened, but it was sort of a rule that people I dated had not only to pass my father's inspection but also play basketball with my brother.

I go outside. Bomp-bomp-bomp.

There's Johnny loping around with his shirt off. My brother and two other little kids are staring at him with awe.

"Hi," he says. "I met Joseph already."

"So I see."

"We're having a little game, okay?"

"No," I think nastily, "not okay. I want you all to myself."

He comes over to me, grinning happily, and smurps me on the face. The boys are fascinated.

He looks at me from under long, lovely lashes like you have. "I won't go away if you don't."

"No," I tell him, completely defenseless, I won't go away."

(And it will be hours before there's a chance for another smurp.)

I know that when you toured Syracuse, my brother showed you the house and the park and told you about the neighbors. So, as much as I'd love to, I won't go into that much right now.

That beautiful afternoon, Johnny and Joseph played basketball, my parents were at the Roessers', planning supper and gossiping, I'm sure, and I mooned around in the garden, accompanied by my cat, Peter, who purred up a storm, rolled around on his back, and smelled each plant individually. After a while, I picked him up and took him around the garage for formal introductions.

"This is Peter."

"Hello, Peter. I don't much like cats, but hello." Pat-pat on the top of his head.

Peter, non-plussed, maneuvered himself to be scratched behind the ear. That accomplished, he sat on the wall to watch the game.

"I really don't know any cats," said your father to no one in particular. Peter just purred.

My father came home, a bit ruffled and sweaty from helping Karl Roesser with something.

I can see this in slo-mo, too: The way they shook hands, the stance of each, sizing each other up and taking their time about it.

They went off to have iced tea on the porch before washing up for supper. I didn't join them and I'll never know what was said.

I hung out with my brother, who was picking up his basketball stuff. "I hope he likes me."

"I'm sure he does," I said, "but you can't come with us tonight."

"I just hope he likes me, that's all."

And so the two of them became an item, in the space of one weekend. My mother says that she and my father simply "fell into step" with each other. It was quick, it was obvious and it surprised the hell out of everyone, including them. Yet it felt natural, and they proceeded to have a great time together. They continued to work together at the D.O. and study at the dining room table of my mom's family's accommodating home. (My uncle showed me around Syracuse one weekend not long ago, and explained how, when he came to visit, my father would run down the hill from campus, across Onondaga Valley, and up the hill on the other side to visit my mother, a three-mile jaunt each way. He always ran it, just like in Delmar.)

After John and Alice met, every weekend was filled with an activity, from the many balls, formals and pinning ceremonies sponsored by Acacia, to movies, dates at Drumlin's, football games and jaunts to visit each one's family and friends, so proud were they to show each other off. It was, my mother said, "a wonderful time" in their lives.

It was pure bliss, to hear her tell it, for about a year.

My father attended Acacia Fraternity's National Conclave in Boulder, Colorado, late in the summer of 1950, representing the Syracuse University chapter as its Venerable Dean. When he returned to Syracuse in the fall, he didn't call her.

Why? Maybe it was his moodiness, the likes of which had puzzled sweet Kitty Brumfield back in high school. Perhaps he was frightened by the growing sense of commitment in the relationship, and, like many 20-year-olds, started to feel trapped. He may have felt justifiably overwhelmed by all that lay before him in the coming year: his duties as president of the fraternity, which was about to move houses and undertake a huge remodeling in the new one in time for "rushing;" sports editor of the Daily Orange, now with a column to fill twice a week; a demanding slate of senior-level classes; and the looming Selective Service, which began that fall to fill the thin ranks of the post-war armed services as the country girded for conflict with the communist menace in Korea.

Or maybe he heard that my mother had played kissy-face with someone else.

He later wrote to my mother from the Navy that his pride had been hurt by her actions, although the exact date and nature of her transgression is not clear. Typically, she dismissed the episode to me as "nothing," with no further explanation, but it obviously had an impact on my dad, who was even more devastated that the new object of her affection, however briefly, was the short and roundish, quite unattractive managing editor of the Daily Orange, Bob Shogan.

...BUT LET'S ATTEMPT TO GENERALIZE ON THE SUBJECT OF PRIDE (ALBEIT FALSE) GATHERED ABOUT THE PERSON OF ONE JOHN LAKE...AND IS IT HALFWAY CONCEIVABLE THAT ONE WHO CONSIDERS HIMSELF QUITE HIGHLY AND AT THE SAME TIME QUITE "NORMAL" FEELS SLIGHTLY OUT OF PLACE KEEPING COMPANY WITH AN OTHERWISE DELIGHTFUL FEMALE WHO SPENDS MUCH TIME WITH HER FAVORITE MALADJUSTEDS?

THIS IS PART OF THE SHOGAN THING. IT IS PRIDE PRIDE PRIDE...THANK GOD I AM IMMATURE. I WOULD RATHER YOU'D GO OUT WITH A VAN JOHNSON THAN A BOB SHOGAN OR A BOB JURAN ANYTIME. IS THIS SENSIBLE? MAYBE NOT.

AND ALTHO YOU MAY NOT BELIEVE IT IN YEARS TO COME, I'LL ALWAYS POINT BACK TO THE YEAR 1951 AS ONE WHICH WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN SO WASTED (FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF YOU AND ME CONSIDERED TOGETHER) IF I DIDN'T HAVE TO BUCK THE SOCIAL STIGMA OF "SHOGAN'S WOMAN"...DON'T KNOW WHAT MAC BUMP SAID TO YOU THAT TIME BUT REGARDLESS OF HOW LITTLE VALUE YOU PLACE IN THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS, THERE ARE PEOPLE IN WHOSE OPINION YOU GO DOWN, FAR DOWN, WHEN YOU SMOOCH WITH A SHOGAN.

INCLUDING MINE. THIS IS A GREAT UNPLEASANTNESS. BECAUSE MY MIND IS LITTLE AND YOURS IS NOT, BECAUSE YOU ARE MATURE ENOUGH TO CARE LITTLE FOR SKIN DEEP BEAUTY WHILE I STILL PRIZE IT...WHY MUST YOU DO THESE THINGS? OR BETTER YET, WHY MUST I BE SO SMALL THAT I MUST EMPHASIZE THEM SO MUCH?

THERE IS NO ANSWER. I JUST ASK YOU TO REMEMBER THAT IN ME, THIS IS A VERY GREAT WEAKNESS. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN PUBLIC OPINION AFFECTS ME...WHEN MY OWN OPINIONS SUPPORT THAT OF THE GREAT PUBLIC, AS IN THE FAMOUS CASE, THINGS ARE QUITE UNSATISFACTORY.

WAS I GOING TO DROP THIS? I GUESS SO. YOU'LL NEVER KNOW THE VANITY IN YOUR MAN, LITTLE IRISH; YOU'LL NEVER KNOW HOW STRONGLY I FELT ABOUT IT. HOW YOU CAN STAND ME, I DUNNO – BUT BECAUSE YOU'RE ABLE, PLEASE DON'T PLAY IN THE MINOR LEAGUES. IT IS A GREAT JOY TO CONSIDER ONESELF HONESTLY MAJOR LEAGUE. I DO. BECAUSE YOU TOO ARE A BIG LEAGUER, I TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN US...LET'S NOT GET FARMED OUT TO SIOUX FALLS.

A subsequent letter, after they were married in Hawaii and he was back in New York for training, expands on the growing impatience he felt with my mother's penchant for gravitating to needy neurotics and social misfits, implying again she was selling herself short, although he seems less concerned about new rumors of romantic shenanigans:

Some things I've never been able to get your agreement on. The Future Portrait above will be one. Another is the old concept of Physical People. You're way ahead of me on that one. About the 95th thing you'd list when talking about your ideal man would be his size – Me, if I were making up a check-list for any young woman, I'd figure she'd want a six-foot youth with the ability to defend himself, way up on the list. I call this Shoganism. You disregard. But these things have a way of turning up from time to time, and here I am again with proof of why, for reasons never put into words, I like Joe Gerber.

Grant much garbling in the transfer and much addition in the telling, thanks to the Pixie who lives downstairs, of course. But when I get philosophical about anything, be it war or some Ensign's relations with my wife, I usually fail. The only complete satisfaction I get is reliance upon my own 177 pounds and good right arm...and your comment that old Joe the Gerber figures I ought to get back there and punch a few noses finds a receptive target here.

But I know that's silly. It's just the idea that if all else fails, I've still got what I need to clobber somebody. If I were a 5-foot intellectual giant, I could be reasonable all over the place and end up where I started. See what I mean?

The tone of these two letters shows me that, curiously, he regarded my mom as both noble and naïve, while painting himself (in an exaggerated, self-deprecating fashion) as shallow, yet capable. I am also reminded of his youth, and that the ability to punch somebody out seems more important at age 21 than it does later on, although my dad was never one to shy away from a physical confrontation, even in his thirties. He was supremely confident, physically and intellectually, and I'm certain that she was the only one in the world he regarded as smarter, if not wiser, than himself.

Whatever the reasons, and there were undoubtedly more than one, John and Alice spent much of their senior year apart from one another. Both dated others, though nothing serious developed for either. On New Year's Eve 1950, he called and asked her to go out with him for the evening. She broke a date to do it, only to have him tell her the following day that it had been a mistake to do so: "I'm glad, but I'm sorry," he said. "You should have told me to go to hell."

More separation, followed by more indecision and heartbreak. As graduation approached in May 1951, he calls again: "Can I come over tonight? I need to see you and your parents."

"Why?"

"We can't graduate like this. Can I come over?"

The brief reconciliation, highlighted by all four parents meeting for the first time over graduation weekend, includes a careful, hypothetical discussion between John and Alice of marriage, employment prospects and the threat of the draft. He's feeling her out, unsure what he wants to do, and she's wishing he'd stop being so twitchy and settle into a plan, one that included her.

He was feeling quite uneasy about his future, flip-flopping all over the place about what he should do. And I think he was still hurt by earlier events. By July, he dropped out of sight again, this time for good, or so they both thought at the time.

According to a few of his close friends from Acacia, my dad was very nervous about the draft. He wasn't particularly frightened at the prospect of going to war; he was frustrated that all his hard work and plans for a career as a sports writer were being stymied by the very inconveniently timed Korean Conflict. In fact, many of the seniors at the Acacia house, including my dad, had already joined the Naval Reserve, following the conventional wisdom at the time, which dictated that one had would have much less of a chance to be called up by the Navy than by the Army, that the Navy was a better deal than the Army, and if you did happen to get drafted out of the reserves, it was only a two-year hitch on active duty. As he assessed his job prospects and interviewed with a few upstate newspapers after graduation, it became clear my father's professional aspirations would be delayed, because nobody was hiring 21-year-old men who'd just lost their student deferment, especially those already in the reserves.

Fraternity brother George Lockwood, a journalism student himself, summed up the situation that graduates faced that summer: "Editors would come right out and say, 'I'm not going to hire you, because you're just gonna get drafted, and then I'll have to find someone else anyway.' That drove John crazy, and he ultimately made a pretty rash decision."

After several months of unsuccessful job-hunting, John Lake enlisted in the Navy.

"I think John figured that he'd just get it out of the way, and then get on with his life," said George, "but he

made a mistake, because by enlisting in active duty instead of going in through the reserves, he was obligated for four years instead of two.”

(George Lockwood is an affable guy who'd stayed in touch with my father after Syracuse and who, with his wife Eileen, came to visit me one afternoon to talk about my dad, ultimately joining me to watch one of my daughter's Little League games. Afterward, he sent me snapshots from the day and a nice note of encouragement. George is another of my father's exceptionally kind friends.)

Back in Syracuse, news of my father's enlistment reached my mother, solidifying the notion that the relationship was indeed over. She busied herself with her new job at the Syracuse Post-Standard, having taken ironic advantage over the draft-bait men also new to the job market.

Not particularly sympathetic in her assessment of my father's quandary at the time, she succinctly described it to me this way: “He got drunk and joined the Navy, and I went on with my life.”

After graduation, my mom moved into an apartment at the bottom of Walnut Avenue, on the top floor of an old house that she shared with her cousin Gracie and two other girls. Referred to simply as “512 Walnut” or “512” by the crowd of friends that passed through the place that year, the apartment became a hub of activity for the girls and their chums, with a never-ending parade of boyfriends, their friends, grad students, study partners, co-workers and other acquaintances, all of whom liked the all-hours accessibility of the place known for interesting characters, stimulating discussions, a beer-coffee-cigarette miasma and a sink full of dishes.

Six months later, already deeply immersed in her new life at 512, freedom from living with her parents and now working for the Post-Standard, she received a Western Union telegram from my dad, who was now stationed at Pearl Harbor:

MERRY CHRISTMAS – MRFFF – CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT YOU – WILL YOU COME
TO BEAUTIFUL HAWAII AND MARRY BEAUTIFUL ME? – WE CAN AFFORD –
ANSWER PRONTO THEN I'LL EXPLAIN HOW – JOHNNY

Dozens of people are reported missing every week in New York City. In many instances, these cases involve subjects who are mentally impaired in some way, often disoriented elderly people who have simply wandered off. Runaway teens are common, too. Less often, but not uncommon, are those who choose to abandon their families. The highest priority investigations are for likely victims of accidents or crime.

There are five official classifications that police use for missing persons: disabled, juvenile, involuntary, endangered and catastrophe. The sheer volume of the total number of people reported missing – including those that don't fit into those categories – is responsible for a procedural policy that one won't find written in any handbook, but which is practiced every day: Don't break a sweat looking for an adult if there's no evidence that he may be in danger. The background information has only to include references to relationship troubles, problems with alcohol or drugs, financial woes or perhaps just a mention of emotional depression, and the cops don't do much after taking the report, figuring it was a voluntary disappearance. The guy will either come back of his own accord, or he won't.

That was the situation when my father was reported missing by my mother on December 14, 1967, four days after he had last been seen. Most of the work done on the case seems to have happened at intake, based on what I can see from the police report, which I requested from the New York City Police Department under the Freedom of Information Act. It is barely four pages long. In it, brief reference is made to the fact that my father was under psychiatric care and that he and my mother were separated.

On December 22nd, a detective named Jeremiah Reidy filed a one-page report to Detective Walter Merkle of the 6th Precinct, who took the original complaint. Detective Reidy, the investigating officer, summarized the activities that had taken place thus far:

1. General Alarm #298 transmitted to all receivers. (This is a missing person alert that is sent to law enforcement agencies in the tri-state area).
2. Check of files in this command and those of cooperating agencies have failed to make reference to subject.
3. The assigned interviewed [blacked out] who has been in contact with complainant and was aware of circumstances surrounding subject's absence. (The individual whose name was blacked out was Sheward Haggerty, my father's editor at Newsweek). Reportedly, John Lake was separated from complainant for extended period of time; was having financial difficulty in maintaining a heavily mortgaged residence in Teaneck, N.J. and supporting three (sic) children. During subject's absence from home he reportedly has been co-habiting with a female who presently is employed by [blacked out]. (This refers to my father's girlfriend, Ann Magnuson, who also worked at Newsweek).
4. Subject to date has not utilized American Express credit card and possibility of subject having a checking account has been discounted by associates at [blacked out].
5. Mr. Lake has periodically indicated moments of despondency as [blacked out] at [blacked out] but has never made attempt to communicate with anyone.
6. Case remains active pending further investigation and/or developments.
7. Case active.

That was the last meaningful activity on the case by the NYPD Missing Persons squad until November of 2003, when, after a year of trying to get someone in the unit to help me, I found a sympathetic cop willing to review the file. The only case lower in priority than a non-endangered adult, it seems, is one that is 35 years cold.

Jeremiah Reidy retired from the police department in 1969 and moved to Fort Lauderdale. According to his wife, he always wanted to live in Florida. He died 20 years ago of cancer. I found Walter Merkle, 75, in Pearl

River, New York. He, too, retired years ago. He has no recollection of my father's case.

The hard fact is that the triage of missing person investigations begins with endangered children, as it should, but it ends with cases like my father's. The only factors that will keep the cops actively working an investigation like that are media attention or another, highly energetic interested party, such as a family member, who must continually stay involved. The police will not maintain a sense of urgency if they are not compelled to do so. There are just too many other cases. It's a simple, ruthless reality.

The technology available to law enforcement today takes some of the shoe leather out of the investigative process that was in place in 1967. A quick search on the NCIC database – the National Crime Information Center, a computerized index of criminal justice information – performs a task now that would have been Herculean, if not impossible, in the 60s, when procuring or comparing information such as criminal background, fingerprints, or dental records required a manual, paper process to obtain it.

To find someone who is missing, standard operating procedure involves contacting the subject's known associates, performing a financial work-up to ensure the individual is not tapping into known sources of income while on the lam, and taking a long, hard look at the spouse, if there is one, to assess whether foul play might be involved.

It is clear from my mother's correspondence that she was not involved in my father's disappearance. She's no saint, but she's not a hit-man, either. And she did most of the early legwork in the other areas, calling the bank and credit card companies, as well as family and friends, to try to locate him.

Another, more gruesome procedure, is to check unidentified bodies that turn up to see if there is a match. This, too, was done, although on a haphazard basis. My mother has told me that she was asked to view unidentified bodies by the police, at the morgue and in photographs. For some unknown reason, there is no reference to this in the police report. I believe she did so, despite being unable to verify it, although I doubt it occurred on more than two occasions, and only within the two or three months after my father vanished.

The process for handling unidentified dead people in New York City hasn't changed much over the past century. The body is brought to the Chief Medical Examiner's office, where it is kept in a refrigerated drawer in the morgue. It is given a file number and dubbed either John or Jane Doe, if gender can be determined. Depending on the condition of the remains, distinguishing physical characteristics, such as tattoos, scars and dental work, are noted. Photographs are taken, if appropriate. If possible, the body is fingerprinted, although sometimes only an imprint of the thumb or index finger is taken. A cause of death is usually determined, again depending on the condition of the body.

Barring special circumstances, if no one comes forward to claim a body within a month, it is buried in the city's "Potter's Field," located on Hart Island, a bleak 100 acres in Long Island Sound, just beyond City Island, off the Bronx. Inmates of the city's prison on Rikers Island perform the interments, between 2,500 and 3,000 annually. There are no headstones, only numbered markers denoting plots of 150 graves each, buried three deep.

Despite the bodies' physical proximity to one another, I can think of no lonelier death, and I hope like hell my father didn't end up on Hart Island.

When my father disappeared, no one requested his fingerprints from the Navy, nor were his dental records retrieved from the family dentist, making the prospect of identifying his body – if it were to turn up after

February, 1968, or somewhere other than the New York area – extremely unlikely. Although a Pinkerton detective mentions in his report that unidentifieds' fingerprints are sent to the FBI for comparison with armed services files, my experience trying to get my father's military records from the National Personnel Records Center and the Veterans Administration tells me that there is no way anyone, even the FBI, was going to obtain and get fingerprints compared within a month, if at all.

I requested my dad's military personnel file from the Navy in December 2002, which includes his fingerprints, and his medical records, which includes detailed dental information, albeit only through 1955. (Our family dentist in Teaneck died a few years back and dental records from his practice are gone). It took more than a year to get everything I needed, which came to me piecemeal. Now that his file is finally included in the NCIC (File # M-563761275), complete with fingerprints and dental records available for comparison, maybe something will come of it. Unfortunately, however, most old files of missing and unidentified people are not updated into the system; if they exist at all, they remain archived, hidden in a file unseen by human eyes for years.

PINKERTON'S, INC.

CONFIDENTIAL

Locate - John Lake

Report of XVG

Date Monday, January 29, 1968

Confidential Informant
6th Pct. N.Y.C. Police Dept.
135 Charles St. N.Y.C.

Stated he could report nothing new on his investigation. A Missing Persons report has been turned over to Central Files who may have additional information.

Confidential Informant
Central Files
Missing Persons Div.
N.Y. N.Y.

Stated there were no new developments on this case. Subject's Missing Persons file is #29273.

Confidential Informant
Missing Persons Bureau
560 First Avenue
N.Y. N.Y.
Chief Medical Examiners Office

Checked his files and stated there are no males answering to subject's description being held in the morgue. We then checked the Alcoholic and Psychiatric Wards in Bellevue Hospital and was informed there were no patients resembling subject, or registered in his name under treatment. He then checked Bellevue General and was also informed there were no unidentified males, or one registered in subject's name being treated in their wards. Informant stated that when an unidentified body is brought into the morgue, fingerprints are usually made and forwarded to the F.B.I. A check is made with prints on file with the Armed Forces and if identified, a report is sent to the Missing Persons Bureau. The same procedure is usually followed when a person suffering from amnesia is admitted to the hospital. In some instances, finger prints are not made because the hospital neglects to request this service and a person suffering from amnesia, alcoholism, etc. is often sent to one of the county hospitals, i.e. Rockland County until an identification can be made.