

## **The Right Stuff**

By Paul Edward Johnson

Hi Larry. I was just thinking about something you wrote several years after our father died at age 45; about how he'd get up at strange times during the night, go down into the living room, sit there in the dark, and meditate while smoking a favorite pipe.

When we heard the sound of his pipe clinking in the amber ashtray, we knew he was tapping out the ashes and on his way back to bed. As a matter of fact, I have what you wrote right here, on my bookcase:

My father was a man who had his ghosts. One of them was his Aunt Amelia. She was a gentle-looking woman who used to come back from his happy boyhood days on her farm to haunt him in a friendly if somewhat persistent way.

In the middle of some big decision or sitting late at night in the darkness of the living room smoking a pipe (you could always hear it clink against the ashtray as he went off to bed) he would be confronted with her presence, and he'd talk things over with her. Out loud.

Who knows, perhaps that little framed picture of her was his last great source of comfort and inspiration, a place to hang his secret thoughts and fears. It meant a lot to him, anyway, that picture. He wept when his mother gave it to him. He had not been able to recollect all her features, and seeing her again must have brought him a little closer to his beloved aunt and ghost.

Now he spends eternal summers on that farm of hers and gets a little bored from time to time, so he comes around here to see how things are. He gets in the way, but you don't mind. Still, it's not always that pleasant having a ghost drop in on your thoughts, whenever he feels like it, demanding attention. He barges in with snow or

mud on his hiking boots, singing loudly, carrying a bag or a crate of produce he has just picked up down at the tracks. He never shuts the door gently! After a hearty and hasty meal he has to have something with chocolate sauce poured all over it, or graham crackers with peanut butter on them.

It's for him and not the earthly man who was my father that this is written. When I'm finished, maybe his ghost will go back to the farm and just come by on weekends, like other civilized people.

My father hated to save old family photographs, albums, letters, etc., precisely because the happiness of those things past was gone forever. He liked Philip Wylie's phrase, "Let the past bury its dead" and he believed we have to live for now, for the living, always.

Yet, having said that, for him the dead were still in the present: Aunt Amelia was probably more important to him in his later years than in his boyhood. But he seldom dared to look at something old which he was throwing away, it was always "Let's get this crap out of here and burn it!" That proves just how deeply sentimental he was. What for others might be simply happy memories were for him unbearable losses, great pieces of himself irretrievably floating down the river of time. He was fascinated by Thomas Wolfe's novel on that very subject.

In a rare mood of touching sentiment he once remarked to me: "I used to look at your big wide eyes when you were just a baby, and I'd be late for work, I would just have to stand there and look at you. Those big dark eyes staring up at me, I'd want a bust, I loved you so much. I don't see now how I made it to work. Just once I should have stayed home."

Unforgettable words of tender happiness mixed with regret. Sometimes he gave you the feeling

his best days were before you were born or when you were just a small child. But I think I know better now. He was simply somebody else then. His present self burning the death of his earlier self. Like all men, he had died many deaths in his lifetime.

And his ghost is calling on me to summon his many lives to appear again, to gather together the stories of those who knew him for his grandchildren, who will know the giant he was by the different measures taken by us dwarves.

He would have loved to end his life surrounded by new life, a gray-haired man with his children's children at his feet and in his lap. The more his life was clouded over with care, the more he would exert himself to be gay, loud, singing. The lonelier he got the more he needed people, lots of people around him.

"L'chaim! To life, to life! L'chaim!" he used to gleefully shout with that other Fiddler on the Roof.

He wanted life simple, straight-forward. He was "Ed" to everybody, hated business suits and ties, and was happiest when he could "make like Heidi's grandfather" and go "inspect the leaves" on a beautiful afternoon.

His biggest pleasure was the outdoors, where he could sprawl out on a picnic table and "conk out" for a while. The food tasted good outdoors, too, especially hot coffee:

"Baaa-aaaah, geez that's good coffee!"

Bad coffee was "battery acid," and anything mixed together was "gunk."

This is how I remember him, forever alive, forever young. For me this is a modest monument to the man we all loved as son and father, as brother, husband, and friend, as teacher and mystery, as a man.

May this be worthy of your bones, your immortal soul, dear father of my blood, bones and soul, my thoughts and feelings, great man!

Larry, this is my favorite portrait of him. I've been trying my hand at catching him in words, but what you captured there is as memorable and true as the fresh scent of grass after an early morning rain.

The reason I'm bringing all this stuff out is because I'm finding myself getting up a lot around two or three in the morning, like right now. I only stay up about twenty minutes. But it's getting to be a ritual. During that time my thoughts go in and out of focus. It's a thought that pulls me out of bed, like someone ringing the doorbell. If I don't answer it, it just keeps ringing. Once I'm up the ringing stops, the thought fades, and then I'm ready to go back to bed again.

Tonight you're at my door, and I've a feeling it's going to be more than twenty minutes before you leave. So I may as well let you know I'm glad you're here, and welcome your good company.

Think I'll put a pot of coffee on like Dad used to do whenever I'd drop in on him at night (after I'd moved out of the house and we both pretended I was independent). If this writing bothers you, it kind of bothers me too. But I've got a feeling we'll get used to it. It's kind of like itching my feet, the more I do it the better it feels and yet the more I do it the more I need to keep itching. I haven't done any writing for a long time, so I have this bad itch.

Did you know that I once shook hands with the guy who had the right stuff in the movie *The Right Stuff*? Yeah! Chuck Yeager. It was back when I was thirteen, 1954; the year Cleveland won the American League Pennant. They had Bob Feller, Early Wynn, Bob Lemon, Mike Garcia, and several other pitchers who all combined to have a collective earned-run average of 2.72. Mike Garcia, like Early Wynn, looked like he had extra mitts and baseballs stuffed under his shirt. And they had barn burners out in the bullpen just in case. And the big bats of Vic Wertz, Larry Doby, and Al Rosen; plus a catcher with steady hands and a strong arm, and a snazzy all-star second baseman with a Spanish name. Bobby Avila?

The reason I remember it was that year is simple. If it was complicated I would have forgotten.

Wayne Swanson, Jerry Bender and I were ushering at the Parade Stadium for the Aquatennial Queen Coronation.

Before the crowd arrived and before I shook Chuck Yeager's hand, we got into a serious argument about who was going to win the American League Pennant. Bender was a Yankee fan.

Swanson and I would have given anything to be living in Cleveland. It was just about time for the All-Star Game, the middle of the season, and Cleveland was neck-and-neck with the Yankees.

Even though the Yankees *were* the World Series, Wayne and I knew in our hearts that this year the Indians, a team that had always finished in second place to the Yankees, this year the Indians were going to win the American League Pennant. This was the year they had the right stuff.

You had to respect Jerry Bender. He not only always knew who the winners were, he was the guy who was always letting us know who we were going to idolize and who we would respect. He had a TV in his house. He discovered Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin long before Wayne and I had ever heard of them. But Wayne and I still knew that this year the Indians had the right stuff and Bender was finally going to be wrong.

But because we respected Jerry Bender, we were ushering that night at the Parade Stadium only because Jerry got us all excited about this test pilot, Chuck Yeager who flew a jet airplane faster than any man before him.

The jet test pilot was going to be in the parade that night. Jerry Bender figured we could get his autograph and shake his hand. Jerry figured that if we had our Boy Scout uniforms on, the guy couldn't turn us down.

Bender figured how the parade ended in the stadium. He also figured Yeager would be getting out of his convertible at the stage where the beauty contestants and celebrities would be sitting. It was just a matter of positioning ourselves at the right place at the right time.

So when the parade started to come into the stadium, we ditched our seats and ran toward the steps leading up to the stage.

When Yeager's convertible entered the Parade Stadium the P.A. system blazed out his name and everybody stood up and applauded him around the track.

We had, just in time, made it to the stage steps as Yeager's red convertible made the far turn around the track.

A cop turned toward us and said we couldn't stand there. But Bender was ready for even that.

He stood to attention and replied, "We're from Scout Troop 151, and we're here to salute Major Yeager!"

Bender had it all figured. Even a cop couldn't do anything about that.

Yeager's convertible pulled up no more than six feet in front of us.

Using just one hand Yeager pivoted off the top of the convertible's back seat and planted his spit-shined shoes right in front of Bender's. And Wayne and I were standing single file behind Bender.

What happened next only Jerry Bender could believe: Yeager saluted us! Bender saluted Yeager back! Wayne and I just stood there like two numbnuts.

Bender then shook Yeager's hand.

Yeager shook Wayne's hand.

Yeager shook my hand!

Then Yeager walked up the stage steps as the stadium applauded again.

Bender did a left face and marched toward the edge of the track.

Wayne and I just stood there, frozen.

When the next convertible pulled up with a beauty queen, we broke ranks, laughing and shouting after Bender, "Hey, Jerry! He saluted! He saluted us!"

I didn't hear much about Chuck Yeager after that. Maybe once every four or five years I'd see his name down at the bottom of a page in *Time* or in *Newsweek* with an asterisk to explain his accomplishment whenever I was reading something about breaking the sound barrier or astronauts or test pilots. I wasn't disappointed about that, though. That's because it didn't take much longer after Yeager shook my hand to learn that heroes don't last long.

The Indians won the pennant that year by winning more ball games than any team had ever before won (111 in a 154-game season). Ed Sullivan had them on his show and Jerry let me watch that moment on his family's TV.

He also let me watch them lose each of the four games they played against the Giants in the World Series. He was rooting for the Giants because they had this player named Willie Mays, who, according to Jerry, had the right stuff.

I haven't had many heroes since those days. Except for Dad, maybe a teacher or two, and Pastor Harry Huxhold, I didn't get many pointers about who deserved to be a hero.

I didn't realize until the night Dad died that he was actually my all-time, all-star hero. Up until then I thought Jack Kennedy was.

But now let me get to the thought that brought me out of bed: You.

As I was thinking about you tonight before going off to sleep, and as I thought about you upon awakening, I wanted you to know you are, to me, as much a hero as Dad ever was. You have the right stuff. I love you and admire you and envy you.

You, like our Old Man, you have made your life an adventure. And you have not avoided the most-scary parts. You nurture three wondrous children who have become a part of your spirit, your vitality. As they grow into their lives, they will become ever more grateful for that part of them which is you within them. As you have been blessed with intelligence, imagination, and the song-and-dance spirit, so too are they blessed.

You have given them your gifts freely. You have helped them learn they are each talented, original, blessed, and have something important to say each day. You and Hita show your children how generosity is art, how music is meant to be played to and for someone, how songs are to be sung together, how each section of a cement sidewalk is an ideal canvas for creating images with chalk, how dinners together are joyful communions.

Your three children are each wonders who behold the wonderment of their parents: a mother and a father who share the energy of the creative impulse that comes from Love and all of its flowers: Compassion, Gratitude, Grace, Tenderness, Humor, Enthusiasm, Respect, Praise, and Adoration. The right stuff.

Time to get back to bed. Thanks for stopping by.