

5025

By Paul Edward Johnson

Welcome to 5025 Vincent Avenue South. Let me hang your jacket here in our entry-way. If there's time before dinner, I'll give you a tour. You chose a great day to visit. It's my 16th birthday. June 10, 1957.

It's been the best birthday ever.

This afternoon, I was walking down the front steps of Southwest High School and saw Sue Foster and Toni Adams on the sidewalk. They invited me to walk home with them. I could hardly believe it.

I mean, I've known Sue since fourth or fifth grade at Fulton. She's gone steady with some of my best friends. But she's never paid any attention to me.

Toni? Well, she's only a ninth grader. But let me tell ya, if I get a glimpse of Toni walking past my house on her way to school? If I can just get her to look my way and say "Hello Paul?" If I see her walking in the halls between classes, just see her in the halls? She makes my day.

And so how do you think I felt when there she was, on this afternoon of my 16th birthday, standing there with Sue, and they asking me if I'd join them on my way home? I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven.

After 15 minutes of Heaven, we said goodbye out there on the sidewalk in front of my house.

Then I watched them walk on down the block toward Toni's house. Two, three times they turned back to look at me looking at them.

As I walked through that front door, I was greeted by a chorus of "Happy Birthday to You." There must have been at least 20 kids from my class singing to me right here in this living room. There were balloons, rainbows of streamers. Wayne Swanson, Jerry Bender, George Bestrom, Mart Aldre, Jim Hutchins, Mike Daggett, Steve Wolf, all my best friends, and oh gosh, even some kids I hadn't got to know well yet.

They told me Sue and Toni had deliberately met me on the sidewalk in front of school to make sure I didn't get home before everyone arrived. I told them that it seemed Sue and Toni were walking slowly, but I sure didn't care.

Well anyway, it was the best birthday party I've ever had. All we did was stand around and talk, eat pizza, drink Cokes, and listen to some of my records on the hi-fi I bought last Christmas. But everyone was laughin' and jokin' and enjoying my jazz and folk-song albums.

I'll never forget this afternoon. Mom said the party was her idea and Mart and Mike and Jim and Steve and Sue had set the whole thing up, without me being clued in, not even a little hint.

Last time any of my friends came over here was when I was sick last year. That was about the most embarrassing moment of my life.

I was up in the side bedroom. Yeah. My brother Larry and I shared the side bedroom up there. Anyway, I was up there in my pajamas, sitting at this little desk facing the two windows, with my back to the bedroom door. Ever since 6th or 7th grade I had been playing this game I got at Dayton's called Cadico Ellis All-Star Baseball. Over the years I had built four teams that constituted an imaginary baseball league I had created.

I had named the teams the Boston Bats, the New York Supers, the Cleveland Chiefs, and the Detroit Lions. The Lions were my team, the one I personally managed. The others were good teams with great players, but they were only in the league for the Lions to compete with, to beat.

Every season, the Lions would win the pennant. Except one season the Bats won. And maybe once the Chiefs. We'd play about 64 games a season, each team. The Supers had Babe Ruth, Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, all the New York players, including Phil Rizzouto, Hank Bauer, Joe Dimaggio, you name 'em. And still they never won a pennant.

Each season I kept a notebook full of box scores and stats on how each of my league's teams and players were doing. I'd spend hours a night up in our bedroom doing this.

My brother Larry got himself the game also, and started up his own league. We'd spend entire evenings and Saturdays sitting in our bedroom spinning dials and cheering our favorite players. We created sound effects and imitated our favorite radio sports broadcasters. Dizzy Dean, he was one of our favorites, and he also happened to play for the Lions in my league. I'm not sure what team he played for in Larry's league.

So one afternoon last year, after what could have been 20 or 30 seasons going all the way back to seventh grade, I was home sick after missing about a week of school. But it wasn't anything. I got in about a half a season that week.

And then, after a week of being "sick," on that Friday, at about four in the afternoon, I was at my desk, playing my All-Star Baseball game, my back to the our bedroom door, making crowd noises, cheering, making murmuring loud

whispering and hissing noises, booing, all under my breath, but quite audibly, making the funny voice of Dizzy Dean commenting about what was happening out on the green cardboard playing field in front of my chest as I placed the disc cards for each player into the spinner device and then put a little red peg at home plate. The red peg, which in my imagination was the player himself, digging in and taking a couple of manly warm-up swings.

As I recall that afternoon a year ago last April, it was the last of the ninth inning of a close game. Al Rosen was up for the Lions.

I spun the dial and it stopped on the number 10. A strikeout. Al had a pretty big 10 on his cardboard disc. But he had a big number one, also. A one was a home run. It was positioned next to the 10.

On Al's at bat, the spinner had stopped on the 10 slot, but very close to the one slot. And if you looked at the spinner from a sideways angle, you could almost say that the spinner was on the line between the 10 slot and the one slot (a home run).

And so after I charged out of the dugout and argued for a minute or so with the blind-as-a-bat umpire, he agreed to let Al have one more chance.

Of course the entire argument was all conducted between Me and Myself. And the entire thing was as audible as a radio broadcast. So you can, I'm sure, imagine how embarrassed I was when after several minutes of shouting and booing and cheering and arguing, I suddenly felt a presence in my little bedroom, turned around, and saw, standing in the doorway, six of my classmates, three of them girls!

They were all standing there, gazing at me in total silence. I mean, I could have been jacking off and I wouldn't have felt more embarrassed.

First of all, from where I was sitting and where they were standing, they couldn't see what I was doing. They couldn't see that the Lions and the Chiefs were in the ninth inning of a tie ball game. That Big Al Rosen was at the plate and could win it with a home run, a one. They couldn't even see the playing field, blocked from their view by my body.

So it ranks up there as one of the most embarrassing moments in my life. I must have looked like a real nut case sitting there in my pajamas at this desk in the afternoon cheering and booing, and arguing in different voices.

I thought about trying to explain it to them, especially to Mike and Jim and, but aawwww hell, Sue Burroughs, Sue Day, and Mary Ellen?

With Jesus Christ helping me they'd never ever ever ever understand.

I don't actually know what I did. I've blocked it all out of my memory. It was my last game of All-Star Baseball. Actually, it still is the ninth inning up there. Nobody stopped by the house after that, until today.

Mom's in the kitchen with my sisters, Sylvia and Sue. They're busy getting everything ready for dinner. We're gonna have my favorite. Round steak with mashed potatoes and peas. They won't let me see my birthday cake.

Dad? He just got home from work. He's right over there in the far corner of our living room, sitting in his big leather chair next to the bookcase full of those new World Book encyclopedias he bought from Mr. Kerr, my old sixth-grade teacher. He's reading all about the Civil War.

Larry? He's in the basement, practicing on the piano. And little Ricky, he's out in the back yard on the swing set.

Yeah, I agree. This place does look a lot bigger on the outside than it actually is. Maybe 'cause it's in the middle of smaller houses on the block. Maybe it's the high sloping roof, the big front porch. Anyway, it's a great place for a family with five kids.

Actually, I wish it had another bedroom. Larry and I now sleep in the basement. Let me take you down there.

Be careful on these steps. I'd hate to see you trip over the cat dish or the baseball bats and gloves or those tennis rackets. We've got to find a better place to stash this stuff.

As you see, we can either go to the left or the right at the bottom of these stairs.

To the left over there's Mom's old spin-dryer washing machine. She's gonna get a dryer, but not until we move up to 4845 Upton Avenue this summer, a few blocks away, closer to Lake Harriet.

Even though that's a bigger house, Larry and I will have to sleep in the basement there, too. I think Dad likes the two of us down in the basement. Whenever he grows tired of my chatter or wants me to get busy doing my homework, he always laughs out, "To your hole, mole." Actually, I'm kind of fond of this basement. I've probably spent more time down here during the past seven years than I have in any other place in the house.

When we moved here in 1950 from Circle Pines, one of the first things I discovered down here was that steel door over by the wall closest to the street.

Go ahead, open it.

Surprised?

I was, too. I mean, what's a person to think? Here's a door. And when you open it, what do you see?

A small closet? It's too small to be a closet. It looks like all you can stash in here are a few brooms and maybe just five or six folding chairs. That's about it.

Now, reach in there and push on that back wall, see what happens.

How about that? The whole wall lifts up on a hinge. It's a secret door that opens into a room under the front porch. Have ya ever seen anythin' like that before?

There's a light switch right above your head.

When I was in fourth grade I spent hours in here. Nobody knew where I was. What I'd do is look out that little hole there, through the louvers, and spy on people walking down the street, yell things at kids riding their bikes, and laugh at the fact they couldn't see me while I could see them.

Isn't this neat?

I never told Mom or Dad or anyone about this secret room for a long time. Maybe a year went by before I showed it to Larry. And then he had to go tell everybody.

Well let me show you the rest of the basement. Careful! That wall-door is heavy when it comes down.

Over here on the right is the room in which Larry and I sleep, do our homework, and practice for music lessons. This long wooden bin along the room's outside wall was built by Dad so Mom would have a place for all our dirty clothes.

Go ahead, lift up the lid. Dad spent a lot of time building this.

What do you think, eight, nine, ten feet long? He made all these partitions in it so's Mom would have a place for all the white clothes, another place for all the towels, another for the sheets, another for shirts, and another here for underwear. Pretty nifty, if ya ask me.

Next to the end of this laundry bin is the door to our room. You can hear Lar in there practicing on the piano. Don't worry about interrupting him. Just open the door and walk in.

It's not a bad room, is it? This is just about the way it looked when we moved here in 1950. Except there was a Japanese guy living down here, Archie Lee was his name. He was a university student and he kind of came with the

house. Mom and Dad got about thirty bucks a month for renting out this room to him.

I've always liked the knotty-pine walls and this little bathroom over here to the right with a shower in it. I'm not real keen on the shower. Every now and then I damn near die when a hairy spider or a slimy centipede scares the crap out of me. But it's okay.

We've got a phone down here, too. After Archie moved out around 1955 when little Ricky was around four and took our bedroom upstairs, they left the phone down here. It's a separate line. Nobody gets to listen in.

Last year I played the busy signal. You've never done that? Come onnnnn. Ya don't know what I'm talkin' about? Where ya been, in outer space? You dial your own number, get a busy signal, and then listen for a voice between each buzz. Come on. You've done it too.

It's most fun late at night-say around ten o'clock. More kids on the line then. Kids from all over the city. You hear something like this: "Hi" . . . BUZZ . . . "my" . . . BUZZ . . . "name" . . . BUZZ . . . "is" . . . BUZZ . . . "Mary." . . BUZZ . . . "What" . . . BUZZ . . . "is" . . . BUZZ . . . "yours?" . . . BUZZ . . .

And then I would say, "Hi" . . . BUZZ . . . "my" . . . BUZZ . . . "name" . . . BUZZ . . . "is" . . . BUZZ . . . "Paul."

The voice might say, "What" . . . BUZZ . . . "grade" . . . BUZZ . . . "are" . . . BUZZ . . . "you" . . . BUZZ "in?"

"I'm" . . . BUZZ . . . "in" . . . BUZZ . . . "tenth."

Sometimes our messages are garbled by sounds of five or six other voices getting in on our conversation. But eventually one of us asks for the other's phone number.

Once I hit it off with a girl named Pat who said she was in 8th grade at Ramsey Junior High School, which is about three miles down 50th Street.

She gave me her number and she said, "Hang" . . . BUZZ . . . "up" . . . BUZZ . . . "and" . . . BUZZ . . . call . . . BUZZ . . . me."

When I dialed her number she answered. We talked past midnight.

She gave me her address and said she'd like to meet me. I never did. Never even talked to her again. Hell, she was only in eighth grade.

And she scared me. Told me that she had met some fraternity guys at the university. That they had taken her up to Taylors Falls.

She said, "Have you ever done it?"

"Been to Taylors Falls? Sure, lots of times."

"No. I mean *done* it?"

"Done it?"

"Ya."

"What do ya mean, done it?"

"You know what I mean."

"Ohhhhh. Did you like it, I mean doing it?"

"Ya, a lot. Do you like doing it?"

"I don't know. I've never done it before. Are you really only an eighth grader?"

"Ya, but I look a lot older. My bra size is 34."

That's when Larry yelled at me to get off the phone so he could get to sleep.

"Who's that?" she said.

"Nobody. Just my twerp brother."

"What grade's he in?"

"Eighth."

"Has he ever done it?"

I thought about getting into our big Chevy station wagon, folding down the back seat, going over to her house, tapping on her bedroom window, and getting her to join me for an hour at the Passion Pit next to the tennis courts at Lake Harriet.

But I didn't have a driver's license.

Besides, Larry would tell on me. Larry's not a bad kid though, for a dork. I mean, just look at him over there in that nook where we put the piano. With his thick glasses and his braces, you can understand why he spends his time just practicing for recitals. I kind of feel sorry for him.

But don't bother saying anything to Lar. He'll just play the piano, louder and louder. Just to get you pissed off.

You like that big upright piano Larry's playing? It's been with our family since we moved back to Minnesota in 1949. It was upstairs in the dining room until we replaced it with the hi-fi set I bought for the family last Christmas.

Getting it down here was a bitch. It had a different finish when Dad bought it. After the 1951 tornado ripped down all the big elm trees on the street and wrecked the front of our house, he stained it blond as part of all the remodeling he did with the insurance money.

Ya, it does fit in good along the bathroom wall. It's a nifty nook to practice in. I plan on spending most of my summer down here working on my sax and learning how to improvise tunes. Might even learn how to write some dance band arrangements.

Well, there's not much else to show you in this room. The twin beds go all the way back to when we lived in a little

cottage on Cass Lake near Detroit, Michigan, when I was about age three. They're made of oak and will last forever. The blue bedspreads with the white sailboats will probably last forever too.

When Archie Lee lived down here it was a lot neater because he had a TV.

We'd sneak down when he was at school or out on a date and we'd watch all the best shows: Ed Sullivan, Show of Shows, the Honeymooners, Liberace, Bob Hope, Uncle Miltie, I Led Three Lives, Dragnet. The Hit Parade. Lots of them.

On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, when Archie was out and about, we'd sneak in and watch Ramar of the Jungle and Zoo Parade with Marlin Perkins. Sometimes be lucky and catch Roy Rogers and Lassie.

Most of the time, though, Archie would suddenly walk in and kick us all out, Mom and Dad included. I always hated that, especially if it was in the middle of Hit Parade or The Millionaire.

When Archie moved out, Dad finally broke down and bought a TV set. You may have seen it when you came in upstairs, near the radiator next to the front entry way? We don't watch it much. That's 'cause Dad hates it. About all he watches are the Honeymooners, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca's Show of Shows, and of courses Friday Night Fights. He's nuts about the fights, always calling the boxers "damn fools." He really likes Floyd Patterson. So do I.

My favorite thing on TV is baseball. Nothing like a pitcher of cold lemonade and watching the Millers.

They've got a great team this year if the New York Giants just leave some of the best players alone and don't bring them up to play in the majors.

Let's get out of here and leave Larry alone. He's got a big recital coming up next week. Poor guy.

As you walk out of our room, turn to the right and walk straight ahead, past our furnace. Let's go up through that arched passageway. I'll show you where it leads.

Wait! Before you go up those steps, let me show you another place down here where I spend a lot of time. That corner over there, behind the furnace and next to the basement stairs.

See that little pot bellied stove? This is where I burn our trash. I used to always take it out to the alley trash burner, behind the garage. But why do that when it's 10 below zero, when instead you can burn it down here? If you stash enough stuff in there, it can produce a fire that gets so hot that the black metal lid turns bright red.

When it gets cookin', the darn thing even starts to jiggle a little. What I like to do then is spit on the lid, and then I see my spit sizzle and disappear into those little white stains.

I really like burning the trash. You could say I'm a pyromaniac. No kidding. It goes back to when I was in third grade in Circle Pines and was setting things on fire.

When I burn the trash out in the alley at night, I'm always pretending that the boxes are all part of a big city that's going up in flames.

Anyway, now that you know how crazy I can be, let's go up through that little archway next to the outside of our bedroom wall, and I'll show you where it leads to.

Careful. The ceiling's only about six feet tall once you enter the passageway.

This bin that runs along the wall in here was built by Dad to hold all the produce he brings home after he has inspected the truckloads and boxcar loads of fruits and vegetables he buys.

Really. He's a produce broker.

This room's always pretty cold and it makes a good place to store crates of lettuce and grapefruit and celery and oranges. And in summer watermelons. But most of the time Dad just stashes all the wooden crates up in the kitchen entry-way, where you enter the back of the house.

See that door?

Go ahead. It leads to a shed that's attached to the back of house. It has a staircase that will take you up to the back yard. Ricky's probably still out there swinging. We used to call this Archie's Entry.

Whenever we heard the door slam we knew we could creep down from upstairs and take in a TV show or two before he would return. Sometimes when he returned, we could hear this outside door to the shed open, and if we were quick, we could shut off his TV, smooth down the covers of his bed, and be up and out before he even came into the basement.

Yup. There he is, little brother, Ricky, still swinging. We all spend a lot of time out here. Most of all, we play softball or badminton. I don't swing anymore, except maybe before and after I mow the lawn.

Don't ask me why. Oh, well, I'll tell ya. What I like to do before I mow the lawn is sit on one of the swings and pretend I'm a forest ranger way up in a ranger tower, looking out over a vast expanse of forest land that's been entrusted to me for safe keeping. From my tower, I determine if it's

time for logging crews to come in and chop down the forest. And decide just where they should begin the cutting.

Then after I finish mowing the lawn, I return to the ranger tower and survey all that has been done, inhaling the clean scent of freshly cut trees and feeling contented about it all, especially admiring the way it has all been accomplished without missing a strip or two here and there.

You think that's dumb? Let me show you what I do over here on the south side of the house, on this patch of grass between us and our crabby neighbors, a couple of old ladies who are sisters.

This is my imaginary outfield. The neighbor's house here is the outfield wall. You know, like the Red Sox's green monster at Fenway?

I stand here with my mitt on, and toss a tennis ball way up there on top of our dormer jutting out from the sloped roof. I mean, the ball goes right out of sight. And then I wait. Sometimes a couple seconds.

Suddenly the ball, which has bounced up off the dormer roof reappears, soaring up and then arching down close to the outfield wall.

The fans are all screaming. The radio announcer's going ape. It looks like it's gonna go for extra bases. Then, with my back to the wall, I leap high as I can and snare the ball at the last moment.

The crowd goes crazy and the announcer declares that he has never seen such a great catch before in his life.

Sometimes, though, it doesn't happen that way. Sometimes the ball just doesn't come back. Then I have to go over to the other side of the house and get it.

When it takes an extra long time to bounce back, I know it's gonna hit the wall before I can catch it. I'd say half the time I have to play it off the wall. But that's okay. Normally I play it off the wall and nail the runner when he tries to stretch it into a triple.

And then, maybe about once or twice a month, the ball smashes through the old-lady neighbors' bathroom window, which can get to be expensive because I always have to pay for it. This year I'm gonna ask them again if they could put a screen on it. You'd think they could at least do that after all the problems it's caused.

During last winter I spent hours after school over there, in front of the garage, shooting baskets until my hands were so frozen I couldn't feel the ball.

A lot of times I'd stand way out there in the alley, maybe thirty, sometimes 40 feet from the basket, and hear

the announcer shout, "Five. Four. Threeeeeee. Twooooo. One"

As he was about to shout Zerooooooooo, I'd launch the icy ball into a long spinning arch toward the basket. Maybe once in 15 tries I'd hit it. Maybe once every other week it would smash through our garage window.

Thank God garage windows aren't as expensive as the neighbor's bathroom window is.

And those crumbling concrete steps there that lead up to the kitchen entry? God, I can't begin to tell you how much time I've spent throwing a ball at them. All I can tell you is that this is the perfect place to practice fielding hot grounders. That's 'cause this walk-way leading to the garage is all shot to hell.

When you bang the baseball against the steps and it comes back at ya, it mostly hits two, three broken pieces of concrete before you can get down to catch it. Lots of times it takes a bad bounce that could knock your teeth out.

It's a challenge. Only problem is, sometimes, if you don't peg the ball just right? It will glance off the edge of a step and smash through the window on the door, and that really makes Dad mad.

Well what-a-ya say we go in and see if dinner's ready? Maybe there's enough time to show you some of my new jazz records. Some are just absolutely *fantastic*.