

From My Journal

By Paul Johnson

April 14, 1987

Dear Mart:

Steve's mother, "Mama Wolf" you always called her,
she called to tell me you died early
this morning.

She called while I was reading the last page
of my copy of the letter I had sent to you
months ago.

I was reading it again
because my thoughts were filled with you
since seeing a sign
on a white truck at 8:30 this morning,
when I dropped Tracey off at work
on time.

I saw this white truck with this sign on the side of it:
"Aldy's Art Supplies."

And I said to myself,
"Why spell a name that way,
when instead it could be A-l-d-r-e?"

And an hour later, while looking at my letter to you
one more time,
so proud I had expressed my love for you on the last page,
Mama Wolf called (while I was reading the last page!)
to tell me you, my fine friend, went Home today.

What I want to know now, Mart,
is not why you went so soon,
but why I heard a carillon's chimes entwine
the melody of your all-time favorite song,
Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow,"
while I was walking past the Edina Theater
at high noon today.

April 25th, 1987:

Tracey and I wandered this sun-filled Saturday afternoon through almost all the stores of my youth, where 50th Street intersects Xerxes Avenue South. Almost all. Not the store in which my father was killed on a Saturday evening twenty-one years ago when two boys thought it might be fun to try to hold up a family grocery store with real guns.

We had parked our pickup truck and walked toward that store on 50th Street between York and Xerxes Avenue. It's now a Tom Thumb. It was Food Lane when Dad was murdered in it.

I remember it best when it was Grossman's Grocery Store, where I could go as a boy to charge packs of bubble gum full of Mickey Mantle baseball cards, or take a signed note from Mom for "1 pkg of Viceroy cigarettes." Sometimes I dared to change the number 1 to a 4 so that I could be famous in Bob Rishovd's basement where our gang would often sit by the furnace and smoke and talk tough.

Tracey and I walked upon that place on the sidewalk where my father chose to turn and re-enter the store, after he had exited with a bag of groceries and had then heard a gunshot from within the store.

Upon that sidewalk, he made his last choice. In front of a man who was once my Sunday school teacher at Lake Harriet Methodist Church, Mr. Meyers, who was walking toward the store when he saw my father put down his bag of groceries upon a parked car and walk back in, to confront the two boys who would kill him.

Tracey and I didn't pause. We didn't look through the front plate-glass window. Didn't look down at that place inside the front door where my father died "in a puddle of blood," an expression he would often use to describe the violent deaths illustrated in Dick Tracy newspaper comics.

As Tracey and I walked past the entrance we didn't talk about it. We had discussed it so many times before, especially whenever we passed that store in the truck while on our way to a place we could arrive at no other way except by going out of our way.

I have secretly, morbidly, "visited" the store a few times during the last few years since moving back into the neighborhood. Why? I'm not sure. I guess I felt compelled; a kind of pilgrimage, I suppose.

As Tracey and I walked past the store, we stopped at the edge of the building, where there is this narrow corridor

that separates the store from the building that's on the corner of 50th and Xerxes, the one that used to be called Hansen's Drug Store. This corridor cuts between the two buildings, takes a left-hand turn behind and then goes out onto Xerxes Avenue. The corridor has an arched entrance on the 50th Street side.

We paused at the entrance to the corridor and I pointed to where my friends and me would stand back in its dark recess and loft snowballs over the arched entrance and watch them splatter on passing cars (pretending we were launching mortars).

I wondered as I recalled this how we didn't cause a fatal accident to occur, especially that one time when Mr. Wigand, wearing a tan coat, stepped down from the back door of a bus that pulled up to let him out, and we accidentally splattered a snowball all over his forehead.

Hansen's Drug Store had two connecting rooms. The one facing 50th was a soda fountain, the other room, on the corner of 50th and Xerxes, was the pharmacy where I spent many afternoons among stacks of comic books. It was where my best buddy Mart and I discovered the first publication of *Playboy*, and where, while we were reading the first *Mad Magazine*, he laughed so hard he threw up a Pearson's Salted Peanut Candy Bar, the flecks of peanuts and his white barf covering the picture of Alfred E. Newman's face grinning, "What, me worry?"

Tracey and I went into that room that was once the soda fountain but is now a place that sells T-shirts and jackets with anything you want lettered or stenciled on them. Probably no more than ten people a day go in there now.

I pointed out where the soda fountain counter used to be and described how it was chin high to a ten-year-old and what fun it was to mount the high revolving stools and debate the merits of the flavored cokes versus the flavored phosphates. My favorite flavors were lime and lemon. Mart would usually order a cherry coke. And then we'd dip the tips of the white paper wrappers covering our straws into our drinks, tear off the other ends, aim our straws toward the high ceiling, and blow the wrappers up there with such force that the wet tips stuck to the ceiling, joining all the other paper wrappers we had stuck up there during days before.

Alice, the soda fountain manager, who must have been in her late sixties, she wore a starched white uniform and would always scold us for doing that, but with a smile.

Girls favored the tall-backed booths, maybe because of the little juke boxes in them.

For a quarter they could get six plays: Patti Page's "Cross Over the Bridge" was a popular selection. My favorite was her "Mockingbird Hill." And I think Wayne Swanson always asked the girls to play Frankie Laine's "Mule Train" or some other tune by Frankie Laine. Maybe it was "Ghost Riders in the Sky." Jerry Bender requested "Skokiaan" or "Wimoway" or "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." Anything with an African rhythm drove him wild; made him spin on his stool, beat his hands on the counter, and shoot straw wrappers at his girl friend, Meridee.

Mart went for the cherry cokes, the ice cream, and a chance to talk to Marci, a saucy sixteen-year-old who went to the high school, Southwest, and worked behind the long tall counter with Alice after school. He enjoyed grossing Marci out when ordering a caramel sundae by saying, "I'll have an ear wax sundae, Marci."

He always told Marci she had Maureen O'Hara hair and once, to prove it, he went into the pharmacy and bought a movie magazine, just to show Marci how Maureen O'Hara's hair matched hers.

Once, while Mart sucked up another cherry Coke, he talked with Marci about her eyebrows, how she made them arch so beautifully.

Marci smiled and asked Mart if he had a comb.

He gave his comb to her and she showed him how to comb an eyebrow properly, saying to Mart, "Always stroke up. Never sideways or down."

I was impressed.

Mart asked her to comb her hair with his comb, and as she undid her pony tail, he promised Marci that he'd cherish the comb for the rest of his life. I couldn't believe how he could handle the dames.

It was probably at that soda fountain where Mart developed the moves he made in our senior class play, when he played George Gibbs in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

The scene in which he and Ann Gould (who played Emily) sat together at Morgan's soda fountain.

The scene in which George is considering the prospect of leaving Grover's Corners and Emily to go off to college; where he says to her:

And, like you say, being gone all that time . . . in other places and meeting other people . . . Gosh, if anything like that can happen I don't want to go away. I guess new people aren't any better than old ones. I'll bet they almost never are.

Emily . . . I feel that you're as good a friend as I've got. I don't need to go and meet the people in other towns.

As it turned out, Mart chose to meet people in other towns, and for the past twenty years or so he made New York City his home. Ann didn't stay in Minneapolis either, and coincidentally became Mart's neighbor on West End Avenue in New York City.

I wondered, this afternoon, as I turned to leave that room that was once our after-school hangout, but is now only a place to buy T-shirts, if Mart would choose a day in his life to return to, as Emily had done after she had died in *Our Town*; and if he would choose to return to a day when he and I once sat at the soda fountain, so he could again flirt with Marci, and gaze at all the stars in the movie magazines.

Emily, after she had died, was advised by her husband's mother, Mrs. Gibbs, who had "passed on" before Emily had, that if Emily felt she must return to Grover's Corners for a day, Emily should *not* choose an important day, but should instead select an unimportant day, and better yet, a least important day.

"It will be important enough," she told Emily.

Tracey and I went next door, to what was once the pharmacy. It's just a store that sells antique lamps now.

We walked up Xerxes Avenue toward other stores: what was once upon a time a dime store, The Variety Store, and another, that was once Southwest Hardware, across the street from what used to be Johnny's blue and white Pure Oil Station flanked by what was once Lunderberg's Hudson car dealership.

And then we walked up 50th Street, by what used to be Don & Mark's, a greasy-spoon cafe, where my brother Larry and I would always stop to buy grease-stained bags full of French fries to take home with all the comic books we bought at Hansen's Drug Store.

Someone tore down Don & Mark's. Now, where it once used to be, there's just an ugly gray concrete-block building that only sells tires. Lunderberg's old Hudson dealership just sells tires now, too.

I tried to explain to Tracey that the sidewalk in front of what once was The Variety Store was where all the fifth, sixth, and seventh graders would assemble after school whenever there was a Duncan or Cheerio District Yo-Yo Contest. As many as 50 kids would line up along the sidewalk facing Xerxes Avenue and do yo-yo tricks in front of

some “expert” from either the Duncan Yo-Yo or the Cheerio Yo-Yo companies.

Through a long process of elimination, we’d each, one by one, attempt such tricks as “Walk the Dog,” “Around the World,” and “Rock the Cradle,” until, one by one, contestants were eliminated because they’d either fail to perform a trick properly or because a string would snap, sending their yo-yo sailing across Xerxes or hit a passing car.

Jerry Bender and Wayne Swanson were the first to win the district yo-yo championships. They both got sweaters with a big medallion sewn on the front.

After a year of domination, they coached me in the fine points of the art, especially in how to execute a hundred “Loop-the-Loops” in succession, without letting my yo-yo string bind up. If it became too tight it would break or render your yo-yo uncontrollable.

Their pointers proved to be the critical difference when I entered what must have been my tenth district yo-yo contest in the summer of 1953, and won it in a marathon “Loop-the-Loop Sudden Death” with Steve Nash, who six years later was rated as one of the finest goalies Southwest High School’s championship hockey team ever had.

After I expressed this to Tracey, who didn’t grow up in the same time and place, we continued browsing the stores. Almost all of them have become antique shops.

I remarked to Tracey that it seemed to me to be so ironic that most of the stores that were such a vivid part of my grade school and high school days were now full of antique furniture, dusty knick knacks, yellowing and browning photographs, musty books, and curious odds and ends. My favorites: Coca-Cola serving trays, wooden skis, a toboggan, a set of wooden golf sticks, and a glass cabinet full of gold pocket watches. Most memorable of all, a mahogany clock that was shaped like the one that ruled the mantle over my grandmother Nana’s fireplace, always intoning one deep mellow bong on the quarter hour. As we beheld the objects in each antique store, each artifact seemed to hold something mysterious within it, a secret perhaps. Certainly a story. Probably volumes.

We walked among the dusty aisles as if in a trance, through one antique store after another.

Then we wandered to the other side of Xerxes, then crossed 50th, to the corner store that used to be a photo studio where the guy who owned it once told my father that his skin was so porous and dark and oily that he must photograph him; that he just had to.

After Dad had agreed to sit through hours of being photographed, he gave the photographer permission to display one photograph, about two feet by three feet in size, in his front window, on the corner, “kitty-corner” from Hansen’s Drug.

It was always sort of unsettling for me to step out of Hansen’s, especially after looking into a *Playboy* centerfold or sneaking a peek into *From Here To Eternity*, it always sort of alarmed me to step out of Hansen’s and see Dad’s knowing eyes looking at me from across the street in that photography studio’s window.

I still have one of those large photos. In this one Dad looks like a blend of Cary Grant and Mel Gibson. In the photograph, which is mounted on thick cardboard, his black hair is slicked with Brylcreem. He’s wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and silk tie, and it’s pretty obvious his skin tone was a dark complexion and oily.

What I like most about the picture is he’s holding a Lucky Strike cigarette that only has one last puff in it and’s dangling a long ash that at any moment could land all over his lap. But what I like even more about the photograph now is what’s on the back of it: his penciled sketch of his plans to remodel the interior of our house at 5025 Vincent.

He hated vanity.

When Tracey and I finished looking at the antiques in what once was the photography studio, we continued walking up 50th Street, past a store that used to be Ralph’s Shoe Service, and past the pink Spanish facade of what once was a realty office. It still has the wrought iron grillwork in front of each window.

And I can still see my first girl friend, Kathy, walking past that grillwork on a bright winter afternoon, after school, after a snow storm, and, as I followed her from about 40 feet behind, wondering when I would ever find the courage to talk to her again, a year after our disastrous first and last date when we were just finishing sixth grade.

Walking far behind her, I saw Kathy extend her blue mitten and softly brush the fresh mounds of snow off each of the two wrought iron window rails, as she passed by them on her way to her home on Xerxes Avenue.

Funny what you cannot forget.

We crossed 50th Street to look at more antiques in a store that used to be The Big Ten Grocery, and was later called Hyke’s, my old source of banana, root beer, and grape popsicles, and a kind of colored candy that was about the

size of small rivets stuck in rows to long strips of adding machine paper.

It was at the entrance of this store that my dog Bugle always waited patiently while Mart and I would stock up before heading off on one of our five-mile hikes. If Mart ever does choose a day to return to, maybe it would be one in which we took one of our five-mile hikes.

Tracey and I had spent last night at Clarence and Dorothy Wolf's house, parents of a friend Mart and I knew since high school: Steve.

We had been invited over for dinner, or actually, had been invited over to be with Mart's mother, Mrs. Aldre, who would maybe be there. She had returned a couple of days ago from New York City, after spending the last six months with Mart, the two of them awaiting his inevitable death, which finally came last week on April 14th.

We were apprehensive about the evening. I'm never any good at comforting people. Too often I blurt out the wrong words while trying to be humorous or comforting. Yet I felt that there was no person I wanted to be with more that evening than Mrs. Aldre.

I wanted her to tell me about Mart's last days, about how he faced his death. Only a month earlier they had tried to celebrate his 46th birthday.

Mrs. Wolf, or Mama Wolf as Mart always called her, had lost one of her two children, Bill, about 21 years ago, actually two months before my dad died at age 45. Bill was 22. Two years younger than his brother Steve.

To Mart, and to Jim Hutchins, and myself and a few other guys who were trying to adjust to post high school life, the Wolf's house had become our "home away from home," a friendly place to go when our parents could no longer understand why we weren't making the progress in college that they had hoped we would. Mart was the only one who was actually progressing toward a goal. He was intent upon becoming an actor, if not a screen star (his real dream), at least a guy with an occasional part in a theater production.

Mart got his fair share of theater roles while enrolled in the University of Minnesota's Theater Department. But I never felt he showed enough promise or talent to become a professional actor. But he worked at it. And he was moving forward toward a degree.

The only thing Steve and I moved toward was getting married, which is what I guess we both felt we needed to do

at that time. Jim Hutchins got married, too, but unlike Steve or myself, I'm not so sure Jim felt he needed to be married.

Twenty years later, Jim's a recent and happy divorcee. Way to go, Jim! And Steve is still luckier'n hell to be living in Sonoma California married to his wife, Gail. Way to go, Steve! And I'm seven months married again after ten years of being divorced and not liking single life all that much. Way to go, me! And Mart, who married Life, has gone on to what I choose to believe is the Ultimate Adventure. Way to go, Mart!

As Tracey and I walked toward the Wolf's house last night, the sun was setting over the giant maple tree in their back yard.

Steve's father, Clarence, was standing in the open front door.

He greeted us, and when we ascended the steps, I was surprised to see Mrs. Aldre sitting on the yellow sofa within. Her car wasn't parked out front and we assumed she hadn't yet arrived.

I reached out, clasped the back of her left hand resting limp upon the arm of the sofa, and said something bumpy, something like, "Well I'm glad to see you're back now."

And then I tried to say, "Do you by any chance remember Tracey?"

I laughed and Mrs. Aldre laughed with the Wolfs and Tracey. She had met Tracey once before, at our wedding, which she attended the day before she went to New York to be with Mart.

Mrs. Aldre's yellow hair furled soft folds to her neck, near her narrow shoulders. She wore a smart gray checked coat, a black skirt, and she had a black wrap about her shoulders. Her face was drawn and gray.

But she still showed dignity, character, and beauty. Women half her age pay plenty to pretend they have a fraction of the beauty she shows within a twinkling wink of her eye.

We didn't cry. I feared and yet also hoped we might. The last time Mrs. Aldre and I had been in the Wolf's home together was with Mart, when we had met three years ago for drinks before going off to join old friends at our 25th-year high school class reunion.

A corner of Clarence's lower lip was bloody, and when he handed me a tall glass of scotch on the rocks, I tried to make a joke about how he either must have stood too close to his razor or else couldn't block a punch from his wife Dorothy as well as he used to.

We spent the next hour filling Mrs. Aldre in on things that had been happening in our lives since last September, detail after detail. And after Dorothy finished telling her about the travels she and Clarence had taken during the winter, and about how some of their mutual friends had been doing, Mrs. Aldre said, "Well, I know you want to know about Mart and how the last couple of months were for him."

Clarence was out in the kitchen pouring me another tall drink.

I'm not going to try and quote her words. She was eloquent. I'd just mess it up. But what moved me most was the way she sat there, all alone on the yellow sofa, in her black wrap, tiny, petite, and brave.

As she described Mart's failing health, from Thanksgiving, to Christmas, to New Year's Eve, to his 46th birthday on March 9th, a day he told his mother that he doubted they would spend together, as she spoke about vivid moments during their last six months together, we began to let tears flow openly, for the first time together.

She said, "He did not die once, but seven times!"

She expressed how he fought so hard to come back, but then at 8:30, on the morning of April 14th, he could fight no more.

And she, holding what was left of Mart's ravaged body, she said, rocking him in her arms, "I will always be your mother, will always love you, hold you, and comfort you, will always be with you."

I moved to get up from my chair, to sit down next to her, to hold her. But Dorothy beat me to it.

We had dinner together, told stories about the Fifties, about my friends: Steve and Jim and Mike and John and Bruce and Dave and, of course, about Mart.

We laughed. And after a generous meal and dessert, we sat in the living room until after ten, listening to Dorothy play the piano, Mrs. Aldre requesting more and more tunes, perhaps welcoming a moment to be together, but without feeling any need now to talk.

We drove her home.

When we stopped in front of her house on Thomas Avenue, I opened my door, to go around to her side of the truck and help her down, and to walk her to her door; something my father would have done. But before I could get out of the truck, she had her door open and was stepping down from the cab, protesting that she wasn't an old lady.

As she passed by my open window, I asked her if she had my phone number.

She turned, and snapped out *her* phone number, and said, "I suppose the next thing you'll ask is if I want a date!"

We laughed and I let it remain a misunderstanding.

She opened the front door of her house, waved good night, and we drove off.

When Tracey and I had finished walking through the last antique store, the one that was once Hyke's grocery store, I regretted I couldn't just order up a box of Dots or a banana Popsicle, or PEZ, or Ju-Ju Bees and then return to one of my old classrooms at Robert Fulton Elementary School, less than a block away.

We again crossed Xerxes Avenue, and walked back toward the store in which my father had died.

As we approached the that store's entrance, Mrs. Aldre walked out, holding a small bag of groceries. Her face was absorbed in thought, looking into mine, but her eyes were not seeing me.

I bent down and waved my hand in front of her eyes, and not until she was only a foot or two in front of us did she stop, adjust her focus, and suddenly recognize me.

She was wearing the same suit she wore the night before. I wanted to carry her small bag of groceries home for her. My father would have insisted. And yet I felt she took a measure of pride in walking to the store and taking care of her own business all by herself. Offering to carry her small bag would have been patronizing.

She said, "You know, Paul, I can never go into that store, I can never leave that store, without thinking about your father." And as she walked away, I regretted I hadn't simply taken her grocery bag and said, "It's a beautiful day for a walk, isn't it Mrs. Aldre?"

April 29th, 1987:

My sister Sue called this evening. Tracey was meeting with her exercise group, and I was in the mood to just sit and chat, and in the mood to talk with Sue about Mart.

I read her the "poem" I had addressed to him on the day he died, April 14th. And as I got to the part where I had to explain to her that carillons are musical bells or chimes, Sue blurted out, "Wait a minute! He's trying to reach me."

I said, "Who's trying to reach you?"

She said, "Mart. He wants to say something to me."

"Sue, What you talking about? You're talking as though he's on Call Waiting or something."

"I'm channeling him, Paul. He has something to say. I'll call you back as soon as I can."

And she hung up.

A few years ago my sister Sue had been labeled by some mystical rabbi as being what she said Hebrews call a "soft medium." I went along with accepting this because it was too much of an effort to dispute, and I guess I actually wanted to believe there might be something to it.

About half an hour later she called me back, saying Mart had reached her and she wrote down what he said as he spoke "in her." Some of it she did not understand.

"But," she said, "Mart's words are for you. He gave me them as one would dictate a letter to a secretary. It begins with foreign sounding words or a phrase. I made an attempt at phonetic spelling. I don't know what some of the words mean or how to spell them. The first words sounded like a greeting, a salutation, and his voice was childlike, full of zest, full of a joyous sense of relief. So here it is:

Heardaga! Aw Tu Lava!

It is better this way that I enjoyed my life to the fullest of the grape, than pretended to live in the bottom of the dregs.

The cure for what I died from is this: That really, Sharnesy, in truth, honestly, there is no death.

Now I am with the Captain Videos of spiritual wonders. And yes there are bells, bells of angels.

Do not let me haunt you, taunt you, regress you. The color of life is not in dusty Salvation Army bargain basements of what was.

It is the magic of brightness of what will be.

See to the future one inch more. One more mark to the right or left, the table will be balanced.

You keep sawing off that leg of memories.

Remember when we sat for hours and talked of our dreams? My God, Oshevella! Hefzalla! I have achieved all my dreams.

So now it is time to prepare for bigger things than what my beautiful body could only have limits on. Now I work with beautiful angels of mind. It is like a Milky Way of heavenly stars. You say it Sue. It is like wandering past the ghetto of youth into a paradise of Eden.

You and I will meet again. We did not stay long together during these seldom years for it would not have fit right.

Right is what I want you to know.

And it is right you remember.

Now it is writing of your dreams. Did you really think you would be all those things?

A giant you wanted to be!

Remember when you told Willie you'd get her? Well she's been got.

Paul, for me, no, don't weep, not long. It does not become you.

You don't deal well with tragedy.

Tracey. Sock it to her. She's what you got and she loves you.

Tell Marci I always loved her, if you see her.

And tell Jim he needs less just when he wants more.

See you Sue, little one.

In *Our Town*, after Emily dies, she is advised by those who had "passed on" before her to not return, to not spend one last day in Grover's Corners. Mrs. Gibbs advises Emily:

When you've been here longer you'll see that our life here is to forget all that, and think only of

what's ahead. And be ready for what's ahead.
When you've been here longer you'll understand.

For a Christmas present in 1985 I sent Mart a copy of stories I had been writing about my memories. I wrote an introduction to the stories, containing images that I felt would speak strongly to Mart, Jim Hutchins, Mike Daggett, Jerry Bender, Wayne Swanson, Jeff Land, and our other grade-school buddies. When we were in eighth grade, we had made lamp tables to proudly take home to our families. So I wrote in the introduction:

The stories in this collection remind me of my eighth-grade shop project: the unvarnished oak lamp table whose fourth leg never touched the floor . . .

"See to the future one inch more. One more mark to the right or left, the table will be balanced. You keep sawing off that leg of memories. Remember when we sat for hours and talked of our dreams?"

I let twenty-five years go by before I ever gave Mart a glimpse of how much I admired him. As Emily said when she returned from her "day back" in Grover's Corners:

It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we didn't notice . . . Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you . . . Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? - every, every minute?

Mart may have. I only shared eight years with him, and although we went to the same schools from grades seven through twelve and sometimes had the same teachers, we were only in one classroom together, our senior English class. Our English teacher, "Willie," was probably respected by many of our classmates for the way she ran a tight ship, and there were those who may have enjoyed her long stories about her European travels. To me the class meant little more than knowing the correct answer to "question three."

Mart sat in front of me and did everything he could to help me get through the year without doing something I might regret for the rest of my life, such as doing hard time

in Stillwater Prison for committing murder on the day when Willie gave me three zeros in less than one minute for twice falling asleep in her class. Every zero she gave a student reduced the student's grade for the class by one third.

Mart and I had stayed up the entire night before, at his kitchen table in a last-ditch effort to complete our chemistry-class projects on time.

Without sleep, we tried to sit upright within Willie's first-period class and when it came my turn to answer question three ("Is the expression figurative or literal?") I was asleep. When Mart kicked my foot, I was so bleary that even though I knew the right answer I honestly couldn't speak past my yawn to respond.

And so Mart whispered, "FIGURATIVE." Except it wasn't really a very good whisper; everyone could hear him. He was right. The correct answer was figurative. And I knew it was figurative. Hell, we all knew it was figurative. Even Jerry Bender, who was sitting behind me, Jerry who was also loudly whispering, "FIGURATIVE!"

So I just grinned at Willie with my scum covered teeth and my bloodshot eyes, and while she was penning the zero into her grade book for me being asleep, I said, "LITERAL." And then put my head back down upon my desktop and went back to sleep.

She gave me another zero and sent me to the office, and gave me another zero for that, too. I guess I'll never forget it. Mart was so angry, so pissed about the way I had twice nodded off, and worse yet, I suppose, that I had not taken his "whispered" assistance. God, was he angry.

And then there was that day when he got the idea to use the fine china dinnerware, pewter candleholders, and silverware that Willie had stashed in a closet next to Mart's school desk.

Mart had grown tired of the drab sack-lunch routine at our table in the cafeteria. Without asking Willie permission, we sort of borrowed her china plates, her pewter goblets, the silverware, and the candle holders, a center piece, some crystal glasses, and who knows what else, oh yeah, a fine linen table cloth.

Just before the lunch period, we slipped into the cafeteria and decorated our table in a manner that suited the refined and mature seniors we felt we had become.

Willie didn't see it that way. She not only gave us zeroes for that, she also made us both stay after school and polish her silverware!

Mart was alive to the joys, wonders, and possibilities in life. One of his favorite books was a Van Gogh biography, *Lust for Life*.

He seemed to always be so keenly aware of all things beautiful. Mart's spirit is of the stuff that inspires poets to write lyrics that help us pay more attention to our possibilities. Shakespeare's memorable tribute from *Julius Caesar* could have been written for Mart:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world "This was a man!"

And Shakespeare's "Sonnet XXX," which goes like this:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:

Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancelled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:

Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored, and sorrows end.

Mart's message through my sister Sue circles all I try to do today. I will be the last to doubt its validity. And as I now look again at my tattered copy of *Our Town*, I feel the Stage Manager speaks to me in a similar manner:

Now there are some things we all know, but we
don't take'm out and look at'm very often. We all
know that something is eternal. And it ain't
houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and
it ain't even stars . . . everybody knows in their
bones that something is eternal, and that
something has to do with human beings.

All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they lose hold of the earth . . . and the ambitions they had . . . and the pleasures they had . . . and the things they suffered . . . and the people they loved.

They get weaned away from the earth. That's the way I put it; weaned away. And they stay here while the earth part of 'em burns away, burns out; and all that time they slowly get indifferent to what's goin' on in Grover's Corners.

They're waitin'. They're waitin' for something that they feel is comin'. Something important, and great. Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part in them to come clear?

I shall look forward to any future visit Mart may pay my sister Sue, and welcome any visit from him in my dreams. And if Mart should want to haunt me? All the better.

I like to think he, along with my father, who Mart much admired, are both preparing a party for me and my friends when it's our time to go Home.

I hope the party will be a lot like the one we enjoyed when we were freshmen at the University of Minnesota.

Mart had gathered together a group of friends in John Durocher's basement to "dress up" like Greeks; all of us wearing garlands and togas and sandals.

We sat on pillows around a candle-lit ping-pong table we had taken the legs off of, and we drank wine while we each composed wild expansive poems, and then we each, one by one, stood and read them aloud to the group, one by one, with exaggerated expressions and gestures. Meaningless poems, perhaps. But what a grand time!

We were carefree and were accepting each poem we had composed and then read out loud.

Our cheers followed each poem created and spoken by Steve Wolf, Jim Hutchins, Dave Swenson, Bruce Henriksen, John Durocher, Jerry Bender, George Bestrom, Mike Daggett, Al Fischer, Jack Rice, Rich Passolt, Bob Rishovd, Wayne Swanson, and Mart.

We, together, on that night in John's basement, we were showing Mart we also, could, on occasion, enjoy our life "to the fullest of the grape."