

We Never Said Goodbye

By Paul Edward Johnson

My Grandma Nana's father finished his dinner, smiled at his wife and eight children, and announced he was going to walk down to the neighborhood store to get some tobacco. The next time any one of them saw him was about 10 years later.

Seems he had wandered off to Alaska.

Nana's husband, my Grandpa Babu (George C. Palmer) ran away from his Riceville Iowa home on his 12th birthday, and he stayed away from Riceville until he had established himself as the owner of a profitable produce brokerage business in Minneapolis.

On Dad's side of my family, my Grandpa Oscar joined the Soo Line Railroad when still a teenager. He and his brother Dave. Oscar became an engineer pulling passenger trains until a head-on collision with a freight train ended his career in 1947.

One of his grandsons, my cousin Ed, he became a ship captain. During the 1960s he captained freighters across the Pacific Ocean; freighters loaded with beer cases for American troops in South Viet Nam.

At age 17 my brother Larry sailed off to Switzerland for his high school senior year as an AFS foreign-exchange student.

While in college he spent a year in Berlin and Spain, wandering off to Africa and other places for little side trips. Larry sent post cards with stamps on them from what seemed to be just about every country in Europe.

After several years of post-graduate study at Harvard in New England, Larry and his family moved on to Seattle, Larry declaring Seattle to be about the closest thing to the most beautiful spots in all the world, which according to him are Austria and Switzerland.

Larry's oldest daughter, Hillery, she traveled all around the world. She may have visited almost every continent.

His son Jesse ventured off to South America, China, Japan, and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa.

Knowing my family and relatives had ants in their pants may help me understand why my youngest brother, Rick, disappeared in 1972 at age 21.

Rick's never been seen or heard from since then.

Before he disappeared at age 21, Rick himself had been to Greece and many places in the United States before he was 20.

When Rick was in high school he owned a VW Camper. After Rick graduated from high school in 1969 he drove it to Woodstock. He drove to it Canada. He drove it to Boston to visit Larry.

Dad was the one who got Rick going on VW campers. Dad bought one several years before he died in 1966. He and Rick would often take off Friday afternoons and go way on up to "Who Knows Where" and spend weekends loafing around a camp site.

After Rick bought his own camper, in 1968, he drove it to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to visit with Alice and me. The three of us went camping in it and we felt like Gypsies.

After Rick disappeared, I then bought a VW Camper in 1974.

One summer morning I drove it to a Laundromat to wash blue jeans, socks, underwear, and a few shirts. As I was folding the fresh clothes I felt an urge to put them in the compartments of the camper, fill the camper's gas tank, and take off for parts unknown, leaving my wife Alice forever.

A year later we divorced and I quit my teaching job. Maybe I should have followed my impulse at the

Laundromat, an impulse that may have come from my genes—an ancestral impulse to escape wherever we may be at the moment.

Whenever I'm someplace with my brother Larry and his son, Jesse, we are there for maybe only 10 or 15 minutes and then Jesse gets restless and starts saying, "Let's go. Let's go."

This was Rick's favorite line of poetry:

"Drive!" he said.

Can't remember the poet who wrote that line, but maybe I could look it up.

What I can't look up is where Rick is today. All I can say is he's in my mind and in my dreams. And when he visits my dreams, I often wake up and get the urge to write down something that might explain why he does not return in person, but only in spirit.

If he showed up this morning in person I'd kick his butt and maybe bloody his nose for all the grief that's resulted after he took a powder and never returned.

My guess is he's not afraid of getting his butt kicked. He knows he's got it coming. He may, however, be afraid that upon presenting himself after more than 30 years, no one no longer even cares to kick it. That would, if I were him, sure as hell scare me.

I ask myself, "If I were Rick could I do what he did?" Just up and leave family and friends at age 21, or at any age, and not once contact anyone for more than 30 years?

Jesus! The guy's more than 50 years old! If I were to walk past him on a street today, I might not recognize him. My guess is he's still pretty lanky. No telling how he wears his sandy hair. Probably still favors boots to shoes. Might be wearing contacts instead of thick glasses. If he hasn't gained much weight, he's maybe a little leaner in the face. Not as soft. But still probably just as dreamy-eyed. At least I hope so. And I hope he

still walks as though he's listening to a Peter, Paul and Mary song.

Maybe a We Five song. We Five was one of his favorite singing groups. Recently, I bought a We Five record album that he'd listen to repeatedly.

The songs on the We Five album are almost all about leaving people.

We all, Mom and my brother Larry and my sisters Sue and Sylvia, we all have admitted he could be dead. We've talked about that. And as the years go by, as far as I'm concerned, he may as well be dead for all of the cherished comradeship I now no longer get to enjoy with him.

That jackass! We never said goodbye.

But what's the fun of thinking he might be dead? He is always alive in my mind, in my heart. Except the longer he stays away, it feels as if he chose to commit suicide. And that leaves me holding a heavy bag filled with guilt, not to mention the heavy bags my sisters, my brother, Larry, and our mother must have been shouldering.

Now I know it's become more and more fashionable to not feel guilty. Guilt, some people say, is for Catholics. Guilt, some say, is destructive. All I know is that I've got mine, you've got yours, and Rick's got his.

All of God's children may not have shoes. But they sure as hell have guilt.

We who love Rick, his family, his friends, we have each been asking ourselves, "What did I do to make Rick disappear and to never again communicate with any one of us? What did I do or fail to do? Whatever it was, why won't or why can't he forgive? Must I live with this guilt the rest of my life? Do I deserve this? Did I fail him? How did I become so insensitive to his needs? Why didn't I sense his desire to disappear? Why did I fail to pursue him?"

It's as if we drove him into seclusion. Relentlessly.

I sometimes blame my sister Sue and my mother for relentlessly calling him on the telephone: Sue smothering him in conversations about her personal problems, Mom relentlessly smothering him in mothering at age 21, he was no longer a kid wanting mothering.

I blame my brother Larry for persistently *not* calling him on the telephone, seemingly ignoring his younger brother's plight, whatever Rick's plight might have been, and Sylvia for the same thing, even though she was by then living 400 or so miles away up in Thief River Falls.

Let me digress a moment. Dad once told me that whatever I do in life, I should become a father.

And when I asked him why, he said something like this: "I have had little to do with raising your youngest brother. Since the day Rick was born, you are the one who has given him the fatherly support and attention he needs. You and your mother are the ones who raised that kid. And look at what a great kid he has become. You know your ma and me think it's mostly because of you."

Dad said that to me when Rick was seven or eight years old.

I recall agreeing with him when he said it. But I also remember that I did not spend a lot of time with Rick when he was between ages 10 and 15.

Dad took over during those years, and based upon what I had then observed; Dad became as important to Rick as anyone in his life.

While Alice and I were living in Mankato between 1964 and 1966, we'd hear all kinds of stories from the two of them. About how much fun they were having together. It seemed about three times a week they would both head on over to the Sports and Health Club located in St. Louis Park.

After an intense series of ping-pong games in which Rick would win his fair share, they'd work-out on weights, go swimming, and maybe blaze away on the punching bags. After that they'd go out to eat and maybe take in a movie. I mean these two guys became buddies. When I was a young teenager Dad and me were usually fighting about some damn thing.

When I went into the Air Force at the end of August, 1966, Rick was 15. We had spent a lot of time together during the summer. And we were still wounded from losing our father in February. Irreparably wounded.

Alice lived in the same house with Rick and Mom and my sisters during the months I was in the Air Force's basic and tech-school training. Rick and "Al" became good pals.

When Alice and I moved up to an Air Force base in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Rick came up to visit us for a week or so once or twice a year.

One year he visited us for Christmas.

When Rick and I then exchanged presents on Christmas Eve we were astonished how we had each given each other identical presents: a double-record album of the Supremes. What are the odds of that happening?

One of the things I was looking forward to most upon my discharge from the Air Force in 1970 was being able to spend more time with Rick. He had a way of raising my spirits, making me see things in a better light, helping me put things in proper perspective. And he told me I had the same effect on him.

During the first three weeks Alice and I lived in Mankato after our returning from my Air Force discharge, we couldn't locate the guy, even though he was living in Mankato himself, in a town that in 1970 was still a rather small community.

After weeks of searching for him and finally getting a lead on where he may be living in Mankato, I walked

into this old mansion full of pot heads, guys all spaced out on marijuana.

And this almost incoherent flake looks at me and says, "Ohhhh? Ya mean you're looking for Eric? Like man, he's upstairs, in a room toward the back. With his dog. I think. Yeah man, his dog. Charlie. Yeah. He might not be in, though."

He wasn't. So I left a note on his mattress. About all he had in his room were a bare mattress, a guitar, and a dog dish.

About two or three days later I spotted Rick walking up the sidewalk in front of the duplex Alice and I were renting, while I was on my way to a grocery store.

I don't recall what we said. I only recall how strange he seemed, as though he had too many secrets to keep, as though he had too much to hide, and how it seemed as though he had taken on a new identity and did not want me to see what it was. I was confused and he seemed to be confused, too.

We spent the afternoon talking, up in the attic of the duplex Alice and I were renting from an old man who suffered from a heart problem. He would evict us in a few weeks because we walked too much on the floor above his bedroom after his nine p.m. bedtime.

From what I could tell, Rick (or Eric as he then preferred to be called) had fallen in with some dudes who were dealing drugs; maybe big time.

The mansion he lived in was called "The Castle," which I learned was reputed to be the headquarters for some drug dealers running a pipeline extending from Mankato to Chicago to South America.

Rick said he was only smoking pot, not dealing it. I believed him. What the hay.

Throughout the rest of 1970 and until June of 1971, I would persistently ask Rick to spend weekends at a

cabin we were renting 10 miles south of Mankato.

Eventually, I started to worry that I might be bugging the guy. But about once every month he would go out to our cabin with us and stay for a couple days. And we'd have a great time listening to his newest records, playing chess, and talking about college courses we were taking. Sometimes we'd work together on projects he was doing for a film-making class.

I cherished those weekends we spent with him at that cabin on the lake. Although Rick didn't know where in the hell he wanted to go in life, neither of us thought that was all that important, even though we sensed it would become more and more disconcerting.

At the cabin, with good records, late-night movies on the tube, and the fridge full of good food and wine, we could care less than a rat's ass about our future in a world in which newspapers were reporting the possible loss of something called an ozone layer because we were using deodorant from aerosol cans.

During the summer of 1971, Rick helped us load our possessions (mostly boxes full of books and records) into a school bus I had bought for \$500. Alice and I were moving to a small town north of Minneapolis where I had been hired to teach teenagers.

As I drove the school bus out onto Highway 169, I looked into the rear-view mirror at Rick, who was following Alice and me in our car, Rick driving about 40 yards behind us.

I shifted gears and heard a series of explosive sounds coming from under the hood of the school bus.

The interior of the bus was suddenly filled with smoke. Red and yellow flames roiled up the dashboard.

I again looked into the rear-view mirror.

Rick had disappeared in a cloud of black smoke that seemed to be at least 12 feet high, maybe 12 feet wide. He wasn't to be seen. That meant he could not see us.

I don't know why, but I started laughing. I had this sensation that Alice and I were in a big B-17 bomber going down in flames and Rick, following us in a Spitfire fighter, could do nothing about it except yell "Bail out you fools! Bail out!"

But I could see through the windshield that we were moving at about 20 miles per hour and approaching the same gas station where I had purchased the bus.

I turned the bus into the highway entrance of the gas station, moved her slowly along the fringe of the property . . . to exactly the same place it was parked when I had bought her that summer.

I flung open the bus door.

Alice jumped free and I grabbed the fire extinguisher by the door, read the instructions, and then discovered the damn thing no longer had any ppphhht left in it.

So I raced into the gas station and the guy inside who had sold the school bus to me that summer handed me a fire extinguisher.

When I returned to the burning bus, Rick pulled up.

He had a big grin on his face, yelling, "Wow, man! I lost sight of you guys in all the black smoke. Totally!"

It took less than a minute to deflame the engine. And in another minute the guy who had sold it to me for \$500 let me sell it back to him for \$200 if I agreed to rent a Hertz van from him, to complete the moving job.

Rick shouted out, "It's the wise bird who rents."

During my first year of teaching I saw little of Rick. He continued to live in Mankato and all I managed to do was get together with him for a weekend down in Mankato during the Christmas break.

I think we went to see a Clint Eastwood movie. Or maybe was it *The Godfather*?

But the summer of 1972 was different. From my point of view, splendid. Alice and I had moved to a northern suburb of Minneapolis, into a swanky apartment building in the suburb of New Brighton.

After summer vacation, it would be a 50-mile drive to the high school in Rush City each morning.

To help make the long commute seem tolerable, we bought a fancy little sports car, a Buick Opal GT that looked a lot like a miniature Corvette.

Rick had moved up from Mankato to Minneapolis and into an apartment in an “affordable” part of town, and got a part-time assembly job working for a company that silk-screened T-shirts.

We spent a lot of that summer together. Mostly just driving around to see movies in the Opal GT, playing intense tennis games, and loafing around in our apartments, listening to music, and never agreeing on who was a good drummer.

At least three or four times I talked Rick into staying with Alice and me for a weekend, just as he had done when we were living in that cabin on Lake Crystal.

As summer moved toward autumn, I began to sense a greater reluctance on his part to spend a weekend with us, a growing sense of Rick becoming more and more remote.

Rick had removed the phone from his apartment, around August or September. I thought I understood why. He told me he had grown tired of getting calls every day from his family, especially from Mom and Sue and me, and maybe calls from Larry, too.

Our sister Sylvia, who was living with her husband about 400 miles away in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, was probably never bugging him. She was closest to him in age and after Dad died when Rick was 15, she and Rick had grown closer. She may have understood him best.

When Rick was 16 or maybe 17, he and Sylvia enjoyed spending Saturday mornings together at the world's first enclosed shopping mall, Southdale.

They'd buy a box of chocolate-covered raisins, sit down on a bench in the courtyard, and watch the passing shoppers.

They'd wait for someone dressed in fine attire; someone who approaching them walked with their nose held high. They didn't have to wait very long. Southdale is located in an affluent and up-scale community that I called Yuppie Kingdom.

When they spotted the type they were looking for, say a regal woman wearing a mink coat and alligator shoes, they would carefully toss several of their chocolate-covered raisins in her path. And wait for the fun to begin.

Stepping upon the chocolate covered raisons, she'd stop, look down at her expensive shoes, lift one foot, lift up her other foot, emit expressions of disgust, wipe the soles of her shoes on the courtyard tiles, and gingerly walk onward, muttering to herself.

On a good day, Rick and Sylvia would spend more than an hour doing this, both reveling in the responses they elicited from their "victims."

I first learned about this while, years later, for the first time, Sylvia spoke with me about the possibility Rick may have participated in the murder of our father. I'll get to that later.

The last time I was with Rick we were talking about why he had removed his phone from his apartment during September of 1972. We were sitting on a sofa in his dumpy apartment, we listening to Frank Zappa's *Hot Rats* record album.

"I just wish everybody would leave me alone, Paul. I just wish you and Larry and Sue and Mom would let me live my life the way I want to."

“Look, Rick. If anybody understands and respects that, it’s me. After all the heat I took from Dad about me not getting my shit together while I was in high school and while I was in college? And then again after Alice and I got married back in 1962 when I was your age? Jesus, if anyone understands that, it’s me.”

“Yeah, Paul, I know. But now it’s me getting the heat. And instead of Dad being on my back, it seems to be the rest of the family, and you, too. Why can’t everyone just leave me alone? Let me do my own thing?”

“That’d be fine, Rick, if it weren’t for the fact your ‘own thing’ is marijuana. Isn’t there more to life than just getting high?”

“Paul, I stopped smoking pot months ago. Was doin’ strange things to me. May even be why I can’t control my pissing problem.”

“Are you still bein’ bothered by that?”

“I can’t control when and where it’s gonna happen. There’s times when I don’t even want to leave this apartment for fear when I get out on the street I might suddenly just piss in my pants. Not even the Mayo Clinic knows what’s wrong with me. They’ve no idea. Maybe it was the marijuana. Shit, I just don’t know.”

“Have you seen other doctors?”

“Oh yeah. Been to the clinic in St. Louis Park. They can’t figure it out either. Nobody can. And can’t think of anything it could be except maybe the marijuana. I used to love it almost as much as sex. I just don’t know what to do. Excuse me. I gotta go again.”

Rick’s pissing problem scared the hell out of me. And I didn’t want to imagine the grief it was causing him.

During the summer, he seemed in splendid shape. Thin as a rail. About six-foot-three, maybe 165 pounds. We must have met at least a dozen times to play games of tennis that would go on for hours.

During each tennis match we'd both comment on how he was improving, his goal being to someday beat me. To encourage him, I would go easy during the first set, almost let him win.

One afternoon, during our last tennis game, I had been loafing along and he had won the first set and the first five games of the second set. With only one more game to win to beat me, he was dancing on his toes, but not saying a word. So I decided to turn my play up a couple of notches and not make it so easy for him.

He didn't win another game.

When we left the tennis court, walking toward the GT and the setting sun, he said, "I love playing tennis with you, but after this, it's gonna be awhile before we do it again. I thought I had you today. You know, I almost did it today. But I don't know, Paul. The way you beat me those last twelve or so games? You've just been foolin' with me. Like a cat with a rat."

I felt bad about that. Still do.

When Rick returned from his bathroom, I asked him if he still had the car door hanging on the wall over the bath tub in there.

He laughed and said, "Of course, and I got a few new things in there, too."

During the summer he had been collecting junk he had been finding in dumps and abandoned buildings. All kinds of junk, especially electronics crap.

Stuff that goes into TV sets and radios. Resistors, tubes, wires, transistors, all kinds of gizmos.

He'd take all this junk home with him, spread it out on his kitchen floor, carefully select stuff that interested his eyes the most, and build a collage, frame it, and hang it on a wall.

"Why you have all this junk hanging on your walls?"

“It’s Found Art, Paul. They call it Found Art.”

“Is that what you call that 1950 Chevy car door that’s hanging on the wall above your bath tub?”

“Yeah. It’s basically the same thing. Found Art.”

“Okay. If you say so.”

Whenever I think about Rick living in that dumpy apartment on the corner of Franklin and Park Avenue, I see that green car door hanging on the wall next to his bathroom tub.

And the two of us sitting on his sofa, talking about his future. About his desire to have a future he could be excited about. A future he could not seem to envision or give any shape or form.

During that last visit with him, I brought up a subject we had talked about during the summer.

“You know, Rick, if I were your age, and single, and bogged down with all the pressure you’re getting from us to do something with your life, I think what I would do is simply just disappear. I think I’d just pack up and take off. Not let anybody know where I was heading. Probably go to Los Angeles. Maybe hook up with a movie studio and learn something about how movies are made. Get a job doin’ anything that might give me a few skills. Learn how to operate a camera or set up sound systems, or who knows what. Something totally different . . . in a totally different environment.”

“Yeah? Like my favorite character?”

“Your favorite character?”

“Yeah. Like Ben.”

“Who in the hell is Ben?”

“You know. Death of a salesman.”

“Death of a salesman? You mean the play? I’ve read that play five, maybe six times. Seen it many times, too. But who’s Ben?”

“You know. Willy Loman’s brother. His brother who disappeared?”

“Oh yeah. That’s his name?”

“Yeah. The guy who disappeared. Went off to Africa. Maybe it was Alaska. Made a fortune. Returned years later as a ghost and haunted his brother Willy all the time with his success. Yeah, Ben. Always liked Ben.”

“Geeze, Rick. Ben had such a small part in that play, I couldn’t even recall him. You kidding?”

“I’ve always admired Ben.”

“Anyway. Think about it, Rick. If I were you, I’d just take off and go somewhere where nobody could bug me.”

I don’t remember saying goodbye to him that day. Not at all.

About a month later, on Halloween night, I drove over to see him, angry about the fact that we hadn’t talked for more than a month and he didn’t have a phone.

When I drove into the alley alongside his apartment building, I could see there weren’t any lights on in his third-floor apartment. So I parked next to the wooden staircase that led up the back of the building to his kitchen.

I climbed the stairs on the chance he might just be up there snoozin’ on his sofa. It was raining and I had noticed he had left a kitchen window wide open. If he wasn’t home I thought I could at least shut the window, if his door wasn’t locked. But he wasn’t home. And the door was locked.

Several days later, Mom called to tell me Rick had disappeared. She said he had left a poetic sounding note on his kitchen table.

The note didn't make much sense to her. So she had given it to Rick's best friend, Mike, to see if it might mean anything to him.

Mom said, "All it said, Paul, is that he now had 'wheels' and was looking forward to hitting the open road. It said something about maybe going somewhere near water, mentioning something about sitting on a dock in a bay and dangling his feet in the water. I don't know. Could mean anything."

At the time, I felt as though I was up to my knees in crocodiles. I had launched into my second year as a high school teacher and was for the first time in my life directing a play. I didn't know a damn thing about directing plays. Had never even ever been an actor. Not even in high school. Except once in a choir that sang hymns in the play *Our Town* and for that I only attended three rehearsals.

Directing a high school play and teaching English and supervising the publication of school newspapers seemed damn near more than I could handle. To find time to find Rick was out of the question. Besides, I was proud of him. He had taken my advice.

In a month or two, he'd call me and let me know how things were going. He had a couple grand in the bank. No problem. Things would work out just fine for him. So I thought.

The only thing that concerned me at the time was that he might still be suffering physically. I would worry his pissing problem could have become so serious that he had to split, go away, be by himself like injured wild animals do.

I would sometimes worry that maybe his problem had become so serious that he had to go find a place to die.

I never saw the poem Rick had left on his kitchen table, along with a glass of milk and a tuna sandwich from which he had only taken one bite.

His best friend Mike had sent it to Larry. And then Larry lost it.

Among the only things of Rick's that I saved is a tape recording he made and had mailed to me in 1969. And a letter about our sister Sue he wrote to Alice and me and copied to Larry and his wife Hita in 1966, nine months after Dad's death:

November 11, 1966
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This letter might seem odd to you at first, mainly because it's sent to all of you; Paul, Alice, Larry, and Hita, both to save time and to get better results (One of you is going to get the carbon copy).

I just got home from a party. Mom greeted me at the door, and through the course of our conversation said Sue wasn't acting too hot tonight. At first reaction, it seemed to be a common statement.

I went up to my room and got ready for bed, when I started to think about Sue, then it hit me, what about Sue? What kind of life does she live, what many problems she must have.

So then I started thinking some more, I got ideas, I needed desperately to talk to someone that would give me some answers. I didn't go to Mom mainly because I figure Mom doesn't know that much to answer the questions I have. So I figured between you four I can get some help.

First of all, I want to express how much I think it is important that we, as brothers and sisters, help her out as much as we can, me by caring about her daily life more, you by writing her more often.

Try to write to her as much as you can, she needs someone to communicate with!!

CAN WE HELP HER?

I sometimes think there isn't much we can do for her, that she herself has to find the road to happiness and can't be given a map or directions. I feel that her life of boredom and bare existence is sometimes part of her own doing. But then if she doesn't like it why doesn't she make friends, and go places and do different things?

Why doesn't she instead of end her existence, change it? Why? You can't blame her for wanting death, I would too if I had to live her life.

The awful thing about it is that after she finishes Business School, everybody thinks this is going to change. I don't. If Sue becomes a secretary? Well so what? She is still going to leave the house at 7:15 and come home at 6:00.

What a lovely future. She has nothing to live for.

So I figure, Give Her Something To Live For, if it's by a trip, or a letter coming a little more frequently, or a telephone call, anything, but let her know that there is someone that cares. Maybe we can give her more incentive or a small bit of drive to help her through her day.

IS SHE WELL OR SICK?

WHERE IS THE DIVIDING POINT?

These are questions everybody thinks about. But no one has the answers. She has relapses, some say a hospital would do her more harm than good. This is a point which I have nothing to do with and I don't think Mom should have either, mainly because she doesn't know that much about it.

It's up to you, I feel, because I know with all you working on Mom she'll bend the way you want her to. I think that Sue is better off at home, especially if we help her by giving her a little more attention.

I am also wondering what it is going to be like with Nana here. Mom's third and I hope final try should cast many changes in both Mom and Sue. I can safely say that Nana has never imposed on home life as far as I'm concerned, in fact I'm always happy to make the worst days of her life a little cheerful as much as I can.

This is a fact Mom never understands, always concerned about my feelings, if Nana should ever have to live with us, when the only reason that I can give for not having Nana with us is that it takes so much out of Mom, that she's so tense and nervous all the time.

There is no getting around it, Nana is a full-time job. I don't have to wait on her, all I have to do is talk to her at dinner, not too big a task for someone depressed as she must be.

After dinner I just take off to my upstairs world of coolness.

Sue on the other hand might be very well having some reactions to this since she is

the only one on the same level of the house. Sue won't be much in the mood to help Nana go to the bathroom at four in the morning.

I don't think Mom will be bounding up the stairs from the basement either.

This will be interesting. I think one of the things I'm going to miss most is someone to talk to. First Sylvia leaves and now Alice leaves. It leaves me with small pickens. I can't think of a better time to try to communicate with Sue though.

If you can't beat 'em join 'um.

I was just speaking of Alice a minute ago, and I want you all to know how great it was to have her living here during September and October when Paul was going through basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

After Sylvia got married in August, I was really blue, but having Alice here, she was as good a replacement as anyone I could think of. She really must be given a lot of credit for doing what she did, not many can survive this family, and believe me, Alice went through every test we could give her with flying colors.

One of the remarkable traits that Alice has is what you might call, Adaption, she can adapt and share with you any emotion or feeling you want her to.

Alice could come home from work tired and worn out, but if she came through the door and I was happy or excited about something, she would be just as happy as I was, no matter how she felt.

She also could transfer her emotions to you. I'm a bear in the morning, among other times, and Mom will go out of her way to make me happy, which for some odd, stupid reason makes me more mad, but all Al would have to do is just simply smile, and man, you felt good, happy man, happy.

The only, and I mean only, criticism I have towards Alice, is I think she judges Mom too quickly. And Sue is sick, so if Sue does something rather odd or something rather stupid it is because Sue's not all there all of the time.

And Mom does things just as stupid as Sue. Just as much if not more, for the exact same reason, the only difference is that Mom has such a strong belief for this Christian Science religion.

I hope that Alice feels the same love I have for her, towards me.

How bout it Lar, where's my letter?

My sleepiness is starting to show. It's time to hit the hay. I want to know whatever answers or ideas you can give me on Sue. I feel like I have ignored this thing for a long time and suddenly all of my guilt has overcome me.

I like writing this type of letter. I feel like you're all around a table gagged and tied up, and I'm at the head speaking my mind about whatever I please. I think you all know that right now you're the top four in my mind and the best outlet I have.

I hope that I can write more of this sort of letter. To me this is the same as all of you being here, and me getting everything off my chest.

You really feel good after doing that. I
really feel good after writing this letter,
please reply!!!

Sincerely Yours,
Rick

He was 15 when he wrote that letter; nine months
after he lost his beloved father in February.

Six months after his father dies, his sister Sylvia gets
married and leaves home, his oldest brother takes off
for the “wild blue yonder” of the Air Force during the
Viet Nam War, and during that same summer his
other brother, Larry, chose to get married and soon
take off for Harvard in Boston, Massachusetts.

To say it again one more time, during 1966 Rick lost
his father, who he felt was his buddy, lost the
supportive presence of his two older brothers, lost his
closest sister after she married and left to live with her
husby; lost them all within in the first six months of
his 15th year.

And then six years after his letter dated November 11,
1966, we wondered how he could simply take off and
leave us, his family.

As for the possibility Rick was among the two kids who
murdered our Dad? I can’t imagine it. Absurd. Yet
Sylvia and her husband believe it may be true, and
may well be the reason he vanished.

According to Mom and my sisters, Rick was not home
on the night Dad was murdered by teenage lads armed
with pistols while they attempted to hold up a
neighborhood grocery store.

Sue and Mom have believed for years that Rick was
actually in the alley in back of the grocery store at the
time Dad chose to confront the armed teenagers in the
grocery store.

They believed that for more than 20 years and they never told me. Not until 20 years later. Jesus!

No one told me. Certainly not Rick.

Yet, according to Sue, Rick had blurted this out at the dinner table one night back in 1969; how Rick told Mom and Sue and Sylvia that he was at the grocery store when Dad was murdered.

And how Rick had then said how he had chased after the two kids who had killed Dad; about how Rick told them how the teenagers vanished on foot up the alley behind the grocery store.

If Rick was somehow involved in our father's death, it would be among the ultimate absurdities in my life, not to mention his.

There is no way I can believe that is possible. Rick didn't have it in him to hide such a thing from me. We can be pretty good, we Johnsons, at hiding things. But Rick was still a puppy when his father died. He had just turned 15. No way.

What I believe is Rick's disappearance was the result of simply wanting to grab up the \$2,500 he had stashed in a bank after receiving at age 21 his share of our father's estate, and then had chosen to take off for a while. I believe he had no idea how long. Maybe a month or two.

As time passed, perhaps he found, to his delight, that he enjoyed being apart from whatever pressures were created by his family. Enjoyed it a lot. So why be in a big hurry to return?

As a year passed, and as two years passed, I imagine Rick learned again, however, that it gets tougher and tougher to return home as time marches on.

I say "learned again," because I recall a conversation we had one night in 1968, when I was in Minneapolis on leave for a week from the Air Force.

I was visiting that night with Rick and some of his teenage friends in a little dump of a house that was (and still is) behind a house on Sheridan Avenue. The house is also behind the fire station on 43rd Street, close to an apartment building located within one block from Lake Harriet.

As we were sitting on pillows that were big enough to be beds for children, as I smoked a Lucky Strike and Rick a joint, as we listened to a record I brought over for him to listen to, a song by Jerry Jeff Walker titled "My Old Man," I asked him if he had seen much of Dad's sister, our Aunt Helen.

Rick looked up at the ceiling. Just stared at it. So I asked again. And he looked at me and said, "Do you know Aunt Helen and Uncle Doug live right up there. Maybe less than just 100 feet away?"

"You're kidding me."

"Nope."

"What do you mean, 'less than a 100 feet away?'"

"I mean they live in the apartment building near this shack. Want to know something even more weird?"

"What?"

"Neither one of 'em has seen me for more than a year. Maybe longer. And get this: Aunt Helen works in the building on the corner. Where I get on and off the bus. In that real estate agency. Where I walk by her office, look in the window, and see her working in there every day. Almost every day. But I haven't talked to her for more than a year!"

"Why?"

"Hard to explain. I sure as hell love her. Just can't do it. I'd never get them to forgive me."

"For what?"

“For hangin’ out here for a whole year and not once calling or stoppin’ to say hello? You know. How do you explain something like that without hurting them or feeling like a schmuck?”

“Well you *are* a schmuck, Rick. Why have you waited so long? How long have you known they live nearly next door to this shack?”

“I knew all along, Paul. Just didn’t want them stoppin’ in here. My god. Could you see them standing in here, checking out this crazy scene? No way. And then they’d want me over for dinner all the time. And at dinner all we’d just talk about is how great their son Dan is doing at Harvard, and how much their rich son Ed is making from all his stocks and bonds.”

“But what are you gonna do if they see you? And discover you’re hanging out here? Wouldn’t that be even worse?”

“Hate to think about it. Pray it won’t happen. But now that all this time’s gone by? No way I can bring myself to saying hello to them. I’ve just let too much time go by. Too much time. They’d never be able to understand why their little nephew kept himself away from them for as long as it’s been. Kinda funny though, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Rick. Reminds me of something that maybe Hawthorne wrote. About a guy who left his wife. Just took off. And then, as I can best recall, he set up residence within a block of her, near her, without her ever knowing that for the rest of her life. It went something like that.”

“I think I know that story, Paul. I love stories like that, don’t you?”

Well all I know now is how much I miss him. I’d give a year of my life to spend one more day with Rick. Five years for one day with both Rick and Dad.

Thank God they keep showing up in my dreams now and then.