

The Norton Street Chronicles

Ralph Ercolano

For Luanne.

The sound of your voice kept me alive.

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THE FIFTH-GRADER AND THE SHEEP EYES

Long before mad cow disease and its precursor, scrapie, were making animals sick, my parents ate sheep heads.

I didn't believe it either.

I came home from school one day and my father said, 'Look in the refrigerator.' There, right next to the provolone cheese and leftover pasta, was a plate covered with wax paper. (Wax paper is what people used to store things in before baggies were invented.) When I moved the paper aside, there it was: a flayed sheep head.

When you're 10 years old, your first reaction is not repulsion... like it might be today. Your reaction is more like, 'Wow! I'll bet I'm the only kid on Norton Street with a real sheep head in his refrigerator.' I'm sure I was right.

My fascination with this sheep head was bested only by my parents' anticipation of it as succulent dinner. How, you might ask, does a sheep head go from animal autopsy to succulent dinner?

I'll tell you how: Your father takes an axe and splits the head down the middle, lengthwise. This only happens, of course, after he removes the eyes carefully... with a spoon. (More on this in a moment.)

Next, the split head is presented to your mom who crushes a tomato and sprinkles it on top of the exposed brains, tongue and nasal cavity with some garlic and grated cheese. Then, and only then, do the two head halves go into the oven. Actually, it doesn't smell all that bad when it's baking.

I tasted no part of the head that evening. I think my mom made me a hot dog for dinner instead. (I was probably eating the exact same thing my parents were, only who knew?) What I was really interested in were the eyes.

My dad put them in a jar of water and I put the jar in the refrigerator.

Any time that evening that an unsuspecting family member opened the refrigerator door, their gaze was returned by two floating, disembodied sheep eyes, back-lit by the 15-watt refrigerator bulb.

It doesn't get much better than that. Except for this...

When you're 10 years old, everything's funny. Everything.

So next morning I convinced my mother to let me take the floating sheep eyes to school as a 'science project.' In her 1957 innocence, she thought that was a stellar idea. I slipped the jar into a paper bag and headed for my 5th grade classroom.

Like virtually all 10 year-olds, my buddies and I were just a bunch of jokesters. One guy had a real-looking spider we used to put in Ruth Ann's desk. Another guy had a throw-up mat. Another, one of those piles of oh-so-real-looking dog do. (OK. So it's pretty tame stuff by today's standards. But remember... this was 1957. Cars had wings.)

As always, we started our school day with math. During the lesson, when Miss Case, our teacher, wasn't looking, I placed the jar on her desk so that she was bound to see it. About 10 minutes into the lesson Miss Case looked down at her desk and stopped talking. She moved closer to her desk.

She let out a scream I still hear.

My buddies and I were on the floor, laughing. We were *not* to be contained. The classroom was amazingly quiet... except for us. Then, *we* became quiet, too. Without moving a muscle, Miss Case said, 'Ralph, come and get these.' How did she know? Four of us had erupted into silly spasms. But she knew the sheep eyes were *mine*.

It could have been a lot worse. As a result of Miss Case's measured response I behaved for the rest of the school year... about a month. When you're 10 years old, you're an asshole and you don't even know it.

UNCLE TONY'S TOMATO CRUSHER

Ethnicity is full of ritual.
Italian-ness is no exception.

Every fall the family would can tomatoes in the basement, our 'second kitchen.'
We'd can lots of tomatoes. *Bushels* of tomatoes.

It went something like this:

Boil the tomatoes, peel them, throw them in the crusher, pour them into sterile jars, boil *those*, then seal 'em. If you've never enjoyed the taste of fresh tomatoes in February, well, you're not Italian...

The bottleneck of this annual ritual process was the crushing.
The tomato mill was a cast aluminum monstrosity with a big crank handle.
Growing out of the top was a funnel/throat where you stuffed the cooked tomatoes.
Turn the crank and this delicious-smelling sauce dribbled out the spout.
The whole thing was anchored to the table by a set screw assembly.

Now, my uncle Tony was a shoemaker in the old country. (He steam-pressed men's clothing in this country.) So Uncle Tony was a man who worked with his hands. He saw, right off, that the crushing step was the slowdown in the process.

He had a solution.

Uncle Tony mounted the tomato press to a piece of scrap $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood about 1-foot wide and 2-feet long. The press was screwed to one end of the plywood. Mounted at the other end was an electric motor. Not an Erector Set electric motor. We're talkin' washing machine motor here. Maybe $\frac{1}{2}$ -horse. Possibly a refrigerator condenser motor. A *big* motor.

While Uncle Tony was good with his hands, he wasn't so hot in the engineering design department. Not only did he have a magneto ready to run the tomato crusher, he really did not have a concept of pulley diameter versus torque/speed ratio.

So, Uncle Tony pulled the hand crank off of the crusher spindle and replaced it with what I thought was an extremely small-diameter pulley. He then proceeded to screw a large-diameter pulley onto the end of the electric motor shaft. All this was done while pulling and jockeying the crusher and motor into position to keep the rubber drive belt taught.

When Uncle Tony hit the switch, all hell broke loose.
The cacophony of the motor and crusher was deafening.
Of course it would be. Thanks to Uncle Tony's careful pulley diameter/speed ratio analysis, the spindle in the crusher was spinning at about 6000 rpm.

What could we have possibly thought would happen to a pint of cooked tomatoes poured into the crusher's funnel/throat, accelerating along the tines of the 6000-rpm spindle?

That tomato meat became a projectile.

It shot out of the spout and people had to jump out of its way.

To this day, I've never seen my aunt or mom move as fast as they moved that day.

The speeding, hot meat flew about 15 feet straight out, then splashed onto the basement floor in a red-orange puddle.

Uncle Tony turned the crusher off. All we were left with was a ringing in our ears and the smell of hot tomato meat on concrete. I looked at Uncle Tony. He looked at Aunt Lisetta. She looked at my mother.

What the hell happened?

We knew. Uncle Tony put the hand crank back on the tomato crusher.

And we crushed and canned all the tomatoes manually.

The next year... we used identically-sized pulleys on both the crusher and the elevator motor. Same end product, only no hot projectile tomato meat arcing across the basement. That fall, we were done crushing tomatoes in about 7 minutes.

We didn't know at the time that we'd only have one more fall to crush and can tomatoes with Uncle Tony.

THE STENCH OF CHRISTMAS, 1962

Think of the wonderful smells we associate with the holidays... pine needles; baking cookies; the scent of a crackling fire when the smoke sneaks its way down the outside of the chimney; perfume on the lady in front of you at midnight Mass.

In our house on Norton Street,
the smell of Christmas emanated from quite a different source.
Christmas smelled like *il pesce di merluzzo*... better known to 'Mericans as codfish.

Unlike the wispy scents I alluded to, the smell of re-hydrating dried codfish doesn't bring along memories. It brings along headaches. It assaults you. It stinks to the high heavens in a totally inexplicable way.

Remember those huge, 2-ton, dual-sided cement sinks sitting next to the wringer washer in the basement? They were really made out of cement. (I cannot understand why anyone would make a sink out of cement...) My father would lay the dried codfish fillets in the bottom of one of the sinks. Gratefully, he used the side we didn't use for wash. Then he'd run some water on the scaly, white slabs of stinky fish. The water would slowly seep into the dried fillets.

And the stench would rise.

It would raise up out of the cement sink and permeate all things, animate and inanimate alike. It showed no mercy. Somehow, that smell crawled up the basement steps to the first landing where our side door opened to the outside. I'd walk up to the door after a day at school enjoying a completely false sense of security. Then I'd open the door. Bam! It smelled like six whales died on our living room floor. It must be Christmastime!

Some of my Jewish buddies liked to come to our house and help us trim our Christmas tree. We'd have such ecumenical fun. We didn't even know it at the time. But this particular year there'd be no religious experiences. The smell from the re-hydrating codfish was so bad, I was embarrassed to have my friends anywhere near our house.

And if this wasn't bad enough, my parents were utterly oblivious to the stench they had created. They'd smack their lips at the prospect of dried codfish-flavored spaghetti sauce. They relished the idea of making a salad with normal greens... and dried codfish. Go figure.

When kids are growing up they make all kinds of pacts with themselves. They decide exactly how they'll live their lives when they can make their own life decisions. As proof, to this day, I've never owned a home with cement sinks.

WHEN UNCLE TONY DIED

Nothing good can be happening when you return home from school on a Monday afternoon to see, unexpectedly, a half-dozen family cars parked where they shouldn't be. I put my books away and went next door to the other side of the duplex on Norton Street where I had lived all my life. Uncle Tony and Aunt Lisetta lived there. While they were genetically my aunt and uncle, they were as close to grandparents as I'd ever know.

I didn't know it at the time, but this gathering was what families do when tragedy happens. Our tragedy, that April afternoon, was the news that Uncle Tony had been taken by ambulance to the ER at Rochester General Hospital. Uncle Tony had gone unconscious, bleeding heavily from the nose.

Uncle Tony and I had had a love/hate relationship all the time I was growing up... until I was about 12. When I finally realized he was a lot more bark than bite, things got better between us. (It also helped that I stopped breaking his tomato hothouse frames and generally ruining his gardening with my buddies in the backyard. Actually, our entire backyard was a garden. But that's another story, isn't it?)

By now, Uncle and I had become fast friends. He taught me how to bury a fig tree underground during the winter months so it wouldn't die. I taught him how to barbecue. He seemed to take more pleasure in my maturing accomplishments than anyone else. He was proud of his nephew and made sure everybody knew it.

Uncle Tony was *not* a quiet man. He even made noise when he slept, snoring and, finally, snorting himself awake. When I got too close to his garden the entire neighborhood would be accosted with his bellowed,

'Git da hell outta dere! Sonnama beech! Amma gonna kee-la you!'

He was barrel-chested, robust-looking and sick. His pink complexion was not so much a result of his gardening as it was a symptom of his high blood pressure. Earlier that afternoon one of the blood vessels in Uncle Tony's brain had given way from that pressure. The force of the bursting sent blood gushing from his nose. The sudden loss of blood sent Uncle Tony to the floor. In an instant we had all learned the meaning of 'cerebral hemorrhage.'

Now, we waited. We ate supper. Italians do that. My parents insisted I go to choir practice downtown. But when the return bus stopped at our corner, I knew Uncle Tony was gone. There were just too many cars parked in the bus turnaround loop next to the house for there to be any other outcome.

I forced myself to go into the house. Aunt Lisetta was sitting on their living room couch, holding a handkerchief, crying loudly. I headed right for her because I knew she'd want to tell me what had happened. And what had happened was simple: Uncle Tony was dead. He was the first person close to me that I had lost. His dying made no sense, then or now.

After someone dies, even someone close to you, there's a lunge at normalcy that takes place. You *want* to get back to normal... you *seek* the predictability of routine. Maybe *that* will make sense. And so the next day was routine... except for being at the funeral home all night on Tuesday.

Uncle Tony was laid to rest Wednesday morning. Afterward, everyone went back to his house. Again, too many cars parked where they shouldn't be. It didn't feel right. Neither did all the noise and laughter and food. My mother tried to reassure me that this is what families do after their mourning.

I was having none of it. My Uncle Tony was gone.

Why were all these people laughing and eating? In the only protest a rigidly-raised 16 year-old can muster, I grabbed up my books and headed off to school for the last three classes of the day. Somehow, in the familiarity of school, and in my memory, Uncle Tony was still alive.

Afternoons turned into days and weeks and months, as they always do. Most things in my world returned to normal, as they always do. Everything... except one thing.

It was very, very quiet on Norton Street without Uncle Tony.

RICHIE AND ME

Remember snowstorms in the 50's? There's nothing like them today, unless you live in northern Minnesota. The snow would drift-cover the doors and windows. It would totally clog the streets so the plows couldn't even push through. You wonder how something so light could stop a city.

My house on Norton Street was pretty close to the street itself... an asphalt strip 8 feet wide, then the sidewalk, then a low row of hedges, then our 'front yard.' The so-called front yard was tiny. Everybody's was. But... it was big enough to get into trouble in.

When snow has been around for days, it changes. It becomes dirty. It becomes heavy. It becomes, well, lethal.

My buddy, Richie, and I were playing in my front yard late one afternoon on a work/school day. We knew we'd have to go inside soon, eat and do our homework. We knew, because the light was getting gray and dim. Parlor lights were coming on. They were yellow... not green-cold like today. Richie and I were surrounded by dirty, heavy snow, five o'clock traffic and the realization our fun was just about over for that day.

My house was near a corner, so traffic backed up from the traffic light well past my front yard. Sitting ducks. Now, imagine making a snowball from that dirty, heavy snow. Think of a snowball the size of a bocce ball. What could it weigh... 10 pounds? At least.

All of us in the neighborhood had a lot of practice throwing pop-flies for each others' baseball fielding practice. Who knew that skill would come in so handy now?

We waited for the next red light cycle. We crouched down behind the 2-foot high scraggly ewe bushes... branches, mostly, in January. We waited until the last car in line was just far enough to our left so the driver couldn't see back to us easily.

We had the cannonball ready.

I can't remember if it was Richie or me... but one of us lobbed that 10-pound snow/ice bocce ball high up into the air over the waiting line of traffic. It made a beautiful parabolic arc. And you know about objects on a parabolic trajectory... they complete the arc with almost the same amount of force as it took to send them into the arc to begin with.

No one would have guessed the sound a 10-pound ice ball would make when it crashed almost straight down onto the hood of a 1956 Ford from, say, 30 feet in the air. Certainly not Richie... or me.

The sound was loud, metallic, sudden. It stopped traffic.
It stopped our hearts.

It, however, did not stop the driver.

He jammed his injured Ford into neutral and jumped out, yelling words I would learn the meaning of years later. He glowered. The only way we knew what he was doing was to spy on him from our vantage point in the ewe bushes. If it wasn't for the lessening light, piled-up dirty snow and the fact that Richie and I were lying on our stomachs in it all, I don't know as I might be alive to tell you this story today.

Richie and I never did anything like that again.
We did other stupid stuff... just not that.

THE LANDLORDS OF WILDER STREET

It was very unusual for Cousin Dicky and I to stay overnight at Aunt Mary's apartment. It was even more unusual for us to do so on the same night.

(Aunt Mary's apartment was quite small.)

It happened to be a very, very hot night... unusual for Rochester.

And for Dick and I to be awake and walking around the block at midnight, on our own, with no one looking after us, well, that was unusual.

Bottom line: This was not your usual night.

Aunt Mary lived in Dutch town, on Wilder Street, on the west side.

It was a working-class, mostly-Italian neighborhood. (None of us could ever understand why it wasn't called Italian town...) All the houses were close to each other and close to the street itself. Think of front lawns the size of a waffle. Like so many other ethnic neighborhoods, Dutch town succumbed to the Urban Renewal frenzy of the 1970's.

So today, where Aunt Mary's house used to be, is the eastbound lane of Interstate 490.

When you zoom into the city and look high up on your right, you can see the church that was almost across the street from Aunt Mary's house.

On that night in 1959 almost everyone in Dutch town had abandoned their front porch vigil. Folks were inside by now, probably getting ready for bed. (Immigrants get up early.) Most doors were closed. Most lights were out. It was dark, still, sweaty-warm.

When you're 12 years old, you live in your sneakers. You also learn how to walk in them without making a sound. Dicky and I were as quiet as two kids could ever be.

We had come around the far corner, ready to hop back up on Aunt Mary's front porch, after encircling her block. Not a sound. Locusts, maybe.

Innocently, a dog barked. Dicky barked back.

The dog barked back at us. We barked back at him.

The next-door dog barked. We, and the first dog, barked at him.

The dog across the street, hearing the noise, began to howl.

Dicky howled. I howled. And the nearby dog barked some more.

Then the dog two doors down began to bark.

Another dog, next to the second dog, began to howl, as well.

Dicky howled again. So did I.

The cacophony spread. More dogs. More barking. More howling. Dog chains rattled.

Every dog within earshot was barking, howling at the night.

Dicky and I barked and howled at the night and each other.

Dogs barked and howled back at us. Barking. Howling.

From silence to 130 barking, howling decibels in less than 20 seconds.

Man, we were good.

By now we had come full-circle, back up onto Aunt Mary's front porch. Innocent, really. We just sat down on the porch steps and watched and listened as the neighborhood consumed itself.

Lights appeared... little yellow squares on those empty front porches. Shouting, mostly in broken English...

'Shut uppa, god-damma! Wattsa da noiz? Go to zleepa'

In the next moment, maybe two, the barking and howling began to subside. The Italian-American profanities eased. You could hear the locusts again, grinding their back legs together as though *that* would make it rain. One less bark here. One less howl there. Fewer. Fewer still. Yellow windows flicked back to black.

Silence.

Except for Dicky and I, rolling around on Aunt Mary's front porch, trying to not piss our pants laughing, hardly understanding that, on one warm night in 1959, we owned Wilder Street.

CHARLIE

The house was too quiet. My father was up, I knew. But I didn't hear him whistling at Charlie like he did every morning. I ran downstairs. The cover was still on Charlie's cage. No, it should be off by now. I looked at my Dad. Neither of us said a word.

Charlie was my parakeet. And my father's buddy.

The only time I saw my dad truly belly-laugh was when Charlie would do something animal-stupid and funny. Charlie'd keep doing the same dumb things over and over. And my father would laugh just as hard every time. It was about the only time he did truly laugh out loud.

We treated Charlie more like a member of the family than a member of the bird world. We opened his cage door every night after dinner so he could eat dessert with us. Sometimes he'd fly right over. Sometimes he was content to stay in his safe cage.

When he did fly over, he usually landed on either my father's, or my, glasses. Charlie loved eyeglasses. Something sparkly and hard attracted him. He'd alight on the temple piece and proceed to bite the lens housing. With vigor. When he was unsuccessful at eating the plastic, his whole body would bob up and down in some kind of bird frustration as he chirped a pissed-off kind of chirp.

Often, after dinner, I would do my homework at the kitchen table. (Forty-five years ago, kids didn't have home offices.) If Charlie was out, he'd fly over and land on the top edge of one of my textbooks as I was holding it up, trying to read. Charlie couldn't be content with that. He always had to bite something. And so he bit the pages in my books. He'd leave this little hole, punctured with his beak.

One bite got him yelled at. A second got him threatened. A third sent him flying back to the top of his cage. He'd skid down the side and pop through the doorway, no doubt believing he was safe from this 12-year old who was swatting at him.

On special nights, my Dad would fill a water glass to the brim. Charlie loved water. He'd fly to the glass, get a grasp on the rim and proceed to splash water all over everything by putting his beak into the water and flicking his head back and forth. He would continue this show until my father and I were crying from laughing. I think Charlie knew what he was doing.

Once, Charlie lost his balance and fell into the glass. Both my Dad and I had tiny heart attacks. We thought Charlie was a goner. But he flitted and sputtered and pushed himself back to his rim perch. Any other bird would have flown away, discontented and drenched. Not Charlie. He just kept spraying water everywhere.

Please don't get the idea that Charlie was a Nobel Laureate.
The reason we didn't encourage him to fly into the living room was because he'd either fly right into that other bird in the big mirror (thud) ... or crap all over the drapery without so much as an "Excuse me" to my Mom.

Birds don't have lengthy life spans. Even birds loved as much as Charlie was loved leave us way too soon. Charlie, being a good bird, did just that. During the night. When no one would know. He was a very quiet birdie the next morning.

We wrapped him in a tissue and put him in a cigar box coffin.
We buried him under our cherry tree in the back yard.
Every year, when the cherry blossoms bloomed, we knew why.

THE COWBOY SHIRT

Like most of the families around us, we didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up. Didn't matter that both my parents had full-time jobs. When your formal education was ended by circumstance or culture at the third grade, it puts a crimp in your lifelong earning potential.

So, if we were going to have a 'luxury,' that luxury was going to come our way from my mother's sister, Aunt Ro. Aunt Ro was single, loud, loving and very hard-working. When Aunt Ro showed up at Christmas or on your birthday, you just knew something great was in the box she was carrying. (The only American Flyer sled I ever had was a Christmas gift from Aunt Ro.)

On my 10th birthday, Aunt Ro showed up with one of her boxes. It was a shirt box. I couldn't *imagine* what kind of shirt was in that box. Coming from Aunt Ro, you just knew...

It was a cowboy shirt. A *real* cowboy shirt.

In 1958, that meant it had to be pink and black. There was thin gray piping separating the colors. The front chest piece was cut diagonally by the piping... black on top, pink on the bottom side. There was this scroll-y design on the black part of the shirt front. I believe it was obligatory cowboy art. Even threw in a couple sequins.

This beautiful shirt had imitation mother-of-pearl snaps, not buttons... three on *each cuff alone!* The cuffs were long, you know, to accommodate all that mother-of-pearl goin' on. The front placket was also piped. The back had this yoke design that was proof positive this was a *real* cowboy shirt. Even the sleeve plackets had mother-of-pearl snaps.

There's no better feeling in the world than to put on a pair of clean dungarees (that's what we used to call jeans) and your freshly-ironed cowboy shirt. None of my buddies had a shirt like this one. Or, none of my buddies had the balls to wear it if they did. How could the 5th grade girls resist me? (They did, though... completely.)

On the days when I could wear my Cub Scout shirt (Den Meeting days), it was always a struggle... cowboy shirt or Cub Scout shirt? Pink/gray/black... or blue with colorful badges and a yellow neckerchief? Both are pretty darn cool. When you're 10, those decisions loom large.

Now, every morning I have to make a choice of what suit, shirt and tie to wear that day. And every morning I look for that black and pink cowboy shirt.

Some things never change.

VAS DEFERENS

It was July 3rd, 1986.

I remember the date because I wanted a day off after the procedure.

Some people said it was nothing. Back to work the next day.

Other people said my testes would swell-up like cantaloupes.

I hoped for the former...

My appointment was at 2 pm in an outpatient surgery clinic.

My buddy, Bob, drove me. He had had the procedure himself years before.

We arrived on time and a pretty nurse asked me to come back into the procedure room.

The room was white tile, floor and four walls-worth. If you farted in there it would echo. One of those gigantic lights hung down from the ceiling, the kind in the hospital shows on TV. I took off all of my clothes and hung them on the back of the room door just like the pretty nurse instructed me to do. I put on one of those hospital 'gowns' and laid down on a table that was covered with crinkly paper.

A young African-American gentlemen came in to the fart-echo room and told me he had to shave me. I thanked him, but I had already shaved that morning. He explained he wasn't there to shave my *face*. Oh yeah.

A few minutes later the nurse and a doctor I'd never seen before burst into the room. The doc made sure I was me and that I was there for a vasectomy. Correct on both counts. While he was talking he was preparing the Novocain injection. This guy was good 'cause I never really felt the pin pricks that would end the feeling around my privates for the next 2 hours.

In my typical understatement, I asked, "Hey Doc... when are you gonna freeze me?" He said, "I already did." There was no backing out now. The nurse glided over to the table holding a tray full of shiny surgical tools she had just removed from the autoclave. The doc helped me get my feet up into these stirrup-like contraptions.

I knew this was for real when the nurse taped my penis to my abdomen. Now understand, I'm no stud. Got about what every guy's got. But I felt like they paid me a high compliment by actually taping him out of harm's way. These professionals didn't want to make any mistakes...

And what were they going to do, really?

The doc would make 2 small incisions, one on either side of my taped-up penis, right at the top of the scrotum. Just beneath the skin he'd find the thin tubes that carry sperm into one of the penis ducts. These tubes, one on each side, are just like rubber bands. They are the *vas deferens*.

And they are persistent guys at that. Stories were rife of *vas deferens* that had grown back together years after the original surgery. “Honey, guess what?...” Not any more. This young doctor would pull out a section of the *vas*, tie it off, cut out a length of the tubing, cauterize each cut end and then tie each end off with surgical thread. Twice. All this would occur within about one inch of one of my most prized possessions.

Everything was going just fine. Then, the young nurse said, “Gee, Mr. Ercolano. Your voice and name are both very familiar to me.” Never missing a chance to puff up at my own modest celebrity, I asked, “Well... do you listen to WNYR/WEZO on the weekends?” “Oh yes,” the pretty nurse cooed, “all the time.” I oozed, “I’m *that* Ralph Ercolano, the on-air newsman.”

A nanosecond later a clitter-clattering sound bounced off every tile surface in the room. It shattered the peace, shattered our little moment. My nurse had dropped the entire tray of sterile instruments onto the hard floor. Who would think stainless steel could bounce? The doctor paused. He asked the nurse if *she* was OK. Apparently, *she* was. He instructed her to get another tray of instruments.

The procedure ended more-or-less uneventfully. The nurse ‘un-strapped’ me and cleaned the entire surgical area with an oily antibiotic. (I’m not gonna tell you I hated it.) But then, abruptly, she left. The doc was gone, too. I was oily, scared, cold and confused. Now what? Can I leave? Why does it feel like my testes weigh 40 pounds each? Hey, I really can’t stand up straight. It hurts. Oh shit.

Somehow, I got back into my clothes. I walked out of the fart-echo room hunched over like a 120 year-old man. I shuffled to the front desk where my pain killer prescription was ready for me. My buddy Bob got a glimpse of me, hunched and shuffling, rounding the corner. He began laughing so hard he fell off the end of one of those waiting room benches.

When he regained his composure, we walked out to his waiting car. He drove me straight to the drugstore near my apartment in Penfield. Bob asked if he could go in and get the medicine for me. I told him no, I’d go myself.

It was only about 30 feet from the car to the store entrance. But when you’re hunched over and shuffling, that’s a long, long walk. Somehow, I made it to the rear of the store where the pharmacy counter was. Normally, I can rest my arms on that counter.

Not today.

I bellied up to the counter as close as I could and reached up to place the prescription where the pharmacist could see it. He came over to where I was standing.

*Let’s see... hunched over, shuffling, Tylenol with Codeine...
wait a minute! I know what happened to this guy!*

All he said was, "Right away, sir." A few embarrassing minutes later I shuffled out, pain killer in hand. Hell... I won't really need this stuff.

Wrong.

About an hour later my gut felt like it was run over by a bus. It looked like it, too. So I took a Tylenol with Codeine. Nothing. I took another. Nada. Then I remembered that if you mix Codeine with alcohol the effects of both are supposed to be intensified. So I drank a half glass of white wine.

Lights freakin' out.

I woke up 3 hours later. My girlfriend, Luanne (now my wife), was sitting on the end of the bed. She was... bemused. I thought it was over. Nah...

The next day, Luanne and I went to see some friends in Buffalo. How bad could that be, even in my delicate situation? I forgot that our friends own a boat. They wanted to go for a ride. On the water. Bouncing. Banging. Flying over one wave to come crashing down on the next. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

The most fun was trying to get into and out of the boat. Remember, boats float. They are, by their very nature, unstable. Imagine having 40-pound gonads dangling between your legs and dancing gingerly from dock to boat and back again. It was funny. And our friends took every opportunity to laugh at their swollen buddy.

If you have a vasectomy and go for a powerboat ride the very next day, I guess you deserve anything that happens. I can tell you for certain... it's an experience I won't be having again any time soon.

THE CHOICES WE MAKE

In 1970, the Vietnam War was raging.
People I knew and liked were dying in Southeast Asia.
No one could explain to any of us why that was good.

What I knew for certain was that I didn't want to join my dead friends.
But being a healthy guy whose student deferment was about to expire,
I knew exactly what my future looked like.

Back then, young men were called to military service (a.k.a. The Draft) using a kind of lottery. (I guess the authorities thought that was the most equitable way of determining who was going to die.) Everybody's birth date was put into a hat. All 365 dates were pulled out, one at a time. If your birth date was yanked out early you were virtually assured an all-expenses-paid trip to South Vietnam. Have the luck to pull a late date and your life would go on pretty much the way you had originally planned.

My birth date was 24th in the drawn sequence. Hello Mekong Delta.

Now what? I wasn't going to book to Canada. Just didn't seem kosher.
My way to not get shipped off to Vietnam was to use my feet. My bad feet.
Podiatrists had treated me since I was a little guy. No armed force would want me to fight in it. My feet were a flat mess. I had actual doctors' certificates attesting to that fact. I brought these certificates with me when I went for the draft physical.

During the physical one of the corpsman sent me into a room to see their 'podiatric specialist'... an old geezer with glasses thicker than mine. (Incidentally, my bad eyesight almost did the trick. But I saw just a touch too well to be physically deferred. That's how desperate the Army had become. When they came up with the slogan, "Be all you can be," they did not have me in mind.)

Predictably, the old geezer podiatric doc passed me with flying colors.
Not to be outdone, I prepared the papers for a Congressional Recall.
That's what happens when a smartass like me doesn't like the Army's decision and brings politicians into the fray. That's how desperate I'd become.

I was called back to the Armed Forces Entrance Examination Station (A.F.E.E.S.) in Buffalo... twice. And both times I was declared fit for military duty... read: 'Eligible to die floating face-down in a rice paddy halfway around the world.'

I was left with no choice.

I joined the New York State Army National Guard, virtually guaranteeing that I wouldn't be shipped overseas. One Monday night in early June, 1970, just weeks after 3 college kids were killed by Ohio State Guardsman on the Kent State campus, I took the one step forward like so many had done before me. I was now a Private.

In the National Guard, we weren't taught how to kill oriental people in Asia. We were taught how to maim domestic rioters in order to keep civil peace here in America during a time of tremendous domestic tumult. (Most of the people who were protesting had risen up against the war.)

I vividly remember weekend 'drills' where we all learned how to wield a battle baton in such a way as to get an unruly protestor to follow your directive. Basically, you got the baton up between his or her legs and drew up until they saw things your way. Effective, huh?

One Sunday morning, while waiting to 'go active,' we had a particularly gruesome training session. At 11AM, a priest calmly came out and set up Mass, using the tracks of a tank as his back altar. We were going to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, prepared on the tracks of a tank. More than one of us was scratching his head over the utter absurdity of the entire scene.

Weeks made months. We were never called active. Christmas came and went. Spring even hinted at us. One day in mid-March, I was perched atop a 20-foot ladder aiming a 1000-watt Klieg light onto the stage of the Channel 21 Annual Auction. Our department secretary came into the auditorium and yelled, 'Hey, Ralph! It's your company Sergeant! He says to pack your bags!'" And there it was.

Because I had not been called active, my fiancé and I had planned our wedding for that Summer... June 26th. Now, three months before the planned nuptials, Uncle Sam had called me in. I sold my 1965 Mustang Hatchback, said goodbye to everyone and packed the small bag we were allowed to take to Basic Training Camp.

I left for Fort Knox, Kentucky on Holy Thursday, 1971. When I woke up the next day, Good Friday morning, there was little good about it. My girl, my family, my life, were 600 miles away. Easter was in two days. There is no Easter bunny in the Army.

There is little to do in Boot Camp Zero Week. You spend a lot of time in lines, getting inoculated, getting your 40 pounds of personal gear you'll come to cart around on your back most of the time. You spend a fair amount of time in lines waiting to eat. The escape of books kept me sane. In retrospect, the books were really stupid. But anything was better than the madness of the world I was immersed in.

Soon, Army 'life' started in earnest.

Up at 5:30 AM every day. Down at 9:30 PM every night.

Shooting lessons, calisthenics and Army rules filled each day.

The hikes under full pack, running, jumping began to take their toll.

Every day my feet and ankles got weaker, not stronger like they were supposed to had I had normal podiatric development.

About 5 weeks into Basic, I woke up one morning and my ankles would not move.

Frozen stiff. I walked like a duck. I dressed and went to morning reveille...

walking like a duck. One of the drill instructors called me a jerk and sent me to sick call.

That meant I had to walk about one mile to Ireland Army Hospital...

the whole way walking like a duck 'cause my ankles wouldn't flex.

A big medical officer with all kinds of rank on his collars told me to come into the examination room. He said,

"I think yer a lyin' sack a shit... but I'm gonna take some pitures enyway."

He meant x-rays... of my feet and ankles. Standing up. Sitting down.

About 20 minutes later, this same big officer came back into the exam room

where I was sinking into hypothermia from the cold. He queried, 'Boy...

how the hell did you get in this man's Army?'" I told him I was cleared for military duty

by the fine medical personnel at the Armed Forces Entrance Exam Station in Buffalo,

New York. He said,

"Shit! No wonder! They take ya in if ya can fog a mirror!"

He gave me two choices, then and there: You want out, or you wanna stay in with a permanent profile? A permanent profile means you carry around a piece of paper that says what the Army can and can't make you do. Sounds fine. But given the education level of the most of the drill instructors, I wasn't ready to entrust my future to their reading and interpretive abilities. Yes, there was a moment of patriotic purpose. But only a moment. I heard myself say, "I want out."

When the Army decides you're of no use any longer, the ostracism begins immediately.

I signed a bunch of papers that said I could never sue the Army for screwing up my

ankles and feet. I was sent back to my barracks and ordered to immediately clear out my

stuff. I was headed for permanent party barracks where I would await my medical

discharge.

That evening I met with some of my fellow trainees. They were incredulous and jealous,

all at the same time. I wouldn't be seeing a whole lot of them any more. They continued

to spend their days in rigorous training. I spent mine in the company kitchen or latrine,

cleaning. Army middle management is where the phrase, 'Out of sight, out of mind'

came to be. I learned that if those guys didn't see you, they just forgot about you.

I became adept at invisibility.

One of the ways I disappeared was by simply leaving the company compound. I'd walk over to the nearby chapel. Got to know the priest. And when my discharge got bogged down in Army red-tape, that priest would come to help me more than I could ever thank him.

We were closing in on Saturday, 26 June... and I was still in Permanent Party barracks at 'C' Company, Fort Knox. Finally, on that Thursday morning, I had to move. I went to see Father. He was angered that my discharge papers were held up. We both went to the Base Adjutant General's Office. He knew somebody important. In about 20 minutes, Father came out with my discharge, all in order.

We went to 'C' Company Headquarters... a place I had spent a lot of time. Father showed Top Sergeant my papers. Top looked over at me and said, 'You're out.' I signed a log that said I left the next day, Friday. But by 2 PM that day, Thursday, I was at the Louisville airport, on stand-by, for the next flight to Rochester.

About 7 PM that evening my plane touched down. When I walked down the steps I kissed my hand and touched it to the pavement. I was never so happy to be home. Guy, a buddy of mine, and the woman he would marry, were waiting for me at the airport. My mother's spaghetti sauce tasted particularly good that night.

The next day, a large number of family members and I drove to Allentown, Pennsylvania. The wedding rehearsal was that night. The ceremony was the next day. My new bride and I were headed for a real honeymoon... not 3 days in a motel on Fort Knox. (I never did cancel those reservations...)

Today, no American citizen worries about compulsory military service. There isn't any to worry about. It seems the military now needs computers to fight. But when I was 22 years old, they just seemed to need me and hundreds of thousands of young guys just like me. So a lot of guys served. Thousands served ultimately.

Today, I take very good care of my feet.

LIFE IS AN EXPLODING CIGAR

What does Norton Street have to do with a Leukemia diagnosis?
This...

It was a dreary Friday, the last Friday in September, 1995.
I was waiting for the call from my internist, Dr. Mike.
I had seen him twice that week, both times for blood draws, because of
a flu that just wouldn't go away.

The call came about suppertime.

"Ralph," said Dr. Mike, "I have some bad news and I have some good news."
I told him I'd like the bad news first.
"We're pretty sure you have leukemia. The good news is it's a type that responds
well to mild chemotherapy and you're going to be fine."

Other people get leukemia. Not me. Were they sure? Mostly... but I would have to
undergo a bone marrow biopsy, soon. He had scheduled one for me with the new
Chief of Oncology at Rochester General for Monday morning, first thing.

Monday, October 2

The sixth floor of Rochester General was pretty much like every other hospital sixth
floor. Quiet. Light green walls. Big art. Big waiting room. Smiling nurses.
I had no idea it would become home for the next 14 days.

The fun started quickly. A tall, handsome, Indian doctor introduced himself to Luanne
and me: Dr. Prad. (This movie star guy in a white lab coat would become a dear friend as
a result of all this.) Dr. Prad said he needed to see an actual sample of my bone marrow
before he and his colleagues could make a definitive diagnosis. He would be sticking a
big thick needle into my hip bone, just to the right of the spinal column and aspirating a
sample of my bone marrow. Twice.

I thought, "Well... this is gonna hurt a bit." It was my usual asshole underestimation.
You haven't felt jabbing, searing pain until you've had a 200-pound guy press down on
your lower back and insert a needle into your hip bone, sans anesthetic. All that crap
about stoicism went right out the sixth floor window. I'll wager they could hear me
scream in Batavia. This had to happen twice. And it did.

Dr. Prad took the stuff he sucked out of my hip bone and went somewhere with it.
He came back 10 minutes later to tell us I did, in fact, have Hairy Cell Leukemia.
That pronouncement changed my life.

I wouldn't be returning to work that day. I called one of my colleagues to tell him I'd just been diagnosed. He said, "What the hell are you talking about?" A lot of people would say that to me over the next few days...

Within minutes I was on a gurney heading for the other side of the sixth floor, the you-have-to-be-in-this-bed part of the sixth floor. I was assigned a private room. I thought it was because I was some kind of important guy. I was wrong. I'd find out later it was because I couldn't be around other people that much with my immune system virtually gone.

Before I knew what was happening I felt a sharp pain on the top of my left hand. A nurse had inserted an IV 'lock' ... the part of the IV that stays inside your vein. They brought in this tall, skinny pole on wheels and hung a bag of clear liquid on it. This pole would become my 24-hour companion for the next two weeks. (We became very close...) The tube from the bag ended at my IV lock. The bag was full of a broad spectrum antibiotic that would drip into my bloodstream until the flu I had was knocked out. That process took 3 days.

That afternoon my mother came to my room to see me. My mother came to see me every afternoon, even those afternoons when I wanted to be dead. There was Mom, bedside. Silent, but present. Every single day. My Mom. Her heart is always in the right place...

Everybody that came near me had to wear a mask over their nose and mouth. I even had to wear a mask when people came to see me. So one of the nurses drew a pig face on my mask. How appropriate. I think I fell in love with her.

Tuesday, October 3

I actually started to feel better because the antibiotic was knocking the hell out of whatever bug was causing my cold/flu. Dr. Prad said this would happen. Everything Dr. Prad said would happen, happened.

I was determined to make a lemonade stand out of this crate of lemons that was just delivered to me. The first thing I did was ask my son to send his scream mat to the hospital with Luanne on her next trip. Chris' scream mat was an ingenious device that laid on the floor in front of a doorway. The mat was attached to a battery pack/speaker by a thin wire. Whenever anyone stepped into my room for any reason they were greeted with a demonic, metallic scream. After about 2 days of that I had Chris take his scream mat home.

Tuesday became Tuesday night. I watched The Million Man March in Washington on CNN. As always, I admired Louis Farrakhan's bow tie.

Wednesday, 4 October

Millions of the Hairy Cells had made their way through my bloodstream to be filtered out by my swollen spleen. Dr. Prad ordered a CAT scan of my mid-section. He needed to know just how big my spleen had become. Normally, a person's spleen is the size of 2 fingers put together. Mine, apparently, was the size of a ripe banana.

Over the next 10 or so days my spleen would become the object of awe of any number of medical students. They would come into my room in groups, hesitant at first, then bolder as they got to know My Spleen and I. The students would tap, poke and press into my spleen in an effort to further their medical knowledge. I had finally reached medical celebrity status.

One student, a young woman of Islamic belief, was extremely careful and proper. I saw her hesitancy and demeanor long before it became her turn to poke me. So the first time she touched me I jolted and grabbed her hand. I thought she would faint. One of the other students yelped. I was having a ball.

Later in the morning a young man with a wheelchair came to get me. He took me, my spleen and my wheel-y bean pole down to the basement for the CAT scan. I hopped up onto a waiting gurney. A young woman came over and asked me to drink about 4 gallons of this awful green liquid. It looked like what the officers drink in 10-Forward on the *Enterprise*. I drank it anyway. Then she said they were going to give me another IV. (This would have been my 4th in 3 days. They hurt.) I asked why. She said it would help the doctors see my spleen more clearly. I told her to tell the doctors that if anyone tried to give me another IV I would stab them with it. She turned and went back into the lab. She came out about 30 seconds later and said the IV wasn't really needed.

I had just learned the meaning of Patient Advocacy.

Thursday, 5 October

This was The Big Day... the day my chemotherapy would begin.

I was wheeled to the lab around 6PM. It was colder in that room than a witch's breast in a brass bra in February. Were these folks going to cryogenically freeze me before they started the chemotherapy?

They had me read this pamphlet about chemotherapy. It told me I'd become nauseous and lose my hair. I didn't care about the nauseous part... but losing my hair!

I had so little...

Turns out the pamphlet was for patients undergoing the 'real thing.' My chemo treatment regimen was mild and virtually side effect-free. But it did last 7 days, 24 hours a day.

Friday, 6 October

I couldn't stop working to be sick. When you are a commissioned salesperson, that's life. So every morning I'd spend 2-3 hours on the phone trying to keep my practice alive. It soon got the point that, when medical people came into my room to do whatever they had to do, they'd simply turn back around and leave when they saw me on the phone. It gave me a real sense of power...

Friends and family were streaming into and out of my room. I truly did not believe that that many people gave a shit. But they did. I was feeling great.

Saturday, 7 October

I could tell that my doc, Doctor Prad, was very straight-laced, proper and reserved. It became my job to crack that façade. But how? I asked one of the nurses if he had an Achilles' heel in his patient relationships. He did.

Sex talk.

So that evening, when Dr. Prad came to see Luanne and me, we asked him straight out how long it would be before we could resume normal boink-a/boink-a. (I may even have said 'boink-a/boink-a.') His dark complexion turned ruddy. Bull's-eye.

Everybody knows the condition I was being treated for, and its treatment regimen, have no impact whatsoever on sexual activity. Everybody knows, including Prad. But I had brought it up, so to speak. He stuttered a bit. Stammered some. Got redder. Then, Lu and I cracked. We couldn't stay serious any longer. We laughed like two goofballs. A look of relief came across Dr. Prad's face. The redness receded. His composure returned. But we got him. And it was fun. Ya gotta love this guy.

Sunday, 8 October

Pizza never tastes as good as it does when eaten in a hospital visiting room. I'll always be grateful to Chris and his buddy, Aidan, for bringing in pizza Sunday night for dinner. Later in the coming week pizza would be nauseating. But not that night.

Tuesday, 10 October

The chemo treatment was kicking in, big time. I had no immune system to speak of. Even my red blood cell count plummeted. That's when the docs decided to transfuse me. The nurses added yet another IV lock to my now swollen, sore arms. And they began the drip of blood product into my veins.

Different people handle blood transfusion differently. I didn't handle it at all well. I became light-headed, hot. My lower back began to ache as my kidneys were called into service over and above normal blood cleansing. I became agitated. This was the first time since I'd been hospitalized that I really felt sick.

10 minutes after the transfusion ended, so did the discomfort.

Wednesday, 11 October

This was the watershed day of my hospitalization. This was the day the proverbial shit hit the proverbial fan. And I felt like it all sprayed onto me.

That afternoon the docs transfused me again... with the same result. Only this time, the discomfort didn't disappear. I was nauseous, sweating. Also, the chemo was finally starting to kill millions of hairy cells. Those dying cells caused my body to react. And, they had to be cleansed out of my body. I drank 6 glasses of water that day and every day.

I was light-headed, nauseous, hot all at once. The only comfortable position was the fetal position, laying on my bed with no covers. Had to cool down somehow.

The parade of visitors kept coming. And I couldn't take any more. So Luanne became my point guard. She closed the room door and would only allow medical personnel to pass. The phone was unplugged. Visitors were turned away. Four wonderful guys from the men's group at my church showed up with a pizza. Luanne almost threw them out physically. They understood. Everyone understood.

This evening was the beginning of a new sense of deep love and respect for my family and my friends. Life, and what's really important, would never be the same as they were.

Thursday, 12 October

This was The Other Big Day... the day they removed my chemotherapy IV. Of course, I had to wait until 6 PM. But at 6 on the nose, a nurse came in and took the needle out of my arm... after 7 days.

That night the 'sweats' hit. The docs said they would. And they did. I was responding to what happens when the chemicals the docs infused into my body killed all the fast-growing (cancer) cells. There was a lot of dyin' goin' on. And those little hairy bastards weren't giving up easily. I sweat throughout the night. But nothing like I would the next night.

Friday, 13 October

Just after breakfast a nurse came in to see me. She said she had to give me an injection. Gee... what a surprise. I asked what it was. The injection was something called Neupagin. This stuff is made from cow DNA. I was concerned I might moo. When Neupagin gets into your bone marrow it makes the marrow work overtime... creating all those blood cells like crazy.

When the nurse gave me the injection it burned. Only later did I find out she gave me the injection too quickly. When other folks slowed down, it didn't hurt at all. (Always ask questions.)

Yes... the docs told me I'd sweat. But nothing could have prepared me for Friday night. As the evening lengthened and even Luanne went home, I began to sweat. Profusely. The nurses seemed to know what to expect. I tried to sleep. I did, a bit. But every 2 hours I would awaken in my own sweat, drenched, head to toe. My hospital gown was soaked. So were the sheets.

That night, God sent an angel into my room dressed in a white uniform. The angel's name was Johnna and she was from Oklahoma. She just seemed to know when to arrive. Johnna had a clean gown and clean sheets each visit. I'd fall back asleep, knowing we'd be together again in 2 hours when everything was soaked. Two hours later, there was Johnna, patient and caring. I will never forget her. Ever.

Saturday, 14 October

When you are sound asleep after a fitful night, the phlebotomists take a certain perverse joy in waking you up at 6AM to draw blood. Couldn't they come at 7 or 8? No. Docs were making rounds and they needed to know my count.

My blood count became the only numbers I cared about. I knew what they were before the docs did. And that Saturday morning, my blood count had doubled. *Doubled*. Looked like I was gonna make it.

Sunday, 15 October

I had gotten quite good at taking a shower with tubes sticking out of my arms. Luanne was always a big help. But this morning was the first morning in 2 weeks that I really had no tubes plugged into me anywhere. I was gonna enjoy this shower.

About halfway through my wonderful shower the door to my room spun open on its hinges. Dr. Peter was standing in the doorway, beaming. He yelled, "Do you know what your count is?" Of course I did. I knew before he knew. My count had tripled since yesterday.

Dr. Peter could hardly stand still. "You know... you're much too healthy to be here. We're going to send you home."

Send me home.

Three words I thought I'd never hear. And there they were. Plans were made. Pick-ups arranged. Today was the last day at Rochester General.

The only thing I can remember about that day was the walk Luanne and I took to the hospital cafeteria that evening. I had a piece of the worst blueberry pie ever made. It really was time for me to go home.

Monday, 16 October

When I awoke, I was told I was the topic of that day's rounds. All of those medical students needed one last poke. Did I mind? Hell, no. They could poke me all they wanted. I was leaving for home. Poke me they did.

I still remember their smiles as I was wheeled out of the hospital room headed for Discharge.

On the way home, Luanne and I stopped for an early lunch at a little diner near our apartment. I had to have eggs and pepperoni on a hard roll the way these gals made them. I finally knew for sure I was alive again.

Nurses came to see me at home, but then stopped coming as my blood count soared back into normal range. Folks from my church visited, bringing Communion. My buddy Bill was very supportive. Life was returning to normal.

The connection to Norton Street?

No one knows for dead certain, but a number of studies seem to link the onset of Hairy Cell Leukemia to exposure to benzene. Benzene is one nasty chemical. So bad, in fact, it was banned from use in any home consumer product in 1978 by the very industry that makes it. But that was a little too late for me.

In the 1950's I grew up next door to a gasoline station on Norton Street. I worked at the station, inhaling gasoline fumes from the time I was 12 years old. Without knowing it, I was also inhaling benzene. When I was 16, I took a job across the street in a dry-cleaning plant. Can you guess what one of the major components of dry-cleaning fluid might be? Right. Benzene. Later, in my 20's, I used a paint stripper to clean the kitchen wood molding of a home we owned off Monroe Avenue. Major component of the stripper: benzene.

The longer you live in remission, the more likely you are to never have Hairy Cell Leukemia again. It's been 8 years, 1 month, 7 days.

But who's counting?