

The Harvard of the Midwest

My mother eyed it first—a billboard on a hillside with gold and black letters “Ashbury University, the Harvard of the Midwest, 25 miles,” scrolled across the top and, below it, an image of students like religious pilgrims headed toward East College, a century-old brick building with a bell tower. Pointing to the sign, she turned to look at me, “It’s a good school, honey. Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll be happy there.” But she wasn’t really sure any more than I was. Her face broke into an easy smile. She wanted to boost my confidence since my acceptance at Ashbury, or any college, had been doubtful. Pep talks, that’s what my parents thought I needed to assuage my own self-doubt before cutting me loose.

My dad added, “Just buckle down, son. You’ll do fine.”

He believed ambition trumped ability, and anyone could rise to the top. Even if you had dyslexia and struggled to read, as I did, it did not matter. If you played your cards right, if you worked hard—as he had, late at night and on weekends—you could become, just as he had, Vice President of Motorola and have people who parked your car, opened the door and let you into your personal elevator to your office with its private bathroom, conference room, and bar hidden behind a bookcase.

Whenever I’d gone to his office with him, Dad’s secretary would stand to greet me, “Good morning, Jason,” and ask if I wanted an orange juice, a muffin, something else to eat. I felt like royalty, and, as such, was expected to comport myself well in public and be successful—or at least act successful—in whatever I did. My dad often told me, “I don’t care what you do—be a lawyer, a businessman or bum—but be the *best* at whatever you do, the very best, even if it’s the best bum in the world.”

My mother was more concerned that I be happy. She worried that I did not have many friends and tended to be a loner. As we drove by the hundredth cornfield, she asked, “Did you see Jeff before he left for college?” My mother liked Jeff, my best friend, and knew I would miss him. He often stayed at our house so much he practically lived with us. His dad was a football coach and pressured him to be number one at everything, paying him a dollar for every point scored in a basketball game, for every hit in a baseball game, and ten dollars for first place in a track meet. Jeff earned a lot of money—sometimes \$40 a week—but it was earned pushing himself to be better than he wanted to be. He wanted to be an average guy, not the best. Though my dad wanted me to excel, for some reason I never understood he never pressured me to be tops in sports, or, for that matter, in my school work. He expected me to earn whatever wages I earned by making an honest effort, to act right and have good manners and to *look* like a success. As long as I worked hard, he was happy.

Before packing for college, I’d seen Jeff at his house. We sat on his front stoop, looking at the late summer light that filtered through one of the domelike elms left on his street that hadn’t yet succumbed to the Dutch elm disease. For several years, a large, red X was sprayed on diseased elms, so that, by graduation, the town had been denuded, the once shaded avenues exposed like open sores to the sun.

“You going to visit me in Urbana?” he asked. “You promised you would.”

“Sure, I’ll hitchhike,” I told him, although I’d never hitchhiked and had no idea how far it was from Greenview, Indiana, to Urbana, Illinois.

If I’d had my way, I would have gone to the University of Illinois with Jeff and with six other classmates, but my poor grades ruled that out, as well as my dad’s insistence that I not go to his old hometown where his father, a restaurant owner, went bankrupt during the Great Depression. Because our next-door neighbor knew the dean at Ashbury and because my dad could pay full tuition, I managed to get in. I’d convinced myself, however, that I did qualify on my own merit as a three-sport letterman. My C average was nothing to boast about, but at least, when the dean told me that I had to have a B average my last semester, I studied and did what he asked.

The cornfields flickered by and, in the distance, by an immense oak, horses grazed in a pasture as they did in back of my home. I remembered one night with Jeff, how he and I had gotten drunk, stripped and, lifting the barbed-wire fence, crouched down, careful not to castrate ourselves, and trotted into the field where Morgans—huge jumpers—grazed on the tall grasses under moonlight. We crept up to them, bent down, interlopers, getting as close as we could. They stared at us, their moon-glow eyes wide and yellow, their breath visible and white in the cool evening air. They snorted like primitive gods.

Jeff turned to me and said, “Let’s race ‘em!”

“No way! They’ll trample us,” I whispered, pulling on his shoulder, trying to back up.

“Come on,” he yelled and stood up, flailing his arms and leaping about screaming, “hey-ya, hey-ya,” like a warrior.

The horses’ heads jerked up. They whinnied, their eyes enormous, then reared, fierce and immense. I turned to flee, but they simply trotted away. Jeff took after them with the graceful stride of a runner, his white buttocks diminishing in the dark. Soon he was beside them, and I sprinted to catch up, the two of us racing alongside the beasts that trotted, three astride, with one in front like a general charging into the misted dusk. Over a dried-up creek, up hillock and into a swale, the clods of earth and tufts of grass smacking against our feet, we heard the deep breath of the horses heaving, felt our straining to keep up with them in our lungs. But we laughed too, when we realized we were one of the herd, our naked bodies in tandem with theirs. They slowed to an amble and stopped to graze again. We patted and leaned against their sweaty flanks, and thick muscular legs, feeling emboldened with beings more powerful than either of us. At the house, later that night, sleeping together, I felt Jeff’s body nuzzle next to mine and let his arm stay, draping over my shoulder. We woke, together like that, somewhat startled, but mostly pleased with our bodies pressed against each other, and dressed, coyly, sensing something magnetic in our bond yet uncertain what to name it, that first of many nights we slept together, discovering the magic of our bodies.

“Look, honey,” my mother called out, “a Greenview sign. We’re almost there.”

The town unrolled before me: the railroad depot, the Monon Grill, a line of run-down three-story residential homes, plain, some with porches, some without, set back a few feet from the road. I felt a jolt of excitement with the realization that in a few hours I’d be on my own, far from my parents, and could do whatever I wanted to do. Up ahead, a town square had a monument of a WWI soldier, his rifle like an assassin’s aimed right at us; and, surrounding the square, brick storefronts squished together in a indistinguishable line; and, interspersed on

several corners, wooden storefronts, some three stories, some two, had paint peeling like picked scabs. Up a hill on the far side of the square, a road sign to the right pointed to “Ashbury University.” We turned on Washington Street, and then took a right on South Locust Street. We passed by large brick sorority and fraternity houses, a quad with three dormitories and, across from them, the Memorial Student Union. My mother, I noticed, reached over to my father and took his hand.

“We’re here, honey,” she said with breathlessness in her voice that belied a fear, perhaps, remembering that, not a year ago, she had left my older brother Jack at Ohio State University. The closer we came to the university, the more nervous I became, thinking of how many things could go wrong, and had already—at least for my brother.