

It was an afternoon in the summer of 1954 when my mother told me that Pop had called and wanted to see me. I was skeptical, remembering all those Saturdays of a decade or so before when I sat for hours on our front porch waiting in vain for him to arrive after he had promised to spend the day with me. And so I crossed my fingers and waited. Sure enough, Pop showed up and off we went for the weekend. Pop said that seeing as he had not been a part of my life for so long it would be difficult to assume a strict parental role and that we would be more like “best friends.” That was certainly fine with me. At fourteen, I was sure that I knew infinitely more than any adult and certainly didn’t need another grown up telling me how to behave. Thus began a twelve-year relationship with this wonderfully charming, terribly flawed man that lasted until his untimely death in 1966.

Pop had some sort of job at the local Westinghouse plant at the time and had secured tickets for a two-night doubleheader between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Philadelphia Phillies at the ballpark in Philadelphia. We were to ride one of several buses chartered by Westinghouse for an employee outing. My younger brother Tom, whom I had never met, was to go with us. We drove to Pop’s home, an apartment on Eisenhower Avenue in Trenton. Eisenhower Avenue was part of a low-income housing project subsidized by some local government agency. The units were rather small, as I recall, and Pop’s second family was anything but! There were six children (*my brothers and sisters*): Dolores, Helen (*Sis*), Thomas, Phyllis, William and the baby Richard who was born in 1952. My stepmother, also Dolores, not only had a full time job at New Jersey Bell but for the most part was the only parent that really looked after the kids. As if that weren’t enough there was always a stray relative or two from Dolores’s family living with them, and on many weekends I’d also be there. There was also the family pet, a parakeet named *Petey*. *Petey* had a passion for attempting to nest in my stepmother’s hair! She hated that bird. To counter *Petey*’s amorous advances, she had procured a pith helmet from God only knows where that she wore around the apartment when at home. Ramar of Eisenhower Avenue!

Pop was always out somewhere cooking up a scheme to strike it rich or hanging around *Novey's* or *Darrell's* saloon. Virtually all of Pop's employment never lasted very long, consequently my stepmother was usually the sole breadwinner during these all too frequent unemployment spells that the family endured.

While most fathers' legacy to their sons were designed to guide them toward a successful and rewarding life, my legacy from Pop (aside from a late blooming case of inherited corneal disease) was a series of one liners. On proper saloon etiquette: "If you can drink and drink with grace you'll be welcome in any tavern." On being unfaithful to one's significant other: "Never s**t where you eat." On finance: "It's the loan company's fault. They should have known I could never pay it back." On philosophy: "Booze is the only answer." And so on. We spent many days together, usually during the summers when I had no school and Pop was in between jobs. He'd pick me up at my house and I'd go with him while he "ran a few errands" which generally meant one or two stops to drop off his shirts at the laundry or pay the light bill with a check written by my stepmother so he couldn't cash it. The rest of the day we'd spend in a saloon somewhere, usually *Novey's* on Mulberry Street in Trenton and *always* on the tab.

Pop did his drinking in a most fastidious manner. To him it was an ancient and time-honored ritual. I can still see him sitting at the bar at *Novey's*, legs delicately crossed, fedora pushed back on his head, that elbow sticking out at a crazy angle. He'd raise a shot of *Four Roses* or some other brand of cheap whiskey neatly to his pursed lips, downing the contents in one quick, efficient motion, grimacing slightly and reaching for the short chaser of Piels draft beer to wash down the booze. I was usually having a ginger ale or something, pretending that we were knocking back the booze together. Lunch? Pop never "ate on an empty stomach" but I got hungry. When I asked the old man would have *Novey* drop a Stewart's Infrared ham and cheese in the little oven behind the bar.

And so we spent those happy summer days together, right up until I left to join the Navy some three years later.