

“GENTLEMEN!”

The year was 1982. The city was Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Ronald Reagan was president and I was a newly minted teenager at the not-so-tender age of 13.

He yelled: “Gentlemen!”

For clarification, the person speaking was an instructor I had in high school, who one day in the middle of class yelled this at the top of his lungs. He said the word gentlemen because it was an all boys school, Roman Catholic High School to be exact, erected in 1890 and which still sits on the corner of Broad and Vine Streets near downtown Philadelphia. Television and radio broadcaster as well as legendary NFL Film narrator Jon Facenda attended Roman. Pulitzer prize winner Charles Fuller went there as well. He wrote *A Soldier's Play*, but most people know *A Soldier's Story*, the movie adaptation with Harold E. Rollins, Jr., Adolf Caesar, and Denzel Washington before Denzel Washington became a bona fide star and won two Academy Awards.

My instructor, whose name I cannot recall, screamed at the top of his lungs, “Gentlemen!” He had this look and boy I’ll never forget it. His skin was normally pasty like curd, like one of those singers out of a barbershop quartet, but not today. This day, this hour, his face was hotter than an Arizona heat wave in August. And it was tilted back and away, the way an angry housewife looks at her husband when he stumbles through the front door after midnight, three sheets to the wind and smelling of whiskey, cigarette smoke, and—if he got lucky that night—the perfume of some young, pretty thing who looked like she stepped right out of the pages of a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit magazine. He bellowed, “Gentlemen!” and his eyes burned in his head. He said to us boys, wild and rowdy: “Do you know the difference between paradise and a prison?”

Now because we were in biology class at the time we all thought this was a trick question. The room, which had up until that point been swelling steadily in chatter as our instructor was attempting in vain to explain the proper dissection of a frog, suddenly fell silent. Each of us looked to the left and looked to the right, and realizing we were all lost with this question...well, we just stayed silent. There in the room sat twenty or so boys—at or about the age of 13—quiet as church mice; to be heard only the Broad Street traffic outside. Jesus Christ himself could have walked into the room at that moment and no one would have batted an eyelash. That’s the way we were back in those days when an adult raised their voice. Not

like that too much anymore. Most of the boys in the class—in the school, when I think about it—were Italian from South Philadelphia, some African American from the north side of the city, a few Chinese out of Chinatown, a Greek here or there, a scattering of Irish and Poles. We dressed in uniforms back then: navy blue or camel colored V-neck sweaters with the Trojan emblem on the left tit, collared shirts, dress slacks, and polished shoes always. Anything less than that and you were sent home with demerits. Too many demerits and you were sent home with a suspension. Too many suspensions and you were looking at public school and two very angry parents. My instructor yelled: “Gentlemen! Do you know the difference between paradise and a prison?” And when no one could answer his question, he said: “A visionary and a fool.”

Now it took me a long time to figure that one out, but when I got it I got it. And let me tell you, before I did I spent a whole lot of time searching for my paradise and a whole lot of time trying to escape this prison called my life.