

Growing up in Avon, Ohio, in the early 1970s usually guaranteed one thing: a simple life. My family lived in a boring, mostly rural community a long way from the suburban sprawl that would later triple the size of the town. Our house, on the west and most rural side of town, was a century-old, modest-sized bright red farmhouse on three acres that abutted my paternal grandparents' multi-acre farm and greenhouse. My time was spent mostly with my older sister Ruth and younger brother Bret, fishing at the nearby ponds, cruising on a three-wheel ATV, building massive snow forts in the winter, and swimming in the backyard pool during the summer. My half-sister Bobbi, who lived with my grandparents, did not spend much time with us. There were no incidents of school shootings, mass killings, or domestic terrorism that form the mainstay of today's news. Thoughts of the cold war with Russia and the Vietnam War were easily dismissed. My one memory of President Nixon comes from the Watergate coverage that interrupted regularly scheduled news broadcasts, forcing an NFL game into overtime or cutting into a children's TV program like *The Wonderful World of Disney*.

My parents stood in stark contrast to one another. My father, very large at 5 feet 11 inches and more than 350 pounds, had brown hair trimmed in a crew cut and wore glasses. He was very strong and, for a man his size, unusually fast. He shaved daily and would leave his whiskers in the bathroom sink for Ruth, Bret, or me to clean out. My mother, on the other hand, was a diminutive 5 feet 2 inches tall and fairly skinny. She wore glasses to help correct a lazy eye and had thinning hair, over which she usually wore a wig. A disastrous homemaker, she never cleaned the house or cooked a palatable meal. While my father was a classic authoritarian, she was a vintage submissive, and no questioning of either one was tolerated. The two would likely not have stayed together had he not gotten her pregnant.

My parents, Ruth, Bret, and I had dinner together as a family almost every night. The atmosphere was usually fairly pleasant, aside from my father's snarky comments about my

mother's subpar cooking. Our food choices were limited and of poor quality, due to my father's habit of bringing home items that were out of date, discarded by a grocer, or retrieved from a garbage dumpster. Equally unappetizing, we children, conditioned to eat sparingly, were continually torn between wanting to satisfy our appetites and having to leave at least seconds for our exceedingly overweight father. The five of us would, for instance, have to split a round steak, aged at the butcher shop then cooked by my mother to the consistency of shoe leather. I also recall feeling nauseous from the fumes of baked spareribs served in their own grease. Every meal included mashed potatoes, which, while fine with me, would invariably elicit the same depressing comment from my father: "Mashed potatoes again. May wonders never cease." Immediately a dejected look would spread across my mother's face, conveying what we later learned was the deep sense of paralysis she suffered in the wake of his verbal abuse. Dinner conversation would follow, occasionally peppered with sexist or racist talk, jokes, or stories—all inappropriate for children.

My grandparents, who lived practically next door, were set in their ways. Grandma would cook delicious meals, play Yahtzee and other games with us, and do crafts with us, always happy to have us around. Grandpa was a salt-of-the-earth guy. Regimented in his routines, every day he wore the same "uniform" for working in the greenhouse—an olive green shirt and pants with suspenders. On occasion, Grandma displayed a self-righteous attitude that led to fights with my dad, after which my siblings and I were not allowed to visit until my father gave us the go-ahead.

Although only twenty miles from Cleveland, we lived like hicks in the boonies. We had a big old country barn that looked like it was about to fall down, as well as lots of chickens, goats, mousing cats, and farm hounds. We hunted rabbits and trapped muskrats in the back fields and ditches. We drank and bathed in well water, even though a fire hydrant across the street provided

access to city water. In the heat of summer, we wore overalls with nothing underneath; and the soles of our feet were so tough we could dash barefoot across the gravel driveway.

Conversely, conservative appearance was a must at the bar my father owned and operated in town. There he sported a buttoned-up shirt and nice pants, and my mother wore a dress. When we siblings went to the bar, we made sure to dress in nice, simple clothes, usually corduroy or plaid slacks for the boys and a dress for Ruth. Often we had not bathed, aware that we would get dirty anyway while performing our assigned jobs, such as stocking supplies, sweeping, and emptying garbage. One of the nastiest chores involved going through the week's trash to extract the pieces of aluminum foil in which burgers had been wrapped. My father would then ball up and flatten the mounds of aluminum foil to sell as scrap metal, worth only pennies to him after the demeaning work of sorting, for which we were not paid. By contrast, my grandfather paid us when we helped out in his greenhouse.

We also wore simple clothes to school—never designer brands like Levi's, Calvin Klein, or even Haines, only off-the-rack items from local discount stores like Hills, G.C. Murphy, Gaylords, Big Wheel, and Gold Circle. Several of my classmates knew I wore discount apparel, which did not bother me.

At the time, small-town Avon was a conservative stronghold. Protesting, had it occurred there, would have been considered un-American. To my father, the only thing more un-American was what he called “those goddamn hippies with their long hair,” and so for years we three kids got “bowl” haircuts at the local barbershop. I did not think much about my short hair until high school, when I felt miserable not only about the length of my hair but about having no hairstyle. When in my sophomore year I dared to feather my hair back one day, my father yelled that I

looked like “a goddamned fag” and he would take me straight to the barbershop if I didn’t fix it. So I began combing my hair down at home and feathering it after leaving for school.

Since there were no computers or cell phones, my only means of escape at home were board games with my siblings and television. At my grandparents’ house, there was much more to do and a great variety of books to read. Although longing to be cool like the Fonz, I was dorky and, more than anything else, enjoyed reading my grandparents’ latest edition of *The Guinness Book of World Records* cover to cover, comparing the statistics cited in it with those of previous years. I also liked poring over a slightly outdated set of encyclopedias, especially to augment schoolwork. I remember being envious of the nerdy kid in an Encyclopedia Britannica commercial, wishing that I, like him, would be admitted to Harvard after someday purchasing a brand-new set of these volumes.

My siblings and I relied on one another, even when we fought. Once, after Bret and I had been arguing, I slammed him into the door leading to the steps upstairs, breaking its wood panels. Fearing our father’s rage upon seeing the damage, we were both greatly relieved when he came home drunk that evening, stumbled up to his room, and passed out. By the time Dad discovered the broken door, Bret had conjured up a clever explanation for it: *Dad*, after coming home drunk, had slammed him into the door. Accepting the alibi, Dad told Bret he had better “fucking listen next time.” In addition to watching out for each other, Bret and I shared the belief that we were witnessing normal behavior for a father.

Admittedly, for the first eight years of my life, I assumed our entire home situation in Avon was normal. Moreover, I respected my father; in fact, I idolized him, viewing him as a successful business owner, volunteer firefighter, and part-time farmer with over two hundred

peach trees. Polite and obedient, I tried to be the best son possible, unaware that my admiration for him would soon be used as kindling to destroy my childhood.