

THE BOYS OF MCNULTY: REMEMBERING JEFF

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We were never supposed to have been friends. By high school he was a popular jock and I was a dorky honors student. He played basketball while I played the oboe. We didn't exactly travel in the same circles. In the end we both gave in a little, distancing ourselves from one another and pretending the past had never happened. But I can't forget. It's been almost ten years since this city lost Jeffrey Johnson, and still I can't forget.

We were far from good friends during our waning years of high school. Though our lockers were close together, there couldn't have been two more outwardly different guys. It didn't start off that way. In the beginning we were equals, similar in many ways. We both went to R.J. McNulty Elementary School, we both lived in the Van Dyke area, and we were both lovingly brought up by two good parents. Jeff and I each had different best friends, but the boys in the honors class of McNulty were in many ways a brotherhood ~ bonding together against the icky, and more numerous, battalion of girls.

In our second grade class we were awarded stickers for a good day of work. We amassed these treasures on a personal folder with our names printed neatly across the top, and at the end of the year the student with the most stickers would win a prize. We all had more or less the same number of stickers, though the subtle differences were discussed and debated among us.

One day my Mom innocently told me how Jeff's Mom had once said that Jeff wished he had as many stickers as I did. Never one to let an opportunity like that go by, I confronted Jeff and he embarrassingly admitted it. I felt badly as soon as the words left my mouth, and his slightly crestfallen mood confirmed that I had unnecessarily inflicted pain to make myself feel better. But kids don't realize this, and while outwardly I acted superior to him, inwardly I wondered at who the better person really was, and why it even mattered.

Each February his family threw him elaborate birthday parties. I begrudgingly attended these events, mostly on the stern advice from my parents, but I inevitably had a good time, always glad I had gone when all the other kids were talking about it the following day at school.

There was a lot of love in the Johnson house. Jeff's parents and his brothers might have sometimes seemed at odds, but they had an easy way of getting past all disputes, talking and laughing through it all in a manner that differed from the quiet turbulence of my own home. His Mom organized the party games: Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey, and a homemade party task that involved dropping a clothes-pin from the height of your waist into a thin-necked jar on the ground (this being the only one I had a chance of winning due to my height, or lack-there-of). These were innocent parties, where boys and girls were friendly and everyone seemed to get along with each other.

It was in gym class where Jeff was truly at his best. He was by far the tallest and most athletic out of all of us: the first to climb to the ceiling on those giant ropes, the kid who routinely hit homeruns during wiffleball, and the one who kicked the ball farthest during kickball. Once or twice a year Mr. Noto brought out a gigantic sphere ~ five feet across and covered in patches of ripped cloth. The class played various games with this ball, the culmination being a contest between two teams who fought to get the ball to the opposite side of the gym. We started in the middle, and groups of us tried to push and maneuver this impossibly immense thing across the lacquered floor.

One contest featured three boys against three boys or three girls against three girls, another pitted all the boys against all the girls (the girls usually won, but only because they outnumbered us two-to-one). In a novelty match-up, Mr. Noto himself challenged our greatest player, Jeff, who was almost up to the teacher's height anyway. Still, it wasn't quite a fair match, so he gave Jeff a little help: namely, me. (And little help I was.)

It was Jeff and I against the brawny teacher. Huffing and puffing and exerting all their energy, Jeff and the teacher battled it out while I fought not to step on my cardigan sweater. Needless to say, Jeff and I lost, but we had put forth a valiant effort, and that was what mattered.

A few months later we were taking part in the end-of-the-year physical education tests, a time when we journeyed outside to figure out how many push-ups and sit-ups we could do in a minute, how far we could throw a shot-put, and other essential tasks which would no doubt prepare us for a well-rounded life.

Apparently not content to humiliate us with the gigantic ball episode, Mr. Noto discreetly approached me as Jeff was preparing to throw the shot-put (that eight-pound ball of iron that people throw for... whatever reason). He said that he'd throw it past Jeff, and I was to run out as though it was my throw. Even I thought this was funny since Jeff was at least a foot

taller than me and had muscles where I had bone. As he reached the length of his shot-put effort, my supposed throw flew past him by a few feet. His jaw dropped and he looked around incredulously, eyeing the shot-put, eyeing me, and eyeing how far it had out-distanced his throw. For once I had beaten Jeff Johnson outside of the classroom, if only for a moment, and when he finally figured out what we had done, his smile was grand.

On one spring day I got a call from Jeff. School was out for the day (was it the week of Easter vacation?) and a group was playing Dungeons & Dragons at Bill Barbato's house. It was Bill, Jeff, Chris Filiberto, Joe Sorbero, and Ben Ramsey, I think ~ the boys from McNulty. I wasn't really into the game, and would have much rather stayed at home watching soap operas, but they needed another player to make it even. Reluctantly, I agreed to come down.

I did not have the first clue as to what went on in a Dungeons & Dragons game, and I still don't. I saw a bunch of weird dice, some crazy rule books, and told them to just tell me what to do and when to do it. The day was burning slowly along, my disinterest in the game somewhat mollified by the presence of friends and the suggestion that we go outside and act out a scene from the game. Someone (and I swear to God it wasn't me) threw a bunch of stones to signal a battle or something, and one of these flying boulders hit Jeff right in the head. There was a moment of surprise on his face, just before the pain registered, followed by Jeff scrunching up his face, holding his head, and crying.

Like all tough boys our age, we avoided eye contact at first, embarrassed and ashamed in the presence of anything remotely akin to naked emotion, but to our credit we worked up the courage to see that Jeff was all right. We trudged back inside ~ perhaps our re-enactments were better left to our imaginations ~ but I wanted no more to do with Dungeons & Dragons. Jeff's crying had spooked me. He was the strongest boy I knew. If he could crumble with the well-aimed toss of a stone, what would become of the rest of us? After allowing them to divide the rights to my character, I cited a pressing engagement and walked the few blocks to my home.

Such was the then-slow passing of our years at McNulty. There were battles and fights and disagreements, but we always managed to stick together. As we prepared for Middle School, we seemed to linger a little longer after class, and laugh a little more. When our time at McNulty came to a close, we shared a distinctive bond, but it was the elusive bond of childhood ~ a bond that would quickly disintegrate with the onslaught of adolescence.

Jeff and I shared a unique friendship ~ sometimes brotherly, sometimes adversarial, often competitive, occasionally poignant, always honest ~ and in some small but fundamental way we each had a hand in shaping and influencing the other's life, as all childhood friends do.

I can still vividly recall our last meeting during that summer. School had just ended for the year and I hadn't seen Jeff for a few days. He had been our paper boy for a while, and I was purposely avoiding him during the afternoon delivery hours. I can't say why, except that I didn't want to face him for some reason. On this day, he caught me by surprise.

He rode his bike up to our side porch, his worn, gray newspaper bag slung heavily over his shoulder, and he sheepishly handed me an envelope. It was near the end of June ~ the end of our years at McNulty, the end of our innocent friendship, and the end of our Youth.

"My Mom wanted me to give this to you," he said. I opened it as he sat on his bike on the other side of the gate. It was a picture of the five of us at a Gifted and Talented Competition, taken a few weeks prior. We had to get an egg through an obstacle course without breaking it. Dubbing ourselves the "New Yorkers" (most decidedly NOT my idea), we were dressed alike in white T-shirts with a "NY" Logo inside of an egg, drawn on with black marker. Of course, our egg broke within ten seconds of beginning the challenge, but I still had a fun time. After we lost so dismally, Jeff's Mom rounded us up for the picture I now held in my hands. I remember his embarrassment at having his mother take the photo, and his red cheeks are still there, framing his forced smile. Such parent/child sentiment always touched me ~ his Mom trying so valiantly to hold onto her youngest son, even as he inched and yearned to grow up.

I thanked him for the picture and felt a sudden sadness, despite the hot sun and the promise of a full summer ahead. I think I knew that we would never be the same again.

Upon entering Wilbur Lynch Middle School, our little group was splintered into five different factions. I was placed in the Honors program and I think Jeff was in Regents. Our lockers were close by, but we rarely spoke. We had one class together that year ~ our last one ever. It was Health 101 with Miss Siebe. Jeff sat behind me ~ Johnson following Ilagan in the abysmally tiresome alphabetical-order classroom configuration. We passed answers back and forth during tests and cracked jokes at our not-so-well-liked teacher. The next year we didn't share any classes at all.

I don't remember much about Jeff during our early high school years. Did he attend Bishop Scully for a while? I don't recall. We registered each other's presence peripherally, if at

all. It wasn't until our junior year, and a few days before his death, that we made any sort of meaningful contact, and to this day I'm not sure what it meant.

His locker was near mine again. The bell had rung for the next class to begin, and Jeff and I were straggling behind everyone else; the halls were quickly emptying of noise and students. Looking up at him as I picked out books from the bottom of my locker, I first noticed his cross ~ a silver one hanging on a black cord around his neck. I made note of it because it struck me as vaguely uncharacteristic for Jeff Johnson to wear anything remotely like jewelry. When I rose to my full height (and still looked up at him) I saw that he was staring at me strangely. It was the most we had looked at one another in years.

There was a strange expression on his face, an unsettling look in his eyes and I wish so badly that I had asked if he was all right, instead of giving him a disgusted glance and demanding in a sarcastic, annoyed tone, "What?!" He simply shook his head slowly and awoke from his weird trance. It would be the last time I saw him, at least the last time that I remember.

A few days later my parents would knock on my door, sit down on my bed, and scare the hell out of me with their grave faces before saying that Jeff Johnson had shot himself. I managed a quiet "Oh..." and didn't say anything more about it. The rain started shortly after that, and wouldn't let up for days afterward. Amsterdam's perfect All-American boy was gone forever, and we were all left wondering why.

For reasons of my own, I couldn't help but think, "That should have been me." Jeff had everything. He was attractive, smart, friendly, and well-loved by everyone. I often doubted that I possessed any of those traits. I wanted suddenly to go back and give him all of my stickers in second grade.

I did not attend his funeral. Almost everyone else in the high school did, but I simply couldn't. That wasn't the Jeff I knew, at least it wasn't the Jeff I wanted to know. Or maybe it was, and I couldn't bring myself to go because of that. I didn't need to say good-bye ~ I had done that in the summer after sixth grade, when we both said farewell to the shared past and began walking different ways.

The sad truth is that if Jeff were alive today we probably would not be friends. I have trouble enough keeping in touch with people from last year, much less someone from high school. I mourn for the many other people who would have been lucky enough to have known him ~ but mostly I mourn for the boy who handed me the picture of our childhood, and somehow quietly understood.