

My Locker Room Talk

Dale Rigby

Childhood is a short season.

--Jim Bouton, *Ball Four* (1970)

The Brady Bunch went to reruns in 1974.

And I, a middle-classed 15-year-old backup point guard with a misdemeanor, punished to the edges of the crabgrass frontier, half-heartedly depilating the family lawn, dawdling by my driveway's basketball pole, praying that the body confident on the hardcourt might be the same in the taco stand, wondered what the show's cancellation meant for our juvenile locker room talk about Marcia and Jan. *C'mon now*, dear reader, 50 years removed, boys will be boorish boys, right? Boasting whether we'd "do" Marcia or Jan was benign compared to a certain *Access Hollywood* tape or the vulgar chauvinism and "enemies list" of the Watergate tapes or even Jim Bouton's brilliant greenie-gulping 1970 work of cultural anthropology *Ball Four*, right?

Scholars note that "weeds" are social constructions.

And my summer of '74 reeked, of a perfidy almost independent of metaphor, redolent of *Chemlawn*, emetic, saccharine-sick, broad spectrum biocides Ferris-wheeled from namesake trucks, like a finger put to the back of your throat, like a bracing stolen slug of dry vermouth before that early summer's Sadie Hawkins dance. For that summer I threw up, literally, from both, crawling to trash cans with the urgency of Billy Buckner trying to rappel the left field fence at Atlanta-Fulton Stadium for Henry Aaron's 715th. Maybe by the day in question my body had acquired some immunity. From *Chemlawn* at least.

The political pollinates the personal.

President Nixon resigned that week in August, and my father, a professor of political science at our small town's university, was livid that our northwest Ohio congressman, Delbert Latta, "still defended that crook." With tanks on the television and tankards in the suburbs even Nixon's "silent majority" felt like downwinders, so the zeitgeist escaped into fads for pet rocks or streaking or disaster movies or the breaking of the 45-hour *Guinness Book of World Records* for the longest consecutive basketball game.

Real songs don't hang themselves on a hook.

So witness 15-year-old bare-chested me in a snug pair of elastic green gym shorts rooting the girdle of our driveway with a dull manual rotary lawn edger, bothered that Harry Chapin's catchy ditty "Cat's in the Cradle" was having its way with the same boy who'd memorized all 404 seconds of "Taxi," while hiding, in an unfinished basement, tossing a tennis ball off the wall; I was being seduced by two-aught-eight minutes of pop pabulum from an album called *Verities and Balderdash*. My mother laughed minutes before when I blustered "Harry's selling out." She knew my lollygagging over iced tea for what it was, and sent her bookish delinquent back to the edges, a gentle sentence for discovering my hoarded stash of shoplifted paperbacks, including Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*, Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, and Jerry Kramer's *Instant Replay*.

"Lawns are nature purged of sex and death," wrote Michael Pollen.

Dawdling by my basketball pole, I watched Kim Kompton, next door, a senior-to-be, in a dancing halter top the color of soylent green, lope across her parents' lawn, past its ubiquitous signage — KEEP OFF THE GRASS UNTIL DRY — to the mailbox; across the street, last year's head of the cheerleading squad, Alice Tom, was washing her father's Chevy Impala. The sign on her lawn said ANOTHER SATISFIED CUSTOMER, which hardly captured her father's demeanor that summer. Mr. Tom had caught wind of the rumor that Par Richards, in a fit of jealousy, had crazy-glued chewing gum within Alice's pubic hair during a tryst. Even my younger sister, 13, inside, with one of her few, and uncool, or so I thought, friends, watching *I Love Lucy*, while tugging on her clothes, always tugging on her clothes, knew about those doubleteens out on Wintergarten Road.

"No wonder Americans like them so much," continued Pollen.

Daydreaming Kim and Alice, assembled, insouciantly, in the gymnasium, no less naked, and no less powerfully confident, than every single girl, fit or not, in my entire school, I sensed the faint approach of a tapering downshift. A 1970 *Volkswagen* Beetle with a weathered tan idled askew to our suburban curb. The gas cap was missing, as though the car had dressed in a sleepy rush; an aerial was festooned with tin foil and Ohio license plates hung from a dented front bumper like an overbite. She waved me over. She was college-aged. Frizzy-haired. Her voice didn't even quiver.

Like nicknames locker room talk can be a most revealing mask.

At nightfall about three weeks prior — Friday, July 19, 1974, to be exact — a *Guinness* world record was eclipsed by 10 white male teenagers anointing themselves Ner and Goose and Nuts and Pimp and Buckeye and Bear and Firpo and Zells and Clayto and Digs. A clever Bowling Green *Sentinel-Tribune* scribe deemed “the ‘game’ basketball lost most its leather cover” after the 50-hour marathon, and a photo caught the 10 standing, lithe and tanned in a bleary-eyed semi-circle. Eschewing the penchant of their foul-mouthed spittle-spraying old-school high school coach (who studied under Bobby Knight at Indiana and hated that the *cathlicks* had ended UCLA’s 88-game winning streak that January) for Chuck Taylor high-tops, their footwear was one-part sandals, two parts missing, and seven parts Adidas low-tops with racing stripes, and their game more a *f-you-and-your-fundamentals-coach* feint at Julius Erving’s madcap ABA style than the more stolid NBA personae. They blasted Mott the Hoople and Aerosmith and the Doobie Brothers and might have talked about that April’s devastating tornado in Xenia, Ohio, the grisly on-air suicide earlier *that* week of broadcaster Christine Chubbuck, June 4’s “10-cent Beer Night” fiasco at Cleveland’s Memorial Stadium, Ali rope-a-doping Foreman in Zaire, whether Billie Jean King was “out” or not, the 1000 streaks on campuses from January to May *alone*, the passage of the 1974 Runaway Youth Act, or, not to mention, of course, their randy assessments of Marcia or Jan.

“If gas pains persist, try *Volkswagen*,” quipped a 1974 ad.

Beyond our City Park basketball court, beyond my shell-shocked smile, third from the left, the blurry photo’s brightest exposure, the youngest, the only blond, barefoot, Chuck Taylor be damned, in those same tight green shorts, but this time with a white shirt sans logo ... beyond all of that, inflation was at 14 percent, the price of crude increased 300 percent in four months, daylight savings went year-round, maximum highway speeds were reduced to 55 mph, and, since President Nixon had halted the draft in 1974, our impending “coming of age” found an anomalous window, falling within that short four-year period when 18-year-old American males were not required to honor the ritual walk to the post office for selective service. Strange as this seems to me now, the most immediate connection to Vietnam for most of us was driving across the Michigan border to buy as 16-year-olds the low beer sold legally to 18-year-olds on military bases, while boasting, I project, since I had not earned even a permit, of fingering freshman girls and fake ID’s and falsies.

Locker room talk redefined as that *not* talked about.

We didn’t talk about Kathryn “Tubby” Johnson Masser’s 1974 letter to Little League honchos. She called national attention to the fact that after the 1950 season

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they'd implemented "the Tubby Rule," barring girls from organized baseball, an injustice Little League — under legal stress — only rescinded *that* summer. What if instead of Marcia and Jan's bodies we talked about Ms. Masser's bravado? What if we went to their games and boasted of the softball prowess of our sisters? What if we talked about what it meant to have a sister pining for the Brady household's groovy bead curtains. And me? What could I share about those shakes in that taco stand the summer before?

The depilatory impulse is *not* about controlling unruly Nature.

Before I crossed the curb to her Beetle I'd already cross-cut the lawn, captured the grass, and filled seven plastic bags to turn fetid by trash day, probably oozing *Chemlawn*, chemicals harmful to children. *Inert* does *not* mean *inactive*. Such broad-spectrum biocides, by their very nature, can, to quote, "harm organisms other than the targeted species." There was vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, the oxygen being sucked right out us by these cousins to Vietnam War defoliants like Agent Orange.

The depilatory impulse is about unruly *human* nature.

Before I crossed the curb to her Beetle, I'd made Little League's top division at the precocious age of *nine*, while our family regularly visited sundry southern California nudist camps, including frequent naked afternoons at the private pool of my parents' friends, parents who planted 11-year-old me in the back seat at the drive-in with Dr. Pepper and donuts sprinkled with white frost to watch 1969's *The Sterile Cuckoo*. Like another transplanted Californian Joan Didion, I was in no small part "programmed by all the movies I'd ever seen and all the songs I had heard sung." I watched high-schooler Sonny Crawford's affair with Cloris Leachman's 40-year-old Ruth Popper in 1970's *The Last Picture Show*, 15-year-old Hermie's affair with Jennifer O'Neil's 22-year-old war bride Dorothy in 1971's *The Summer of '42*, and Dustin Hoffman ask, "Mrs. Robinson, are you trying to seduce me?" in 1967's *The Graduate*.

We edge outside against what's hiding inside.

Before I crossed the curb to her Beetle I'd spent a night the previous summer in a county fair taco stand exploring the force field of sex with a more experienced classmate. Here is how I described the scene a lifetime ago before I had any idea why I got the shakes, why the body that took over on the hardcourt froze in the taco stand.

"Hey," she teased, as I made a tentative try at unzipping her elephant-bottomed jeans, "that's for me to know and you to find out." Here's what I quickly found out: it was fun to ... both feel and inhale the slickness between her legs, and so to be bolstered by the intoxicating belief *that she must like me*; however, I also discovered something less reassuring: when she fainted at touching me down there, lingering over my belt buckle, so self-assured, I shivered and shook and locked up like an engine without antifreeze.

Something about her was familiar sang Harry Chapin in "Taxi."

Memory captures her as a dead ringer for Liza Minelli's fey Pookie Adams, that "skinny, scrubby-haired, dark-eyed, pale girl, with a thin-lipped sarcastic, almost-smiling mouth," from John Nichol's novel *The Sterile Cuckoo*, and remembers being mesmerized at the drive-in by her bumbling first sex at the hotel with Jerry, and the intoxicating way the two agreed, "Let's never be weirdos."

Harry said Sue's smile *was a sad smile just the same*.

That's the smile I remember her making when I replied, with a faked matter-of-factness, "I ... don't ... think ... she'd ... mind ... but ... no ... I ... don't," and then drove away so I could dishonor us both, make weirdos of us both, with locker room talk, running, breathless, three houses down to Chip Yodgis, the captain of our high school hockey team, as he pulled out of his driveway. *Chip, you won't believe it, I was hanging out by my basketball pole and a crazy hippie college lady just said I wonder if you'd make love to me and then when I didn't answer because I was shaking asked believe it or not I wonder if your mother would mind if you made love to me and then grabbed her gear shift to drive away when I said my mother wouldn't mind but I saw her naked beneath her dress because I saw her entire bush and this is all I swear true.*

But it wasn't, true. It was all plot, situation devoid of the story. Fodder for the locker room that nobody believed there anyway.

Of course she was almost certainly a troubled young woman rather than the cinematic palimpsest of my imagination. Acting out like that, she'd been abused, sexualized early, no doubt. The true story, which took my sister 20 years to share, was a story I bet that young woman already knew. "Remember those bead curtain doors popular in *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*?" "Sure I do," I fibbed. And then she said, "All my childhood I wanted to knock my door down and put up beads like in Greg's attic. Great big plastic noisy clanking beads that

you could see through and hear.” And then added, “You know, I was actually a *damn* good softball first baseman, but you never ever even came to one of my games.”

Now there’s a gut-wrenching image of sports in the 1970s to couple — as I cry — with a sister pulling on her clothes, pulling on her clothes, a brother making fun of her, making fun of her, his body, the non-targeted one, which took over on the hardwood but froze at the taco stand, intuiting what his mind could not fathom, a transgression of boundaries a father was committing under a brother’s failed watch.

Dale Rigby sits in his faculty office at Western Kentucky University waning nostalgic over a framed poster — Barnes and Noble Welcomes DAVID MCGRATH, DALE RIGBY, & MICHAEL STEINBERG from *Sport Literate* Magazine — for a reading in Chicago from *Braving Winter* 1998 Volume 2 Issue III wondering what adventure lies ahead in the next quarter century for he and this storied labor of love.