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SCHOOL DAZE: REFLECTIONS AND RIFFS ON A NEW YORK CHILDHOOD

Michael Steinberg

Junior High School Bus

Junior high is the universe's cruel joke on adolescent males. Had it been up to me, I'd have skipped ages twelve and thirteen and gone straight to high school.



P.S. 44, the junior high, was located on Beach 98th street, less than five miles from my house. Yet it took the school bus almost an hour to get there. The ride took us through neighborhoods our parents had warned us about since we were little kids. Once you got past McGuire's Bar and Grill on Beach 108th, all you'd see were seedy looking bars, gated liquor stores, run-down markets, weed-choked vacant lots, shuttered stores, ramshackle houses, and shops with iron bars on the windows. Ever since I'd read *The Amboy Dukes* over the summer, I'd been romanticizing sleazy, run-down neighborhoods like these. But when I saw them for the first time, I was unnerved by the ugliness and squalor. I couldn't imagine growing up in these conditions.



The junior high itself was a dilapidated turn-of-the-century red brick building. With its old, peeling paint and barb wire fenced school yard, P.S. 44 sat squarely in the heart of the Arverne-Hammels-Holland section of Rockaway Beach—one of the roughest, most run-down areas in south Queens.

The neighborhood and the junior high were in dramatic contrast to P.S. 114, the suburban grade school we'd all been

attending for the last six years. For one, the school was less than a ten-minute walk—close enough for us to go home for lunch. Plus, we mixed with the same middle class, college prep kids year in and year out. To the likes of us then, P.S. 44 might as well have been on the far side of the moon. Nothing we'd experienced at home or in grade school could have prepared us for *this* junior high.



The pecking order on the school bus was a microcosm of the junior high social hierarchy—one that had even more sharply defined boundaries than those we'd established in grade school.

The guys who got on the bus after Beach 79th street were predominantly Irish and Italian Catholics. Most lived in dilapidated old wooden homes with two, sometimes three, other families. The Blacks and Puerto Ricans, who got on next, lived in the city funded housing projects close to the El.

A lot of the white guys belonged to street gangs like the “South Laverne Boy’s Club” and the “Hammels’ Raiders.” They took special classes like automotive shop and woodworking. Many were just biding their time until they turned sixteen and could legally quit school.

We sarcastically referred to these guys as “greasers,” but we all knew better than to mess with them. Like the characters in *The Amboy Dukes*, they had slicked back D. A.’s and wore the same clothes each day; black motorcycle jackets with upturned collars, tight black tee shirts with cigarette packs rolled up in the sleeves, Garrison belts and dungarees, or pegged pants with white stitches running down the sides, and black “shit kickers” (steel-toed boots with straps and buckles).

The girls often came to school with curlers in their hair. They wore breast-hugging black sweaters, tight black wool skirts with slits down the side, black nylons with seams running down the back, and open-toed flats. Some had black cloth jackets with

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club names, like “Pink Pussycats” embroidered on the back. Most of them smoked cigarettes and chewed gum.

The greasers and their “gun moll” girlfriends commandeered the back of the bus, their feet up on the seat backs, smoking and cursing loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Up front were the guys in the Belle Harbor-Neponsit clique (Louie Mandel, Freddy Klein, Allen Nathanson, and Frank Pearlman), who I thought of as over-privileged Archies and Reggies. They preened and held court with their Betty and Veronica girlfriends.

The four guys were clean-cut preppies—future class presidents and school leaders. All of them had VO-5-styled crew cuts, and they wore blue oxford button-downs, khaki pants, and scuffed white bucks. Their companions—would-be cheerleaders, baton twirlers and boosters—were well-scrubbed, pony-tailed girls dressed in starched white blouses, plaid, pleated skirts, and white bobby-sox, with either penny loafers or saddle shoes.

A row behind them was another group of four guys who I thought of as the “genteel greasers.” All of them went to my grade school, and none were aspiring athletes, big brains, social movers, or even hard-core greasers. Yet, they had an aura about them.

Their leader was Manny Angell—a ruggedly handsome Sephardic Jew, whose father was rumored to be in the Jewish Mafia. Manny was tall, lean and broad shouldered with a chiseled profile and a thick mane of dark, unruly hair. He had a brooding insolence reminiscent of a young Marlon Brando, or of the James Dean character in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Manny’s comrades—Stuie Issacs, Mark Goldman, and Larry Ramis—were always in some kind of trouble. The buzz back in sixth grade was that Manny and Stuie had already been to reform school. They’d got caught hot-wiring stolen cars and taking them for joy rides in the Riis Park parking lot. I’d also heard that they all smoked reefer, and that Mark and Larry drag-raced their souped-up Harley’s. But the most titillating rumors were the ones about Manny and Stuie “going all the way” with

the rich high school girls from the Five Towns—an enclave of gated villages just across the county line.

On the school bus, these four had an air of defiance that bought them a kind of unspoken respect. The greasers, I noticed, never taunted them like they did everyone else. And the pretty, popular girls would steal furtive glances at them when the guys in the clique weren't looking.

Sandwiched in between the preppies, genteel greasers, and the real greasers, were the four losers and social outcasts. Poor Eli Rubinstein and Bernard Schoenberg still had Vitalis-trained hair and wore blue or brown gabardine pants and Buster Brown shoes. The girls, Stephanie Sterner and Francine Leibler, were overweight and had oily skin and acne. They wore gray felt poodle skirts to school. At dances and make-out parties, they'd always end up doing the Lindy Hop with each other.

The greasers taunted the two guys unmercifully, sometimes called them "kikes," even "dirty Jews." I felt sorry for those four. And I sometimes wanted to intervene—to stand up for them. Yet, like everyone else who didn't want to be typecast as a loser, I kept my distance from them.

Where, I wondered, did I belong in this deviant hierarchy?



At thirteen, I was a short, chubby kid, *persona non-gratis* with the clique, as well as with Elaine Rosen, Alice Hirsch, Sandy Kaufman, and Linda Firestone, the popular girls they hung out with.

Ambivalent as I felt about them, I still held out hope that those guys would someday accept me into the group. And so, I sat right behind them on the bus, listened in on their conversations, and tried to put in my two cents worth every so often. Yet, no one went out of his way to invite me to the Friday night make-out parties or the after school pick-up basketball games in Frank Pearlman's driveway.

Sure, the snubs were painful, but the more indifferent they

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acted toward me, the more determined I was to court their approval. Whenever I asked myself why I was so desperate for their attention, all I had to do was look at the circle of girls (and guys) who were also vying for their approval.

Just what would it take, I wondered, to wedge my way into that crowd?

Temple Beth El Dance

By the middle of my first term of junior high, I was still having no success getting the guys in the clique to notice me. Maybe I'd get their attention if I could catch the interest of one of the popular girls in their entourage.

I'd had a crush on Elaine Rosen since back in fifth grade. And so did everyone else. She was slender, about my height, with dimples and sandy blonde hair that curled in ringlets around her ears. The guys in the clique, naturally, fawned all over her.

Normally, I wouldn't even think about approaching someone who was so far out of my league. And on top of that, like the other three girls she hung out with, Elaine had the reputation of being stuck up and aloof. But in fifth grade, for reasons I couldn't immediately understand, Elaine asked me to help her write a book report on *The Yearling*. I took the bait. I was so surprised I couldn't say yes fast enough. Her request flattered me so much that I volunteered to write the book report myself. And she didn't bother to protest.

The book report got an A, and I was bitterly disappointed that all she said was a polite "Thank you." She couldn't get away from me fast enough.

Clearly, I'd misread her signals. It was as if she'd planned the whole scenario right from the beginning.

But several days later, Elaine threw me a bone. She made it a point to wave or say hello to me before class or at recess. It was just enough to build some hope on.

You'd have thought I might have learned my lesson. But it's

strange what you'll do when you're so desperate for attention. Elaine was the only popular girl who'd so much as even spoken to me.



I was always self-conscious and shy at social events—particularly, dances, mixers, and make-out parties. So much so that I rarely attended them. But this time, I'd risk it and attend the first neighborhood dance. I'd already decided that I was going to ask Elaine Rosen to dance. If she said yes, it would boost my stock with the guys in the clique. If she turned me down, at least I'd had the guts to try.

Temple Beth El mixers were typical of most neighborhood dances. The guys—even the clique—stood around on one side of the synagogue's rec room, while the popular girls clustered on the other side. The boys shuffled their feet, nervously laughing, telling jokes, and making snide comments about the girls. The girls, in turn, giggled and pointed across the dance floor at the boys.

That night, I stood off to the side rehearsing what I'd say to Elaine. She was standing with Alice Hirsch, another of the popular girls who'd never acknowledged me. I could feel the lump in my throat tighten as I walked across the room. Real or imagined, I felt that every eye in the room was on me—especially the guys in the clique. I thought about chickening out. But I was already half way across the rec room floor when Alice spotted me first. She signaled to Elaine with a slight tilt of her head.

Just as I blurted out "Would you like to dan . . ." Elaine cut me off. "Sorry, but thanks anyway," she said. Just like that. No excuses, no explanations. Why had I expected any other kind of response?

Then, she abruptly turned back toward Alice, and both of them started to giggle. I trudged back to the boy's side of the gym. I didn't dare pick up my head for fear of having to confront all those laughing faces. My scalp tingled, my legs felt wobbly, and

my face was flushed. The last time I felt so mortified was when I threw up in kindergarten, after our teacher, Mrs. Buckley, had publicly criticized my drawings.

Before I'd even made it back to the boys' side, I heard Alice say—loudly enough for all the others to hear—"I'd never dance with him; he's too short. Besides, he hangs around with those other losers. At recess, all they ever talk about is stupid baseball."

I swallowed hard and tried not to cry. My legs felt so heavy. I wondered if I had enough strength to make it to the entrance. Knees shaking, I skulked out of the rec room and headed straight home. I crawled into bed without saying good night to anyone. I was too numb with humiliation to even take off my clothes.

The next day, I ducked around stairwells and hid in dark corners of the hallway. I kept my head down during class, at lunch, and at recess. I even avoided Peter and Mike, my two recess cronies. Every two minutes, it seemed, I checked my watch. By three o'clock, I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.



I had to admit that Alice's cruel remark did have some truth to it. Mike Rubin and Peter Schwartz, the two social outcasts I hung out with, spent most of our time at recess talking about baseball.

And it's true that baseball had been my safe haven ever since fifth grade. Except for reading books, baseball was the only thing that made me feel knowledgeable and secure.

So I ran home, grabbed a broomstick out of the closet, put on my Converse high-tops and old torn corduroys and raced down to Casey's Lot—a weed-choked, rock-strewn open field on the corner of 129th and Beach Channel Drive. As I swatted handfuls of stones into Jamaica Bay, I pretended I was Duke Snider, then Jackie Robinson, then Gil Hodges. It was a familiar ritual—a world I retreated to whenever I needed to escape from

disappointments at home or in school.

I kept it up until the broom handle was covered with nicks and cuts, and my palms had sprouted blood blisters. And with each swing of the broom handle, a nagging voice inside me kept saying, "I'll show them. Someday, they'll all be paying a half-a-buck to watch me play."

Junior High Yearbook

As far back as I could remember, I idolized writers the same way I worshipped professional baseball players. They were Olympian gods whose powers sprang from some magical source that would, I thought, always remain elusive to me. But it didn't stop me from wanting to write.

In eighth grade, the only class I looked forward to was Language Arts. My teacher, Mr. Aaron, was always praising my book reports and papers, which only made me want to work harder to please him. When he gave my *Huck Finn* paper back, he handed me a hardcover novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

"If you liked Huck," he told me, "you'll really get on with this Holden Caulfield character."



Holden quickly became my new role model. He could articulate my own deepest yearnings. I, in turn, understood his angst and self-imposed isolation, identified with his compassion for all the losers and outcasts, and shared his disdain for the "phonies." For weeks, I went around imitating the hip, witty way he talked. I even wrote an unmailed fan letter to J.D. Salinger.

So for my Language Arts term project, I wrote a series of Holden Caulfield knock-offs—short sketches that plumbed my deepest fears and secret prejudices. I wrote about the dark thoughts I harbored toward teachers, my family, and myself. But I reserved my nastiest barbs and diatribes for classmates,

especially the clique and the popular girls.

Mr. Aaron encouraged me to show the sketches to the school yearbook editors. I was flattered, but I wasn't sure I could show anything this personal to strangers. Suppose they hated it? Worse yet, what if they wanted to publish it? Then everyone would know what I was thinking.



I'd always been curious about Rita Caselli and Sarah Broomfield, the yearbook's editors. I'd observed them in the halls and in the cafeteria talking to their Bohemian friends. Both were eighth graders who looked older and acted far more aloof and sophisticated than any of the other girls. Both had dark, braided long hair, and they dressed like identical twins: loose-fitting black cable-knit sweaters, black wool scarves that hung down to their knees, baggy black skirts, black socks, and either high, black boots or Indian moccasins. Their faces were pale and washed-out looking. And they never wore make-up or lipstick. They always looked like they'd stayed out all night at some Greenwich Village jazz club, smoking reefer and drinking hard whiskey. I could imagine them five years from now studying literature or philosophy at Mount Holyoke, Smith, or Radcliff—or any of the other exclusive “Seven Sisters” colleges.

Whenever I'd see them in the cafeteria, they'd be hanging out with a small entourage of eighth grade girls who looked and dressed just like they did. I'd sometimes eavesdrop while they spoke in hushed, serious tones about the books they were reading and the cool musicians who were “gigging down in the Village.” I knew I wasn't “hip” enough for this crowd. Yet these two girls were the only ones I'd encountered in seven years of school who even talked about books and writers. For a moment, I entertained the fantasy that we were kindred spirits—and so, perhaps they might even like my sketches. But I couldn't just barge in on them and say, “My teacher, Mr. Aaron, told me to give these to you.”

To find out, then, what I was up against, I made a scouting trip to the yearbook's office.



The "office" was at the far end of the third floor, right next to the fire escape. The room was a converted supply closet that reeked of stale cigarette smoke, Clorox, and coffee grinds.

For all its grunginess, the place had kind of musty old bookstore charm about it. The chipped, peeling walls were covered with black and white posters of writers from the 20s and 30s, like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Steinbeck.

When I peeked through the half-opened door, the two girls had their backs to me. They were leaning over a scratched oak desk that was strewn with sheets of wrinkled, typewritten pages. Both were chain-smoking and sipping coffee as they passed the pages back and forth. I could hear faint muted strains of music coming from a radio. It sounded like the jazz—Miles Davis, Coltrane, Monk—that I listened to on the Jazzbo Collins show late at night.

I felt a sharp pang in my chest. I pictured myself sitting with Rita and Sarah at some imagined jazz club in the West Village, smoking, talking about our favorite books and writers, and intermittently downing shots of Scotch.

After a week of procrastination and worry, I finally put my sketches in a brown manila envelope and wrote my name and homeroom class on the front. Then I held onto the envelope for two more days. On a Friday afternoon when I knew everyone would be gone, I slid the envelope under the office door. As soon as it left my hand, I immediately wanted to take it back. I even tried to slide my hand under the door crack before giving up.

I fretted for days over what they'd think of my writing. Then one morning during homeroom, a hall monitor handed me a coffee-stained envelope. The stains had blurred all but my last name, and I could barely make out the homeroom number. I

instinctively knew it was bad news. Why else would they be sending back the envelope? My ears burned and my heart was thumping so loudly that I was sure everyone could hear it. I couldn't bring myself to open the envelope.

I thought about it all morning until I couldn't stand the tension any longer. In fourth period Social Studies, I asked for a bathroom pass and ducked beneath a staircase where no one could see me. All I could hope for was a polite rejection. Or maybe some suggestions on how to improve the writing. I ripped the envelope open and inside was a handwritten note. Two short sentences: "We don't accept work like this. Besides, it isn't typed." It was signed "the Editors."

My knees began to shake. I read those heartless comments over and over again. What did they mean by "work like this"? I felt a momentary stab of anger. It was all Mr. Aaron's fault. Why did he subject me to this? When the anger passed, I began to blame myself. I should have known better. I hadn't felt so shamed since the seventh grade dance.

All afternoon, I walked around in a stupor. In the halls, I avoided eye contact with everyone. On the bus ride home, I sat alone and buried my head in a book. The rejection stung so much that finally I couldn't keep it to myself. I blurted it out to my parents at dinner.

"You took a chance and it didn't work out," my father said. "You'll bounce back."

Easy for him to say. I wish I had his resilience.

My mother felt sorry for me—which was, of course, the sympathy I was looking for. She suggested I talk to Mr. Aaron. Maybe he could say something to the two editors. It was good of her to take my setback to heart. But the last thing I wanted was to give those two harpies the satisfaction of knowing how I felt.



For the next few weeks, I'd imagine them in that broom

closet, laughing and making fun of my writing. When I passed them in the halls, I couldn't bear to look either one in the eye. Even if I did have the balls to stare them down, they wouldn't have had the slightest idea who I was.

What's worse, I wondered, being rejected or being invisible? In two years of junior high, those seemed to be my only two options.

So, I turned my attention to making the summer V.F.W. baseball team. Fueled by the two editors' rejection, and still driven to prove myself to the clique and their arrogant girlfriends, all that summer it seemed as if I was on an urgent mission. If I didn't play for the V.F.W. team, there was virtually no chance of making the high school varsity—my obsessive dream since the seventh grade dance.

Pitcher Wannabe

At thirteen, I was what baseball coaches called a “shlepper”—a slightly awkward but not entirely inept athlete. I knew I'd never be one of the top baseball players. I'd seen a lot of games, and I could spot the good ones in an instant. They have an effortless grace, an ease and fluidity that infuse every gesture. I'd never have that kind of raw ability. Still, I was driven to pitch.



That summer, I literally taught myself to pitch. I read dozens of how-to books and I scrutinized the mechanics and flaws of the major league hitters I watched on TV and in person. On home Saturdays, I went to Ebbets Field and sat directly behind the plate—the best angle for studying the Dodger pitchers' habits and delivery. And I took pages and pages of notes.

Preacher Roe was tall and lanky, all arms and legs. He had a big sweeping motion and high leg kick that shielded the ball from the batter's line of vision. Don Newcombe was built like

a lumberjack. He had a ninety mile-an-hour fastball, and a perpetual scowl designed to intimidate opposing hitters.

Still, Carl Erskine was the pitcher I identified with most. He had a slender build—narrow shoulders and a tapered waist. He looked more like a distance runner than a pitcher. But he threw a sneaky fastball and a wicked overhand sinker that induced hitters to beat the ball into the ground. I noticed too that he threw all his pitches, including the change-up, with the same motion. What made him so effective was that the hitters couldn't pick up the ball's rotation until it was right on top of them.

Moreover, I liked his cunning and resilience. In a *Sporting News* interview, an opposing manager had said that unless you got to him right away, you were in for long day. But even when he got roughed in the early innings, I noticed that Erskine rarely lost his composure. Usually, he'd settle down by the third inning. Just like the article said, he'd get stronger as the game went on. That summer, I studied him more carefully than the others.



There were moments that summer when pitching seemed to come naturally to me. If I concentrated hard enough, I could throw strikes, change speeds, and make the ball sink or break sharply away from the batter. I even had a knack for sizing up hitters' weaknesses. I could tell what a batter's blind spots were just by studying his habits and mannerisms.

As a pitcher, my inhibitions and self-doubts seemed to dissolve. Whenever I was out on the mound, I felt as self-assured as I did when I was sitting in the stands at Ebbets Field, studying pitchers' mechanics and explaining the ins and outs of the game to my cronies, Mike and Peter.

When I pitched, every inning and every batter was a challenge. On the mound, all of my senses were open. I could feel the warm breeze on my cheeks, hear the muffled noise of the crowd, my teammates' chatter, and the other team's barbs. None of it distracted me. In fact, it made me bear down harder.

Even the little gestures and rituals felt natural; tossing the spongy resin bag nonchalantly to the ground and watching the swirl of dust kick up, or inhaling a baseball's pungent scent, rubbing up its smooth, slick surface, wrapping my thumb, index, and middle fingers around the ball's raised seams, searching for the right grip on the curve, fastball, sinker, or change-up. Most of all, I relished the cat and mouse game that went on between pitcher and hitter—me deciding what pitches to throw, the hitter trying to guess.



I didn't throw hard enough to have what coaches call a "live arm." To build my strength and endurance, each morning I got up early and ran on the beach—wearing army boots and a rubber jacket. During the day, I pedaled my bike even harder when I delivered prescriptions. After work, I'd go down into our cool, damp cellar and lift weights.

I soon began to think of myself as a pitcher. In emulation of the big leaguers, I'd walk around the neighborhood, even on the hottest days, wearing a satin baseball jacket draped across my right shoulder. Whenever anyone asked me about it, I'd explain that it was to keep my pitching arm warm between games.

In the evenings, I set up a regular practice routine. First, I cut a twelve-inch hole (the size of home plate) in a bed sheet, and hung it on the backyard clothesline. Then every night until it got dark, I threw hundreds of rubber-covered baseballs at the target. I got those balls by trading my Topps and Bowman bubble gum cards with Arnold Berkowitz, who worked at the local batting range.

By mid-July, I could throw four out of every five pitches through the bed sheet hole. By the end of the summer, I could throw three of five with a blindfold on. Some evenings, my brother, Alan, stood in front of the garage door with a bat in his hand while I pitched shaved tennis balls to him. By trimming the ball's fuzz, you could make it break and dip crazily. The more I

worked at pitching, the more instinctive it felt. By mid-summer, it was as natural to me as reading a book.

I was convinced that with the right guidance and coaching, I could get a lot better at this.

Parts of this essay appeared in a different form in *Still Pitching: A Memoir*. Michigan State University Press, 2003.