Johnny K Heading Home is an exciting, sometimes humorous, and always fast moving story of a kid growing up in a "loving," albeit dysfunctional, family. A friend said I should have called it: Leave it to Beaver Meets Bart Simpson.

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The characters and events in this book are true. Some of the names have been changed to protect the innocent.

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John Kanelous

Chapter VIII The Coal Silos

Just to the east of Baldwin was the town of Freeport, best known for its picturesque fishing boats, docks, fish stores and seafood restaurants which lined the west side of Woodcleft Canal. It was a long straight creek that emptied into Great South Bay. Nearly on the border of Baldwin, north of the Long Island Railroad tracks was an industrial area that once supplied the whole area with coal. By 1952, oil had pretty much replaced coal as a fuel, and the area had been abandoned.

One summer day, Doug and I rode our bikes to the reservoir located just east of Nunley's Carousel along Sunrise Highway, bordering on Freeport. This was one of our favorite play spots – there was always something fun to do.

The reservoir was large, south a half a mile or so to Merrick Road, where there was a concrete mini-dam with a four-foot-wide overflow channel. The channel funneled the gushing excess water, dropping several feet into a brook that meandered into Great South Bay. Its banks were lined with cat o' nine tails, a favorite habitat of red-winged blackbirds. There were a lot of muddy flats where we often sank up to our knees.

Sometimes, on a dare, one of us would trudge deep into these mud flats and really get stuck. In these cases, the other would find a branch or old piece of rope to help the other out. There was also an old raft some kids had made out of empty gasoline cans and scraps of lumber found strewn around the shoreline. Occasionally, we would give it a go. We

never got far from shore, however, as it was not seaworthy. Our fear in using the raft however, was not of drowning, but of the mud we would have to cross to get back to solid ground. We were not sure how deep the mud actually was in the larger flats, and the thought of sinking over our heads in mud was a very scary thought.

"Hey, Doug," I said. "Let's go for a bike ride."

"Where to?" asked Doug, who was ready to do anything.

"Freeport," I answered, thinking we could ride around Main Street. There were some neat stores there, like a hobby shop, sports store and a five and dime.

"Okay." Doug approved.

With Doug in hot pursuit, off I went, tear-assing on my wide-tire Schwinn along the sidewalk running alongside of Sunrise Highway. About half way to the town, I noticed two huge silos rising above the huge maple and oak trees just north of the tracks that ran parallel to the highway. I jammed my foot on the brakes, my rear tire sliding out to the side as I came to an abrupt stop. Doug swerved barely missing my rear wheel.

"Gees, John, I hate when you do that!" Doug said a little exacerbated.

"What are those things?" I asked, ignoring the remark.

"I dunno, maybe it's a farm," he said, having seen silos on a farm.

"Yeah, let's check it out," I said, thinking there might be some cows there.

"Awright," Doug responded approvingly.

We rode across the six-lane highway, then carried our bikes across the LIRR tracks, carefully avoiding the third rail. We hid our bikes in the underbrush alongside the track bed. We created our own path through an area of overgrown bushes and small trees that opened onto a large concrete tarmac. The tall weeds growing between the cement cracks were a testament to the fact that this area had not been used for a very long time. Scattered about were low piles of black coal, and toward the back were two gigantic silos, each about sixteen feet in diameter, about sixty feet high, and about ten feet apart. The entire desolate area was blackened from years of storing and hauling coal. It had an eerie, almost frightening, appearance. Disappointed it was not a farm; we pushed on to explore the scary area. I walked up to one of the gigantic, blackened silos. Waves of fear flushed my body, adding to the excitement.

"Hey Doug, this silo has a door in it." I said, as I cautiously walked through the door with Doug not far behind. Although it was early afternoon, the inside of the silo was very dark with its blackened walls. Its only light source was the small door we had just walked through, and a small opening just below the silo roof that must have been used as a coal chute. A blackened steel ladder ran vertically practically out of sight up the silo wall ending at the rectangular small opening. There was still a foot or so of fist sized coal on the floor, crunching as we walked toward the ladder.

"Let's climb it," I suggested.

"Not me, no way!" said Doug

"Come on. Don't be a chicken," I challenged.

"Uh, uh," he muttered.

Without giving it a second thought, I started up the ladder. As I approached the top, my arms and legs were burning with exhaustion. I wondered if this was really a good idea.

The silo was constructed of cinder blocks about eight inches in depth. On the bottom edge of the opening, centered on the cinder blocks, was a concrete ledge about twelve inches wide extending its entire width of the window. The opening was a lot larger than it looked from the bottom. It was actually about four feet wide and about five feet tall.

With arms and legs trembling from fear and exhaustion, I climbed up onto the last rung of the ladder, about two feet below the ledge. I felt weak. I knew I had to sit down on the ledge to get my strength back. I balanced myself with my shaking left hand along the vertical edge of the opening, then very carefully swung my left leg over the ledge, straddling it. I sat for a minute in silence as the fear and exhaustion subsided. After gaining my composure, I checked out the vistas through the opening and then looked down into the dark abyss of the silo. I could just barely make out Doug's small frame silhouetted against the darkness from the subdued light coming through the small door at the base of the silo.

"This is great, Doug, you can see Nunley's from here. Come on up! There's plenty of room for you to sit." I hollered, my voice eerily echoing off the enclosed chamber.

Seeing I had made it up Okay gave him the confidence to try it. As he started to climb the ladder, I gave him some advice. “Don’t look down!”

“Okay,” Doug acknowledged.

He struggled the last ten feet as I did, and as he approached the top, I told him how to get onto the ledge. He was apprehensive that he could do it, but I assured him how easy it was. As he duplicated the moves I had made with his opposite arms and legs, I held onto his belt to make sure he did not lose his balance. Exhausted, he sat on the other side across from me, straddling the ledge as I instructed. He, too, sat silent, resting and contemplating what he had just done.

“Wow! This is great!” he said after looking out of the five story high opening. He then looked down for the first time, first toward the outside, then into the blackened silo. His expression changed from satisfaction and pride to guttural fear.

“I told you, don’t look down,” I said disapprovingly.

“Let’s get outta here,” said Doug, obviously shaken up and realizing the danger we were in.

The second silo was identical to the one we were in, except its opening faced us. Stretched between the two silo openings was an old and weathered wooden ladder. Each end of the ladder rested securely on the opening ledges. The ladder was constructed of two-by-four rails, with one-by-three slats nailed to the two-inch sides. It was obviously made without the use of a square because the slats and rails were all a little crooked. Each slat was fastened a little more than one foot from the other. Someone

must have put it there a long time ago for a purpose that alluded any kind of logic. but in any event, there it was, beckoning me to crawl across it to explore the other silo. It was about eighteen inches wide, but it looked like it could hold at least one person despite its decrepit and rotted appearance.

"Let's go across to the other side," I suggested.

"No way," Doug said emphatically.

"Okay, I'll go myself," I responded.

"You're crazy," Doug responded admiringly.

I carefully climbed onto the rickety ladder and started across, scooting on my hands and knees. The flat, rotted slats did not inspire confidence, so I kept my weight on top of the two-by-four rails. About halfway across, I noticed the ladder was bending and creaking more than I thought it would, and the fear it was going to break caused me to stop. Momentarily, I was frozen with fear. I wanted to go back to the safety of the ledge, but the thought of crawling backwards, five stories up, was even more frightening. I fought my fear and continued forward inch by inch. With a sigh of relief, I finally reached the other side. I sat on the chute ledge with my legs dangling on the outside of the silo, holding onto the ladder with my left hand for added balance and security. I motioned for Doug to come across.

I wanted Doug to feel the fear as I did. The excitement of fear, and the accompanying adrenaline rush, was always a thrilling experience for me. I could not ever remember being this frightened, and I wanted to share it with Doug.

"Come on, Doug, just don't look down. Keep your eyes on the ladder," I advised.

"Nope, it's too scary," he said unconvincingly.

"Come on. If I did it, so can you. Don't be a chicken," I coaxed.

"Oh, awright," he said as he climbed onto the makeshift ladder.

"Keep your hands and knees along the top edges, it's stronger there," were my final words of advice.

He kept his hands along the edges as I suggested, but his knees were not. About halfway across, I heard a crack as Doug's right knee went through a slat. The rotted piece fell to the ground below making a slapping sound, echoing up the silo walls as it hit the concrete slab below. I saw the panicked look on his face as he thought he was going to fall, but he struggled for a moment and was able to get his leg back onto the ladder rail.

"Keep your legs on the edge!" I screamed, as he quickly scampered the remaining distance to the safety of the ledge.

"Shit," he said, still in shock. "I'm not going back across that thing."

And neither was I. "We'll go down this side," I said confidently.

When I turned and stared down into the blackness, my eyes adjusted to the low light and it was then I noticed, to my horror, the second silo was partially filled with coal. There was no door. There was no way out! We had to cross back over the rotted ladder, which was now missing a middle wrung, if we were to get out of there. We sat on the ledge for what seemed

like hours, trying to get up enough courage to cross it. But we were both too frightened.

Dusk was now approaching, which added to our fear and growing panic. Almost in unison we started yelling for help at the top of our lungs. We yelled and yelled, but no one heard us.

"Doug, we can't spend the night on this ledge," I said despondently. "We have got to go across!"

"I can't," he said, terrified at the thought.

"I am heavier than you. If I can make it then so can you," I said reassuringly, but feeling terrified myself. "I am going to do it. I have to do it. I'm not staying here. It will hold," I said, trying to pump myself up.

I studied the now damaged ladder with it's nearly three feet long gaping hole between the weathered and partially rotted rails. The thought of crossing that gap on my hands and knees, with nothing else between me and the cement slab below except two widely separated, skinny rails, was absolutely terrifying. The missing slat also revealed a noticeable rotted area on the left rail.

"I'll have to avoid putting my knee on that area," I thought, talking myself into doing it. And, if that weren't enough, there were two rusty six-pennyweight nail heads sticking up half an inch above the two-by-four rails where the, now missing slat, had been attached.

"Need to avoid those nails," I thought, preparing myself mentally to cross over. "If they catch on my jeans, I am in big trouble. If I kneel on one of them it's going to hurt like hell. I could lose my balance. Jesus

Christ, it's getting dark. I can't do this in the dark – I've got to do it now while I can still see the ladder."

With my heart pounding, I knelt on hands and knees onto the rickety ladder. Carefully and slowly, I kept my hands and knees along the rails. I came to the hole created from the missing slat. I was almost paralyzed with fear, but I continued on, carefully avoiding the nails and the rotted rail area, inch by inch trying to avoid any unnecessary movement causing a rail to break. When I reached the ledge on the adjacent silo, I quickly straddled the ledge and beckoned for Doug to come across.

"Come on, Doug. If I could do it so can you! I am heavier than you. If it held for me it will hold for you," I coaxed.

Doug was crying.

"I can't do it!" he whimpered.

"Yes you can. It will hold you. I'm heavier than you are and it held me. Come on! I'll help you when you get to this end. Come on! Come on Doug! It's getting dark, you have to do it now!" I repeated my plea.

"Okay, Johnny, I'll try. If you did it then I can do it too." He reassured himself.

Doug fearfully climbed hands and knees onto the ladder, still whimpering softly.

"That's it. Don't look down. Keep your eye on the ladder. Stay on the edges. Watch those nails. You can do it!" I said guiding him across.

As he approached the ledge, I grabbed hold of his shirt with both hands to help balance him. He rapidly crawled the last few feet and maneuvered onto the other side of the ledge.

"Awright! Goddamn! You made it" I exclaimed, grateful he did not fall to his death.

"Yeah," he said shakily, but proud of himself. His tears now gave way to a big smile.

"Let's go home," he said triumphantly.

"I'll go first," I said confidently, sure the climb down would be a snap.

The sun had set and it was getting dark. I peered down into the blackness that lay below. A slight glow appeared through the still-open door at the base. As I descended the steel ladder, a total blackness filled the silo. I could not see the rungs on the ladder and had to rely on my sense of feel to find each rung. Suddenly, a new wave of fear struck me, causing me to stop. I felt weak, and I was afraid to move a muscle for fear of losing my grip and falling into the dark, bottomless pit. I could hear Doug above me as his shoes made contact with the rungs.

"I can't see a goddamned thing," I blurted out, practically in panic.

"Neither can I, " Doug said with a trembling voice.

At hearing Doug's voice, I mysteriously regained my strength and confidence to feel my way down the ladder. At last, I felt the wonderful crunch of coal on my feet and knew I had made it. I turned my head for the first time after my tedious and frightful descent, and could see the dim

gray light of approaching nightfall coming through the open doorway. I ran jubilantly out the door into the nearly black night. Doug followed seconds later.

We both silently ran, retracing our path to the railroad tracks. We found our stashed bicycles, crossed the track sections and headed for home.

I arrived late for dinner. Mom asked me where I had been.

I truthfully answered, "At the reservoir."

"You know I don't like you playing there. It is very dangerous. A boy your age drowned there a couple of weeks ago falling off a raft. I hope you did not go out on that raft."

"No, I didn't," I said, not mentioning the previous times I had done so.

"Jesus Christ! The things you get into. Sit down. I saved you some dinner"

I do not know what happened to Doug when he got home. Actually, I did not see him again for several months, and we never spoke about our awesome caper.

Some Mistakes Are Bad

Dad was a practical joker. Any chance he got to scare a kid was considered fun, and everyone laughed. Cousin Helen, who lived in New York City, was one of his favorite targets. She came to visit often when school was out. She was very high strung for a fifth grader.

Once when she was at the dining table, as dinner was about to get started, Dad sneaked up behind her and dropped his car keys from high above her head onto her empty plate directly in front of her. The plate amplified the crackling sound as the keys smacked into it. She screamed hysterically, and her hair actually stood on end. Not only did we all get a big laugh out of it at the time, but it was a great memory that got told and re-told at the dinner table, always inspiring some hearty laughter.

Scaring someone was good fun.

"Scaring a pet should then be fun too," I thought.

Following the burglary incident, and the gun fiasco, Dad thought we needed a dog for protection. What is the best guard dog? A Doberman pinscher. So Dad bought a fully-grown Doberman and brought it home. The beautiful dog walked gracefully into the kitchen for the first time, Dad still holding him on his leash supplied by the pet store. He walked directly up to me and started sniffing my face. I was only five years old at the time, so the dog and I stood eye to eye. I looked him in the eye and went "Boo!" The Doberman, yet unnamed, was not scared, and proceeded to bite me across my face, puncturing both of my cheeks with its fangs. The dog was quickly returned, and I was blamed for biting the dog on the nose. No one believed all I did was say boo.

I quickly recovered from the physical wounds, but in another incident a few years later, when I was eight, the emotional wounds lasted a lifetime. There are some mistakes you make in life that haunt you forever.

After the Doberman, Dad decided a dachshund would be a safer alternative, so one day a new dog there appeared. Mom and Dad named him Murdock. Everybody loved and knew Murdock, even people we had never met, because he loved to roam the neighborhood making new friends along the way. He had crook n his tail, making him easily recognizable from other dachshunds. His tail had been broken when it accidentally got caught in the folding seat mechanism of the car as he was racing out of the back seat. He was cute looking, smart and totally unmanageable and independent. He bit every one of my friends at least once, and some on many occasions. He was never really housebroken. During the day, he would scratch on the door when he had to go, but at night he would do his duty and pee all over the kitchen. He chewed up anything that was not hidden from him, and he did exactly as he pleased. He sat on his haunches at the dinner table and was always rewarded with scraps. He would eat virtually anything that originated from a plate. Mom and Dad treated him more as a family member than a dog.

Over the years, we also had several pet cats that Murdock tolerated, but stray cats were promptly chased, usually up a tree, where they stayed until Murdock got bored and left.

One of Murdock's favorite places to nap the day away was our living room bay window. He loved to lie in the afternoon sun that streamed through the many-paned French windows.

Our pet cat had recently had a litter of kittens. Mom gave away most of them, but I got to keep one female calico I named Bootsy because of

her white paws. I was not much of a cat person, but I really liked Bootsy. She grew up fast, and was almost full sized when I came up with a neat way to scare Murdock.

One day, while Murdock was snoozing in the bay window, I picked up Bootsy and tossed her on top of Murdock, expecting to scare him out of his wits. However, my joke backfired. Suddenly, there was a tremendous commotion as Murdock, in the blink of an eye, sprang to his feet, and, to my horror, snapped his jaws around her head. Instantly, he shook her violently back and forth like a rag doll, breaking her neck. It happened so fast that I did not have time to do anything. I just stood there dumbfounded.

Mom, hearing the noise of cat howls and Murdock's ferocious growling came running into the living room.

"What the hell is going on in here?" she shrieked at me.

"I dunno! Murdock had a fight with the cat," I sheepishly answered, leaving out the part where I deliberately threw her onto Murdock. As I approached the bay window, I saw Bootsy lying motionless. Murdock, sensing he had done something wrong, quickly jumped off the base of the window, onto the couch, and headed for the safety of his rumpled bed under the breakfast nook table.

"Don't know. Not dunno," Mom corrected me.

"I think she is dead," I said feeling guilty I had just killed her.

"Take her to the woods and bury her," said Mom coldly, not knowing what really happened.

"Okay Mom," I said, trying not to cry.

I lifted Bootsy and held her in my arms as I walked grimly to an open grassy area of the woods. I laid her there and went back to the woodshed that was attached to the back of the house to get a shovel. When I returned, to my horror, I noticed Bootsy blink her eyes, and then she opened her mouth as if to cry out in silent pain. Her neck had been broken, but she was not dead.

"I cannot bury her alive," I thought. "I have to put her out of her misery." So I headed despondently back to the shed, where I picked up a hammer and returned to my dying Bootsy. I knelt over her nearly lifeless body and petted her hoping she would die peacefully on her own, but she continued to move her mouth and blink profusely. I could not stand to see her suffering. I felt nauseous that I was responsible for her condition. In an act of mercy, I hit her with a hard blow to the head with the hammer, attempting to end her short life. Shaking almost uncontrollably, I stood and reached for the shovel to complete the burial. In her silent agony, mouth agape, she again began to blink her big yellow eyes.

"Oh, my God, she is still alive," I thought. Sobbing, I knelt beside her and hit her again, and again and again. Wracked with grief and guilt as I pummeled her head, I suddenly felt a paralyzing wave of fear engulf my body. Leaving the shovel and hammer behind, I ran in mindless panic to the safety of home across the street.

When I entered the house Mom asked, "Did you bury the cat?"

"Yes!" I lied – as I buried the memory, but not the nightmares that would haunt me for years to come.

The Wave

As a young kid, I had two Grandpas, one on my mother's side who lived in Brooklyn; the other was Dad's father, known to me as Popou (pronounced pa-poo). Popou lived a mile or so away in the southern part of Baldwin on a street called Eastern Boulevard that connected Milburn Avenue and Atlantic Avenue. He and Nauna (pronounced naw-nuh) lived on a corner lot in a white brick bungalow with two large bay windows on either side of the front door. In the back, there was a large screened-in porch with a shingled roof, and a three-foot-high brick footer forming the perimeter and supporting the gabled roof. Popou built the bay windows and the screen room himself.

Dad and his brother, John, subsidized Popou's Social Security checks by each sending him one hundred dollars per month. Uncle John often kicked in more than Dad – he could afford it.

In his day, Popou was a tough customer. He was born in Greece, but came to the United States through South America. Leaving his wife and kids at home, he was commissioned as a ship's chandler bound for Montevideo, Uruguay, where he was arrested and did jail time for smuggling. Nauna, still living in Greece – took the children, John, Julia and baby Dad – to Uruguay to help get Popou out of jail. We never did find out what he tried to smuggle into Uraguay. He was a ship's carpenter

by trade, and after his release from jail he decided to exit stage left, moving the family to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he launched his own boat-building business.

After hearing about the economic opportunities in New York City through relatives who were living there, he decided to take a chance and emigrate with the whole family to the U.S. where he found work as a general contractor.

Popou's English was never that good, but he sure knew how to get his message across. As one story goes, Popou was the general contractor on a construction project in lower Manhattan. The project was running behind schedule. The draws from the bank, which occurred as things were completed, had put him in the arrears with a loan shark who had fronted him the money to get things started. While Popou was directing his crew, the loan shark approached him demanding money. Popou invited him to talk it over in the office, a portable wooden shack on wheels. The man followed him up the three roughly made steps and sat down with Popou at the small round conference table.

From under his coat, Popou pulled out his Colt .45 pistol and laid it on the table.

Popou stared sternly across the table into the loan shark's frightened eyes and asked, "What's the problem?"

"No problem, Kanelous! Take all the time you need," he said nervously, as he sprung up from the table and ran out the door.

Occasionally, mostly on a Sunday, Mom and Dad would take Irene and me, but not Linda, to Popou and Nauna's for a late afternoon get-together and dinner. Linda did not like to socialize with the family, and usually declined any offer to go anywhere. Nauna made her own yogurt from scratch. It was a disgusting process, but it did taste good. Popou did a lot of the cooking, and fried the fresh catch of the day when the snappers were running. Salt, pepper, butter and lemon were his only ingredients. I loved the way he prepared them, and I loved to fish for them.

During the summer I would ride my bike the mile or so to his house, usually at the crack of dawn, and we would then head to a bogged area across from where his boat, the Athens, was docked. Sometimes he would take me on the Athens, a thirty-six-foot converted navy launch, into Great South Bay, where weather permitting, we sometimes went through the treacherous Jones Beach Inlet into the ocean.

One summer afternoon, we all met at the Athens to spend the day on the bay. There was a small cove at the far end of Jones Beach called Short Beach. The shoreline of the cove was covered with fine white sand, perfect for bathing. Farther back from the water's edge were sand dunes with sparse patches of clumped tall grass on top. The dunes stretched southward, where another, much larger, beach area, Jones Beach, met the Atlantic Ocean. From the cove it was only about a fifteen minute walk to the ocean, but it meant trespassing through the nesting grounds for terns and seagulls which would attack you if you got too close to their nests.

Dodging the diving birds was fun the first few times, but it got old and was more of a pain than anything else.

Although the cove was small, only about a hundred yards wide, it seemed that every boat in the bay ended up there. Finding a place to drop anchor without crossing another's line was a problem. Sometimes groups of boats would tie up together and party the afternoon away. Most of the larger boats had dinghies, but we did not, so we had to be content watching the beach.

It was hot, and I was getting bored just sitting there.

"Popou, let's go through the inlet," I suggested.

Popou thoughtfully looked westward toward the Coast Guard station that guarded the mouth of the inlet on the Jones Beach side. On the other side of the inlet was Long Beach, another popular beach. There was a huge flagpole adjacent to their building where they hoisted weather advisory flags. He studied the flags, looked carefully at the sky, then glanced at the shoreline checking tide conditions.

"Okay, Johnny, we go," Popou said authoritatively.

I was excited. I had been on the ocean two other times with him, and it was so much fun riding the swells. Mom and Dad bored with just baking in the sun agreed it was a good idea, although they had no idea what they were getting into.

We pulled up anchor and threaded our way out of the cove between the crowd of weekend boaters. We slowly headed west toward Long Beach following the coastline.

We continued westward until we were at the gateway to the inlet, then we turned to port, and headed south into the inlet toward the open ocean. The calmness of the bay rapidly gave way to waves two to three feet in height. Popou cautiously proceeded into the inlet, searching for telltale signs of trouble that would cause us to turn back.

"Don't know, Johnny, looks rough," Popou said in his Greek accent, unsure he wanted to continue.

"Oh, come on, Popou, this is fun," I pleaded.

Popou studied the water ahead, looking for signs of whitecaps, a sure indication it was not safe. There were none.

"Okay, Johnny, we do it," Papou said.

"Yeah!" I excitedly approved.

Mom and Dad, with Irene in between, were sitting on a wide, cushioned bench across the stern of the boat. They were not talking, and looked a little queasy from the rolling motion of the boat. Popou reached for two orange life jackets stowed above his head, threw them back toward us and ordered Irene and me to put them on.

"George, make sure they are on securely," he barked to his son.

"Okay, Pop," he obeyed.

Popou was not worried, but he had a healthy respect for the sea. He knew the Athens, a converted navy launch, was a seaworthy vessel, with its high-flaring bow and low superstructure, and knew it could take just about anything the inlet could dish out.

About halfway through the inlet, where it was the roughest, waves were now four to five feet in height and moving swiftly toward us, plowing into the bow of the boat. The big difference between ocean waves and inlet waves is not in the size, but in the distance between crests, also known as the wavelength. As the inlet compresses the sea's power during changing tides, the wavelength becomes much closer together accelerating the apparent movement of the wave. Many a sailor had underestimated the danger posed by the inlet, and paid the price with their boats as well as their lives.

Popou was standing solidly at the wheel, legs apart, navigating from behind the windshield in the mostly enclosed bridge. I was behind him, kneeling on the starboard bench near the stern with my head hanging over the side, mesmerized by the action of the concave bow knifing through the huge waves. Sometimes a gust of wind would blow the white, foaming spray into my face, cooling me from the hot summer sun. Mom found the salt-water spraying in her face annoying, so with Irene in tow, they moved forward under the protection of the covered bridge, and sat in the directors chairs.

Mom, noticing me leaning over the side, screamed "Johnny, sit down, you're going to fall out and drown!"

Popou turned and gave me a look. Instantly, I moved to the starboard corner of the rear bench, sitting down immediately, but still able to lean far enough over the side to watch the action of the bow plowing through the ever roughening surf.

With the inlet behind us, we cruised into the open ocean, where the sea became a vista of watery hills and valleys. The Athens would slowly ascend, then descend, the rolling waves as we headed for deeper water south of Jones Beach. Mom and Dad now seemed to be enjoying the cruise, sitting in two director's chairs plopped between the bridge and the stern. Popou had earlier retrieved the canvas-and-wood folding chairs from the cabin where they had been stowed. Their initial queasiness had apparently disappeared. Irene had joined me on the bench. The rhythmical movement of the boat, the fascinating motion of the water, and the almost cloudless blue sky were all one could ask for a magical afternoon.

"Got to get back," Popou declared in Greek, as he slowly turned around, noticeably increasing speed. From our position, you could see Jones Beach and the Coast Guard station in the distance, which meant we were no more than a half-hour offshore.

"What's the matter, Pop?" Dad asked in Greek.

"Sea's picking up. It's time to get back," Popou replied in Greek. He preferred Greek, his native tongue.

"What's the problem?" Mom curiously asked, not understanding Greek and not wanting to be left out of something.

"Nothing. We're just heading back, that's all," Dad replied.

"Oh, that's good. I've had enough," said Mom relieved.

As we approached the inlet, Dad stowed the chairs back in the cabin, then stood next to his dad, holding onto the cabin hatch for balance. Mom, not wanting to get wet, moved herself and Irene under the canopy of the

bridge, sitting on the port-side bench. I sat sideways on the stern bench, with my back twisted away from the bridge, watching the large waves rolling in from behind the boat. When we were in the trough of one wave, the next wave appeared to loom eight to ten feet above us. Then, as it rolled under and lifted the boat, the next deep trough appeared behind us. I could feel the boat accelerate on the forward part of the wave, then slow up dramatically on the backside as the wave passed underneath us.

We were in the most dangerous part of the inlet. I was still watching the rapidly moving waves as they sped toward the stern of the boat, disappearing under the boat lifting us high above the next trough, then back down again, as if we were riding a roller coaster. It was exciting.

I was constantly scanning the waves, looking for the large ones that were more fun. Suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared a really huge one not far behind us. It was twice as high as the other waves I had seen, and had white foam running along its crest.

"Hey, Dad, look at the size of that wave," I yelled enthusiastically.

Dad turned, curiously peering over the stern of the Athens. As she rose from the trough, the giant wave came into view. Dad's eyes suddenly widened in fear as he recognized the enormity of this wave. He grabbed Popou's shoulder and turned him abruptly as he shouted, "Pop! Pop!" pointing over the stern to a wall of water now right behind us, and closing fast.

"Jesus Christ," Popou blurted out, as he trimmed the throttle.

The gigantic wall of water was now directly behind the boat. The Athens stern dropped abruptly into the deep trough, and was sucked backwards and upwards, climbing the face of the steep wave that was moving much faster than the boat. The bow of the boat tilted severely downward as it passed through the trough and up the wave, accelerating as if we were on a surfboard riding a wave. Suddenly, we leveled out high atop the foaming crest, then heard the thunderous sound of the huge wave breaking below us. The water instantly turned into a churning white mass. The Athens lurched precipitously into the foamy turbulence of the breaking behemoth, rolling on its side, then spinning violently, practically in a complete circle, tossing everyone onto the deck. Before we could get up, the next wave hit us broadside, and again the Athens almost rolled over.

Popou, finally able to regain his feet, jumped to the helm and struggled for control as the Athens was tossed like a toothpick in the violent, churning water below. Suddenly, the white water dissipated and the sea returned to normal. Relieved that we survived, Popou headed north towards the bay.

An eighty-five-foot commercial fishing boat, out of Freeport and heading out the inlet, noticed we were in trouble. The large vessel swung around and pulled alongside us.

"You okay?" the captain hollered through an open window on the enclosed bridge.

"We're okay," screamed Popou, still in a state of shock.

"Thought you was goin down. Saw your prop," the captain yelled.

"Scared the hell out of us," Dad yelled back.

"Freak wave! First one I've seen in the inlet. You folks are lucky to be alive," the captain bellowed, as he slowly pulled away, turning back toward the fishing grounds of the open ocean.

We cruised through the open bay, then snaked our way through the ever-narrowing canals and marshy, reed covered bogs to the Athens' dock in Baldwin Harbor. No one said a word. From that day on, Popou stayed in the bay. Mom and Dad never stepped another foot on the Athens, or any other boat for that matter. But I knew that someday I would be back.

The following year, Popou passed away. He had gone to Clearwater, Florida, for vacation. While there, his car accidentally ran into a deep drainage ditch. Although it was not a serious accident, it had caused a bothersome blood clot in his leg. When he got back home to Baldwin, he went to see the doctor who gave him medication to dissolve the clot. He died only hours after taking the anti-clotting pills, causing the clot to dislodge from his leg and travel to his heart, killing him.

Mom and Dad never even told me he died. I overheard them talking about it, and ran upstairs to my room where I cried for hours. I loved my Popou. I did not go to his funeral, either. I was not invited.

After he died, his house and the Athens were sold. Dad got most of his carpentry tools including a large wooden worktable with two built-in vices storing them in the unfinished section of our basement. They sold Popou's huge, leather belt driven, power table saw. Dad had no use for

tools. A hammer, screwdriver and a pair of pliers are all he knew how to use, and he rarely used any of them. Despite this, I was always being blamed for losing his tools.

The Experiment

Since my accident, I was afraid of basements and rarely ventured alone into one. Our basement stairs were located behind a door in the breakfast nook. The stairs led into the finished portion to the right. It had blue and white asbestos tiles on the floor, a TV, a phonograph, a toy chest and two beds set at right angles that served as couches. To the left, through a door, was the unfinished part. It was eerily similar to Aunt Julia's basement, where I had the accident. Both had oil burners, hot air ducts and oil tanks with filling pipes leading to the outside of the house.

The galvanized hot air ducts, installed in the walls, ran through the entire house, and were forever creaking as they expanded and contracted. Sometimes, as they cooled, they let off a loud metallic sound, as if someone hit their head on one of the vents, giving rise to the hair-raising thought that something was in the house. I could hear these sounds in any room. They often scared the hell out of me as I tried to fall asleep.

At the end of the unfinished side of the basement, toward the back yard, there was a narrow wooden door with two small, vertical, side-by-side windows. Through the door, and a step down, was a four-foot-square

stairwell. On the floor of it was a small steel drain cover that led to our very deep cesspool in the back yard.

Concrete steps led upward, alongside the house, to a flagstone patio. The stairwell walls extended about three feet above ground-level. hiding the unsightly stairwell from view, and preventing anyone from accidentally falling into it.

The woodshed jutted off the back of the attached garage. It was a small room barely eight by ten feet in size, which Mom mainly used to store all of her extensive gardening equipment, supplies and the power lawnmower. Mom always bought good rakes and hoes with strong handles. They made great stickball bats, and every now and then I would saw off one of the handles, causing her to flip out.

"Every time I go to rake something, its handle is gone," she would yell in frustration.

"I need them for stickball! They're the only ones that don't break." I, too, was frustrated.

"What about all the broomsticks I bought you?" she asked.

"They stink – one hit and they break. Why don't you just buy an extra rake now and then?" I pleaded.

"Oh, all right. But next time, let me know before you take one," she demanded.

"Okay, Mom."

One boring summer day I was milling around the shed looking for something interesting to do. Mom had a lot of spray cans, mostly

insecticides for her plants. I picked up a can of rose spray and pressed the nozzle. Sprrrt. A powerful powdery spray came out of the tiny hole in the nozzle.

"I wonder what's inside this can that makes it work," I thought.

I dropped the can on the floor, reached for the pick ax I had previously found in the woods, and whacked the can squarely with the pointed end. Pow! There was an explosion scattering the rose dust all over my face and body. I must have closed my eyes right before contact because none of the poisonous spray got in my eyes. I rushed to the hose next to the back of the stairwell and washed off the pink poisonous powder. Still bewildered, I looked inside the gnarled can. It was totally empty. I picked up another aerosol insecticide can and read the back of the label. One statement interested me. "Warning: Do not heat above 120 degrees. It may explode."

Just then my friend Richie appeared at the doorway.

"Whatcha doin?" he asked.

"Nuttin'. Hey, ya know these cans blow up if you get them hot?"

"How ya know that?" asked Richie."

"It says so right here. Look," I said, as I proudly handed him the can, and pointed to the warning.

"So what. Let's go play in the woods." Richie said, uninterested.

"Let's make a bomb," I said enthusiastically.

"How?"

"We'll heat this can up till it blows," I said.

"How ya gonna do that?"

"Easy. Come on, I'll show ya,"

"Hold this can. I'll get the other stuff," I ordered, as I grabbed the one-gallon can of gasoline used for the lawnmower and an empty blue coffee can.

We both walked to the bottom of the stairwell. The basement door was locked, so I went through the house and down to the basement, where I opened the locked door with a skeleton key located on a shelf right next to the door. We took the coffee can, the aerosol can and the can of gasoline and placed them on the workbench. Mom smoked, so there were always books of matches lying around. I filled the bottom of the coffee can with about an inch of gasoline and carried it to the bottom of the stairwell. I placed the aerosol can inside the coffee can.

Excited and a little scared, we both got inside the basement. Through a crack in the door, I started throwing lit matches at the can. I told Richie to get back, and he instantly ran to the opposite wall, but still in the unfinished area. I was on my haunches below the windowpanes, fearing they could blow out. I kept tossing lit matches until finally – Whooosh! The aerosol was engulfed by a mighty burst of fire. I slammed the door shut and headed for the back of the basement. I grabbed Richie by the shirt and pulled him through the door to the finished side. With the door open only a crack we both peered anxiously at the stairwell. We could see the dancing lights against the wall indicating that our fire was still burning.

We waited and waited, but nothing happened.

"Guess it didn't work, eh, John?" Richie asked disappointedly.

"Yeah, guess it didn't," I answered softly, also dejected.

We had just started toward the stairwell door to see what went wrong, when Boooom! – A tremendous explosion rocked us.

"Wow, that was unbelievable!" I said, in awe of the power of the blast. Richie was equally impressed.

We opened the stairwell door. There was no more fire. The coffee can was still there, but its side was ripped down the seam. The aerosol bomb was gone without a trace. It was at least ten feet from the floor of the stairwell up the narrow walls, which meant the can had to have flown straight up to get out of the stairwell.

"I wanna see that can. Let's go look for it. It can't be far away," I exclaimed as I ran up the stairwell.

We started looking in the back yard. It was not on the lawn. We then looked in Mom's garden, a six-foot-wide cultivated area following the white wooden fence surrounding the property. We carefully sidestepped most of the flowers where we could, but many got trampled in our enthusiastic hunt for the remains of our bomb. We stood on the bottom slat of the four-foot-high fence, scrutinizing the neighbors yard, but it was not there.

"Let's check around the house," I said as I dashed out of the back yard with Richie in pursuit.

How it could possibly be anywhere, but the back yard was beyond me. The deep, narrow, stairwell would have forced it to fly straight up. "Where the heck could it be?" I thought.

We checked in all the lush shrubbery against the front and side of the house. It was not on the lawn or in the street.

"Damn, where could it have gone?" I thought, puzzled by its disappearance. "Oh, well, let's make another one," I suggested to Richie.

"Do you got any more cans?" he asked.

"Yeah, we got lots of 'em," I replied as I ran through the back yard gate, heading towards the shed.

"Here's another aerosol. Grab that empty coffee can," I said excitedly at the thought of making another bomb.

In the corner, under the hanging spade and rake, was a wooden milk box. Inside it there were wire metal dividers to hold the quart bottles of milk.

"Let's put this over the top and see what happens," I said, as I picked up the heavy wooden box and headed for the stairwell.

The gasoline can was still sitting on Popou's workbench. Again, I added some gasoline to the coffee can and placed the aerosol can inside of it. I carried it to the stairwell. Knowing from the previous experience that it would not explode immediately, I lit the gasoline by dropping a lit match into the can, placed the milk box over the top of it and ran for cover, closing the door to the stairwell behind me. We both hurried into

the finished side of the basement, waiting with anticipation and excitement for the explosion.

"It's taking too long. The fire must have gone out. Maybe the box put it out," I speculated to Richie, who agreed, since it seemed a much longer wait than the first one.

"Let's check it out," I said.

As I opened the door that separated the two sides of the basement, baaam! There was a tremendous explosion. It was way more powerful than the first one. We both raced to the stairwell door, flinging it open. Checking out the milk box, we saw there was a five-inch splintered hole in the top of it. I pulled off the damaged box, throwing it to the side. Again the coffee can was still there, but this time it was severely mangled and lying on top of the steel drain. The aerosol can again was gone.

Just then I heard Mom, who had come home from the ballet school where she taught.

"Are you down there Johnny?" she called.

"Yes, I'm here with Richie," I said, thankful she had not walked in two minutes earlier.

"What are you doing down there?" Mom queried.

"Just playing," I responded truthfully.

"Go outside and play. I don't like you playing in the house," she demanded.

"Okay Mom," I said. Leaving the gasoline can on the bench and the mess in the stairwell, we ran up the outside stairs, through the back yard and out the west gate heading for the woods.

Chapter XIII Annapolis

The first eight weeks at Annapolis resembled military boot camp. Each squad of fifteen midshipmen was assigned a first-classman (fourth-year midshipman) who was responsible for instructing everyone on how to march, clean and takedown an M-1 rifle and forty-five semi-automatic pistol. Lockers had to be stowed perfectly, and beds made with square corners. We learned how to sail boats, spit-shine shoes and tie knots. We dressed in the traditional white sailor uniform and cap. And we learned we were all in the Navy now, subject to military justice.

Our "firsty" was equivalent to a drill sergeant in the Marines. We were given books on the tradition of the Navy and the Naval Academy, and were expected to memorize them. We were fitted by a legion of tailors for our summer and winter dress uniforms, and were kept busy from six in the morning to ten at night seven days a week. We marched to breakfast, lunch and dinner served in a huge hall seating thirty-six hundred. We marched in parades with M-1s, bayonets fixed. We marched and marched and marched until everyone was sick of marching, and by summer's end, we were as perfect as you can get as marchers.

The food was terrific, and efficiently served by a hundred or more Filipino men. We were required to eat using the square meal method, which meant sitting erect on the edge of the chair, lifting the food straight up with a fork and then at a right-angle turn toward the mouth. Any foul-ups resulted in a "come-around"– that meant showing up at the

upperclassman's room for any harassment they felt appropriate. It usually consisted of push-ups or deep-knee bends, always being ordered to do more than was humanly possible and always resulting in extreme discomfort and apprehension.

"Kanelous, do push-ups till you pass out," was a typical order at a come-around. If I stopped from exhaustion or shear pain, they would scream insults and demand I kept going, sometimes tormenting me for an hour or more. It was extremely intimidating.

Except for the first-classmen assigned to training the plebes, the rest of the brigade, numbering twenty-four hundred or so, were on various warships, getting training in naval navigation and warfare.

We were warned by our drill instructors that when the brigade returned in September the hazing would be severe. Instead of having one ball-breaker for each group of fifteen, each midshipman would have at least one or two pricks to worry about. And Plebes, the name for first-year Midshipmen, would then be required to "Brace-Up," a term used to describe a postural demeanor required while walking the corridors and while sitting for meals. Bracing-up consisted of chest out and chin tucked in to an extreme, distorting one's face. We were told all upperclassmen were to be addressed as "sir," and any insubordination would result in a court-martial, leading to a dishonorable discharge from the Navy, or the brig, or both. Despite the hype, I could not see how things could get any worse.

The entire brigade arrived one night at two o'clock in the morning. Two returning upperclassmen showed up in our room yelling, "Attention! Attention! Get out of that bed! Attention! Brace-up, you maggots! Get the hell out of that bed!"

I must have been having a happy dream, because I had a hell of an erection and despite their fear-mongering, it would not abate. I was totally humiliated. Thank God I slept in skivvies.

Not acknowledging the pitched tent, they continued their rampage. "Sound-off, mister!" one yelled, looking me right in the eye.

"Midshipman Kanelous, sir," I said, still half asleep.

"I can't hear you!" he yelled.

"Midshipman Kanelous, sir!" I screamed.

In the background, I could hear the entire company barking commands to the startled plebes. The cacophony rose to near-hysteria as the upperclassmen announced their arrival and authority over the Class of '64. The ultra-grand entrance was a shock we had not expected, our drill instructors leaving this tradition unsaid.

"There will be a white glove inspection of this room at oh-seven-hundred. If I find one speck of dust anywhere, you will all be put on report. You got that?" one of them growled, trying to sound just as mean as possible.

"Aye-Aye, sir." we all yelled loudly.

My two roommates were what I call dorks. As a matter of fact, the entire company of one hundred was a weird bunch, with not a single

athlete among them except for the brigade heavyweight boxing champion, who took an instant dislike to me.

We stayed up through the remainder of the night and spit-shined the room, searching every ledge and crevice for a speck of dust. Exhausted from lack of sleep and apprehension, we passed the inspection with only a few minor gripes.

Relieved, we all got ready for our first brigade inspection. Over three thousand midshipmen, in black winter dress, formed up in the huge cobblestone courtyard located in front of the many steps that led to the majestic main hall. The Marine Drum & Bugle Corps quietly lined the steps as platoon and company leaders inspected the brigade.

"What is your name, mister?" barked the midshipman inspecting me.

"Midshipman Kanelous, sir," I barked back.

"Kanelous, there is a hair on your uniform. Your cap is dirty, and your shoes are not shined properly. You are on report," he notified me.

"Aye, aye, sir," I responded, thinking, "What the hell is he talking about."

After they finished their inspection, the elaborate ceremony continued, complete with color guard and sword-swaggering brigade commanders. Then all stood still, commanders and company leaders facing the thousands of future officers aligned in precise rows and columns across the promenade. There was dead silence. Then on cue, the ceremony commenced.

"Leffffffft faaaaace!" roared one of the commanders, drawing out the sound as half the brigade turned simultaneously.

"Riiiiiggggght faaaaace!" barked our commander, as our half of the brigade snapped to the right.

The Marine Drum & Bugle Corps suddenly blasted a marching tune that reverberated off the U-shaped building that formed the immense cobblestone courtyard. The suddenness and intensity of the sound caused an immediate adrenaline rush.

"Fooorewaaaard, maaarccch!" echoed the command to march.

The entire brigade of thirty-six hundred midshipmen moved in unison, separating into columns and marching three abreast through the six ground-level entrances located on either side of the steps. We marched in perfect step to the intense beat of the drums reverberating loudly off the huge stone facades that formed the sides and front of the oversized concourse. It caused goose-bumps and my hair to stand on end. I was never as proud of anything in my whole life as I was at that moment in time. A midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy.

At breakfast, I got my first taste of what life at the academy was going to be like. We marched into the dining room, a mammoth room with hundreds of tables. Each table sat ten midshipmen, four along the long end, and one at each end. Two plebes sat across from one another, four in all, surrounded by upper-classmen. To my right was a second-classman, Schmidt, who roomed right next to me. He had obviously had a hard time as a plebe, and was not playing with a full deck. But he had complete

authority over me. Once, he admitted to me that the reason he was being so tough on me was because I might become a prisoner of war in the future, and he wanted to find out if I would crack under the torture. Across from me was Thompson, the boxing champion, and next to him sat a natural-born cock-sucker, Kretchky, who was determined to make my life as close to hell as he could.

The scrambled eggs were served in a large ceramic platter, passed smartly around the table, as was a silver pitcher of milk. After all were served, I scooped up some eggs on my fork, and was about to square them into my mouth, when I heard. "Kanelous, put that food back on the plate! Square-up that knife and fork!" It was Gordon, a mean third-classman.

"When an upper-classman speaks to you, put down the food and square up the knife and fork parallel to the plate, like this." He demonstrated how they had to be placed.

"Aye, aye, sir," I responded.

"Shove out Kanelous!" Gordon screamed.

Shoving out meant moving one's chair back from under you while maintaining a sitting, braced up position without the benefit of the chair.

"Aye, aye sir," I said, as I pushed the chair back away from me.

I raised the egg-filled fork toward my mouth.

"Kanelous!" he yelled again. I lowered the fork.

"How many operational LSDs are in the Navy?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir," I answered.

"That's not an answer, Kanelous! You either know the answer, in which case you will tell me the answer, or you will find out the answer. Got that, Kanelous?" he barked.

"I'll find out, sir," I complied.

"You'd better, Kanelous. If you don't – you're going on report," he barked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

I again raised the egg-filled fork toward my mouth.

"Kanelous!" The champ barked.

"Sir," I snapped back, lowering my eggs properly.

"What is the structural composition of the sail planes of a nuclear submarine?"

"I'll find out sir," I repeated.

Once again I raised the egg-filled fork toward my mouth.

"Kanelous," Kretchky said.

"Sir," I acknowledged.

"How many propellers are there on an aircraft carrier?"

"I'll find out sir," I again repeated.

These questions continued every time I tried to eat. The entire time, I was shoved out. Suddenly a bell rang. The upper classmen all got up promptly and left the table. The plebes waited for them to leave the table, then got up promptly and headed, braced-up, to their rooms. I hobbled back to my room, my legs knotted from sitting in a half-crouched position for the entire meal. For the thirty-minute meal, I was only able to gulp

down half the glass of milk as I left the table, and with so many questions being asked, I was not able to remember a single one of them.

At the next meal, they all asked the same questions, and when I could not answer them I was given come-arounds, and Thompson put me on report.

"Kanelous, I am going to put you on report every day until I get you out of here. I don't like you. You have no business being here, and I'm going to personally see to it that you bilge out."

"What a prick," I thought.

If you were put on report it meant getting up at five in the morning, an hour prior to the regular wake-up time, and reporting to the athletic field, where they made you do calisthenics or run around a track for forty-five minutes.

I was put on report daily by Thompson and others, was shoved out throughout every meal, and had at least two come-arounds every day for three consecutive months. I lost thirty-five pounds, dropping to a skinny one-hundred thirty-eight pounds on a six-foot-one-inch athletic frame. I was being starved and tormented to death.

By early December, my fear had turned to anger, and then to a deep depression. I did not care if they locked me up or discharged me. All I knew was that I had taken all the shit I could, and I was not going to take it anymore. I did not care if I lived or died. Actually, I preferred death, and was thinking of ways I could end it all rather than face the disappointment of everyone if I returned home. Jumping off the four-story roof of our

barracks was an option I often thought about, but rejected the idea, fearing I would not die and would only maim myself.

I was furious, depressed and suicidal, with no one to help me get through it. Mom and Dad just said to stick it out. Lois said I could do it. My basketball assistant coach, a Navy captain, tried to intervene, but in the end he said I would just have to tough it out. Teammates were unable to understand what I was going through. Most could not fathom why I was being singled out for such gross treatment. I was teetering on the edge, and no one knew the depth of my despair or the fury brewing for those who were out to destroy me.

One gloomy day, our company headed to the firing range. It was run by the Marine Corps drill instructors. I had already qualified as an expert with the rifle, and was scheduled for qualification on the Colt forty-five semi-automatic pistol. One of the Marines laid down the ground rules for the competition.

When it was my turn to shoot, evidently, I did something wrong because a drill sergeant came running over to me, got in my face and started reaming me out. He was screaming so loud his veins in his neck were popping out, his face beet-red and his eyes practically bulging out of his head.

The straw broke the camel's back. I could feel the rage overcoming my sensibilities. I had crossed over into something unreal.

I spoke firmly and deliberately, as I pressed the loaded forty-five against his forehead, "Shut the fuck up, or I'll blow your fucking brains out."

The color drained out of his face. He did not say a word, and after several seconds just turned and walked away.

"Well, I guess I did it. I'll spend the next few years in the brig," I thought, but not sorry for what I did or worried about the consequences. I did not care.

The shooting session passed, and absolutely nothing was said to me by anyone. I guess the drill sergeant never ratted on me, perhaps understanding where I was coming from. Maybe he had been there himself. At any rate, nothing came of it.

That night in the barracks, one of the real nasty upperclassmen, whose room was a few doors down the hall, told me to come around with my rifle, bayonet fixed. The torture usually consisted of holding the gun extended in front of me, at shoulder height, until I would nearly collapse with pain. As I attached the bayonet to my M-1 in preparation for the come-around, I thought about killing him.

I walked into his room and stood in the open doorway. He was on the opposite side of the room reading, at his desk. He turned, and ordered me to shove out the rifle. His two roommates, to the right of me, were in their bunks relaxing. I did not respond to his order, thinking, as he approached me, that I would crack him across the head with the butt of the rifle.

"I'm going to kill this miserable prick," I thought.

Recognizing I was not obeying his order, he started screaming at me, stood up at his desk. “Shove out that rifle, mister! Obey my order, NOW! Kanelous!”

I remained still, silent and resolute, not responding to his order. My face burned as the rage and hate for him welled-up inside of me.

“I’m going to knock his fucking head off,” I thought, prepared to kill him with a blow to the head.

He started to walk toward me, eyes bulging and veins popping in his forehead, screaming for me to obey his order. I remained motionless, waiting for him to get closer. Suddenly, both of his roommates, practically on cue, jumped out of their bunks.

“Stop!” They yelled, practically tackling him.

“Can’t you see he’s going to kill you?” one said, as he restrained him.

With a trembling voice, the other turned toward me and blurted loudly, “Kanelous, get the hell out of here. Get out of here!”

I turned and left the room, wondering how they knew.

You could not quit Annapolis. The only way out was to fail a subject, or a final exam, for the semester. Then they kicked you out. The rule for the entire brigade was fail one subject or a final exam and you were out. The academic year consisted of two semesters, the second starting after finals in early January, just after Christmas break.

Since the pistol and bayonet incidents, things had gotten easier for me. I guess the word had gotten around that harassing me could be dangerous to your health. I was even called for a performance review

before the reviewing captain. I thought, this was it. I would be kicked out with a dishonorable discharge for threatening an upperclassman.

"Kanelous, we have reviewed you progress here, and, although you had a rough start, the latest reports indicate that you are doing quite well and seem to be adapting to a military way of life. Keep up the good work,"

I walked out bewildered. "Maybe this could work," I thought.

Making the basketball team in mid-December had also made things easier because I was assigned to the basketball training table, where there was no hazing allowed. Plus I could eat in peace, quickly gaining back some of the weight I had lost. I felt better, but had already crossed a line, and there was no going back from it. I was still mad as hell, and I was not going to take any more of their shit.

The basketball coach did not like my style of ball, or my reluctance to follow his stupid plays, and was determined to keep me sitting on the bench. In practice sessions, as a leader of the second team, I would drive him crazy by beating the first team in scrimmages on a regular basis. Finally, he took care of the situation by demoting me to the third string. Our team had thirteen players, and I was ranked thirteenth in his book.

During an exhibition game in the field house, I decided I had had enough. I got up off the bench, with the game in progress, and walked into the track and field section of the huge field house, where the track team was holding an indoor practice session. I was the fastest player on the basketball team, and had the greatest elevation, a perfect combination for

broad jumping. I walked up to the track coach in my sneakers and basketball uniform, and asked if I could try out for the team.

He looked at me incredulously and said, "We've got our team pretty well set. Most of our team has been recruited from all over the country."

Ignoring his comment, I explained, "I can jump, and I am fast. I want to try out for the broad jump."

"Have you ever broad jumped before?" he asked.

"No, but I think I would be good at it," I replied.

"Well, you're welcome to give it a try, but I don't think there is much of a chance of you making the team," he advised.

"Thank you."

I lined up on the cinder path leading up to the long sandpit. I took off down the approach, but I did not time it right, jumping before the take-off board. It was not a very good jump. Unimpressed, the coach did not say a word.

"Let me try it again?" I asked.

"Go ahead," the track coach said.

The second jump was right on the money. The coach measured it. "Nineteen feet, six inches," he said.

"With track shoes and a little coaching, you could be doing twenty-two feet in no time flat, and that would make you competitive." The coach was impressed.

"I don't know what your situation is with the basketball coach, and I don't want to create any waves, but if you want to be our broad jumper, I'd be happy to have you."

"I'll let you know by tomorrow," I said, and walked back to the game that was still in progress. The coach never even noticed I was gone.

After the game, I went to Ben Cavanale's office, the athletic director, the man who recruited me and the man who was my basketball coach's boss. I wanted to give him a chance to react to the situation, although I knew it was a long shot.

"Hi, John, how are you doing, what brings you here?" he asked.

"Not so good, sir. The basketball coach does not like me. I am the best guard on the team and he knows it, but he has me playing on the third string. Today, I tried out for the track team, and the track coach wants me. I want to play basketball. I love basketball. But if I am not on the first string by tomorrow, I am joining the track team," I said.

"John, you can't come in here and threaten me. You are free to do what you want. Besides, I have nothing to do with the decisions of your coach. I can't tell him to put you on the first team. That's his call," Cavanale explained authoritatively.

"I don't know about that. But I am just telling you – I am through with basketball unless I am on the first team in tomorrow's practice," I said, reasserted my demand.

"Well, I'll talk to him and check it out, but it really is not up to me. I can't tell him who to play," he explained.

"Thank you," I said as I walked out, fully expecting to join the track team the following day.

The next day in practice, the basketball coach put me on the first string.

After Christmas break were final exams for the semester. I failed the calculus exam by several points. I was happy – I was finally out of there. I stopped by Ben Cavanale's office to say goodbye and thank him for helping me get onto the first string.

"John, if you had a week to study, do you think you could pass the calculus test if you had another chance at it?" he asked.

"Sure. But I didn't think they gave re-tests on final exams," I said, puzzled.

"Well, they usually don't. But under your circumstances, I think they would if you want to stay in the academy. Do you want to stay?" he asked.

The moment of truth – stay or leave. Quit or stick it out. Fight or flight. I wanted to get out of there so badly, but I said, "Yes, I want to stay,"

"Great. I'll arrange to get you some material to study for the re-test," said a smiling Cavanale.

The materials arrived in a manila envelope. Inside were three calculus exams, with a note to find the correct answers and study them. I spent most of the evenings studying until I had all of the answers memorized.

I was scheduled to take the re-test on Monday morning.

On Saturday morning, I walked out of my room heading for the town of Annapolis where I intended to spend a relaxing day away from the harassment. On my way out of the room, I heard, "Kanelous, get in here."

It was nine in the morning. I walked into the upper-classman's room.

"Brace up against that wall," he barked.

"Aye, aye, sir," I responded, as I backed myself against the wall.

"Okay, you can go now," he said. It was now ten o'clock in the evening!

"That's it, I am outta here," I thought.

On Monday morning I took the calculus re-test. I knew every answer (the test was actually one of the tests I had been given to study) and I could have gotten a perfect score, but I only answered enough of the questions to get a barely failing grade. I wanted it to look like I tried. Then the thought occurred to me that they might pass me anyway, so I crossed out some of the correct answers, guaranteeing a score no higher than thirty of the one hundred questions. I completed the three hour test in a half an hour, and left.

The next day I was called before a committee of captains and an admiral. There were two captains sitting on either side of a long conference table with the admiral at the opposite end. I stood at attention. The admiral spoke first.

"Well, Kanelous, you didn't do as well as we thought you would on the make up test," he said.

"No, sir, it was a tough test, sir," I responded smartly.

"That's why you only spent a half hour on a three-hour test?" he asked.

"What can I say, sir," I responded, surprised he knew how long I spent on the test.

"Kanelous, it's pretty obvious that you want to get out of the Naval Academy,"

Then came the shocker. He followed, "Is there anything we can do to get you to change your mind?" he asked.

I thought hard. They want me to stay. Is there anything that could change my mind? Hmmm! I stood there in silence – shock, actually – thinking, maybe this could work. But how?

"Well, Kanelous, we are waiting for a reply," he said, a little annoyed at the delay.

"Yes, sir. Well, I have been put on report so many times that my extra duty will extend half way through next year. If you eliminated my extra duty, I would stay at the academy," Eeeehhhhh! Wrong answer!

The admiral's pale face suddenly turned red as he grabbed a book off the conference table and threw it at my head. I ducked as it flew by.

"Get out of here! Get the hell out of here!" he yelled, as I turned and ran out of the room wondering what I should have said.

To make it official, only the U.S. congressman who appointed me to the academy could discharge me, so I had to wait until my discharge from him came through, which I was told normally took between two and three weeks. I did not have to attend classes, braced up in the corridors or take

part in academy drills. However, I had to dress and be a part of the brigade for meals. Hazing and harassment ceased, and I just hung around all day waiting for the release to come.

The following Saturday, I was strolling around the front courtyard when I heard this familiar voice. "Kanelous, Kanelous!"

It was Richie Hulser, an old friend of mine from Baldwin High School.

"Eh, Richie, how ya doin'?"

"Great. How you doin'?"

"You're lucky you caught me. In a week or two I'll be outta here," I said.

"Couldn't hack the Mickey Mouse stuff, eh, Johnny?"

"Yeah, this place is not for me. What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I came to see what it's like. I got an appointment and I'll enter in July."

"Hey, you want to see my room?" I asked.

"Yeah, but am I allowed in there?"

"No, but what the hell. They'll think you are a 'firsty.' They're allowed to wear civies." I urged him not to worry; it was no big deal.

We were sitting in my room when another plebe, who was the officer of the deck for the afternoon, walked in and asked who Richie was. I said to my friend, who could get in trouble for letting a civilian on deck, "He's okay, he's a first classman."

"Okay," he said as he turned and walked out.

After Richie left, I was summoned by the OD to report to one of the second-classmen's room.

"Who was that in your room?" he asked.

"An old friend of mine from Baldwin," I replied.

"You told the OD he was a first-classman."

"Yes. I didn't want him to get in trouble," I explained.

"You lied to him, and that is a class A offense," he said.

"Yes, I lied to him," I admitted.

"I am going to court-martial you, and recommend you get a dishonorable discharge from the Navy."

"I have already been discharged from here. I am waiting for my papers. Why would you court-martial me?" I pleaded.

"You're still a midshipman. You committed a class A offense, and I am filing papers right now to make sure you get court-martialed immediately. You are dismissed," he said.

"What a prick," I thought as I turned and walked out.

An hour later, two tough-looking and armed SP's showed up at my room.

"You're to come with us," one said gruffly.

"Where are we going?" I asked, confused.

"You'll find out. Keep your mouth shut," the other demanded.

They silently led me to a jeep, then drove me several miles to a naval base located on the Severn River. They escorted me into a drab building where they left me with a naval clerk.

"What am I doing here?" I asked.

"You are no longer a midshipman. You are in the regular Navy now," he replied.

I was issued standard Navy attire, assigned a bunk in a large room with thirty other sailors, and was instructed to keep my mouth shut and follow orders. I worked with the other sailors, scraping ship bottoms from morning until night. No one knew, or would tell me, anything about where I was, why I was there or how long I had to stay.

After two agonizing weeks, I was told to report to the front office.

"You are free to go. Here are your orders," the uniformed clerk said as he handed me some papers that notified me I was in the inactive reserve and was to report within two weeks to the nearest inactive reserve unit from where I lived. There was nothing about a dishonorable discharge or any mention of a court-martial. I had dodged another bullet.

Thank God, I was free at last. But, free to do what?

"I'll worry about that when I get home," I thought.

Johnny K Heading Home is an exciting, sometimes humorous, and always fast moving story of a kid growing up in a "loving," albeit dysfunctional, family. A friend said I should have called it: Leave it to Beaver Meets Bart Simpson.

Johnny K Heading Home