

Rue Matthiessen
There Was A Time

My friend Jackie Meacham recently died, but I had lost her a long time before that. Upon her death that loss, always a source of regret and mystery for me, instantly moved out of the category of distantly retrievable, to unsalvageable.

My stepmother Maria called to tell me. She had seen the obit in the paper. Maria, who was the era after my mother died, never knew Jackie. Jackie had moved away at about the same time Maria married my father. Over the years when I came home to Sagaponack to visit, I'd talk about her. Maria would see Jackie's mother Barbara, whom she did know. They'd have a chat about Jackie, and how Jackie and I should get together because we had once been so close. Or I'd get an update from Jackie's cousin Brenda Walker, whom I'd see at the mall. Once I got a number and called it. Jackie, never very forthcoming, wouldn't reveal much. I'd get the facts only. She'd moved away in her twenties, she worked in data entry in an up-island town. Sometimes she visited. "Let me know when you're here," I'd say, and she never did. I'd see Barbara or Brenda and they'd say, oh, Jackie was just here for two weeks, for three weeks. She just went back yesterday... Or something like that.

Maria told me the news with a sort of gentleness across her name, which then plummeted into the finality of that last word, "died." There was no softening preamble, because she doesn't really do that. I think she just wanted to make sure I heard it from her, and not at the store or getting the mail. I was truly shocked, as she knew I would be. "Yes, she had a heart attack while camping..." Maria added, reading from the paper.

I had never been able to figure it out, and now the door was closed. I am white, and privileged. Jackie was black, and underprivileged. We grew up about a seven minute drive from each other in the same town. Things went a certain way. Outside forces intervened. Like an angry rhinoceros, the world nosed its way in. Or maybe it was something else. About me? About her? At the news of her death I felt a part of me disappear.

I did what was natural to me—tried to sort out my feelings by writing them down in the form of a letter to her. It turned out to be long, packed with stories of the two of us in those years we were close.



The Hampton Day school where I met her was begun in 1966, along the lines of the famous Summerhill school in Britain. Set down in the



potato fields of Bridgehampton, it offered an alternative for year-round local families, some of whom maintained apartments in “the city,” many of them professionals, artists and writers. The idea was that children have rights, and that their inherent creativity should not be annihilated by state dictated lesson plans, rigidity and clanging bells. Most teachers were on a first name basis only. Before “HDS” came into being, the Bridgehampton Public school was the only local offering. It wasn’t considered very good. I remembered hearing that. I also remember hearing snide remarks that the real reason for the Hampton Day School was for white families to avoid the Bridgehampton school, because it was almost all black.

The first year of the school there were only thirty-five students in a farm style house south of the highway, owned by our friends the Mullers. They had gone sailing around the world for a year with their three children. Despite a shoestring budget, the founders of HDS had a small scholarship program that aimed to bring in disadvantaged kids from the other side of town. This wasn’t only a guilty exercise. They were interested in diversity for many reasons, among them the benefit for their own kids.

The scholarship kids were mainly from what was known as “the Turnpike,” in Bridgehampton. Families there had settled from waves of southern migrant workers who worked the big farms around Bridgehampton and Sagaponack, a practice that finally died out in the mid-seventies. I remember seeing groups of twenty or thirty workers camped at the White farm across the street from our house near the ocean, where we were surrounded by potato fields. Their skins were sable, ochre brown, the men tall and stooped, the women with scarves on their heads. Their ragged clothes were all the same color, the color of the dirt in the fields.

Jackie, maybe your forebears were migrant laborers, I don’t know. I did read in your obituary that you had an interest in your own Native American ancestry—something I didn’t know about. But in 1966 we weren’t interested in ancestry, politics, race, or class—were we. Clouds, the sky, running, getting out of class as soon as possible, playing tag and soccer, these were the important things.

It is from about this time, that a picture of Jackie takes shape in my mind. Compact physically, smooth skin the color of walnut shells. A heart shaped, pretty face with almond eyes. About my height. A cotton dress, sneakers, hot combed hair in a stiff pony tail. Jumpy, quick to laugh in a breathy, nervous way. Not often at ease. Interested in school, unlike me. I’d always start off strong in the year, get bored quickly, and spend most of my time looking longingly out of the window at the trees and soccer field. In this, Jackie and I were similar. We wanted the same things, to be running and playing and making a world of our own, but I was much more vocal about it. I was loud and disruptive and sensitive all at once. Jackie, even with her ever present nerves, was more grounded. She liked her lessons. We both loved music class with Lelya, and whenever they put on records at recess. We both liked art class with Mrs. Berringer, who preferred the old fashioned form of address, a firm delineation between herself and the students. Thinking about how Jackie was, I bet she was shy about calling teachers by their first names anyway.

Do you remember dancing to Jumping Jack Flash in third grade? Do you remember the wrestling matches in the barn, girl-on-boy, on tatami mats? Hmmm.... They’d never have that kind of thing now. Do you remember the hours

long standoff between Rodney and me? You wouldn't participate in that game, even though you were incredibly strong and probably could have beaten him. There were certain things that you just wouldn't do.

In its second year HDS moved, in part because the NY State Board required schools to be in brick buildings. Finally one was found on Butter Lane. A square stucco farm house, it too had potato farms all around, with migrants dotting the fields in the distance. Its big barn was re-purposed into classrooms. Enrollment increased. Another soccer field was created, directly adjacent to the re-purposed farmhouse.

I was strong, but not like you. The second year at the school you were semi-famous for being able to jump three aluminum garbage cans lined up vertically. I almost killed myself trying to match you, and no one else could do it, not even the bigger boys.

Over the next years a handful of black students came to HDS. Debbie Madison was the daughter of our housekeeper. Mark Jackson was from East Hampton and became the longtime boyfriend of my friend Sylvia's older sister, Linda. Rodney, whose last name I don't remember, possibly from Southampton, was my wrestling pal. Carolyn Wiggins was also from the Turnpike, and Sylvia remembered going to play at her house. Sometimes the scholarship kids stuck together, according to the town they were from. But new friendships were forged. Jackie and I stayed close all through. Her mother Barbara and my mother Deborah would shuttle us back and forth between houses, ours on Bridge Lane and hers on Norris Lane.

Your house was tiny, like a doll house. The ceilings were low, the linoleum on the kitchen floor worn. You shared a room with your younger sister Penny. She always had neat, coiled braids and a pressed shirt, unlike us, who were more tomboyish. It was warm and cozy, your Mom made me feel right at home. There was lots of music. We'd have Wonder bread sandwiches with Fluffernutter which I never got at home. Barbara had an upright piano in the hallway, on which she'd practice for the services at the Baptist church.

Our house was on the ocean side of Long Island. Set down on six acres, amid many more acres of fields, it felt sometimes as if it was on the moon. Because many of the houses near us were second homes, they were vacant in the off season. My brother Alex was a baby, and friends for me were scarce. I remember that Jackie once brought a cousin to play, and we went down to the beach. Her cousin had never seen the ocean. That day I realized for the first time that probably quite a lot of people from Jackie's neighborhood hadn't seen it. The deep shock on the girl's face told me that was so. It seemed as though the very fact of *the ocean*, deep and blue and glittering and wide, not a ten minute drive from her own house, was too much for her to digest. It's also possible that Jackie hadn't seen it until she came to my house that first time, but she was always cool about things. I don't remember that she remarked on it. My parents were shocked about this girl, especially my father. Parking was easy, in fact in those days the beaches were often empty. So *why*, we wondered, and especially they wondered. For me, this sort of question came along with a new consciousness about how our lives differed. Looking back, I am certain that Jackie's awareness of the differences was well ahead of mine.

Jackie often came to stay in Sagaponack. We made a playhouse at the pond in the reeds with a turned over row boat, propped up with stones. We worked well together, Jackie bossing me with quiet disdain, me bossing back in my overbearing way. Which she ignored, smiling to herself, with a certain prim bitterness. Regarding who could know about this clubhouse, we were in agreement (almost no one). She never seemed to mind my outsized personality, and in that way that children are grateful without being aware of it, I was.

Sometimes we'd write poetry together on the dining room table, set up probably, by my mother Deborah. Jackie liked a fine, blue ball point pen, and dotted all of her "i's" with tiny hearts. My mother would read the poems, set mine to the side and gush about Jackie's poetry, which made me fantastically jealous. I remember that Jackie's poems were more innocent and from the heart, with their little heart dotted i's. My mother kept everything, but I don't have any of those poems. I'm sure Jackie, in her neat and organized way, folded them up and put them in her pocket to take home.

In turn, I'd spend weekends on Norris Lane, sometimes going to the Baptist church with Jackie, Penny, and her brother Hank. Barbara would play the service. On these Sundays I was the only white person among many. I loved the music, the way everyone knew the words. It inspired a deep, shared feeling, and they'd all sing along. Afterwards the little girls would swarm around me, fascinated with my hair, touching and stroking it. Then we'd play, going house to house. Jackie's grandmother lived nearby. There was a shack in the back, and one day someone had a battery-operated record player. I heard James Brown for the first time. It was incredibly exotic. At my house it was the Mamas and the Papas, and Bob Dylan. And here was James Brown's *Cold Sweat*, an unfettered call to the wilder side of things. It was irresistible. It was earthy, it was honest. It absolutely called to me. Brown later came onto the national stage. I'll never forget my mother looking at a picture of him in Life magazine and saying he was beautiful. And he was, like an ebony carving. I took note because her world was so white. I'm certain that a lot of her contemporaries wouldn't have taken their kids to play on the Turnpike. But my mother, a thoughtful, brilliant woman, was fundamentally experimental. She believed in following the natural course of things.

For me, Jackie, that was you, and the music you listened to. After the James Brown introduction, along came the Temptations, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Jackson Five, and the Isley Brothers. Hearing those for the first time, with you, and plaguing my mother to get the 45's. Waiting for the next issue of Right On to come in at the drug store. Watching Soul Train at your house or my house, we never, ever missed it, and practiced all the moves.

I loved it on the Turnpike, while at the same time I was learning that my differentness was greater there than with other friends, say, in Sag Harbor. I got called a *honky* quite a bit. I didn't really care. What could they do to me? It was just a slur, and I wasn't going to go away just because this boy said it. But I told my mother and she was quite surprised. A lot of these houses had a small woods in back, and outbuildings or shacks where we'd play. There was an old crazy man who lived in one of these shacks. He was always trying to grab the kids. In a dim tiny living room with pea green shades drawn, a black and white TV flickered in the cor-

ner. He went for me, (*what were we doing in there?*), fingers groping, eyes at half-mast. Jackie and her cousin warned him off sharply, as if they had done it many times before. I was hustled outside, and we all caught our breath. "He's nasty," was the only thing Jackie said, with a note of sadness, as if disappointed that he hadn't changed his ways. None of the parents seemed to know about this guy, who was probably forty. He seemed to me like some ancient old monster lying in wait—as in a fairy tale. I was not able to conceive what he wanted with me.

The music, the church, Barbara's playing, your friends and relatives, the houses close together and small, going to each one of them, checking in on people—I never had so much fun in all my life. I always liked a bit of danger, and you did too.

I remember feeling like a curiosity there. Show-off that I was, this suited me fine. I was the white friend; I was paraded around. As we got older, this became more clear. Once, Jackie was having her hair hot combed at a neighbor's, who had a little set up at one end of her kitchen table. She brought me along, somewhat sheepishly. I guess she couldn't change the appointment. There was a lot of emotion around getting her hair "done." Somehow, I wasn't supposed to see it. The neighbor raked me up and down with her eyes. Jackie bowed her head, a scowl on her face. The thick metal comb rested on a glowing hot plate. The grease went on, then the painful pulling, tears at the corners of her eyes, until her thick, kinky hair came out in straight spikes. Then she set it with hot rollers, creating a perfect tube-like curl on the bottom, and Jackie was ready for church, for school, whatever it was, for at least a day.



That the sixties and seventies were "a different time," is often hauled out as a defense for the exploitation and excesses, as well as the freedom of that era. In this case, like many clichés, it is also true. I'm applying it here to just one cultural moment, in New York, where the collective psyche had a casual sort of courage and fluidity that seem elusive now. There was a space, a clearing, especially among left leaning circles, for things to just grow the way they wanted to. My memory of it is more simple, the freedom of being young and running on a soccer field with a friend, but I realize now that that was not separate from the greater context, which was the era of civil rights. I can say without a doubt that we were more hopeful then. Though I was too young to understand what it *was* we were escaping, there was a pervasive, happy buzz about the future: things were going to be different—different from some nebulous and unfair past.

There were bumps in the road. Toward the late sixties Jackie and I would call each other *honky* and *nigger* and laugh so hard, making caricatures of ourselves. It must have been jarring. My mother wrote it down in her journal, and I do remember it, how we reveled in the shock value like kids do. I thought we were blowing up those words, robbing them of meaning. We were changing it, change was coming from *us*. We were young and we were the future, and it was going to be great. A new awareness was on the horizon, at least it was new for me, and it was many-sided.

In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists at the Olympics. Right around that time Jackie banded with Debbie and Rodney against me. One afternoon, talking about “Black Power,” they poured water in my book bag as we waited for the bus. A few days later, Jackie threw her arm around my shoulder and apologized in her sweet way. Nothing like that ever happened again; I’m sure she knew how hurt I was. The following year my mother wrote to my father that I’d sometimes come home from the Turnpike with bruises that I had told her Hank, Jackie’s brother, had given me. She added that I didn’t seem to care much. I don’t remember one thing about it, only that he would get into trouble sometimes. The music got more specific. James Brown’s funky, driving beat, the *ONE*, had a precise origin, and it wasn’t my side of town. Brown came out with “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.” I loved that song, but it wasn’t mine, I wasn’t black. Because I felt that song so deeply, I wondered how blackness could’ve missed me.

We were absolutely bonkers about the Jackson 5. In the summer of 1970 I went to Madison Square Garden with Jackie’s entire family to see them; I was the only white person among 18,000. There might have been a few other *ofays*, but I didn’t see them. Barbara did not like that there were slurs. *Honky, whitey*, etc. She disapproved mightily, pursing her lips crossly the same way Jackie did. Jackie thought it was funny. She knew I had a fondness for drama, and she knew I did not care. The music and the show were too good. All the ladies were throwing jewelry and ribbons and coins and underwear at the J5, they were in a virtual shower of panties and phone numbers and room keys, dodging and dancing to avoid getting hit. The crowd was out of its mind. We were just humble country folk, agog at the spectacle. We had the best time ever, full of longing (me—Michael, Jackie—Jermaine), and also a smug satisfaction at having gotten *that close*. We talked about it and dreamt about it for months. We left the Garden citizens of the new world that was ours alone. It was going to be fantastic.



In 1970, partly because of my parent’s foundering marriage, I left the Hampton Day School, and began boarding school of my own volition. Because of that, for a time, I saw less of Jackie.

In January of 1972, my mother, whom Jackie knew well, died. That summer, Jackie was back on the scene in Sagaponack.

I can well imagine how the conversation went.

“Hey Rue, it’s Jackie.”

“Jackie!”

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Nothing!”

“Sorry about your Mom.”

“Yeah. *Come over.*”

“Ok.”

She was transformed since I had last seen her—beautiful in a tight striped T-shirt and faded bell bottoms. Gone was the hot comb. She had a

big, immaculately groomed Afro at least seven inches out, with a pic stuck in it. A pack of Newports in her back pocket, and a stack of LP's under her arm. Somehow, at fifteen, she had a car, a big American 8 cylinder bomber, light blue in hue with a red interior. It was touch and go with the car. On her visits she'd pat the dashboard and praise the car, and nobody could say anything bad about it, because it would be offended and conk out. The car needed constant praise just to get down to the beach, about a half mile down the road. Another friend, Jessie Goldman, would come on his mini-bike and see me at my house stuck in the potato fields. Jessie and Jackie came all the time, rescuing me from isolation. They were there when, having just lost my mother, I really needed them.

We had a blast, which was the perfect medicine.

Jackie would bring the music. Jessie would bring the pot. We had a big KLH stereo, a living room that opened onto a patio, and a well stocked bar. On summer days with the picture windows open, the warm breeze held the smell of the sea. My father Peter's studio, where he worked was set well apart from the main house, so he wasn't bothered by the almost constant party. We'd play records and dance, doing all the moves from Soul Train, Jackie also teaching my brother Alex, who was turning eight that summer. *Mandrill, Donny Hathaway, Earth Wind & Fire, The Jacksons, Kool and the Gang, Larry Graham, James Brown*. She liked records from our collection too, *Leon Russell, John Mayall, the J. Geils band, Rufus, Elton John*.

Jackie was fascinated with Africa, big cats especially, which was further inspired at our house, because of the unusual way my father earned a living. Spears, tribal wear, masks, and lots of pictures and books crowded the living room. These were artifacts of expeditions to Africa and other remote places, like New Guinea, that he wrote about. He'd talk to her about his trips and the animals, and Jackie would look at the books for hours, planning a trip there one day. One time he gave her the picture proofs (4X6's) from a New Guinea expedition, as she was captivated with them. At a certain point, she started to think she was a big cat. While she never discussed it, I know this was as real as a fantasy could be. She had a deep voice, and did a cougar type of call that was heart stopping and ultra-cool. We'd strut down the empty lanes of Sagaponack in the dark, smoking Newports, Jackie making this insane sound. Jessie and my father would request it, "Do the thing..." And she'd do it. The call didn't sound quite human, coming from a girl of fifteen. She'd purse her lips with that modest, contained smile, satisfied at having let us all in on her true nature.

In the fall my father went to Nepal and Tibet with George Schaller on the long trip that would inspire the book, *The Snow Leopard*. Jessie's entire family moved into my house to look after my brother and I while he was gone. By that time Jessie and I were tremendous potheads. Jessie's mother Mab didn't care if we smoked all day. We'd try to get Jackie to toke with us, but she was becoming more religious, as well as conservative in her nature. She was not going to smoke pot in Sagaponack with a bunch of crazy white folk. Likewise she declined the occasional tab of acid, or a sniff of the poppers found in my father's bedside drawer. While Jessie and I rushed out on the poppers, she'd howl with disdainful laughter, clutching her sides. To her, that kind of thing was sheer foolishness. I was delighted

to have amused her so much. She did like wine though, and other drinks. She'd make something from the bar and sip while cooking up a huge batch of excellent fried chicken.

One time we sat on my bed, looking at the new platform shoes I had bought. They were four inches high, natural leather color, with criss-crossed suede straps. Jackie liked them and wanted to know how much they were. Thirty dollars, I said. *Thirty dollars*, she said, as silent fat tears slid down her face. I didn't ask her why; I knew why. She would never in a million years blow thirty dollars on shoes. First, she was frugal. Second, it would be an extravagance. Thirty dollars in the mid-seventies was not an insignificant amount. I felt ashamed and also somewhat ridiculous, because it was so uncool. I felt terrible. What was my life? What had I done to deserve it? Nothing. Nothing at all.

One day Mab's diamond engagement ring went missing. Her three daughters searched for hours, all through her room, branching out into other areas of the house, top to bottom. Eventually, Mab got the idea that Jackie had stolen it. Jessie didn't want any part of it and left. Mab accused Jackie and threatened to call the police. We were not to leave under any circumstances. I was quietly outraged, because I knew Jackie would never do such a thing. But my father was away and my mother wasn't there to defend us. I was overwhelmed by the personalities of the three sisters and Mab. As relaxed as life with them seemed to be, in regard to a platinum ring with three fat diamonds, it had gotten very serious.

Later on that day the ring was found, and so Jackie was off the hook. I don't remember a sincere, heartfelt apology from Mab or the girls, though there might have been one. I will never forget the look on Jackie's face when Mab accused her, the panic there. I didn't defend her, as I should have.

Were we really a "race" story? Not at the beginning. That is the very hardest, when you start off innocent of all that. You don't know, do you, that you are going to be dragged into it. Were you dragged into it? I wish you could tell me.

As we got older Jackie's deep throated laugh got an edge of anger, while her eyes held things I didn't know about. Something of her became absent, she was not as trusting. We were not children anymore her mood seemed to say, though it is certain that I was more innocent than she. Her hands shook, getting a Newport out of a pack. She looked away more. A year older than me, she had real boyfriends now, instead of just a fantasy about the J5. Some sort of calculation had begun, and was whirring slowly behind her eyes. It seemed that she had to *take care of some things*, away from me. The change was so deep rooted, I was afraid to ask about it. I didn't broach the subject for fear it was in part my fault, that it was something so fundamentally wrong it could not be fixed. I was afraid to lose her completely.

Death—Marriage. Bookends to a life. When Maria told me I remembered your marriage, the last time I had seen you. Did you invite me to the reception? I don't think so. It was probably Barbara who thought that I should be invited. Maybe it would jump start our friendship. She always wanted that. The envelope was big, a creamy stock paper. It wasn't your fine script with little hearts dotting the i's, but at the age of about thirty, you would have grown out of that anyway.

I ran my finger over the embossed letters in fancy gold: the reception would be in Hempstead, Long Island. At that point I hadn't seen her for at least eight years. There was no R.S.V.P. I thought, yes, I'll go. I was taking a photography class, and made a print of pink flowers, which seemed appropriate for a wedding. I got a map and figured out all of the turns to get there, about an hour's drive away.

There was a small reception hall with a drop ceiling and buffet. It was very hot. There was no music or dancing. Everyone was black. I think it was August, '86 or '87. Jackie was heavier, in a shiny, hot looking wedding dress. I gave her the present, and she thanked me in an offhand way. I don't remember being introduced to anyone, though I might have been. I do remember that no one really talked to me. I sat by myself for a little bit, and then I left.

I mulled it over for a while. Some people don't like seeing people after a very long time. *Obviously, Jackie, you were one such.* They feel bad about not being more accomplished. There might be some old hurt. Or they are very accomplished, and have no time, and the other is not and has plenty. People can be afraid there'll be nothing left, that they have changed so drastically, and so might the other person, that there will be no way to get a foothold. I decided that she was perhaps overwhelmed, and we had been apart too long. Her world and my world were no longer green grass and soccer fields, the latest dance moves, *Soul Train*, giant privets and tiny shacks with monsters in them. We were in different worlds now.



Sometimes James Brown's *There Was a Time*, sneaks up on me from my YouTube algorithm, and I am jolted right out of whatever I'm doing. I loved that tune then, and even more now — the sadness in his voice, and also strength. He's singing about a distant past that is still with him, a world that he *knows*, maybe better than anything in the present. His relationship with it sounds so familiar. It sounds just like those days to me. Running free in a neighborhood where someone is at home in almost all of the small houses. Going here and there, the sweet-smelling privet in bloom, the welcoming faces, especially that of Barbara Meacham, the patches of woods, the excitement around the church services and listening to Barbara practice and play. One of the first places other than home, that I knew.

So it was very sweet that I did hear from Jackie again, in 2014 when my father died. Because she knew.

Soon after the announcement went out to the press, she called. Her voice was much lower. I was surprised when she said, "This is Jackie." "Jackie!" I said, feeling that *of course* it was Jackie. I remembered about her chronic smoking. She was unsentimental, picking up a conversation that had been dropped decades before as if it had only been a week. She worked as a transporter at South Nassau hospital, the same place she had met her husband, Butch. She had a son, Waddie, and she was very happy to hear that I had a son, who was then 14. She seemed to think it was good for me to have had a child, specifically a male child; that it was necessary component of living to have brought a person into the world. In order to keep Waddie out of the gangs, she had brought him to stay at her mother's

place in Bridgehampton for many summers. She was in a dispute with the hospital because she had refused the flu shot. She didn't trust any vaccines, and was trying to keep her job. She sighed when she spoke about it—as if she really didn't want the job anymore.

We remembered my father. The way he'd work in his studio all day, coming in to fix himself a drink on his way to change for whatever he was doing that night. It was always something. Together we laughed at how he loved the J5's *Never Can Say Goodbye*, pretending to sing along, especially the *Oooo-ooooooh bayyyyyybee...* part, laughing at himself. But *Jungle Boogie*, oh yes, *Jungle Boogie* by Kool and the Gang was another story. He'd dance to that, doing what he called the "spidey," this with an interpretive flourish that was his alone. It would always make us laugh, because he couldn't help himself. This was our power over him. The records. In one so self-determined and imbued with the Protestant work ethic, it was fun to see him let go.

She talked about camping; she loved the outdoors still. She had a back yard at her house in Rockville Center. She talked about a tree that she had planted. It was late April. She loved this tree. She comforted me so much, with these details of her life. We still had the same joy in things like a tree, we always had happiness in small things, felt together the delight of a beautiful tree in spring.

Having thought about it for decades, I got a chance at last, to apologize to her for the time Mab Goldman accused her of stealing. She brushed it off, claiming she didn't remember it. I didn't believe her. I remembered her modesty, her dislike of drama and calling attention to herself. During the conversation she sounded tired. In retrospect, what sounded like maturity might have been weariness. At that point she was getting near to the end of her life. At the end I said, as I had before, let me know when you are here. I pictured her over at my house, meeting my son, who was then fourteen. It did seem like a possibility. But it was not to be.

We became Facebook friends, and I saw that religion, specifically the Church of God in Christ, was a big part of her life. On her page there were warnings about the devil, and evil, and vaccines, and Islamic take overs. On the sweeter side, some great gospel music clips, and tips for friends about sales, she had remained frugal to the end.

I tried to fill the blanks by talking to people who knew her both at HDS and also on the Turnpike. I did get a few nuggets. Christina Muller, an older student with whom I had stayed in touch, remembered Jackie as "determined somehow," but cautioned me that it would be challenging because her life was not documented like others who had attended HDS. "She may remain partly in the shadows," she wrote, "which in itself is telling." Yes, I thought, it is.

John Reed, who was our age and part of our soccer-loving crowd, positively lit up when he talked about her. He remembered how they sang ABC together, each one taking a line alternately. He added that she was "gloriously physical, like an Amazon," and that she was very kind. Kimberly Goff remembered her as sweet and energetic, and that they "always had a smile for each other..." Mary Scheerer remembered her as "a very good person."

Then I turned to the other side of town. Sadly, Barbara Meacham had died a year before. I found Penny on Facebook; I could not get a response. I found Hank on Facebook, not a word. I found that her cousin Brenda Walker had moved away, but we messaged on Facebook. It was a relief to hear one voice from those days, *Yes Rue, I have been living in North Carolina for two years. It hurt me to my heart when this happened to Jackie. I never thought she'd be gone now.*

There was another cousin I found on Facebook — Reggie Pope, the Long Island director for Al Sharpton's National Action Network. He lived near Jackie, and he had made the announcement of her death on her page, leaving a phone number. I called and left a message, and he got back to me that day. He explained that he was Jackie's cousin by marriage, that he had introduced her to her husband, Butch. He said that they had gone camping in Pennsylvania, and Jackie was tired and wanted to lie down in the camper. Her breathing had changed, he said, and her lips were turning blue. "She went to sleep and..." He had been on the phone with Butch when this happened, he was a very close friend, and was frustrated by her loss. He had argued with her about her smoking, and pressed her to stop, but she wouldn't. It was "puff, puff, puff all the time," he said. He wanted to put me in touch with Butch, and I said I didn't want to intrude. "You wouldn't be intruding," he pressed, "He's having a hard time with it." "Okay," I said.

He called Butch, and apparently Butch knew immediately who I was, "Rue? Jackie talked about her all the time," he had said. Fifteen minutes later Butch and I were on the phone.

This was kind of amazing.

Butch was a sweet-sounding guy, stunned by the loss of his wife. The first thing he said, was that Jackie was a very religious person. Then, the camping trip in Pennsylvania when she had died. He said that he didn't want to go that last time, but she really, really did. "She insisted," he said, a note of regret in his voice. He said that people always gravitated to her, that she was well loved by a lot of people in the church and outside of it. If there was a death in the family she was there. She was very active in her garden, busy all the time. She talked about me a lot. That's why, Butch said, he felt like he knew me. She loved her dog, Peedee, a miniature pincer, their second of that breed. They did everything together, fishing, crabbing, camping in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. She "Loved to go to the ocean—had to go see the ocean all the time—ride out to Bay park and look at the sunsets...had to be around that water—we'd go out there and go fishing. We bought a pop-up tent, graduated to a trailer."

I remembered something I had forgotten, that Jackie would find some bait in the kitchen, we'd tie it to a piece of string, and go down to Sagg Pond and get crabs.

"All that energy? I am the same," I told him. "I never stop moving. Barbara said we were like two peas in a pod."

I asked about music, if that had still been a part of her life. He remembered that she had studied bass guitar for a while, another thing that came back to me. But then she "gave all that up," he said. I asked if he thought

she was high-strung or nervous. He just about laughed at that. Not at all, not at all.

I asked what he was doing now. Retired, he said. "I was working on my boat for a little while...but I just..."

"...she wanted to go so bad, so bad. All she wanted to do was relax, 'I gotta relax...' So I said, let's take the camper." He added, "I miss her so much, I really do..." he said. "She's here, in Greenfield cemetery, in Uniondale."

"Jackie...in a cemetery," I said, feeling out the impossibility of the words. We both got very sad together.

"I thought I would spend the rest of my life with her," he said at the end.



The conversation was like a gift from Jackie through him, but also just from him. I felt that some of her had come back to me. I was glad to hear that she remembered me, but wished again that she could have had many more years.

Since his loss was so much greater than mine, I did not say what, somewhere in the back of my mind I had always believed — that one day Jackie and I would get into the habit of meeting, maybe once a year. A lunch here and there. I would not be in writerly-detective mode at that lunch. I would just be happy to see her, even if I knew it would be short. Because our lives no longer fit together, as seamlessly and perfectly as they once had. She had moved away and our lives wouldn't fit together anymore. *But so what, Jackie. It would be okay. You would have given me that window, and I would just drink you in, every ounce of you, my dear old friend.*