

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

Myron S. Lubell

Goodbye Michael Epstein – Blue Knight of River Park

In memory of Michael Epstein, my childhood friend 1938-2010

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A DARK, OVERCAST DAY – a spooky purple sky, with thunder and lightning, and a werewolf howling in the distance – like the start of a Dracula movie. That’s how I envisioned this day - that’s how I fanaticized this ominous moment in my life. Yeah, I know- werewolves are only supposed to howl at night - but this was my fantasy, so my werewolf howled in the morning.



For the past six months I dreaded the morning of September 11, 1951, but as I looked out the window of my second story bedroom I saw a radiant blue cloudless sky. This was supposed to be the worst day of my life - I didn’t want sunshine. It wasn’t part of my script! However, my mother did her best to snap me out of my depression - she smiled (*a fake happy face*) and bounced around the kitchen with a contrived buoyancy – she even made my favorite breakfast, pecan waffles covered with maple syrup and gobs of butter - and a peeled orange. We listened to “Don McNeal’s Breakfast Club” on the radio, like we always did, and marched around the kitchen table - just the two of us. My father never got into childish things like that.

I was twelve years old (*almost 13*), and this was my last day in Chicago. We would be leaving after breakfast, moving to Miami Beach, Florida. My father had a heart attack the previous year and the Chicago winters were too difficult for him to tolerate. So, he retired and decided to move the family to Florida. I was heartsick - I would be leaving my best friend, Michael Epstein, but I understood that we had to move because of my father’s health. He was 60 and seemed like an old man to me; his posture was bad and he was unsteady when he walked. Because of his heart condition he had trouble climbing the stairs to our second story apartment; he needed help, either from my mother or from me. And he was very concerned about the drive to Florida, a drive that a younger, healthier man could make in two days. He told my mother that we would take five days for the 1,427 mile trip - stopping at 3:00 PM every afternoon. In 1951 my mother didn’t drive, nor did she read maps, so my father would do all the driving and I was the designated map reader. That’s how I knew it was exactly 1,427 miles to Miami Beach.

I banged a large wooden spoon against a pot as my mother and I marched around the table, a daily ritual with the “Breakfast Club.” The program began with a “first call to breakfast,” then a few boring guests – the first guest was Edgar Bergen, the famous ventriloquist, joined by Charlie McCarthy, his dummy. What a stupid guest! How could you tell if his lips were moving on a radio program? Then came a “second call to breakfast” – more guests - and finally, breakfast. My father just read the morning Tribune, the stock market pages.

The phone rang; it was Michael Epstein – his voice cracked. “Damn!

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Myron, why do you have to move? I'm really gonna' miss you." Michael said he was coming over by bike to say a final goodbye. He lived only five blocks away. I made that short walk to his house many times, even in the snow and biting wind of Chicago, which is the only thing about Chicago that I hated. The snow was OK, it was even fun, but the wind was horrible. I remember freezing days when I walked backwards, to shield my face from that ice cold wind.

"Rose, turn down that damn radio," my father lifted his head from the newspaper and growled at my mother. "I can't hear myself think."

"Sol, this is our last day in Chicago. "Who knows if they'll have this program in Florida, let us enjoy our final breakfast march."

My mother gave a look of defiance and shouted in Yiddish, which was unlike her. Normally, she agreed with anything my father wanted. But, on this last morning in Chicago, she raised the volume a little louder and I continued banging the pot with my wooden spoon. I lifted my knees high in the air as I marched around the kitchen shouting, "second call to breakfast." I didn't want to think about the reality of the day. I loved Chicago and I would be leaving my sister Bobbie and my two-year old nephew, Barry. We had fun in our apartment when they came to visit. Barry was just beginning to walk - he struggled and kept falling. But he recognized that every time he fell we all laughed - so he started falling on purpose, to entertain his mother, grandmother, and me. It was really neat being called "Uncle Myron." How many kids who are twelve years old are already an uncle?

The car was ready to go; all of our personal belongings were packed, so after breakfast we just closed the door of our apartment and went down to the car. No one was there to say goodbye, not even my sister - we said our sad farewell the previous night. I urged my parents to wait a few minutes; Michael was coming over, and I wanted to see him, one final time. We waited in the car and my father lit a cigar. "Sol, please," groaned my mother, "not so early in the morning, that stinkin' cigar makes me wanna' puke."

Several minutes later Michael came racing up the street on "Excalibur" - (*that's what he called his big blue bike*). We hugged - it was a sick feeling, an emptiness in my stomach. I tried to say something but a lump in my throat made it difficult to talk. Michael was older than me, taller than me - and he knew a lot about history, especially all the tales from Camelot, and World War II - he even knew gory details how Hitler, Goebels, Goring, and Himmler committed suicide - like what kind of poison they used.

"Here Myron, a present for you." Michael handed me a gift-wrapped box, "but don't go opening it til' you get to your new home."

He didn't cry but his eyes were red - like mine, and he turned to my father, "Mr. Lubell, don't forget to bring the tape recorder so Myron and I can send recordings to each other."

"Don't worry Michael, everything has been packed with the movers - tell you dad I'll send him some "Romeo and Julietta's" from Miami - they're the best Cuban cigars."

My father respected Michael because they both read a lot, and to

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my father, if you were a “reader” everything in life would fall in place. However, my mother thought he was a wild kid because he often wore a WWII German helmet and raced in and out of traffic on his bike - and because he was twice suspended from school for “unspecified violations.” I’m not sure, but I think one of those violations was for carving a huge picture of his dog on a desk. He had a black Dachshund named Merlin - it looked like a long sausage with four tiny legs.

Michael’s favorite color was blue - just like his bike. He loved that color - so did I, but he said I couldn’t use it, I wasn’t ready - definitely not on Sunday mornings when we played war games at nearby River Park. The gentile kids were all in church so we had the park to ourselves - we’d race our bikes up and down the hilly trails like crazy daredevils. And Michael told everyone he was the Blue Knight of River Park, courageous, loyal, and handsome - like Sir Lancelot from King Arthur’s Court.



Later, when the gentile kids got out of church we’d call each other ugly names and fight “to the death” with our swords (*tree branches*). They called us “dirty Jews” and accused us of killing Christ - which is so stupid. He died 2,000 years ago. We responded by calling them “*goisha kups*” - although I never was sure what that Yiddish term meant - but I’m sure it wasn’t nice.

“Kneel and say homage to the Blue Knight,” Michael shouted, “also to Sir Myron, the best damn squire in Camelot. And don’t none of you ever forget, your beloved savior was a Jew - just like us.”

“You’re crazy, Jew boy, responded one of the gentiles, “Jesus might have been born Jewish but he saw the light and became Christian after John the Baptist dunked him in a lake and made him eat holy locusts.”

The fighting always stopped when we heard bells from the big white Good Humor truck. We’d drop our swords and buy chocolate ice cream bars - then we’d sit together at round tables in the park and talk about girls from our school - which ones wore falsies and which ones were really stacked - and we’d laugh until the cease fire ended.

As we drove away - toward Lake Michigan - I looked through the rear window of our 1947 Packard and waved goodbye to Michael, to Chicago, and the White Sox, my favorite baseball team. I was in the back seat, alone, with my head buried in a pillow so my parents wouldn’t hear me sob and snuffle. We were on our way to Miami Beach - a place that we had visited frequently, but only for short winter vacations. I was positive, I wouldn’t like living there. The beach was fun, but after a week of swimming and making sand castles what else was there to do? And there was nothing worse than going to bed with itchy sand sticking to your body - especially in a few very private places.

“Dad, did Jesus Christ really eat holy locusts?” I couldn’t stop thinking about the gentile kids at River Park.

“Sunshine (*that was a nickname my dad often used when we had serious discussions*) - every religion has its own fables - don’t we have a talking snake feeding an apple to Eve?”

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"Yeah, I guess so. I'm sure glad I'm Jewish – I like apples, especially the sour green ones. No way I'd ever eat holy locusts."

As we got started on the long drive to Florida my job was to read the detailed map and the information booklet prepared by the Chicago Motor Club. I was alone in the back seat, working as navigator, tail gunner, and bombardier – we were flying in a B-17, on a bombing raid over the southern part of the United States, wiping out pockets of escaped Nazis. It was a secret mission; I was commissioned by President Truman. I couldn't even tell my parents. If I was captured, I'd have to swallow a poison capsule – so, I carried a few m&m's inside a secret compartment in my shoes (*the deadly red ones*) – just in case!

When we reached the lake we turned south and joined hundreds of cars on the Outer Drive. I loved that highway, especially the vista of the Chicago skyline. It was the prettiest view in the world – except maybe Paris when the American army, led by Ike, marched through the Arc D'Triumph and rescued the city from the Nazis. I saw pictures in Life magazine. I wish I was there, marching in that parade. I couldn't understand why Eisenhower had to run for president in 1952 – we should just appoint him as our next president.

"Don't get me wrong – I like Ike," said my father, "and so do most Americans. He is a very popular general and will probably win the 1952 election in a landslide. But, generals usually make terrible presidents – except for George Washington. Adlai Stevenson is the voice of the future – he is advocating civil rights for the Negroes and the end of segregation. Ike is a good man but he just wants to rebuild America like it was before the war."

Later that day we listened to the White Sox baseball game on the radio, but not until I finished dropping a few of my bombs – I demolished the giant crematories in Gary, Indiana. That ugly smoke filled city was a secret haven for escaped Nazis, a place for them to prepare for World War III. The word "GARY" was a clandestine acronym: "German Army Relocation Yard." Not many people knew that, but I figured it out – with a little help from my secret decoder ring – which I got by saving box tops from Puffed Wheat – the same cereal that Michael Epstein liked. The gentile kids ate Wheaties or Cheerios. They'd probably eat locust cereal if there was such a thing.

The White Sox were two games behind the Yankees in a heated pennant race, with only one week remaining in the season. The exciting rookie, Minnie Miñoso, nicknamed "the Cuban comet," stole two bases – we were leading the Yankees by a run. It was a great Sox team that year; many sports writers called them the "Go Go" Sox. We listened to the game until we were outside of Chicago radio range; the sounds of Chicago faded, replaced by Indiana grain reports – and the price of wheat, oats, corn, and barley.

"Dad, do you think Minnie Miñoso will be as good as Babe Ruth – and what's barley?"

"Those are the little white things floating in mushroom barley soup. Of course I like Miñoso – he's really fast, but I don't think you can compare him to Babe Ruth. However, that Yankee rookie, Mickey Mantle,

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looks like he might become a powerful home run hitter.”

I hated the Yankees almost as much as I hated the Nazis. For a Jewish boy growing up in post war Chicago, the blue and white “NY” of the Yankees was the second most hated symbol, second only to the dreaded Swastika. I couldn’t believe my father was saying Mickey Mantle, a New York Yankee, was better than Minnie Miñoso.

I was a big collector of baseball cards - five full shoe boxes, the entire ’49, ’50, and ’51 Bowman series, with doubles and triples of many cards. Of course, like most boys, I never chewed that saccharine gum; it tasted like cardboard. When my mother said that we wouldn’t have enough room in our new apartment to save all my cards, it was like pouring salt into an open wound; she was destroying the last vestige of my Chicago identity. I could only keep one box - I had to make important decisions, which cards to save - which ones to cut. I saved five Minnie Miñoso cards - and dumped the two New York rookies: Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays.

“OK, here’s a riddle,” said my father, as he tried to break the monotony of the boring drive. “What state is round on both sides and high in the middle?”

“Colorado,” my mother responded.

“Wrong, Colorado is high in the middle but its square on the sides. It’s Ohio – O’s on both sides – and HI in the middle.”

“That’s stupid,” I groaned. “Now it’s my turn. What’s the longest word in the dictionary?”

“Antidisestablishmentarianism,” my father chuckled.

“No. It’s smiles, an S on both ends and a mile in between.”

On the fourth morning, as we passed through Claxton, Georgia, I studied the travel booklet prepared by the Chicago Motor Club and informed my parents that Claxton was the “Fruitcake Capital of the World.” We all laughed but refused to eat fruitcake when we stopped for breakfast at a local diner. I really hated the green cherries in that yucky cake - or whatever those disgusting little green things were. Lots of Nazis were walking the streets of this pristine town pretending to be Americans, but I could see through their disguise, especially when they smoked cigarettes. Real Americans hold their cigarette between the index finger and the middle finger, with the palm of the hand turned toward the face; Nazis hold the cigarette between the thumb and index finger, palm facing outward. I learned that spy trick in a Humphrey Bogart movie. All I needed was one well placed bomb at the steps of the old courthouse - that would take care of the Claxton problem.

We were definitely in enemy territory. Along the highway I observed a series of covert cryptograms from a secret branch of the Gestapo known as Burma Shave. The signs were spaced exactly one tenth of a mile apart. I jotted them down to send to President Truman. He would have the secret code deciphered.

A Man, A Miss,
A Car, A Curve

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He Kissed the Miss
And Missed the Curve
Burma Shave

Hardy men
were the Caesars
Instead of razors
They used tweezers
Burma Shave



I don't remember how much longer it was after "Operation Claxton" but we finally reached the Florida border where we were greeted by a huge billboard - "WELCOME TO FLORIDA" - and several road signs with pictures of pretty women in bathing suits drinking orange juice. My parents cheered as we entered the state, but I just sat quietly, reading the pages of my travel booklet to see what important attractions we would be passing in Florida. Were there any good sites to drop additional bombs? I learned that Florida oranges outsold California oranges; I never knew that before. In Chicago we only ate California Sunkist oranges; I liked them better, much better; they tasted like oranges were supposed to taste. On the outside Florida oranges looked real, just like California oranges, but that was deceptive. On the inside, they weren't even an orange color.

Somewhere south of Jacksonville, as we scanned the radio, searching for baseball scores, I heard the devastating news. During the past four days, while we were driving south through rural America, completely out of touch with the world, while I was doing my patriotic duty - dropping bombs and eradicating enclaves of hidden Nazis, Mickey Mantle hit five home runs and the Yankees beat the White Sox four consecutive games. The Yankees had just clinched the pennant. I was miserable - I wanted to cry - but I didn't. I just stared at the billboards along the Florida highway - more pictures of women in bathing suits drinking phony Florida orange juice.

"Dad, where are the coconut trees?" I broke the long uncomfortable silence.

"They're in south Florida - it's too cold here in the northern part of the state."

"Goodbye Michael Epstein - Blue Knight of River Park," that's all I could think as I fell asleep. I slept for the entire state of Florida. The next voice I heard was my father, asking directions from a teenage boy, how to find the causeway to Miami Beach. The boy wore a straw hat and carried a bamboo fishing pole. "Y'all take this here road for two lights." He pointed his pole to show the way. "Then hang a right to the Beach, but watch out - that place is loaded with old Jews - and none of them speak English. They all got little blue numbers branded on their arm - probably some kind of secret cult."

And as we crossed Biscayne Bay to the tropical island that was about to become my new home I opened the goodbye gift from Michael. It was a blue t-shirt, two sizes too large, but that didn't matter - it was beauti-

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ful. The next morning I wore my new shirt to the beach – it hung to my knees - and I filled a bag with dozens of seashells, most were white but a big pretty one was blue. Later that day I mailed the blue seashell to Michael along with a note - "Greetings from Sir Myron, the Blue Knight of Florida. Tomorrow I'm going to go looking for locusts on the beach." Thanks for the cool t-shirt."

