

The
Stories of
My Life

'The master
storyteller
of our times'
HILLARY
RODHAM
CLINTON

James Patterson
— by —
JAMES
PATTERSON

James Patterson
— by —
JAMES
PATTERSON

‘One of the greatest storytellers of all time, Patterson has led an amazing life. *James Patterson By James Patterson* brings to mind Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*. I love the pithy, bright anecdotes, and at times his poignant narrative will bring you to tears.’
New York Times bestselling author Patricia Cornwell

‘I felt I was interviewing James Patterson under the highest permissible dose of sodium pentothal, the truth serum, for hours – and he spilled the whole story of his truly astonishing life and experiences and the absolute unlikelihood that he would become the best-selling fiction author of all time.’
Bob Woodward

‘The book was damn near addictive. I loved it. Patterson recounts turning points and life-shaping lessons in short, riveting bursts that inform, entertain, and satisfy – then propel you into the next story. That Patterson guy can write!’
Ron Howard

‘James Patterson does it again. The master storyteller of our times takes us on a funny, poignant, and ultimately triumphant journey through his own life. If you are among the many millions of us who enjoy reading Patterson’s books, or if you haven’t discovered him yet, you’ll love reading this one too.’

Hillary Rodham Clinton

‘In this breezy and revealing autobiography, James Patterson packs his narrative with scores of personal stories that will delight fans, and even non-fans, of America’s storied storyteller.’

Ben Bradlee Jr., author of *The Forgotten*

‘James Patterson’s first rule of storytelling is “be there”. And that’s the genius of his autobiography. You’re right there with him as he’s growing up in Newburgh, New York; then on Madison Avenue; and as he begins to sell more books than anybody else on the planet.’

New York Times bestselling author Mike Lupica

‘Jim Patterson’s life is a thriller itself. From his hardscrabble upbringing as a great athlete from a small town in upstate New York, to his time as a hippie in the 1960s and a great ad copywriter in the 1970s, Jim became the bestselling author of all time.

This book is a pure joy to read.’

Stephen A. Schwarzman, co-founder, chairman and CEO of Blackstone

‘As the author of more than two hundred novels James Patterson has shown considerable potential as a writer. He reveals how he is working on that potential in his memoir. The book is always entertaining. You will enjoy the read.’

Phil Knight, creator of Nike and author of *Shoe Dog*

‘A masterpiece of storytelling! Funny, poignant, brutally honest, filled with life and love and heartbreak; it is the most entertaining book I have read in the past fifty years. Patterson reminds us all that even in our smallest moments, there are great stories to be told.’

Admiral William H. McRaven (US Navy Retired),

author of *Make Your Bed*

‘*James Patterson by James Patterson* is a compelling account of the life events that shaped an extraordinary man – combining elements of a tragic love story, counterculture youth, and cutthroat corporate success, this memoir will be a fascinating read for fans of his thrillers and beyond.’

Nicholas Sparks

James Patterson
— by —
JAMES
PATTERSON

The Stories of My Life

C
CENTURY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Century
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

Century is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

Copyright © James Patterson 2022

James Patterson has asserted his right to be identified as the author of
this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in the UK by Century in 2022

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-529-13687-6

ISBN 978-1-529-13688-3 (trade paperback edition)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® paper.



James Patterson
— by —
**JAMES
PATTERSON**

i want to tell you some stories
...the way i remember them
anyway.

hungry dogs run faster

THIS MORNING, I got up at quarter to six. Late for me. I made strong coffee and oatmeal with a sprinkle of brown sugar and a touch of cream. I leafed through the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Then I took a deep breath and started this ego-biography that you're reading.

My grandmother once told me, "You're lucky if you find something in life you like to do. Then it's a miracle if somebody'll pay you to do it." Well, I'm living a miracle. I spend my days, and many nights, writing stories about Alex Cross, the Women's Murder Club, Maximum Ride, the Kennedys, John Lennon, young Muhammad Ali, and now *this*.

My writing style is colloquial, which is the way we talk to one another, right? Some might disagree—some vehemently disagree—but I think colloquial storytelling is a valid form of expression. If you wrote down your favorite story to tell, there might not be any great sentences, but it still could be outstanding. Try it out. Write down a good story you tell friends—maybe starting with the line "Stop me if I've told you this one before"—and see how it looks on paper.

A word about my office. Come in. Look around. A well-worn,

hopelessly cluttered writing table sits at the center, surrounded by shelves filled to the brim with my favorite books, which I dip into all the time.

At the base of the bookshelves are counters. Today, there are thirty-one of my manuscripts on these surfaces. Every time journalists come to my office and see the thirty or so manuscripts in progress, they mutter something like “I had no idea.” Right. *I had no idea how crazy you are, James.*

I got infamous writing mysteries, so here’s the big mystery plot for this book: How did a shy, introspective kid from a struggling upstate New York river town who didn’t have a lot of guidance or role models go on to become, at thirty-eight, CEO of the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson North America? How did this same person become the bestselling writer in the world? That’s just not possible.

But it happened. In part because of something else my grandmother preached early and often—*hungry dogs run faster.*

And, boy, was I hungry.

One thing that I’ve learned and taken to heart about writing books or even delivering a good speech is to tell stories. Story after story after story. That’s what got me here, so that’s what I’m going to do. Let’s see where storytelling takes us. This is just a fleeting thought, but try not to skim too much. If you do, it’s the damn writer’s fault. But I have a hunch there’s something here that’s worth a few hours. It has to do with the craft of storytelling.

One other thing. When I write, I pretend there’s someone sitting across from me—and I don’t want that person to get up until I’m finished with the story.

Right now, that person is you.

let's start with
something crazy

five years at a cuckoo's nest

MY WRITING CAREER unofficially began at McLean Hospital, the psychiatric affiliate of Harvard Medical School in Belmont, Massachusetts. It was the summer of 1965 and I was eighteen. Fresh out of high school. I needed a job, any job, and McLean was hiring. I spent a good part of the next five years at this mental hospital. That's where everything changed about how I saw the world and probably how I saw myself.

I wasn't a patient. I swear. Not that I have anything but the highest regard for mental patients. I just wasn't one of them. Besides, back then I couldn't have afforded a room at McLean, not even space in a double room.

I was a psych aide. I think I was hired because I have empathy for people. You'll be the judge of that. The heart of the job was to talk to patients and, more important, to listen to them. Occasionally, patients tried to hurt themselves. My job was to try and stop that from happening. In addition to my usual daytime shift, I worked two or three overnight shifts a week, from eleven p.m. until seven in the morning. Most nights I just had to watch people sleep. Which isn't that easy.

I had never liked coffee, but I started drinking the awful stuff

just to make sure I stayed awake, since there were usually patients on suicide watch at Bowditch or East House in the maximum-security wards where I regularly worked. For hour-long stints I had to sit outside their rooms, watching them flop around in bed, listening to them snore, while I fought off sleep at three or four in the morning.

So I had a lot of free time. I started reading like a man possessed during those long, dark nights of other people's souls.

Two or three times a week, I'd go the three miles or so into Cambridge and make the rounds of the secondhand bookstores. I especially loved tattered, dog-eared books. Books that had been well loved and showed it. The used books cost me a quarter, occasionally a buck, even for thick novels like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Tin Drum*.

At the time, I wasn't interested in genre fiction, the kind of accessible stuff I write. I had no idea what books were on the *New York Times* bestseller lists. I was a full-blown, know-it-all literary snob—who didn't really know what the hell he was talking about.

My ideas about how the world was supposed to work had been framed growing up in Newburgh, New York, and the somewhat parochial outer reaches of Orange County. As I read novel after novel, play after play, my view of what was possible in life began to change.

That first summer at McLean Hospital, I read a lot of James Joyce and Gabriel García Márquez, plus as much Henry James as I could stomach. I was into playwrights: Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Ionesco, Albee, Israel Horovitz. I read novelists like John Rechy and Jean Genet (*Our Lady of the Flowers* will get you thinking). Also Jerzy Kosinski and Romain Gary. I loved comedic

American novelists. Stanley Elkin and Thomas Berger got me laughing out loud. So did Bruce Jay Friedman. John Cheever. Richard Brautigan. Vonnegut.

But the novel that influenced me most was Evan Connell Jr.'s *Mrs. Bridge*, the story of an ordinary middle-class family living in Kansas City. *Mrs. Bridge* is told from the point of view of India Bridge, a wife and mother. A companion novel published ten years later, *Mr. Bridge*, tells the same story from the point of view of Walter, her curmudgeonly lawyer husband. A reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Connell's novel is written in a series of 117 brief, revealing episodes. The method looks and is rather unusual. . . . It enables any writer who uses it to show, with clarity and compactness, how characters react to representative episodes and circumstances."

Mrs. Bridge and *Mr. Bridge* helped inspire my writing style (don't blame Evan Connell). So did Jerzy Kosinski's novels *Steps* and *The Painted Bird* (don't blame Kosinski). Short chapters. Tight, concise writing (hopefully). Irony and wit (occasionally).

During the time I worked at McLean Hospital, I read everything (except bestsellers, God forbid) I could get my hands on. Then I started scribbling my own short stories, hundreds of them. That was the beginning of the end. I was now officially an addict. I wanted to write the kind of novel that was read and reread so many times the binding broke and the book literally fell apart, pages scattered in the wind.

I'm still working on that one.

cuckoo's nest east

EVERYTHING ABOUT BUSTLING, sometimes overwhelming, Harvard-centric Cambridge, Massachusetts, and McLean Hospital, in nearby Belmont, seemed fresh and new, and the experience woke me from what felt like an eighteen-year coma, or at least a very deep sleep.

What made McLean most interesting were the patients.

James Taylor was a patient at McLean. The musician checked himself in for depression as a prep-school senior and stayed for ten months. He wrote “Knocking ’Round the Zoo” about his time at McLean. His breakout hit, “Fire and Rain,” was a sad, beautiful tribute to a friend from that time of his life who’d killed herself.

And Taylor definitely was Sweet Baby James. Long blond hair, stunningly handsome, musician, poet. His sister, Kate, was also a patient at McLean. So was his brother Livingston. Both Kate and Liv also went on to record albums. There was actually a small school on the grounds of McLean and I sometimes escorted Liv or Kate to classes. My only experience with James was hearing him sing several times in the hospital coffee shop. Free admission, good acoustics, great seats ten feet from Sweet Baby James himself.

The poet Robert Lowell checked into McLean twice while I was working there. Lowell would do private readings in his room for an audience of three or four patients and staff.

He would read his poems and occasionally explain what he was trying to accomplish in them or complain about the hospital food or that he wasn't admired enough by some critics and peers he respected.

Lowell was just another troubled guy, but a bright and interesting one. We were friendly, and I found him to be a sweet, generous man. I sat in on as many of his readings as I could.

Hell, I was getting paid to listen to James Taylor and Robert Lowell.

Susanna Kaysen was a patient on South Belknap, which housed young women who weren't violent. She wrote her memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (which became a hit movie) based on her experiences at McLean. My opinion is that Susanna made up some parts of the story, stretched the truth, anyway, but isn't that what we writers do?

The summer that I worked on the hospital's male maximum-security ward, Bowditch, a Brandeis University premed student named Marty Cohen was a patient. Marty and I became close friends that summer. He was a suicide risk, and it was actually kind of nerve-racking to be his friend.

Late in the summer, several of the patients on Bowditch got to spend a long weekend with the nurses, aides, and a couple of doctors at a camp that had just closed to the public for the season. For some reason that I didn't completely understand at the time, this trip was thought to be therapeutic. It was definitely going to be interesting. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest Goes to Summer Camp.

The camp was on the north shore of a beautiful lake in southern New Hampshire, and late one afternoon I went on a canoe ride with Marty. We stopped paddling and talked pretty much nonstop for an hour or so, like we always did. Only this time, it was out in the middle of a dark blue lake surrounded by birch and balsam firs and rapidly deepening shadows.

There was no breeze. The water was still. The world seemed silent and serene.

Finally, Marty looked at me and quietly asked, “Jim, don’t you find it strange that the doctors let a suicide risk like me come out on a lake in a boat like this with you?”

He saw the fear in my eyes and quickly said, “I would *never* do that to you.”

I loved Marty for saying that.

A year later, when he was back at Brandeis, Marty killed himself. I still haven’t gotten over that. I’m still thinking about Marty—and writing about him.

double specials

ONE AFTERNOON WHEN I arrived for the three-to-eleven shift, I saw that hospital maintenance had put new windows in at the nurses' station on the maximum-security ward. Maria Ruocco was the charge nurse, and a good friend. "What's with the windows?" I asked.

Maria rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hold back a wry smile. "Funny you should ask, James. They're Plexiglas. Hurricane-strength. Won't break. So says the maintenance guy. We'll see."

Case in point—down the hallway was a patient I'll call "Crash." A young guy. Crash was on double specials. Regular specials meant that patients were considered a serious risk to themselves or others. These patients needed to have an aide within arm's length at all times. Double specials meant *two* aides within arm's length. That's how dangerous Crash was considered.

As Maria and I stood there at the nurses' station, Crash took off in our direction. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. His two aides followed a half step behind.

"Shit, shit, shit. They're not going to catch him. This is bad! This is bad!"

Maria and I sprinted forward to try and intercept Crash before the inevitable happened. But he got to the new Plexiglas windows first.

Crash crashed headfirst. I'd never heard anything like that sound before. Imagine a melon thrown at full speed against a brick wall. Crash had previously broken three glass windows in the nurses' station. Upon impact with the new Plexiglas window, he dropped to the floor like he'd been shot by a long-distance sniper.

He left us for a moment there, blacked out, maybe gone to heaven for a sneak preview. Then his eyes blinked open. He tried to focus on Maria and I. "Who put those fuckers in? You could hurt somebody."

Just another day at the hospital, and the three-to-eleven shift was only beginning. I loved my years working at McLean, though. I grew up a lot. Learned to handle responsibility responsibly. Saw rich and poor, business leaders and failing artists, some high-school-age kids completely losing their minds—and, occasionally, finding them again.

I had also started the journey to become a writer. And I thought *they* were the ones with a problem.

But hey, I'm getting way, way ahead of myself in this story. Sorry, and I mean it, but I have to go back to the beginning.

Who says you can't go home again?

dirt poor for a while

robert caro or walter isaacson,
i'm not

THERE'S SOMETHING I should clarify for you up front. Here's what I'm not going to do in this book. I'm not going to write any more paragraphs like the following one.

My hometown of Newburgh is 4.8 square miles bordered on the east by the Hudson River and on the south by the Hudson Highlands, approximately sixty miles north of Manhattan. Newburgh has its share of significant addresses. From his headquarters on Liberty Street, George Washington, in April 1783, announced the end of the Revolutionary War—and the beginning of America. On Montgomery Street, Thomas Edison built a generating plant that electrified the city in 1884. Off Cohecton Turnpike, the Brookside Drive-In Theater was a regional destination where seven hundred cars could park in view of a two-thousand-square-foot screen mounted on a seventy-foot tower. I was born in Newburgh and lived on North Plank Road, Gidney Avenue, and North Street before my father changed jobs and our family was uprooted to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

That's all factual, yes, but this is a book of true stories the way I remember them. I'm sure I'll get a few things wrong. But I *was* five foot eleven in high school, and I *could* dunk a basketball the summer before my senior year. I *did* take that joy ride I'll tell you

about later. And the first girl I ever kissed was named Veronica Tabasco.

I wasn't a big reader in grammar or high school. Sometimes that shows in my prose. My mother and father were readers, though. They set a great example. There were open books everywhere in our house, left spread-eagled in the living room, kitchen, even some bathrooms. That book-in-every-room approach is supposed to be encouraging but it didn't do anything for me, at home or in Catholic school. I had a goofy-high IQ, but the books, essays, and stories they tried to force-feed us in class were especially boring to me and seemed irrelevant to most of us.

So how did I wind up writing, and reading, so many books? I'm going to try to tell you how it happened. As I said early on, this is a mystery story.

Actually, come to think of it, quite a few people die.

you're slipping, james

ACCORDING TO PATTERSON family lore, on March 22, 1947, I nearly died at birth at St. Luke's Hospital in Newburgh, New York. I don't remember, but I did live to tell about it.

Let's start with my father. Charles Henry Patterson was a quiet but tough man who came from tough times and from a tough river town.

My dad grew up in the Newburgh poorhouse (think about that for a second or two). It was called the Pogie. His mom was the charwoman there. She cleaned the kitchens and bathrooms, worked, she said, from "seven to seven, seven days a week." For her long, hard work, she and my father got to share a single room on the basement floor. They weren't homeless, but they were damn close. My father never met his father, at least not as far as he could remember.

My mother, Isabelle Ann, attended high school with my dad. After college she became a fourth-grade teacher at St. Patrick's, one of the four Catholic schools in Newburgh. She made next to nothing. Maybe even a little less than that. I'm surprised the parish priests didn't ask her to pay them for the privilege of teaching at their school. Several nights a week, she

would be bent over the dining-room table grading papers until nine or ten.

She had a cool mission as a teacher: she wanted to turn mirrors into windows. She pretty much followed the same philosophy at home. Mirrors, physical or symbolic, weren't big in the Patterson house.

My sisters—Mary Ellen, Carole, and Teresa—ruled the roost. In their view of the world, I was hired help. I was muscle. I was their minion. So I handled the garbage detail, the lawn work, the snow removal, and the repair of bicycles, small electrical appliances, deflated balls of all sizes and shapes. We were a very ball-sy family.

I was always a good student, driven to be number one in, well, *everything*, but I'd get a ninety-seven on a test and my mom or dad would say, "How come you didn't get a hundred? You're slipping, James."

The idea I had growing up—and I held on to it into my forties—was that my folks only cared about me as long as I was number one in my class. I don't blame them, because I feel they were doing the best that they could. I think they honestly believed the next Great Depression was just around the corner, and they always clung to *Careful. Careful. Go slow. Look both ways. Then look again. Your best isn't good enough. You're slipping, James.*

my favorite dad story

A FEW WEEKS before my father got shipped out to fight in World War II, he received a long-distance phone call that turned into a famous story in our family. He must have told this one to my sisters and me a couple dozen times.

The man who phoned my father identified himself as George Hazelton from Port Jervis, a town about forty miles from Newburgh. He asked my dad to bear with him for a moment. He needed to set the scene. George told my dad he was about to leave for the Pacific theater with the navy. After dinner the night before, his mother and father had sat him down in the living room. They'd teared up and had trouble speaking.

Finally, his father managed to say, "George, you know we love you very much, and you're about to go off to fight in this horrible war, so we have to tell you something that we've kept from you all these years. We're not your natural parents. We adopted you when you were one year old."

Then George Hazelton told my father—over the phone—*that he was his brother.*

Great punch line, Uncle George. What's that line from the

Doobie Brothers song “Takin’ It to the Streets”? “You don’t know me but I’m your brother.”

So Charles Patterson and George Hazelton, two brothers who still hadn’t actually met, both went off to fight for their country in World War II.

Miraculously, they both also came home. They became best friends, extremely loyal and loving toward one another. The thing I remember best about the two of them was that when they were together, they would laugh and laugh. And my father didn’t laugh all that much.

My father would sometimes tear up when he told the story about how he and his big brother, George, found one another. I think it was the only time I ever saw him cry.

i don't even know grandpa patterson's first name

A FEW YEARS after the war ended, my uncle George called my father again. This time he started with the punch line: *"I found our father."*

My uncle went on to report that their father was tending bar in Poughkeepsie, New York. He was working in a seedy joint under the Mid-Hudson Bridge. My uncle George said, "C'mon, Pat, let's go to Poughkeepsie. The two of us. I want to meet him."

My father said, "Well, I don't. I'm not interested in meeting the bastard. I'm not going with you, George."

So my uncle went all by himself to this ugly little gin mill sitting under the Poughkeepsie bridge. A couple of rummies were inside, bellied up to the bar. The joint reeked of months-old stale beer and hard liquor that was even older. Just right for a scene in a novel about upstate New York by William Kennedy or Richard Russo.

My uncle George didn't drink, so he ordered a Coca-Cola. Then he sat there nursing his soda, watching his father, who he'd never met, growing so disgusted by this poor excuse for a human being that he never even introduced himself. After half an hour—an excruciating time, I imagine—Uncle George left the

bar and drove back to Port Jervis alone. His father never knew that one of his sons had been there.

And to this day, I don't know my grandpa Patterson's first name.

Small-town bars actually played a big part in my youth. On many a Saturday afternoon, my father would drag me along to a local joint on Broadway in Newburgh. My dad called it "baby-sitting the boy."

Here was our ritual: The bartender would slap half a mug of beer down in front of me. I was five or six years old. I'd quaff the beer in one big sip. Every Saturday. The guys in the bar would cheer for me, and my dad was clearly proud. Somehow, I didn't become an alcoholic, but encouraging your kid to chug down beers at six was an interesting way of being a dad. I don't recommend it.

the altar-boy story

SOMEHOW I MADE it through those early barroom days and headed into St. Patrick's grammar school in Newburgh.

I grew up Catholic. Lord, did I grow up Catholic. The Church was all-seeing, all-knowing, omnipresent, and all-powerful. From ages eight through twelve, I was an altar boy. I felt like I had no choice, no free will, and no say in the matter.

This is no exaggeration—I served Mass every day for a year and a half. If there happened to be a funeral, I would serve two Masses that day.

St. Patrick's Catholic Church was about a mile and a half from our house on North Street in Newburgh. Every morning I would ride my bike to church down either Grand or Liberty Street, past beautiful old houses—Federal, Gothic, Revival, Italianate structures. Or, if I was feeling extra-guilty about something, usually “impure thoughts,” I'd walk.

The altar boys at St. Patrick's were mostly good-natured small-town kids. Sometimes, though, we needed to break the rigid rules. *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. You won't believe this one!*

You really won't. Before and after Mass, we used to snack

on *unconsecrated* hosts. (In the Catholic Church, this is almost like eating Jesus.) Those paper-thin communion wafers weren't exactly potato chips but there was a bad-boy thrill to munching them. Of course, no bad deed goes unpunished. The Church was all-seeing, after all.

One morning, I was serving early Mass with a pal named Ray Cosgrove. Halfway through the service, I almost had a kid heart attack.

Communion wafers, at least a dozen of them, were scattered on the floor all around the altar.

God, please have mercy on me!

I immediately figured out what had happened. Ray Cosgrove must've stuffed communion hosts into a pants pocket—with a hole in it. The priest, Father Brennan, who was well over six feet tall and at least two hundred fifty pounds, spotted the hosts and figured he had spilled them. Okay, that gave Ray Cosgrove and I some hope.

He stopped the Mass—which in those days was delivered in Latin.

I was about to have my second kid heart attack of the morning.

This mammoth priest got down on his puffy, arthritic hands and knees. He proceeded to pick up every host, every potential "Body of Christ," then sprinkle holy water all over the floor. This excruciating cleansing ordeal took close to ten minutes.

I held my breath and wondered if *all* the wafers had fallen out of Ray's pocket or if there were more. Would a telltale trail of communion wafers lead right to the guilty ones, Ray Cosgrove and me?

Meanwhile, I was having a more urgent thought: *I will die after this Mass. First, I will be excommunicated by this priest. Then*

my father will kill me. My mother will help. My sisters will joyfully pitch in—the little witches.

But Father Brennan never figured things out, and Ray Cosgrove and I sure weren't going to confess our sins to him.

Not to that priest. Not to anyone.

Not until now.

Bless me, reader, I ate the unconsecrated communion hosts.

kissing veronica tabasco

LET'S GET BACK to those “impure thoughts.” Or, better yet, some “impure actions.”

When I was in sixth grade, I got invited to an elementary-school make-out party. This freaked me out—*the Church was all-seeing, and so were my parents*. But there was no way I was going to say no. Hell, I'd never been kissed by a girl before.

The party of a lifetime was happening after school at the house of one of the girls from my class at St. Patrick's. Her parents both worked. There was no chance they would come home early. We were on our own until three that afternoon. Until three, anything was possible. But what did that even mean, *anything was possible*?

There were six girls and six boys. A lot of staring down at our sneaks or saddle shoes. Nervous smiles. Giggling. Offers of soda pop. And beer.

We got paired off in no particular order, at least none that I was told about or could figure out.

I slowly walked to a bedroom with a pretty girl named Veronica Tabasco. What a great name for a first-kiss girl, right? Veronica was one of the smart kids in our class. She stuck to her ideas no matter what the nuns said, which I loved about her.

She pulled down the shades in the bedroom. We both laughed. (I think I laughed.) We didn't know what we were doing but our make-out session was kind of sweet. She was a good kisser. She said I was too. I thanked Veronica and she thanked me. What can I say—we were polite St. Patrick's Catholic School students, after all.

The story doesn't end there. Years later, when I was in my early thirties, I went to visit my grandfather's grave at the Calvary Cemetery on the outskirts of Newburgh. (This was my grandfather on my mother's side, "Pop.")

I wasn't that big on visits to cemeteries, and I couldn't remember exactly where the gravesite was, but I finally found it. I stood there, hat in hand, a stiff Hudson River wind chilling me to the bone, and I had a few good memories of Pop. I said a half-remembered prayer or two.

Then I turned back in the direction of my car and—*Jesus*—I read the name on the gravestone right next to my grandfather's.

It was Veronica Tabasco. My first-kiss girl. My sixth-grade crush. According to the stone tablet, Veronica had died in her mid-twenties. I'd had no idea until that moment. It kind of broke my heart.

taking piano lessons from a nun in a convent

MY INSTINCTS ARE usually pretty good about what I should do—and what I should run away from as fast as possible.

This was true even when I was a kid. I was faced with a dilemma: I was being forced to take piano lessons at Mount St. Mary's Convent with an elderly nun, Sister Catherine Dominica, but even though Sister Catherine Dominica was actually pretty nice (she gave her students, good or bad, gingersnaps after every session), the lessons were truly nasty. The experience rivaled listening to Liberace or watching *The Lawrence Welk Show* on TV. And I knew for sure this was not the road to becoming the next piano-banging Jerry Lee Lewis or Little Richard.

I can still vividly remember the numbing boredom of repeating scales and the tedium of memorizing not one, not two, but three different versions of "Ave Maria." And I actually *liked* "Ave Maria"! All three versions.

I have a decent Irish tenor voice, so I sang a little in the church choir in those days. But I couldn't handle piano lessons at the convent plus endless practice on the *tone-death* spinet in our living room. I finally told my mother I'd had it.

My grandfather leaned into the conversation and said I'd