

## Childhood influencers

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At 6 a.m., December 24, 1952. I was in a hospital. I had been alive for about three hours. I was already depressed.

Shortly after 6 a.m. a nurse came into the room. She was big. And it wasn't just me being small that made her look big. She genuinely had a massive, imposing presence. And she wore the kind of nylons that made a *swoosh-crunch* noise when she walked that sounded like somebody was sawing a tree down.

"We thought we'd take you in to meet your mother now," she said. "Get you something to eat, maybe take a little nap."

And with that, she scooped me up in her arms and carried me out of the nursery. She walked down a long hall (*swoosh-crunch, swoosh-crunch*). We rounded the corner and walked down another long hall (*swoosh-crunch, swoosh-crunch*). Finally, we arrived at the room where my mother was. We walked in and saw mom laying on the bed. Dad was sitting in a chair next to her and my big brother, Barney, was in a chair next to him. The nurse gently laid me down on the bed and lifted up the blanket for everyone to have a look.

Now the whole family was depressed.

And so completed our nuclear family. And we were more nuclear, self-contained, than most. My brother and I didn't grow up surrounded by grandparents and aunts and uncles and dozens of cousins. Any blood relatives were hundreds or thousands of miles away. My parents weren't too big on friends or extended family tribes, either. It was us four against the world.

## *Jarvis*

My dad, Jarvis, was from New York City. "Born on Broadway," he liked to say. And, technically, it was true having been born in a hospital at 3300 N. Broadway. The year was 1915 and he was the youngest of three. His father, my grandfather, had died of pneumonia ninth months earlier on Christmas Day, 1914. Apparently, he had gotten one last shot into grandma, impregnating her right before he exited planet earth.

My memories of my paternal grandmother were images of a dour, humorless old turd. But, as an adult I came to appreciate what an amazing woman she was. The idea of a single mom raising kids on her own, in New York City no less, was pretty much unheard of in 1915.

Relatives offered to take the kids off her hands. Some wanted the girl because, you know, sugar and spice and all things nice. One relative had a farm in upstate New York and said he would take the boys (free farm hands!). He wanted nothing to do with the girl.

But to the dismay of all of her family members, Gram would have no part of any of their plans. She would neither split the children up nor let them go.

She taught herself to be a beautician. I hear she got to be quite an expert at the Marcel Wave, very popular with her Upper East Side Clientele in the 1920s. They were very poor, but they were together. And she raised the three of them on her own.

When dad graduated high school in 1933, the depression was in full swing. He did odd jobs to earn some money, but his passion was acting. He pounded the pavement doing every audition he could wrangle. His break came in 1938 when he landed the leading role in a new Broadway play *The Good*.

The play told the story of a tortured, young homosexual man and his relationship with his mother. At age 23, my dad played the young man and stage legend Frances Starr was opposite him in the role of the mother. Both my dad and Ms. Starr received favorable reviews. But as for the subject matter of the play, that was a different story.

*The Good*, of course, had no graphic love scene. It had no scene at all with my father and another man. It was an introspective reflection of a young man struggling with his identity and a loving mother trying to help him through it. An intelligent attempt to discuss the torment a gay man experienced in a society that wasn't ready to accept him for who he was.

The problem was, in 1938, the theatre world, much less the world at large, wasn't ready to accept even a discussion on the topic. And the "don't say gay" boys in the band of New York drama critics were intent on letting the theatre patrons of New York City know exactly how they felt about this outrageous affront.

Sidney R. Whipple in the New York World Telegram began his review with "It has always been my belief, or prejudice if you will, that the explorations into the field of abnormal sexual psychology were better left to the scientific world and not forced upon the public in the theatre."

And Mr. Whipple was the kinder, gentler homophobe/critic compared to the New York Times drama dude. That guy ended his review with the words "I was glad to get out into the stench and filth of the city streets for a breath of fresh air."

As the Bard would say, "*They doth protest too much, methinks.*"

After nine days *The Good* was shut down. And so was my dad's Broadway career. He never scored another role on or off Broadway. He knocked around the scene

for another three years until the premier of *World War 2, The Sequel*, opened to rave reviews.

Luckily for dad, and subsequently for me and my brother, he never saw combat. He and his friends weren't Gung Ho soldier boy wannabes. They didn't enlist but waited to be drafted. Once in, he bounced around stateside doing this and that. My fav gig of his was touring the country giving presentations to young ladies in an effort to recruit WACs.

Well done, dad!

The final years of the war he was a radio personality on the prequel to Radio Free Europe. Once out of the war he continued his career as a broadcaster. And that's where he met mom.

### *June*

In 1916, halfway across the continent and a world away from the likes of New York City, my mother was born in the southern most town of Indiana, Evansville. This hamlet sat on the banks of the Wabash River across the way from Kentucky. You couldn't find a city less like the Big Apple. And you couldn't input into a computer the request for an opposite of my dad and come up with a more spot-on candidate than my mom.

The first big chasm that separated their respective childhoods was money. Unlike Dad, Mom's family had it. Her father owned a foundry in town. She was the youngest of four with her closest sibling being fourteen years her senior. The way she waxed poetic

about it, she was a Disney princess years before there were Disney princesses. Her father and mother were king and queen. Her siblings were her three fairy godparents.

But alas, not all fairy tales end happily ever after. When the depression hit, gramps lost his foundry and a good chunk of his money. He wasn't broke, but the glory days were over and never returned. But even though hard times had hit the family, my grandparents were quick to share what they had with the less fortunate.

Unknown to them, a hobo symbol had been etched on their front curb indicating their home was an easy mark for free food. And, as the story goes, one day a policeman knocked on the front door to inform them about the hobo marking so they could remove it. But my grandparents didn't remove it. Instead, they kept a steady supply of paper bags with filled with food to pass out to anyone who stopped by.

As my mother recalled, the depression seemed to go on forever ravaging savings accounts and chipping away at the souls of America. And then Pearl Harbor was attacked. Unlike my dad's crew over in New York City, every able-bodied male in mom's sphere enlisted the very next day. This included a strapping young man who was the love of her life. He became a pilot and was sent to the Pacific theatre. And, like the 416,799 other young American men who went off to fight that war, he never came back.

After the war, my mom picked herself up and dusted herself off. She enrolled in college and quickly became the head of her sorority. She was selected to go on a whirlwind tour around the country to promote the charity work the sorority was involved with. Part of that tour landed her in New York City being interviewed on a radio show. The interviewer was my dad.

What happened next was always a little hazy growing up. As a child, I never stopped to think about it, but later realized a few things. There was no wedding photo on the mantel. No wedding album to thumb through. My parents never celebrated their wedding anniversary. In fact, we had no idea when or where mom and pops had gotten hitched. Plus, it was never really explained how we wound up in Chicago when all of our relatives were miles away.

It took years to peel away the dubious layers of the onion to get to the real story. And the truth was quite a shock to my brother and me. We learned that both my father and mother had been married before (*Gasp!*). We discovered that my brother had been conceived out of wedlock (*Take my arm and help me to the couch!*). We'd find out that, after that fateful radio interview, June and Jarvis went out on a date, got drunk and made my brother.

Both being devout Catholics (perhaps the one and only thing they had in common), they decided to get married and have the baby. Neither one, however, wanted to remain in their respective hometowns. They had become quite the scandal. It was rough on dad, but simply devastating to my mom. She had been disgraced in her beloved fairy land. And she never really recovered from the pain of being banished from the Kingdom of Evansville.

So why would they embark on this lifetime adventure based on one night's hapless misadventure? How could they both agree to take this profound detour in their lives? For much of my life, I wrote them off as being just stone, cold nuts for doing it. But I've grown to consider another explanation. Sure, they were crazy. But they also possessed a quality that subsequent generations have been rather lacking in: honor.

They did what they did because it was the honorable thing to do. And, let's face it, it took big, clanging brass balls, too.

But for whatever reason, these two complete strangers made their way to Chicago with no jobs, little money, and pretty much nothing in common except the biological accident that resulted in the birth of their first-born son on November 8, 1949.

### *Barney*

If my mom was the princess, my big brother was the second coming. Barney was June and Jarvis' love child. And I must say, for good reason. Outside of sports, he excelled at everything.

He was quite the little Renaissance Kid. He could draw, he could play an instrument, he could sing. And he loved to perform for friends and family. And if that wasn't enough, at school Barney got straight A's and was beloved by the nuns for being so squeaky clean perfect.

When we came home from school, my brother would perform a monologue regaling my mom and I with what had transpired that day in the life of the chosen one. My mother would sit rapt in attention, hanging on every anecdote. I sat listening too. It never dawned on me to share my day. Why would I? I was but a mere mortal.

You might think all of this adulation would make him a snotty brat to me, his little brother. But not true. My brother loved me like crazy. And he wasn't afraid to let the world know it. He took me everywhere, often had his arm around my shoulder pulling me close. We grew up being the most important person in each other's lives. While I

was certainly close to my parents and I felt their unconditional love, Barney was El Senior. No contest.

### *Randy*

A little over three years after my brother arrived, I came along. I wasted no time demonstrating to the world that I was nothing more than a cheap knock off of the original masterpiece.

I was always following right behind my brother struggling to imitate his every move. Every time he drew a picture, I drew the same one. And his was actually quite good. Mine looked like a little kid drew it. I could sing, but not as well as him. And at school, the chasm between the two of us was not subtle.

I got poor grades. Almost flunked out of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Do you know how hard it is to do that? I was also a troublemaker and a cut-up. And believe me, the latter of those really, really pissed off the nuns. Ain't nothin' they hated more than a wise guy.

It was like God had created me by Xeroxing my brother on a really cheap copy machine that was low on ink. A dull version of the real deal. I was pretty sure the only reason my parents kept me around was for parts. In case Barney needed a kidney or lost a limb in an accident.

But before you feel sorry for me, let me tell you I believe I was the lucky one. The family dynamic provided me with some very important skills and sensibilities.

First and foremost, I learned how to listen. Okay, yeah, I didn't have much of a choice. I lived with three extraverts who only stopped talking to take a breath. And when they did, one of the other two would snatch the spotlight and take over. But it allowed



me to learn the power of listening. At an early age I figured out that when you are talking, you aren't learning anything.

I also realized the importance of keeping your cards close to your chest. My brother didn't do that and he paid the price time and again, especially with my mom. One of the drawbacks of being the apple of your parent's eye is that your family tree branch keeps a very tight grip on your stem. From day one, and even on into adulthood, they were all over his shit. Helicopter, hands-on parenting before it was in vogue.

Me, not so much. I could maneuver in the shadows while my brother sucked up the attention. When it did come time for me to pony up some response or participate in the family discourse, I summoned up what I discovered early on to be my superpower. A power my brother did *not* possess. I was funny.

Giving credit where credit is due, I learned from a couple of masters. Both of my parents were skilled in the art of funny. And their talents lay in completely different areas. Mom was accomplished at the vulgar, earthy farmgirl humor courtesy her Southern Indiana roots. Dad, on the other hand, was master of the sarcastic, highbrow put down, ala the Algonquin Club. And I listened and learned and became quite adept at both of these dark comic arts.

My superpower served me well at home. And many times it was my saving grace at school, too. But only up to a certain point.

*Bullies*

My first experience with a bully was on the playground in kindergarten. I had gone down a slide and inadvertently rammed into another kid and made him cry. I felt terrible as he was led away by an adult to the school nurse.

Suddenly, another boy grabbed me and threw me to the ground and shook his fist in my face saying "I'll pound your face in if you ever hurt him again." It was a rush of confusion and fear I had never experienced.

And it was just the beginning.

The curious thing I quickly learned was that the kid I had collided with wasn't even a friend of my assailant. I hadn't hit a "made" guy in the mob and now had to pay for it. The kid who threatened me was just a thug. A predator, and he preyed on kids he could bully. And some primal sixth sense had told him I was an easy mark.

Welcome to the asphalt jungle of kindergarten... and elementary school... and middle school... and high school. The bullies and the bullied. Plus a bunch of other people in the middle who just kind of managed to skate through under the radar.

My street education continued as I soon discovered my brother, my hero, wasn't going to be much of any help. He was bullied too. In fact, he was probably bullied worse than I was. I, at least, could sometimes joke my way out of a possible confrontation. Barney was the textbook nerdy kid from central casting. Complete with black, horned rim glasses like Clark Kent wore. Only no Superman lay in wait underneath. Inside, he was just a sweet, gentle kid.

Years later I was listening to the comedian David Spade on a podcast a few days after the Oscars incident where Will Smith got up and slapped Chris Rock. Spade said he had been bullied as a kid and the exchange brought it all rushing back to him. He

said he knew his friend, Chris Rock, had also been bullied and he imagined that his emotions in that moment went back to the playground, too.

All of us who were bullied in our youth know exactly what David Spade was talking about. You never really shake it off. Sometimes you can just be walking down the street and you turn a corner and, boom, something triggers a memory and it all comes rushing back.

### *Illness*

When I was 4 years old my mother suffered a major heart attack. She almost died. The year being 1956, they didn't know very much about heart disease. The doctors told her that she had probably only few years to live. Maybe not even that.

At 40 years of age, she was given a death sentence. She had two boys, ages seven and four.

I imagine she felt like she had two options: keep it hidden from the boys or be honest and open about it and invite your children into the process. A friend of mine whose father died of cancer when he was in middle school experienced the former approach. He had no idea his dad was sick. And when the cancer started to show his dad was moved away to a relative out-of-town so he could suffer and die on the QT. My friend never even got to say good-bye.

My mom chose the latter path. Of course, those first couple of years I had no idea she was sick. But I have memories of how she was confronting her situation. One that sticks out in particular was the maid she hired to clean the house. Our maid did more than clean, she would rough house and play with me. I have a vivid memory her

having me on the floor tickling me while I rolled around in a fit of giggles and my mother sat in a chair with her cup of tea, with a smile on her face.

My mom felt laughter and fun were so important that she actually paid someone to get on the floor and play with me when she couldn't physically muster the strength to do it herself.

What an extraordinary soul she was!

But very soon I was hit by her illness and, like my dad and brother, became fully aware of things like: "this might be the last Christmas with mom," etc. She was in and out of the hospital all throughout my childhood. It was an ever-present elephant in the room.

I certainly don't hold her decision to share her situation with her young children against her. She was just trying to prepare us for what she was sure was inevitable and remind us that every moment is precious.

The only thing was, she didn't die. She actually lived another 36 years after her first heart attack. A good half of those years she was bedridden. And her choice to display her illness out in the open grew to consume her. Being sick became her brand. Being pitied was her drug. Her illness was also one hell of an ace to hold if you got in an argument with her.

### *Holidays*

Okay, let's lighten things up a bit. Yeah, mom was always sick and bullies were dicks, but an awful lot of my childhood is filled with good memories, too. And at the top of the list would be holidays. We celebrated them with gusto and passion and lots of

tacky decorations. Beginning the year with Valentine's Day, then St. Patrick's Day and Easter. The summer had the Fourth of July and come Fall we went over the top at Halloween and reveled in Thanksgiving.

And then the granddaddy of them all: Christmas! Holy Mother of God did we go nuts over the birthday of baby Jesus. And all of our traditions and rituals were locked in stone. One week before Christmas, not a day before or after, we went to the lot to purchase a live tree. We took it home and set it up in the family room, but that was it. No lights, no ornaments, just the tree.

On the next day my dad strung the lights up. Still no ornaments. The day after that came the ornaments. Barney, mom and I put most of them up. We saved the special fragile ones for my dad to put up when he got home after work.

The next day came the tinsel. And we wouldn't just take a strand or two and carefully place it on the end of a branch. *Fuck that shit!* We would grab handfuls and throw it in the air and watch it separate like fireworks in the sky and shower down on the tree.

Then came the presents. A few would be set out under the tree right away. And every night after my brother and I went to sleep, more would be added to the obscene pile. Finally, Christmas Eve came.

I got a bonus in the morning by receiving birthday presents and cake. Christmas Eve night we opened all of the presents under the tree. But wait, there's more! Christmas morning we rose to be greeted by stuffed stockings and another barrage of gifts courtesy Santa's visit.

I don't know how my parents did it, i.e. afforded it. Actually, that's not true. I know exactly how they did it because I did the same damn thing for my kids and I'm quite sure they will continue the tradition with theirs. You just decide that this stuff is important. Debtors prison be damned.

### *Music*

Comedy may have been my superpower, but music was my Fortress of Solitude. (Last Superman reference, I promise.)

Music was the one sure way I could produce something of value. The proof that maybe, just maybe, I had a talent to do something. And *writing* music was my confessional and my redemption. Not sure what my life would have been without music.

Music meant friends. I got my first guitar in seventh grade and was performing within a year. In high school I had a garage band. Damn, did we have fun. And we were best of friends. We held reunions when we all turned sixty and seventy. Many more life-long musical friendships were forged in college and beyond.

Music meant respect. My brother tells the story of coming home from college one day when I was still in high school. I was playing Blackbird by the Beatles on my acoustic guitar. It was a somewhat difficult finger picking piece. He said he remembered thinking, "Shit, Randy might actually turn out okay."

But it was in the writing of music where I really found an essential part of myself. I started writing poetry when I was eight. I wrote my first song when I was 12. And I've written songs/music every single year of my life since. And it isn't a discipline that I force

myself to do. The music comes to me and says, “stop whatever it is you are doing and write me.” Always been that way, and I guess it always will be so.

### *The Catholic Church*

Unlike many of the families I grew up with who were of pure Italian or Irish lineage, I didn't have much of an ethnic culture to wrap around myself. I was a mutt. I think this is one reason the Catholic Church was such an influencer in my life. My heritage, my identity, was entrenched in Catholicism.

I was born and raised Catholic. And in my family, Catholic was serious business. We never ate meat on Friday, never missed mass on Sunday. My brother and I were both star sopranos in the church boys' choir, the sissy alternative to being an altar boy. And we both found a reason to feel guilty about pretty much everything. And if by chance we happened to miss an opportunity to feel guilty, our mother, God bless her, was there to point it out.

I remember one Holy Saturday (that's the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday for you non-Catholic heathens) my brother and I were playing outside. My mother came out and scolded us for being so callous. “You should be thinking about Jesus laying in the tomb after being crucified,” she said. My brother and I retreated to our rooms to pray and ask God to cut us some slack, for Christ's sake.

Years later I would learn just how deep an imprint the Catholic Church had on our family. Remember how my parents had been married before and how pappa got mamma knocked up with big brother Barney? Well, a simply jaw-dropping result of all of

that was, as far as the church was concerned, these offenses could not be wiped clean by a quick trip to the confessional. No way, St. Jose!

The church had declared that my parents were forever banned from taking the sacraments. And that was a huge deal. There are seven sacraments in the Catholic Church: holy communion, confession, and... whatever, five more. The sacraments are basically the amenities that come with your Catholic Church membership. The sins my parents were guilty of literally banned mom and pops from being active, participating Catholics... *for life*.

Or so they thought.

Apparently, not long after I was born (lucky for me, as you will now see) they met a priest who took their plight to heart. He told them about a rather obscure section in the small print of Catholic dogma that would allow them to get back in the good graces of the church: The Brother/Sister Clause. If they swore to never, ever do the nasty again and essentially live as brother and sister, they could be forgiven. They could once again enjoy full membership in Club Catholic.

Mom and dad were beside themselves with joy. They happily signed the church's *No Fuck, No Fault, Contract*. And if you believe them, and I do, they never wavered from that vow of chastity. They honored that demon's deal to their death bed.

Takes your breath away, doesn't it?

And this being the 1950s, it's steeped in irony, too. While the church was affixing imaginary chastity belts onto my parents' naughty bits, parish priests throughout Christendom were polishing their poles up the poop-shoots of pre-pubescent boys leaving them with enough P.T.S.D. memories to last a lifetime.



But, of course, growing up I wasn't aware of any of these dark dealings. I was a good Catholic boy. I loved Jesus and the saints. Like many of my male counterparts, I dreamed of becoming a priest. (That, of course, went south when I reached puberty and discovered girls.) My beliefs ran deep, my faith was strong.

But you can't stay a child forever.

And entering adolescence, I was to meet head on my final childhood influencer: that hapless collection of goofballs that came to be known as Baby Boomers, my generation.

On the surface, and, let's face it, even if you scratch below the surface, my generation is made up of a bunch of whinny, self-absorbed ninnies. Which is steeped in irony because, relative to the previous generations, we really have had very little to complain about.

The generations that occupied the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century got served up one shit sandwich after another. A depression wedged between two world wars. They even kicked off the century with their own deadly pandemic. And after all of that, to add insult to their injuries, they got us, their children.