

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Houston, Texas, the middle kid in a large white family with an Hispanic last name, living in the same house with two parents, a Mexican cook, and a flying dog. I was the fifth in a lineup of eight kids, with three sisters and one brother ahead of me, and two sisters, a brother, and the dog behind me. In our house, at any given time, music would be playing, girls would be dancing, fires would be breaking out, kids would be falling out of moving vehicles, and Santa might even be threatening me on the phone. The cook taught life lessons with a flyswatter and the dog learned to fly without a cape or a bong. Things were weird like that on Carvel Lane in the 1960s.

The decade got off to a bad start with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Some say that America's hopes and innocence died with him, and that was definitely true for some. His death certainly sent this country into a spiral of changes. But for us kids on Carvel Lane the sun still rose in the east and set in the west, and we knew how to fill the hours in between. Perhaps this story will show that for some of us, that innocence hadn't quite yet been laid to rest.

This book is titled after a double disc music mix I made for my brothers and sisters over a dozen years ago. Music was like another family member in our house and that mix seemed to capture our time together. We played it at a family party once, and after the vino got keeno we started singing together, and then we got up and danced with each other around the living room. Someone stood on an ottoman and another on the coffee table to play solos on air guitar and drums. It was a total geek-fest. This lasted for over an hour, and it was the only dance party we ever had together—it was also the last time I ever danced.

I've shared some of my essays with family members over the years, and after I made that music mix some of them began encouraging me to write about that time in our family history. Telling that story had been something I'd been considering, and while the title was obvious to me, I didn't think I had enough memories with the necessary details to fill a book. Then one day my

sister Sharon asked me point-blank if I thought I could write the book; then she asked if I would; then she volunteered to take care of the business end; and the rest is, well, Carvel Daze.

To any kid who might be reading this, I do not recommend doing the things I write about in this book. Attempting the things we did without practice would be like calling yourself a lion tamer and walking into a circus cage. You will get hurt. It's not a question of bravery, it's just that you haven't been properly trained . . . yet. And while this book is about growing up in a house as one of "The Crazy 8s," the story really begins with a friend.

MY FIRST FRIEND

I have a vivid memory of the day I met my very first friend. Think about that. I wonder how many people have even tried to think all the way back to the beginning of their remembrances, to their first friend, or to the day they actually *met* their first friend. I wonder how many of those people would be able to conjure a lucid memory of that first encounter. I thought about that moment only recently myself, and it wasn't hard for me to draw up that day at all, but I was surprised that I had never actually thought about him in that way before—as my very first friend—probably because he's been one of my closest friends ever since that day we met, and one of the best people I've ever known. My first friend's name is Bob Layton, and I remember the day we met.

When we moved from Kansas City to Houston in the spring of 1967, I was six years old. I don't have a lot of memories of Kansas City, at least none that involved playing with other kids. We had a neighbor that lived behind us named David Learner. He was a little older than I was, around the same age as my brother Dave. The only recollection I have of David Learner was the time his wiener dog went after our tomcat Smoky. Big mistake. Chain-link fences and an alley separated our backyards. I have an image of him shortly after the fight between the pets. It was in the fall, the trees were dark and getting bare, and the ground was covered with brown, wet leaves. David Learner was in his backyard close to the fence, crying as he held his dog like one would cradle a baby, with its paws in the air and its bloodied stomach exposed. The wounds were superficial, and the dog was okay, but if David Learner was ever our friend, I doubt that he was after that incident. Other than him, my only Kansas City memories of other human interaction involved my immediate family, and my cousins who were all much older than I.

It was a sunny afternoon the day we moved to Houston, and because there were eight kids in our family, we were expanding from a one-story house in KC to a two-story. The house seemed huge! And it had a staircase and a second floor! Some of the floors were tiled, and the wooden

ones looked like they'd been dipped in honey. It wasn't a new house, but it sure looked new to me.

Bob lived three houses down on the same side of the street as we did. I didn't see him riding his red bike with training wheels up the sidewalk towards our house that day, but my sisters who were outside described that scene later. He was a curious kid, and one who was always looking for adventure, so he rode with determination and a purpose. He was coming to see who moved into the neighborhood.

There was no furniture in the house that I recall, at least there wasn't any in the living room yet, so as I was on my knees helping to unload boxes, I looked up to see a red-headed kid with his nose mashed into our screen door. We had a short, built-in bookcase just inside the doorway blocking part of his view so he asked whomever he saw if there were any kids in the house that could come out and play. My older sister Cindy looked at me and opened the door, and I got up and went outside. We introduced ourselves to each other and ended up sitting on the porch just talking. I don't remember what we were talking about, but a short time after he arrived a green, wood-paneled station wagon crossed the street in front of our house and pulled into the driveway next door. In the backseat of that car was another kid who looked to be around the same age as Bob, but a kid that would rub me the wrong way from that day on. I'll tell you more about him later.

Bob was one of two boys belonging to Jack and Susan Layton, who arrived from Oregon several years earlier. He was a little over a year younger than I was, and his older brother Bill was slightly older than my brother Dave. The two of them couldn't be any different. While Bob was good-natured, amicable, and funny, Bill . . . well, he was a good guy, but he had a little junkyard dog in him. The first time I played football against Bill, I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Bob and I became fast friends, and before long we were spending the night at each other's houses. Staying at his house was different for me because he had a TV in his room, plus he had a

record player and had already started collecting comic books. Everything we needed was right there in his room, and he shared it all. We were already collecting 45s by then, so while we read his comic books, we'd be listening to music from the Monkees, Tommy James & The Shondells, Johnny Cash, one-hit wonders like *Vehicle* by the Ides of March or *Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head* by B. J. Thomas. And then of course, there was this band called The Beatles. But one of our favorites to spin was the comedy album *Revenge* by Bill Cosby. We played that album over and over until we had it memorized word for word. We used to walk down the street together, tossing a ball back and forth and trying out our comedy routines on one another, or we'd just recite it together.

On Saturday afternoons, after our cartoons had already played out, if there was a good monster movie coming on, we'd shut the blinds to make Bob's bedroom as dark as possible and watch *Creature From the Black Lagoon*, *Frankenstein*, *The Wolfman*, *Dracula*, or *The Mummy*. They absolutely terrified us. After an hour and a half of that dark horror, we'd have the full-on heebie-jeebies, so as soon as the movie ended, we'd throw the shutters open to watch reruns of *The Lone Ranger* or *The Cisco Kid*, or we'd just bolt for the outdoors and into the sunshine, where monsters never went.

But when it got late, we'd have to turn the music off. So we'd move into the living room to watch *The Late Show*. This was a weekend movie feature that aired at 10:30 p.m., after the 10:00 PSA that stated: "It's ten o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" That spooky message always set an ominous tone, putting our heads on a swivel as we scanned that darkened living room, looking for something lurking in the shadows. After the PSA, came the ten o'clock news. Bob's mom would usually make us a root beer float just before the movie, so with his parents having gone to bed, we'd settle in.

On one occasion we watched a movie called *The Defiant Ones* with Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis. In the film they were two escaped prisoners on the run but chained together, one black and the other white, so they had to learn to work together to make their escape. At the end of the

film, after the two had failed to hop a train and get away, they waited for a policeman to take them away as Poitier sang a chain gang song that ended the movie. The final four words of that song were, “Bowling Greee-*een!* Sewing machine!” And he sang it with a huge smile on his face. The next day Bob and I were walking down the street arm-in-arm, with one of us calling out, “Bowling Greee-*een!*” And the other answering, “Sewing machine!” Neither one of us knew what it meant, we just liked saying it.

During another late-night movie, we made too much noise and woke Bob’s dad, a gruff, hardworking man from the steel mills who had no appreciation for being awake that late. He came out and said, “Chris, go home.” Trembling like the Cowardly Lion who just got booted by The Wizard, I quickly gathered my things and went out the door. I knew Bob was in trouble, but I knew I couldn’t help him. He was doomed. Besides, I had troubles of my own to deal with now. As I made my way back home it occurred to me that it was past 10:00, and my parents didn’t know where *I* was.

While Bill was the more athletic of the Layton boys, Bob was more imaginative and creative. I suspect his interest in comic books and love of cartoons had a lot to do with that. He had a rock bed in an outdoor atrium that was part of his front porch. That was one of the focal points of our playtime. If we were playing with army men or miniature action figures, we were playing “mans,” and if we were playing with our Matchbox cars or Hot Wheels, we were playing “cars.” If we ever grabbed our guns and headed for Bob’s treehouse, we played “war.” I guess we tried not to make things too complicated. But Bob was great at making sound effects for everything, for cars peeling around corners in a chase, for fists punching faces in a fight, or for tanks blowing up in battle. In everything he did he was making his own little movie scene. One time, when we were in the yard timing each other running from one driveway to another, my sister Sharon saw that as Bob ran, he was looking back over his shoulder towards the ground. That was unusual, so she asked me why he was running that way, but I knew, because I *knew* him, so I told her: he was looking to see if he was kicking up any dust, like in the cartoons.

I remember one time Bob's parents took us to AstroWorld for his sixth birthday. Located across the freeway from the Astrodome—the first domed stadium ever built and nicknamed the Eighth Wonder of the World—AstroWorld was Houston's version of Six Flags Over Texas and was a legendary amusement park in its own right. So, on Bob's sixth birthday, we rode on The River Of No Return, a boat ride that sat approximately twenty people and snaked through and beneath a swampy canopy of moss-draped trees that filtered the sunlight into shadows, the sounds of birds and growling animals hidden somewhere behind them. The boat's guide made Bob the honorary captain of the ship, and towards the end of the ride we turned a corner and up in the near distance I saw that we were heading for a big dark tunnel with a waterfall pouring over its mouth. At that moment the guide cried out, "Oh no, Captain Bob! We're headed for the waterfall! What are you going to do?" He put the microphone in front of Bob's mouth and with both hands gripping the wheel and a steely determination in his eyes Bob looked straight ahead and said, "I'm going to drive right through it." I wouldn't be here to tell the story today if he didn't.

Bob had a great setup and the best toys, and playing with him at his house was always fun. But there was a big red house down the street, full of kids, that offered a few thrills and chills of its own.