



# SET FREE

One Man's Story of Deliverance from Addiction



Daniel Glushefski

# Set Free

*by*

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# Dedication

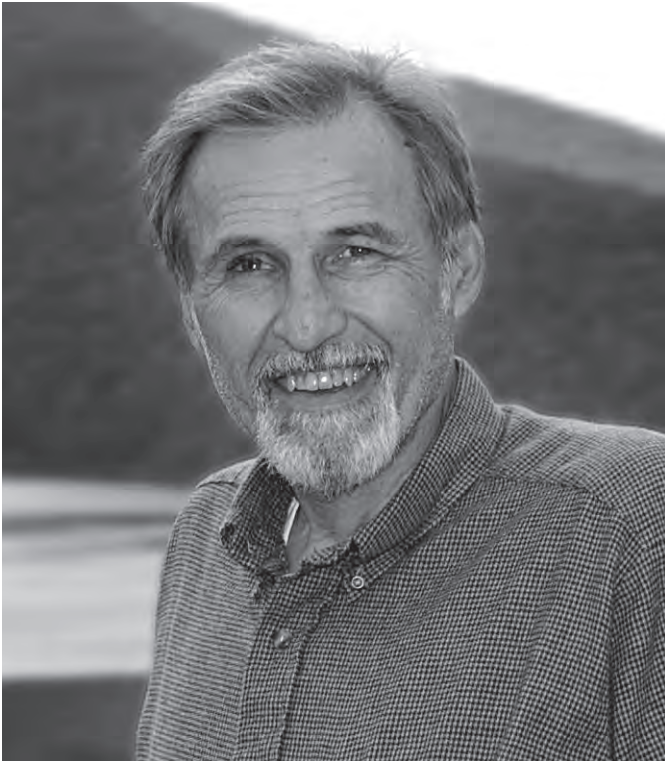
We all love to read a good story full of gory details about someone famous who overcame all odds. Well, I am not famous, just an ordinary person like you, but I have an amazing story to share. It is a true story of triumph over a very common and deadly problem in our society, one you may be experiencing yourself. Not once was I ever called an addict or did I ever refer to myself as one. But way before I was ever addicted to alcohol, gambling, promiscuity, or non-stop entertainment and excitement, I desperately craved attention and acceptance from my father. When I could not get that, I looked elsewhere to fill that need like an addict looks for another fix.

This book is dedicated to you.

This book is my personal testimony of a lifelong search for acceptance and attempt to end the pain and heartache caused by alcohol, gambling, and other addictions. Because of these addictions, it was long my belief that I did not deserve happiness or a family of my own. Maybe you have a similar heartache or addiction or search for acceptance. It is my desire that by reading my story, you can learn from my mistakes. There is hope for change and a better life! It is my great joy to tell you that you can know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

# Acknowledgements

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In loving memory of my brother Ed  
November 8, 1951 – May 26, 2011



## CHAPTER 1

# Time To Pay

**T**HE PHONE RANG AND MY BEST FRIEND JOE ANSWERED IT. It was a quick conversation. “Dan, Nails is coming over.”

There is only one thing worse than losing money, and that’s losing money you don’t have. Bookies and game runners are famous for their innate ability to rate a gambler. That is, sizing up a guy they don’t know too well, figuring out how much credit they should extend him and still be able to collect from him when he loses. And gamblers always lose. You would have thought Nails, the debt collector for the bookie, was someone I was forever indebted to because just about every Friday night, without fail, I handed him a thick envelope of cash.

Joe was a good friend. He allowed me to go into the till and borrow whatever I needed each week to pay my debt to society, I mean to Nails. Did I ever win? Yeah, maybe once every 10 or 12 times, but I lost 10 times what I won. Joe yells over to me a little frustrated, “Why do you gamble?”

“Why do you eat?” I shot back.

I’m thinking to myself, I already feel like a big loser. Do I really have to explain to him again why I do this insane thing when I don’t even understand it myself. I don’t know why, other than that it’s unfortunately part of who I am. Who was I anyway? What did I believe in? What made up my being? What was my purpose in this life? Those were questions I constantly avoided by living a nonstop lifestyle that consisted of drinking, gambling, living for the next party, the next girlfriend and the next fix of excitement.

Living for me revolved around the bar that I owned. One guy came in and recruited me to play flag football, one guy asked me to shoot pool in a bar league and another guy came in and opened the door to high stakes gambling. There was an illegal dice game at a construction company on the East Side during the day and above a fish market on the West Side at night. Those games were nothing like the casinos I used to visit with all their glamour, but that’s not what attracted me. It was the feeling of gambling, not knowing your fate on every roll, the feeling of living on the edge.

Frank, Jim and I played everything for money. Poker, pool, gin rummy, backgammon and darts along with betting on all the sports games on TV each night.

Eric, who I met through my bookie, owned a furniture store and was in his fifties. He would invite me over in the evening and we would play gin until the wee hours of the next day. We played \$100 a game and a dollar a point. His wife was nice and never complained, but I felt like a loser, whether I won or lost, leaving as she was getting up in the morning. Jim and the boys gambled each night on all the games that we watched while we tended bar. In addition, we gambled on euchre, pinochle and whether the next girl that walked in the door would be a knockout or not.

Frank and I were the worst by far. We gambled on everything from backgammon to whiffle ball. One day we went to the beach bars at Angola on the Lake in western New York. After playing ping-pong all day for money we switched to backgammon, which we always brought along if we needed some action. When Joe wanted to go home we refused to quit, and although illegal, we rode in the back of his pickup truck to continue our game. Joe was so frustrated with us he would swerve, speed up and slow down to make us struggle to hold our pieces on the board in place. From the start of our gambling that day until the end late at night, we went from Frank being up several hundred dollars to me winning several hundred dollars.

My addiction was so severe that I gambled with Frank and others even when I knew they didn't have the money to pay if they lost, just because I loved the action. Thankfully, Joe never gambled, which kept our friendship intact. In the small-time games I won more than I lost, but in the illegal dice games I almost always lost. As a gambler, when you are up it's never enough, and when you keep playing you're bound to start losing. You never have the sense to quit.

Dating relationships were sort of like gambling; I was never satisfied or it was never enough, no matter how nice or attractive the girl was. Ultimately, I would keep playing and messing up in the relationship until the girl had enough and it was over, never having the sense to quit.

In addition, I wrestled with a constant fear of abandonment. Because of the fear of being alone, not just for a day but for durations in my life, I found myself in relationships with some girls I didn't even like. One time a girl was giving me the old breakup talk. While she was telling me how it just wasn't going to work out, I was thinking of all the fun I would have once I was free from her. It was a relief to me we were breaking up. But within minutes of her walking out the door a depression came over me. There was a definite bad pattern to my drinking, relationships and gambling. It

seemed each relationship was more dysfunctional than the last one. Something had to change or give soon. Every fiber of my life was coming apart at the seams!

My drinking addiction was probably the worst and most dangerous. From the age of 15, as a sophomore in high school to my senior year I drank heavily most nights. From 18 to 28 years old I drank every night, most nights falling in bed and passing out. My drinking and big mouth got me in trouble many a time in crowded bars and I drove home drunk thousands of times. More often than not I would hear stories from friends the next day of things that I had done but had no recollection of doing.

Was I addicted? Yes. Did I know it? Not at first, but later on I did. My behavior and lifestyle, these sordid things I did, were something I could not control, something I just did, like breathing. I don't want to even get into whether I was a victim, but I do know that my dad's drinking had everything to do with the way I lived my life. From my childhood I had sworn I would never be like him, but I had become like the person I despised the most. From the time I took my first drink or took my first gamble, it seemed I was destined for greater trouble. And here I was, only 26 years old, mixed up in a lifestyle that left me empty inside. What was I searching for or hoping to find that would forever numb the pain I was feeling? It certainly could not be the things I did every night because the next day I had that same empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Was it possible to be this unhappy and have everything most young guys would want? How do I know I had what most guys wanted? Because friends told me so. I owned a bar with my best friend, had a lot of friends and girlfriends, played on several sports teams and made my living while drinking, shooting pool, gambling and living life on the edge. What could be better? But most of my friends never knew about the addiction, the heartache and all the inner turmoil, they only saw the outward fun.

Over the next few years I would helplessly watch my life spin completely out of control. Until one night when my life would be changed forever.

## CHAPTER 2

# Growing Up and Frozen TV Dinners

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1958. I WAS BORN THE THIRD SON INTO AN alcoholic home in Tonawanda, a suburb of Buffalo, N.Y. My dad was a finish carpenter and my mom worked minimum wage jobs to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads. My childhood, which for many years I tried to block from my memory, was dominated by drunken episodes, each more anger-filled and painful than the last. There are two events from my growing up years that I vividly remember: swinging a baseball bat in the yard pretending to be Mickey Mantle at about age 7, and my 10th birthday anxiously waiting for Dad to come home until he showed up drunk, scaring off all my friends and destroying my party. It would take digging into the recesses of my mind to call up the rest.

I remember how cruel childhood friends could be about my dad's drinking problem and their teasing and jokes. I remember all my mom's excuses and covering up for my dad's alcoholic tirades. I remember the fights and the screaming and going to bed crying almost every night. Obviously, there was much more to my childhood days but nothing that could outweigh or erase the pain, fear and humiliation that dogged me from my Dad's alcoholism.

When I was in Catholic elementary school I struggled as a student. I was a hyper kid and would have definitely been diagnosed as ADD if the label existed back then. Most days I was tired from being up late the night before listening to the yelling, fighting and threatening from my father. Once he was drunk he would yell and scream and smash things and threaten to kill one of us or my mom. It made me worry. Ironically, when I got in trouble for falling asleep during class I was punished. Never once did my mom consider the circumstances I was put through because of my dad's drunken tirades. It was always my fault and that confused and hurt me. During school it was commonplace for the penguins, I mean nuns, to slap me in the face or whack me on the knuckles with a yardstick for not paying attention, with

an even worse fate awaiting me for talking back or disrupting the class. They got away with murder. As I became a little older, by age 8 or 9, I responded to my teachers with disdain for their system of dysfunctional abuse. Most of the friends I sought out at school were the cool kids who got in trouble. Looking back, I would venture to say that at least half of my friends came from alcoholic or broken homes. By the fourth grade I was a certified cool troublemaker at school. But at home I was still a frightened, insecure child.

Each night of my father's drinking seemed worse than the last and haunted me for years to come. Like any kid, I was a little boy who longed for his dad's love and attention. All the screaming and fighting made me afraid of the dark. I'd be sent to bed each night shaking with fear. When I was younger my brothers and I slept upstairs. In that big, dark room all alone I conjured up every fearful thought imaginable. However, even more frightening than the dark room was the thought of being caught and spanked by my dad if I went downstairs. With that in mind I would sneak out of bed, slowly and quietly slide down the nine stairs to the third stair from the bottom, and sit behind the closed door in the dark listening to the fighting, cursing and angry drunken threats. I feared that my dad would one night kill my oldest brother Ed or my mom. When I was 8, Ed was a big, strong teenager of 15. He started to stand up to Dad to protect us. Sadly, I didn't fear that Ed would kill Dad, thinking only that that would stop the insanity. I was too young to understand or concern myself with what consequences Ed would have to face if that happened.

It's interesting how differently we each reacted to the alcoholism. Ed got angry, I feared, and Jim, who was 2 years older than me, didn't seem to care much; but no one in our family escaped it. Thank God for my brothers; having someone to share the pain made things so much easier to bear. As we got a little older Jim would kid me about all my fears and worrying. He wasn't necessarily being mean, just a brother who wasn't ever taught how to deal with all of that. No training in the world could have prepared us for growing up in that crazy environment.

The only real escape from this living hell was going to Aunt Rose's house. Each year we would go to Glen Lyon, Pennsylvania, to visit my mom's sister and my Uncle Ed and cousin Joe. We'd load up that old car with the back seat as big as a studio apartment. No seat belts or car seats required. My dad smoked Pall Mall cigarettes nonstop; that, coupled with car sickness, required my brothers and me to each hold on our lap a large brown shopping bag. It was not for if, but when, we would throw up. My dad had no patience for us three boys and would not tolerate anything, not even having to pull over for someone that was puking his guts out. In the early '60s we would travel on back highways for eight hours instead of riding five

hours on the NYS Thruway. The Thruway was completed back then but my dad didn't like to take it for some reason. If we were lucky we would stop at Molly's diner for lunch at the halfway point. Those eight long, bumpy, winding hours were all worth it because we loved to go to Aunt Rose's. Once there we were safe. My dad wouldn't dare get nasty when he was drunk and if he started anything Aunt Rose would yell, "Shut up and go to bed." Amazingly, he would comply.

It was like a slice of heaven. We played all day running in the back gravel alleys and small grass yards. Sometimes while being chased by my brother Jim, I made my getaway by jumping off front porches that seemed as high as the cliffs the Lone Ranger jumped off. At night we stayed up late playing games and watching TV. At the end of each day I slept like a baby.

We took day trips to go swimming at Lake Silquerth, where my grandma had a tiny one-room cottage, visited all our aunts, uncles and cousins and spent quaint days at my grandma's apartment in Nanticoke. My dad's mom, Stella, was very nice, warm and loving. She always bought us a gift when we came to visit, my favorite being a package of dime store cowboys and Indians, which I kept forever. Occasionally at night we would go to the Three Duces Bar for lobster dinner, we little kids dancing to the jukebox while the adults drank at the bar. It was here at my Aunt Rose's that I received my formal introduction to gambling. We played Pokeno and Michigan Rummy for pennies and nickels and I loved to win and count my change at the end of the night. My mom's mother, Nunna, taught me how to play pinochle when I was 8, and when I beat her she would yell, "I don't want to play with you! You cheat!" I had a knack for games, especially card games.

Nunna was much different than grandma Stella, being short-tempered and having no patience for children. But she could cook; we feasted on home-made Italian dishes throughout our vacation. Both of my grandfathers had died before I was born, so I never got to know them or even hear much about them. My cousin Joe, who was 10 years older than I, taught Ed, Jim and me how to play poker. He was a lot like a brother, though I only saw him once a year. I loved Joe. As we got a little older there would be mysterious nights when my older brother would take off late with Joe to go who knows where. I wished I was included, but I didn't really care; I felt safe—the only time I ever felt safe. I relished it. Leaving Glen Lyon would be like the end of a dream and the beginning of another prison sentence back at home.

Words can be more painful than a father's hard slap across your face. When my dad was sober in the morning or early afternoon on weekends he didn't say much and was always on edge. But when he was drunk his words cut like a blunt knife leaving large, gaping wounds.

When I was born I was covered head to toe with eczema, a skin condition that would burn and itch and get raw when scratched. My condition was so severe I had to stay in the hospital the first month. My mother told me that I almost died. Even when I was 1 and 2 years old my face would be swollen from the steroid medicine used to combat the eczema. Because of the uncertainty of my fate and the constant sickness I never was given a middle name or a baby book like my two brothers had. When drunk my dad would bring this up and yell at me, “You should have never lived when you were a baby. I wish you were dead!” When I was little I would run into my bedroom and jump in bed crying.

One thing I hated almost as much was when he came in my bedroom stumbling drunk to apologize, leaning over me, slurring his words and reeking of booze. As I got a little older I wouldn't allow him to see that his words hurt me, even though they still did. Many nights after a big blow-up my mom would go to bed upset and crying, and Ed after some choice words to my dad would storm out of the house to go over to a friend's. After checking to see if my mom was all right and offering to get something for her, I would wander sheepishly into the living room where he sat on the couch inebriated. “Please, would you stop drinking?” I would beg. “You are destroying our family.”

Many times he would tell me he was going to quit. My brothers would laugh at me when I would tell them the “great news” the next day. Time after time he would lie to me and get drunk the next night and I would be heartbroken.

My mom worked at Sattler's department store for minimum wage to pay the bills and make sure we had food to eat. She was friendly, kind, responsible and hard-working. Everyone at work and in the neighborhood liked her. Thinking back, it was a miracle we never lost our home to foreclosure. My dad would give her half of his paycheck, sometimes less. For dinner we would eat one of those frozen turkey and gravy dinners over white bread and meals like hot dog soup, fish sticks or macaroni and cheese. When I saw some of my friends have steak for dinner I thought they must be rich.

One of my fondest memories with my mom was going downtown to the big Hostess bakery. The only thing I remember was that the factory was a pretty long drive into Buffalo and the treat of day-old cupcakes. She would take me and my brother Jim to her friend's house in Riverside in Buffalo, which was so much different than the suburbs where we lived. The homes were much older, yards smaller and the kids a lot tougher-looking. Every Sunday after church we would go to Mesmer's milk store, which for some strange reason thrilled me. The best thing though, was getting to go to

bingo with her and stopping at Your Host Restaurant for a danish at the end of the night.

My mom was naïve about boys' tricks and pretty easy to pull one over on. By the time I was 8 or so I would pretend to be sick. She would give me some medicine, tell me to stay in bed and then was off to work. As soon as the car pulled out of the driveway I would spring out of bed, turn the TV on and get out my cowboys and Indians for a day of fun. The couches and coffee tables served as cliffs on my make-believe western frontier. One day while playing I noticed something written underneath the coffee table. So following suit I wrote, "Dan was here August 28, 1965" right next to my brother's many prior signings.

Over the years we filled up the bottom of those tables. We still have the coffee tables in my mom's basement. What a laugh for my brothers and me when we visit her to get underneath and look at all those names and dates and recall the crazy times growing up.

During the summer when my parents went to work, mom would leave a list of chores for us with Ed in charge. We all tried to get out of doing as much work as possible, and Ed would impose his rule over us like a dictator, making Jim and me do all of our own and his chores, too. Ed was twice as big and 7 years older than I was so I avoided getting punched around. Jim was big for his age, and even though he was 5 years younger he got beat up a lot by Ed. Of course, when Ed beat up Jim, Jim would beat up on me.

One particular day will live in infamy. Ed was really hard on Jim, beating him up several times before lunch. As Ed stood at the counter gloating, making a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Jim quietly and calmly reached in the freezer and pulled out one of those 5-pound frozen turkey and gravy dinners. He walked up behind Ed and whacked him over the head with a two-handed hold on the frozen weapon. Ed crashed to the floor like a ton of bricks almost unconscious and unable to get up for several minutes. Jim just surveyed the damage and, after a few seconds, realized what he had done and ran out the kitchen screen door as fast and as far as he could. He paid dearly for his crime and nothing of the sort was ever attempted again.

St. Amelia's Elementary School was grades 1 through 8. At lunchtime the stone playground became the proving ground of what you were made of and who would become your friends. Of course, you could spend the half-hour break sitting by yourself, talking with nice boys and girls or just hanging out doing things little kids do. Or you could join all the tough, cool kids on the adjoining grass field playing kill the guy with the ball. There were no gym classes in Catholic school, so this was your chance to shine in a chaotic setting where there was no supervision or rules. I was



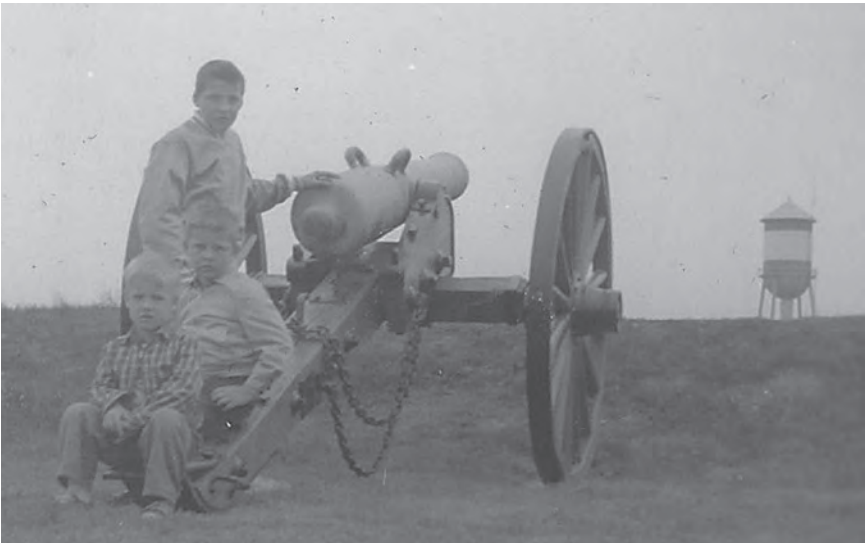
very fast, and with two older brothers I was introduced to sports at an early age. The boys I hung out with were athletic and we would have races up and down the sidewalk to see who was the fastest in our grade.

Tom and I had older brothers out there on the playground and each day we ventured closer to that somewhat dangerous arena. One day when I was in the fourth grade the football came flying right toward me. Do I dare risk picking it up or do I make a failed attempt to pick up the ball on purpose to save face and of course the guaranteed beating I'd receive? It was a decision made from instinct, I scooped up the pigskin like a veteran ball player receiving the opening kickoff of a big game. You would be surprised how fast you can run with 80 kids, no exaggeration, chasing you. At first I just outran everyone, but soon very adept moves were required to fake out the guys who broke off and doubled back to make the tackle on me. I ran that ball for what seemed like a school record time before an older kid brought me down. What happened next cost me great pain but brought me instant notoriety with several of the older tough kids. As I lay on my stomach trying to get free, one of the obnoxious big kids jumped in the air and landed in cannonball fashion on my back. While I lay there temporarily crippled, and writhing in pain, a couple of the ring leaders hurried over and helped me get up, congratulating me on my successful mad dash across the schoolyard. It was the beginning of a new type of attention that would lead me through all my school years—being befriended by older, popular guys.

One friend I made at St. Amelia's who stood out from the rest of the kids was T. Herb. His name was Tom but T. Herb is how he would refer to himself and I always thought that was funny. He was unique because, although he was smart, tough and a good athlete, he certainly didn't need anybody's approval. He never bullied other kids and, if anything, protected the weaker kids. He was his own person, not easily influenced by anyone. I admired him and wanted to be like him. Tom was a huge baseball fan. He would bring a transistor radio to second grade and listen to the Cardinals in the World Series right during class. He was extremely creative and built a basketball court in his basement by nailing two metal rings 7 foot high to the rafters about 30 feet apart. He used a rubber baseball for a basketball and we played full court B-Ball complete with foul shots and dunking. About every three weeks he'd invite me to sleep over and we would have a riot watching old movies, playing sports games all night, and tackle football in his living room. Of course, I never had him sleep over. Many a night as I lay in my bed with the screaming going on downstairs, I would wish I was T. Herb.



Ed, Jim, and I in front of our Brighton Road home in Tonawanda in 1960.



At my favorite place to visit as a boy, Old Fort Niagara, New York, with my two brothers.



With Santa at Sattler's Department Store in 1960. My face and body were swollen from steroid medicine used for eczema.



Ed hams it up while my cousin Joe (far right), with his friend (center), teaches us how to play poker.

## CHAPTER 3

# Ron Bacardi and the Green Acres Cardinals

**A**T AGE 9 I WAS LEADING A DOUBLE LIFE AS A COOL, TROUBLE-making class clown in school and fearful, anxious, unconfident boy at home. My dad spent no quality time with me or my brothers. No catch in the yard, no walks, no swimming, no vacations, no growing-up talks, nothing. Actually, he did take Jim and me fishing several times but we couldn't talk or goof around, and he always went a few hundred feet down the shore like there was something wrong with us. He even seemed to like the neighborhood kids we sometimes brought along better than us. He definitely didn't like being alone with us, especially when sober. When he was drunk he would take me to Kaiser's, an old-fashion drugstore, to get more beer. But that was it. By the time I was 9 my oldest brother, Ed, was 16, and Jim was 11. The time was 1967, with the Vietnam War, hippies and the start of a whole new rebellious anti-culture. My dad was an angry drinker, criticizing people and things he knew little about, always slamming cupboards, doors and occasionally kids. With Ed being older, fights between him and Dad were commonplace, usually with just yelling; but more than once punches were thrown and bodies rolled on the living room floor in a heap over busted-up cheap end tables. Something had to give soon, someone would have to go, and I feared it would be Ed.

For a kid desperately lacking a father figure, Ed stepped in admirably and became my hero. He was cool, funny, strong, tough and athletic. In our neighborhood on Wrexham Court North gangs of kids were everywhere. On just two adjacent streets there was Ed's gang of about 10 kids from ages 14 to 18, Jim's group of boys from 10 to 12 and my little brood of 8- and 9-year-olds. On any given summer day there would be at least two different football games played in the street, a whiffle ball game in the court, a few games of tag and lots of rough play that sent more than one kid home crying to his mom. Ed's gang would be holed up in Scott and John's garage,

playing Dogfight, a WWII board game, or Risk, taking a break in between all the sports. Sometimes we'd be allowed to play in the sports games but we never went in the garage, we could only observe the action from afar. Jim and I were the only ones on the street with an older brother in that garage. That carried a lot of weight for us. Up the street was another whole group of kids, and every other side street was the same, kids everywhere. The older kids on the other streets knew of our big brother and would never mess with Jim or me.

When bored with the same old thing, Ed's gang would make up games and we would follow suit. There were bicycle relays around the block, capture the flag, a tag game that extended through several yards, which entailed chasing each other and jumping over fences and bushes, wrecking flower beds to the dismay of neighboring parents. King of the hill in the fields behind the McCaddens' house was the most creative, complete with water hoses as heavy artillery, rolled-up newspapers for swords and garbage can lids for shields. Then there was the old standby, chasing down one of the obnoxious kids on the street and giving him a super wedgy (pulling his underwear up over his shoulder blades). Football was always the favored game though, and it became a daily tradition on our street for the next 10 years.

Street football was played on Wrexham Court North, a road about 25 feet wide and 100 yards long. One goal line was the curb in the rounded court with the end zone being the McCabes' front yard. The other end zone landed right in the middle of the intersection of Blackstone Boulevard. We could have shortened the field 10 yards to avoid the intersection, but it would not have been an official 100 yard field, which was unthinkable to us. Many a play in the end zone was broken up by an oncoming vehicle. Obstacles were the huge tree branches that hung over the road, electrical wires and worse—the two or three parked cars that were almost always in the road. In Ed's teen years he must have broken his nose at least five times. None was more colorful than the time he made a beautiful over-the-head catch of a long bomb and ran full speed into a parked pickup truck. Normally, an injury wouldn't end the game but that was no ordinary injury.

The following Friday would be no ordinary day. For some odd reason my friends and I were allowed near Scott and John's garage that day, even encouraged to come in. Something was up but we didn't care, we wanted in bad. They were all there, all the older kids playing Dogfight, but something was different; they were wilder, if such a thing were possible. Scott called, "Hey Dun," his nickname for me, "Come over here."

"What's that in your hand?" I asked.

"Ron Bacardi 151" was his answer.

“What’s that?”

You would have thought my brother Ed, always one to protect me, would have stepped in by now, but he didn’t.

“Try it. Take a big swig,” Scott told me.

One of my friends and I did as he said. That’s all it took, one or two ounces of 151 proof rum and I was toast. Nine years old and drunk as a skunk at 4 o’clock in the afternoon! My brother didn’t even try to stop me from going home. After they all got a good laugh pushing us around in mild rough play, they let us go and despite an hour passing, by dinner time I could barely walk home. Failure to hide my drunkenness at dinner got me in big trouble with my mom and never a word about it from my dad. My first brush with alcohol would certainly not be my last. When you live in a dysfunctional home nothing is structured, there is no consistency with discipline, no regularity of anything except the alcoholic’s drinking. Within days the drinking episode was forgotten; after all, there were far greater problems to contend with than my little nonsense.

When a young kid has a big mouth, shows off or gets in trouble a lot, there is almost always a good reason. Usually it has to do with lack of a father figure. With nothing in my life to build self-esteem and give me confidence, I was in big trouble. Of all the things that would affect my growing up years, little league football would do the most to change, help shape, and even save my life. I’m sure to most people that sounds a little extreme, but up to this point all the attention I had ever received was from negative behavior. The first time I heard a compliment of “good job” or “you are really something special” was on a football field.

My mom didn’t have the money for the fees and equipment for me to play football, and as far as I can remember Ed paid for most of it. Over the years, he played, and now he was encouraging Jim and me to play. He lectured me not to get cocky because of my speed and abilities, and he gave me enough belief in myself to succeed. He even told me to hook up with the younger brothers of a few close friends he had played ball with in high school.

Every year that I played Green Acres football I was at least 20 pounds under the weight limit. My first year in 1969, at age 10, I played in the 80-pound division. I started at receiver and was pretty decent. With the kids being so little, the quarterback could barely complete a pass so the year was fairly uneventful. Having a good coach made all the difference in the world. My second year, at age 11 and weighing 70 pounds soaking wet, I played for the 90-pound team. That year was a dream for me. I played running back and quarterback on offense, cornerback on defense, returned punts and kickoffs and never came off the field. We even played one game on TV, which was unheard of back then. The feeling of a parent saying something positive or

the coach pleased with my play was something I never had experienced before and something I desperately craved. My dad never came to a game all the years I played; thankfully, my mom did and was supportive, but there is something about a father's acceptance that is essential for a boy growing up. Every game I would scout the crowd in vain to see if my dad was there. My brothers and friends were encouraging, and I used football and sports to gain the love, acceptance and confidence I desired.

The night before a game I would get so excited to play that I literally could not sleep and would have goofy dreams of losing my football helmet or missing the ride to the game. Game day I would get to the field an hour before anyone else and just sit and wait. Before the games there would be a weigh in. The bigger, heavier kids would wear plastic suits and jog for miles to lose one or two precious pounds to make the weight limit. They would sometimes get on the scale just in their underwear because every ounce mattered. Most kids took off at least their spikes and shoulder pads if they were close. To be a clown I always weighed in with everything on, holding a couple extra helmets in my hands.

Right before the game the ref would line us all up and walk by every player to make sure we had a mouth guard and our cup on. We would knock on our cup as he walked by. My cup pinched my thighs when I ran and I didn't like it, so after the first year I never wore one. When the referee walked by I would fake knock and the guy next to me would knock hard on his and cover for me; I never got caught once in four years. At halftime we sat in the end zone, and while the coach talked to us they gave us orange slices and sugar cubes for energy. Most of the games were played up at Sheridan Park. Before I left home I would put a quarter in my knee pad and after the game I would go to Louie's hot dog stand for a dog. Little league football was one of the few positive memories of early childhood. It was the beginning of a pattern that sports would be a major part of who I was and the gauge by which I measured the value of my existence.



Green Acres Cardinals 1970. I am number 22 with long hair and no helmet on.



My dad, after he had a few, mid-afternoon, sitting in the yard.





Bedtime, Christmas 1965.  
Ed 14, Jim 9, and me 7.



At Fort Niagara: Mom, me, Ed, Jim, and Grandma Stella. Dad, as usual, stayed home.

## CHAPTER 4

# That's It For Minibikes

LIKE ALL NEIGHBORHOODS, WE HAD A QUIRKY GANG OF KIDS. Most of Jim and my friends were only two to four years apart so a lot of times we did stuff together. There was Ne, Buddins, Whipple, Beaver, Jed and Little Sperge. No summer day was complete without a walk to PK Drugs to get a candy bar and comic book. Paul, Joe, Hank and I hung out together and then there were Brian, John, Alex and Jim, my brother. When we were about 10, Paul, nicknamed Whipple, Whip or Winks, and I got our own paper route and with the money chipped in and bought an old used minibike.

Paul, one of my two best friends, was super fast, a great athlete and one of the most popular kids on our street. He was really skinny like me but at around 13 bought some weights and by the time he was 14 looked like a miniature Hulk from working out. John was called Buddins because when he got fighting mad he couldn't pronounce his T's well. He was three years older and had a paper route for years. His dad had a sixty-year-old Brunswick pool table in his basement and we would all play for money. Although John was way better than all of us, we would gamble and almost always lose to him. So he had the most money of all of us and bought a nice, fast minibike. He was tall, big and one of the best basketball, hockey and baseball players. He was pretty slow, only average in football, but he could throw the ball a mile.

Joe was my other best friend. He was a nice, quiet kid who never gave anyone a hard time. When he was young he was skinny and slow and not that good at sports, but in high school he grew quickly and became a good athlete. Hank, his one-year-older brother, was nicknamed Beaver or Beav by me because he had bucked teeth and wore braces. I should talk: my teeth were so crooked I could be the poster boy for the orthodontist's society. Although Hank and I were close friends, we were always at each other's throats. He was a good athlete and we always seemed to be trying to outdo one another. Of course, all the other kids fed on that too, hoping for and encouraging a fight whenever possible. One day playing "kill the guy with

the ball,” I was running the ball and breaking a bunch of tackles and a few guys had a hold of me but couldn’t bring me down. Hank came running full blast to lay a huge hit on me from behind. At the last second I ducked and he flipped over me, crashing down hard on the ground, with all of us on top of him. He broke his arm badly and needed a full upper body cast. That incident didn’t help our little rivalry.

Brian was nicknamed Ne or Neanderthal man, a name chosen because he was incredibly tough and unable to be hurt. He was Buddins’ age and he had two older brothers who would beat on him mercilessly. One summer morning when I went over to his house to get him for a game, his older brother said, “Yeah, come on in, he’s sleeping. I’ll wake him up.”

We walked into his bedroom and without another word his brother Jerry casually took his BB gun, pumped it up 20 times, pulled back the covers and shot Brian in the fanny. As Brian screamed in pain, Jerry just said, “Wake up, Danny’s here.”

We used to play street hockey with those rock-hard plastic balls instead of a puck. Ne would get hit in the face with a blazing slapshot and not even flinch. He dove for balls in the street playing football. He was good in every sport and menacing when we played tackle football on the church grass. He didn’t appreciate little punk kids like me, Whip and Beav calling him Ne and Caveman, so he would chase us down, pin us to the ground and give us a Charlie horse, which was a crippling punch to the side of the upper leg. Alex was one of the rare kids with no nickname; there was nothing we could pick on him for. Strong, fast and very athletic, he would be the first to outgrow our little neighborhood gang.

Then there was my brother Jim. When young, he was fat and got picked on a lot, but by eighth grade he became strong and, from Ed’s daily beatings, very tough. I was nicknamed Little Sperge, but only Beav or Paul called me that, the rest called me Danny. My mom called my dad Sperge so Beav called me that to get back at me for the nickname I so lovingly gave him. There are great advantages to hanging around with older kids; the biggest is competing in sports. You learn and get better quickly or get brushed aside. The bigger kids never gave us younger kids any slack.

Alex’s dad was a good athlete and incredibly fast for a man in his late thirties, early forties. He would play basketball with us and was rougher and more unpleasant to play with than Ne. He would fire a pass at you so hard that, at 9 or 10 years old, if you weren’t ready for the ball, it went right through your hands and hit you in the face. Then you would have to deal with his insults to boot. He once chased me down and caught me on one of our midnight hell-raising escapades. I learned quickly that if we were causing trouble at night, his yard was off limits.

Beav ended up buying a brand new minibike, the fastest by far in our little gang. Among the eight of us we only had three, so we would go up to the fields on Niagara Falls Boulevard and take turns riding the worn paths in the high grass and weeds. One day we were riding and Buddins got off the path and rode into a deep ditch, smashing into the rock-hard ground. He busted up his bike good and got a concussion for his efforts. The whole way home he just kept repeating the same thing: "I never saw that ditch! My dad is going to kill me. What time is it? That's it for minibikes!"

He was right about one thing, that was it for him; his father impounded his minibike, his riding days were over.

My crash was a lot less punishing. It was on my Schwinn bicycle on the way to the drugstore. While riding no-handed, I tried to dislodge a half-dollar out of a keychain, the only money I could find in my room. No matter how hard I tried I could not pop it out, until I hit a parked car. As I lay stunned on the hood of the car, after flying over the handlebars, I heard the distinct sound of a coin spinning on the concrete. It wasn't the way I planned it, but I did get my 50 cents to spend.

My little gang of friends was heartless—no one cared for the safety of the others. We used to go down to the Shoots, a bridge over a narrow part of the Niagara River. Under the bridge were several little four-foot-wide tunnel compartments. We would jump off the bridge into the current and the river would quickly usher you into a tunnel and then shoot you out like a cannon on the other side. The only problem was I couldn't swim. Being the youngest I couldn't be left out of all the fun, so like a fool I jumped in. The current actually saved my life. It was so fast that all I had to do was doggy paddle toward the shore and the current kept me afloat. I had to get out of the water a lot farther down from the bridge than everyone else did, but that was fine with me. I was just happy to be included and still alive.

We used to take trips to Sherkston Rock Quarry in Canada to swim. There were cliffs with a 30- and 45-foot tower to jump off into the endlessly deep water. Out in the water was a floating dock 150 feet from shore. All my so-called friends and brother would jump off and swim out to the dock. This was a lot more dangerous than the Shoots but my stupidity was up for the challenge. When I was 12 I took the plunge and desperately attempted to swim out. Twenty feet of doggy paddle and then tread water, off and on for the entire distance. By the time I got to the dock I thought I would die. As I tried to pull myself up out of the water, instead of a hand, one of the guys pushed me back in. This went on for a few minutes. When they finally let me up I almost tossed my cookies from exhaustion and all the water I swallowed. It was a small miracle that I didn't drown. To be jerks, they all immediately dove in and swam back leaving me alone on

the dock. I rested for about 20 minutes before I took the death-defying doggy paddle back.

There were always little prejudices in our neighborhood. As kids we were mean—a slow kid might be left out of a bike hike, another excluded from going to the beach, or a kid that couldn't hit would not be picked for baseball. When Ed's gang played tackle football at the "Toilet Bowl," Jim and I were the only ones invited. It was mostly kids 5 to 9 years older than I was. The "Toilet Bowl" was this tiny field only 25 yards long and about 12 yards wide that was only used in the worst weather conditions, which made it all mud. My brother and his friends would pitch me the ball and I would do my best imitation of Gale Sayers running on the sloppy turf. Ed usually put all the guys that he hung out with and liked to pound on, on the other team. It was just physical smash mouth football at the line of scrimmage, no passing. For some reason games were always at 9 p.m. and with me being 10 or 11, I needed special permission to go out that late to play. By the time I was 12 there would be no more Toilet Bowl games and no more older brother around.



Our only family vacation in 1969, spent fishing in Canada. Dad wasn't drinking that week, but he was miserable.

Dad fishing alone on vacation. He would spend the last 20 years of his life fishing alone.



My Confirmation Day at 9 years old, with Aunt Mona, left, and a rare appearance by Dad. This was one of maybe three times Dad ever attended church.

