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Worlds Apart

Not too long ago, it was 1958, not the year it is now. In my neighborhood in the Bronx, as the days lengthened and the weather became warmer, my friends and I had begun to play stickball, punchball, and even baseball again, even though both the Giants and the Dodgers had abandoned New York for California, which we were still pretty miffed about. The girls, meanwhile, were all twirling their hula hoops, sometimes several at a time, which was very impressive, though from our point of view, pretty dumb, and we told them so. We were all anxious about Elvis going in the Army, though we continued to listen to his songs on the radio, along with the Everly Brothers, Ricky Nelson, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Just about everyone I knew saw *The Blob* in the movies, and we loved watching *American Bandstand* on TV. And despite the awful headlines in the newspaper practically every day, there was no doubt that spring was slowly turning into summer, and from my particular vantage point, life was good.

I was putting the finishing touches on my elementary school education, completing sixth grade with a few hundred of

my learned colleagues. We had recently received our treasured autograph books, mementos of six years of academic achievement, and would pass them around the room to garner as many autographs and words of wisdom as possible before class actually began. This continued in the cafeteria as well, sometimes at a fevered pitch, the autograph books getting far more attention than the food du jour.

When I came across my autograph book recently, it had not seen the light of day for more years than I care to remember, but I accidentally rediscovered it during a search for a totally unrelated item in a dark, spider-webbed corner of the garage. But there it was, staring up at my unbelieving eyes out of the gloom—a little book with multicolored pages bound in a red, white, and blue leatherette cover, marked, in what used to be bright gold, *Public School 90*.

For a moment, I knew what archaeologists experience uncovering a find from another time. I blew off the dust, wiped it clean of years of disuse, and opened the book to my world of fifty years before. There was my school, three stories of brick and glass, in a photo probably taken when it was built in 1920 something. My principal, Peter J. DiNapoli was next, a man I had never actually seen in real life. I flipped several pages ahead. Names and faces long forgotten came suddenly to life, as did the personalities, often reflected in the classic witticisms expressed on the various pages by my sixth-grade cohorts—

If you get married and have a divorce,
Come to my stable and marry my horse.
—Bobby Becker

Some pages were dated “till meatballs bounce,” or “till Niagara Falls.” One page, back at the beginning, was entitled “My Favorites,” designed to provide an encapsulated profile of the book’s owner: TV Show: *Ramar of the Jungle* . . . Song: “Little Darling” . . . Movie: *Apemen from Space* . . . Sport: Stickball. I was obviously an urban sophisticate, even way back then.

My official photo showed a confident, smiling, skinny kid with curly dark hair, a reasonably pleasant face, trim white shirt, and his father's tie. What the photo didn't reveal was that I was always the tallest kid in the class, something that junior high school kids would soon teach me to be ashamed of. I continued to thumb through the autograph book, each page a different color, and holding a different endearment, like

Don't worry if your job is small and your rewards
are few,
Remember that the mighty oak was once a nut like
you.

—Sandy Klein

All the pages that carried actual dates showed early June, 1958. Then there were several blank pages, and a continuation about a month or more later. At first this confused me, but looking at the various signatures revealed the explanation for the time gap—the pages were inscribed and signed by my summertime friends, with whom I would reacquaint myself each summer. My parents had been renting a bungalow in upstate New York ever since I was an infant, and each year, for part of June, all of July and August, and even a bit of September, I resided in a world as far removed from the asphalt and concrete of the Bronx as a kid could imagine.

And there before me were the utterances of my friends from Pesekow's Bungalow Colony, being read for the first time in half a century. It was absolutely fascinating, and it took me back through the years. Most of the pages contained similarly silly couplets in faded ink or pencil, and the names, Melanie Pesekow, Ray Gottlieb, Marty Rosenfeld, and Sarah Steinway were immediately recognizable, even though we saw each other for only three months a year. Marty's inscription,

When you get married and think you're sweet,
Take off your shoes and smell your feet

was exceptionally inspirational, matching his personality perfectly. The last page was Sarah's, and her message, in pencil, took on a somewhat different tone—

Remember Grant, remember Lee,
But most of all, remember me.

Just beneath her name, she'd added a very unusual suggestion: *Read "Isle of View."* Though I read a lot, I had never heard of that particular book, but I recall promising myself to check the local library when I got back to the Bronx. I recall as well that it took me quite a while to fully understand what Sarah was actually saying to me in her coded message. Holding her page open before me, I did indeed remember her, and so much more. I find it interesting that my recollections of the winters, the school years, are essentially vague and inconsistent. But those of the summers in *The Country* are as vivid as yesterday, and that particular summer of 1958 would be especially meaningful in a way I couldn't even begin to imagine as I entered my classroom on a balmy morning in early June. As for now, I found it incredibly easy to bring it all back, to return to *The Country*, to, as Sarah suggested, "*remember.*"

What we called *The Country* back then was a faraway place, so far from the steamy streets of the Bronx that it seemed like we were indeed traveling to another world entirely. In it were towns and villages that to me had magical names; they were places that even today still suggest a certain fairytale quality when I see or hear their names: Monticello, Woodridge, Mountain Dale, Fallsburg, Liberty, Loch Sheldrake: it was the realm of Sullivan County, New York. In it were sun-filled green meadows and dark, mysterious woods; wonderful lakes and streams for endless summer fun; enough frogs, fish, snakes, salamanders, and turtles to keep any kid deliriously happy; there were cool, starry nights and dewy mornings; and there was the special charm of a childhood summer romance. It was *The Country*.

Or, as some would have it, *The Mountains*. No matter. What mattered was that it existed somewhere out there beyond

the George Washington Bridge. I was thinking about The Country that morning in June of 1958, as I sat in my classroom seat waiting for the right moment to give Mrs. Grable the paper I was clutching in my hand, occasionally being distracted by the need to sign someone's autograph book. I shoved my own inside my desk when I saw Mrs. Grable enter the room. How well I remember being a kid of distinction in my Bronx school, looked upon with unconcealed envy when I brought that important document, the note from my mother, to class, requesting that I be allowed to leave school weeks before the school year actually ended so that I might travel upstate with my family to spend the summer in The Country. I proudly (and somewhat conceitedly) got up from my seat in the back of the room as soon as Mrs. Grable sat down at her desk. I walked up to the front of the room and handed her the sacred note. There was a brief whiff of her perfume, which somehow reminded me of my Aunt Molly's bathroom; I then returned to my seat, foolishly thinking that the deed was done. My ticket out was about to be validated. But looking up from my mother's note, Mrs. Grable, her eyes bright with the anticipation of an impromptu learning experience, said "Boys and girls, Philip will be leaving our class soon to travel upstate with his family for the summer." Then, turning directly to me, "Philip, why don't you tell the class all about Lake Sheldon."

All of a sudden, the pride and conceit were gone, replaced by the nervousness of having to stand next to my seat to address the class. Being as tall as I was, the movement always made me feel like a giraffe getting back up after a drink in some African pond. Every kid in the room turned around and stared at me, eagerly awaiting my stirring oration.

"Um, uh, well, it's really called Loch Sheldrake, and it's in the country. We have this bungalow, and we go up there every summer." I started to sit back down, hoping that my eloquence overwhelmed Mrs. Grable, and would suffice. But she wanted more, asking "What do you do there?"

Standing next to my seat again, I said, "Well, lots of stuff. We go swimming in the lake a lot, we go fishing, exploring.

Lots of stuff." I quickly sat back down, hoping that would end the proceedings, which it indeed did, as Mrs. Grable, frustrated in her efforts to turn my request for early dismissal into something greater, let the opportunity pass. Relieved to be seated once again, I saw that Neil, immediately to my left, was glaring at me, muttering just barely audibly, "Lucky stiff." No argument there. I briefly turned my attention to the front of the room, but I knew that the door to summer vacation had already partially opened. My thoughts were not on Mrs. Grable's lesson, but on returning to The Country. A furtive glance out the open window and into the warm June morning called to my inner self. In a quick succession of mental images, I thought of my new PF Flyer sneakers, my fishing rod, the lake, the woods, and my summertime friends. Nothing within the confines of P.S. 90 could compete with that. Just send my report card to Pesekow's Bungalow Colony, Loch Sheldrake, New York. The first step had been taken. The journey was almost underway.

That Friday's walk home down the McClellan Street hill was filled with the realization that I wouldn't be taking this particular walk ever again. Sixth grade, in fact all elementary school, with its finger paints, white paste, bathroom "accidents," and nurturing teachers, was now behind me. I had cleaned out my desk, and Mrs. Grable promised to mail my report card and my research paper on Peru to Loch Sheldrake by the end of the month. Next fall, I'd be taking an entirely different walk, actually much shorter, to J.H.S. 22, just down the street from our apartment. But that was eons away, and not a real subject for concern. Yet.

Entering our first-floor apartment on College Avenue that day was like entering Allied Headquarters just before D-Day. My mother was General Eisenhower, the military uniform replaced by her floral print apron covering a house dress. There were cartons everywhere, clothing hanging in doorways, open suitcases on the beds, and pots and pans on the kitchen table. My mother, though she was in no mood for small talk, and deep into the tension and fatigue of the day before departure, was well aware that I had crossed a major bridge that day, and despite

the chaos of packing, smiled as I came in the door and asked, "So? How was?"

"Pretty good," I responded, "I'm all set."

"Did you clean out your desk?"

"Yeah. This is everything I had."

"What about the address for Pesekow's? And my note? She has them, right?"

"Yeah, I gave that stuff to her on Tuesday."

"Okay. Why don't you take out whatever things you want to bring. I already packed your clothes."

For me, this meant the basic essentials for living in The Country: a select but small group of comic books, a rubber-banded stack of baseball cards, all my fishing gear, my basketball, my baseball glove, a Pency Pinky for handball, and all the cash I could gather, which this year amounted to \$4.33, mostly in coins, some of which I scooped out from under my bed.

Getting the car ready was something that occurred in the world of my father. At the time, I had no idea, but looking back on it, he must have had the car checked and rechecked from bumper to bumper. After all, we were talking about a trip of well over a hundred miles, and the car had to be ready to make this trip once a week for the next few months. But on the night before actually getting underway, the car was ready, gleaming and spotless as usual, inside and out. Packing the car was my mother's domain, and woe to anyone who got in her way. Think of it: the very survival of the family, far from the haunts of civilization, was her responsibility. She had to insure that we had everything we might need for the next two-and-a-half to three months—all the clothing, kitchen utensils, bedding, bathroom supplies, swimming paraphernalia, and food for when we got there, not to mention some food for the trip itself, for relying on road food, as far as she was concerned, was like playing with fire—far too dangerous to even contemplate. Somehow, amid all the excitement, yelling, arguing about what can and can't be brought along, my father convinced that it won't all fit in the trunk and the back seat around me and my sister, futilely repeating that anything forgotten will just have to wait until the

following week, somehow, the job is completed and we're ready to go, with stern warnings that it will be an early departure in the morning.

Which it absolutely would be. After a quick breakfast in the kitchen, we started our morning ritual. With the sun low on the horizon, the street of apartment houses was in dark shadows. Since it was Saturday, we were the only sign of life on the entire block. A row of parked cars stretched along both sides of the street; only ours had all the doors and the trunk opened, the four of us rapidly carrying out last-minute items to be somehow stuffed into the few remaining air pockets left inside. In a little while, the door to the apartment was locked, we all got into our assigned places in the car, and with my father's words, "Okay, we're on our way," we pulled away from the curb. Later, my friends would be congregating across the street in the playground to determine the course of action for the day—movies, basketball, stick ball, punch ball, or just hanging out. Except that today would be different. It would all happen without me. I was on my way to nirvana. I would keep in touch with them by way of occasional letters and postcards, but as I looked out the back window of the car at the rapidly receding street, I knew that we would be worlds apart.

For me, this first leg of the trip was generally characterized by a suggested return to slumber, not easy when a third of the back seat, that area between me and my sister Sheila, was occupied by a short stack of cartons topped by a noisy birdcage containing our green and yellow parakeet, Peppy. If I did nod off, having slept a total of about twenty minutes the night before, I would usually awaken to the sound of the car crossing the George Washington Bridge. There was a different sound to the pavement, or maybe it was the height of the bridge above the Hudson River, or the way sound played through the suspension cables. Somehow, it was different. Maybe it was the difference of New Jersey. As we'd pass through the toll booths and pay the twenty-five-cent toll, we knew we were in a foreign land. The signs were different. The roadsides were different. Crowded apartment buildings quickly gave way to a varied assortment of

gas stations, diners, tourist cabins, motels, and drive-up stores of every description. Some that defied description. Even the road itself had a different look. It was Route 17, one concrete lane in each direction that we would follow for the next few hours, all the way to the Promised Land.

I remember that around this point in the trip, it used to be time for our first on-the-road meal. That was a few years ago when I was just a little kid, and I would announce that I was hungry. My mother would break out the fresh rye bread, and make sandwiches for everyone. At that time in my life, my diet consisted entirely of rye bread and grape jelly. It took just a moment for the sandwich to be handed over the seat back to my anxious hands. Drinks came from a large canister with a spigot at the bottom, and was usually a sweet red fruit punch. My mother had what amounted to a small kitchenette at her seat. I don't know how she managed it, but she did. It wouldn't take long for my next announcement to be made, which was that I had to go to the bathroom. My father's response would usually be, "Okay. We'll be at the Red Apple soon, so hold it in." I'd respond, "I'll try," which always carried the suggestion that I might make it, but then again, I might not. I always felt, and still do, that it didn't hurt to negotiate from a position of at least perceived power.

For miles along this section of Route 17, we were seeing huge billboards along the road proclaiming RED APPLE REST—25 MILES, followed shortly by RED APPLE REST—22 MILES, and so on. The Red Apple, in Southfields, New York, was known far and wide by all those heading to or from The Country as *the* place to stop, and probably the only place to stop, on the entire trip. We never ate there. In fact, just about the only thing we ever did there was go to the bathroom. Those who ran the place were well aware that that was the main attraction, painting a gigantic sign, in huge blue letters on a white background, REST ROOMS, with an equally huge arrow pointing directly to the way in. Even this early in the season, hundreds of people milled about the acres of parking lots, some anxiously following that huge arrow, others heading for the restaurant itself, which had

both indoor seating and outdoor service windows for hungry travelers. Above all, a giant red rooftop apple gleamed in the midmorning sun. My father had pulled up to the gas pumps, and had asked for his usual "Two bucks worth of high test." Before long, relieved and refreshed, we were all back in the car, returning to Route 17, quickly approaching and just as quickly leaving such places as Harriman, Monroe, and Goshen.

Somewhere in the rural farm country beyond Middletown, Route 17 began a long, slow, steady climb up the Shawangunk Mountains, which separated the relatively mundane world of Orange County from the paradise found in neighboring Sullivan County. It was known as the Bloomingburg Hill. There was no way around it. A new road was being built nearby that would soon change all this, but for now, it had to be climbed. My father was currently driving a 1957 Mercury, painted two shades of pink; with its V-8 engine, the hill was a snap. But how well I recall driving up the same hill a few years before, in our 1950 Oldsmobile, which was already old when we bought it. We never knew for sure if the car would get to the top or not. My father would add to the drama by letting us know every few minutes that the temperature gauge needle was going up. Would the car make it without overheating? Tension built as the Oldsmobile struggled up the miles-long incline. My sister and I were absolutely silent, knowing that this was not a time to ask questions, complain, or make comments of any kind. Sheila was two years older than me, but not a bit more brave. Or foolish. As we ultimately approached the hamlet of Bloomingburg, we knew we were just about at the summit, and as far as the car was concerned, we were apparently okay. But the worst was yet to come. At the very top of the hill, the road went through a little underpass and seemed to lead directly over a cliff and out into the admittedly rarified air of Sullivan County. But what good would it be if we didn't survive to enjoy it? Our very lives were in the hands of my father, holding the steering wheel in a death grip, making sure to take the sharp right turn just before the precipice at a slow enough speed, so that nothing unexpected would take place. My sister and I were so scared here that since

simply closing our eyes wasn't sufficient enough to shield us from potential disaster, we'd actually scrunch down onto the floor for extra protection. Finally, after an eternity of terror on the floor of the car, my father would sound the "all clear." Another trip over that mountain had successfully been accomplished. My father hadn't driven the Olds over the cliff after all. We would then be able to get up off the floor and open our eyes. We were in Sullivan County at last, and we would live to tell about it.

I smiled at the recollection, feeling quite self-satisfied that, this year, I wasn't afraid of the Bloomingburg Hill at all. As we slowly drove down the other side of the mountain, I looked out into the valley below to see the village of Wurtsboro shimmering in the early June sunshine. This was one of the first actual crossroads we'd pass through. Here, some travelers would turn off onto Route 209 and drive toward Ellenville, in nearby Ulster County, to seek their particular haven. But not us. With Wurtsboro and the mountain behind us, we continued on Route 17 to Monticello, the nexus of the county, and its largest city. Even though the actual summer season was still a few weeks away, the city was bustling with activity. The sidewalks were crowded with people, the streets filled with drivers looking for parking spaces; here was every kind of store and service imaginable. The marquee of the Rialto theatre proudly proclaimed to passersby that *Gigi* was now playing; beneath the marquee dangled a blue banner announcing the presence of air conditioning inside. At the Short Line bus depot nearby, crowds of people, most toting luggage, waited for the next bus to their destination. Not everyone had the luxury of traveling in their own car. At this time, we were searching the streets for a sign pointing the way to Route 42, for at Monticello we left Route 17, which continued on to Liberty, location of the fabled Grossinger's Resort. Monticello, of course, was the home of the nearby Concord Hotel, beloved by millions over the years, but not our style. Having found Route 42, we turned away from the crowds, and continued on our way.

Route 42 meandered over the countryside and found its way to South Fallsburg, not nearly as large as Monticello, but

busy with people nevertheless. Stores and restaurants lined both sides of the street. My father pointed out Frank and Bob's, his favorite area restaurant, where he'd like to "grab a meal" sometime soon, maybe even tonight. Passing over the railroad tracks and the nearby train station, we soon left South Fallsburg behind us. It didn't take long for my mother to point out a sign by the right side of the road that said, simply, GREEN'S COTTAGES. This was a small bungalow colony where we used to stay, and where I spent the first summers of my life. I happened to be deep into thumb-sucking as a baby and toddler, which was a delightful, absorbing activity that for me actually involved both thumbs—one, of course, was planted firmly in my mouth; the other, however, was carefully stroking a soft, smooth, special piece of fabric that might have been part of a shirt, or a pair of pants. Now it just so happened that Mr. Green himself owned and wore a pair of khaki trousers that suited my needs perfectly, and as my mother told the story, I was attached to Mr. Green's pants wherever he went.

In a little while, we passed the Flagler Hotel, at the time ranked quite high in the world of luxury Catskill resorts. This meant we were approaching Fallsburg, just a little crossroads town named after the spectacular bouldered falls of the Neversink River. Oretsky's Garage was on the right, and my father never failed to look to see if he could spot his old buddy Moe Oretsky, the owner, and honk as he passed. But not this time. Crossing the intersection, we could see the Crossroads Restaurant, perched right above the falls so that its patrons could enjoy the view. Just down the side road near the old stone bridge over the Neversink was one of the more infamous local night spots, The Wonder Bar, known throughout the area for its incredibly wicked reputation and goings-on. However, of more interest to me was a dirt road just past the Wonder Bar and a sign indicating SCHIEKOWITZ'S BUNGALOW COLONY, with a red arrow pointing the way.

Schickowitz's was where we stayed for a few summers after we outgrew Green's. The dirt road led off the highway through corn fields and then crossed a small brook with a

wooden, white-washed bridge. If we kids were on the bridge when a car or, better, a truck was coming from, or going to the colony, we would hold on to the railing and “go for a ride,” for the bridge trembled and shook under the weight of various vehicles. For a five- or six-year-old, it was a lot of fun. That dirt road then went up a small hill into the colony itself. We started out at Schiekowitz’s in a single, crowded room in a large rooming house with a deep wrap-around porch. There was a shared bathroom down the hall, and a common kitchen in an adjacent building. Eventually, we moved up to a modest bungalow.

What I remember best about Schiekowitz’s was the forest and the river. What was remarkable about the forest, other than its incredible depth, was the number of gigantic, glacial boulders found within its confines. They were famous among the kids: Mother Rock (pretty big), Father Rock (even bigger), and Whale Rock (biggest of all, and a real challenge to climb). The woods were great; always dark, kind of spooky, full of adventure. A well-worn path led from the colony down to the Neversink River, where we’d swim and fish for sunnies and perch from the large, flat boulders that lined the riverbank. As time progressed into the modern world of the 1950s, however, river swimming became passé; consequently, the Schiekowitzes added the wonder of an in-ground swimming pool. But with the pool came a long list of rules and regulations for use that caused considerable friction between the residents, my mother included, and Mrs. Schiekowitz, the chief rule enforcer. As a result, their first summer with a pool was our last summer as residents. We moved on.

As we did this morning, leaving Fallsburg and its memories in our wake. It was now just a few miles to Woodbourne, where we’d turn off 42 and onto Route 52, going up the hill toward Loch Sheldrake. Woodbourne was a nice little town settled along both sides of the same Neversink River. It was, however, dominated by the overbearing presence of the Sullivan County Correctional Facility, a somber regional prison whose presence on the hillside could not be ignored. Prisoners were often seen out in the fields around the prison tending various

crops in the hot summer sun. It was always astonishing to see them out there, always hard at work, always watched over by mounted police with rifles across their saddles. One time, when we were driving by, I saw a group of prisoners standing by a barn near the road with their hands raised high in the air, and several mounted officers pointing their rifles directly at them. I didn't know what was going on, but I never forgot the sight.

The turn onto Route 52 was actually just before the village proper. The landmark was a Shell station right at the intersection at the bottom of the hill. We made the sharp left and drove away from Woodbourne and its prison. Persistent loud static on the radio that prevented us from listening to William B. Williams on WNEW told us that we were both very far from home, and very close to our destination. Soon we'd be passing the New Roxy Hotel on the right and, on the left, a glimpse of Lake Evans and the sprawling Evans Hotel beyond the lake in the distance. A black-and-white state highway marker read, in bold print, LOCH SHELDRAKE and, in smaller print underneath, LIBERTY, 5. We had arrived.

The year is 1958. Philip, a twelve-year-old kid from the Bronx, is getting ready for his family's annual trip upstate, where he'll spend the summer in a bungalow colony in the tiny village of Loch Sheldrake, a faraway fairyland of mountains, lakes, starry nights, and dewy mornings. With his colony friends, he'll explore the woods and fields, have an array of adventures, and even experience the special charm of a childhood summer romance. It was a time and place of wonderful memories wistfully looked back upon fifty years later, and lovingly recalled in this humorous and poignant memoir. What young Philip didn't know was that there would never be another summer like this one.

He was not alone. In the 1950s, about two thousand bungalow colonies dotted the countryside of Sullivan and Ulster counties, catering to an estimated one million people a year who spent all or part of their summer in "The Mountains." Among them were countless kids like Philip, who today carry with them the fondest of memories and a nostalgic longing for a precious moment in time that can never be equaled. Today, they find themselves returning to the country, seeking out the places where they stayed so long ago, only to find that the world has changed a lot in fifty years, and time has a way of erasing all evidence of a world that used to be. *Bungalow Kid* vividly recreates what it was like to be a city kid in the Catskills in the 1950s, and reaches out to all those kids, now grown, who would very much like to go back.

"For a 1950s kid from the Bronx, 'The Mountains' (Sullivan County, New York) was a familiar, essential, alternate universe. Philip Ratzer's nexus was Pesekow's Bungalow Colony on the shores of redundantly named Loch Sheldrake Lake. His affectionate, vivid recollections center on this small summer resort and the adjacent village of Loch Sheldrake. Ruby the Knish Man, who stopped at Pesekow's, was the traveling culinary troubadour of all of our Catskill memories. Phil's adventures remain alive to all of us—the superannuated Bungalow Kids—no matter where we summer today."

— Irwin Richman, author of *Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memories of Catskill Summers*

"Philip Ratzer's story is a tender reminiscence, written in the style of the preteen bungalow dweller whose life is his subject. Unable to catch ourselves from sliding into our own youth, we are propelled back to that simplicity of summer pleasure, rooting for whatever we want to have happened there. Fifty years of memory, prompted by a return visit, brings us to the utter magic of the Catskills which shaped so many lives. *Bungalow Kid* is a joy and a treasure."

— Phil Brown, author of *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* and editor of *In the Catskills: A Century of the Jewish Experience in "The Mountains"*

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