

Locker Boys

We argued off and on for 35 years about what it was he played that day, his recollection tending more toward Bach, mine Gershwin. He'd just transferred to my school, to the eighth grade, and the chorus teacher introduced him to the class as a very talented pianist who'd agreed to play for us. Whatever it was he played had the effect of a revelation on me: to see and hear someone my age bring music to life right in front of me, with such self-confidence and skill, lifted me a little above the safe and predictable realm I inhabited. This was the beginning.

We both remembered clearly how we met. It was just after lunch, when the students left the cafeteria and spent the last few minutes of their lunch period on the blacktop. I walked up to him, standing apart, and formally introduced myself: "Hello, Jerry Hunt. I'm Stephen Housewright." I believe I even extended my hand. I hope I did. In later years, when we'd both begun to look back on our youthful friendship as the initial stage of the history of our love, he'd tell this story of our meeting, always with a touch of mockery of my rather stiff manner. I'd laugh a little, too, at the spectacle of it.

But now I have the time, and urge, and need to examine what it all meant, and what it means. That he was from another world I must have sensed right away. (Twenty years later critics would describe his performance art as "shamanic.") With an intuitive grasp of the significance of the meeting, and with even a sense of deference, as toward a superior being, I was on my best behavior, supplying full names for the record and the contract. We soon became friends, and I'd frequently go by his house after school. His stop was just before mine on the bus route, at the end of a long street of all-brick houses (ours was merely trimmed with brick). Unlike at my home, where there was always someone there, at Jerry's house there were only the dogs, until his parents came in later from work. We'd talk, listen to music, explore the kitchen for snacks. The Hunts enjoyed a wider variety of foods than I was used to, including capers, shrimp, and the thinly sliced hard salami they ate with mustard and crackers and that became a special favorite of mine. Jerry knew his way around a kitchen much better than I did; sometimes he would perform some chore or other to help his mother prepare dinner.

From time to time I'd stay for dinner, particularly on Friday nights. His mother would come in from her job as a secretary and start cooking, her hat still on and a

cigarette in her mouth.

When Mr. Hunt was not traveling (as a salesman for Pet Milk), the four of us would have steaks and baked potatoes, grilled outside in good weather. One night Jerry and I stayed on the patio long after dark, acting silly (as we often did), taking turns playing deceased and mourner, the picnic table our bier.

That memory, still so vivid (because, I suppose, evoked so often over the years), serves as a kind of corrective. What mattered to me most, then, about my relationship with Jerry was that he was invariably fun to be with. Our silliness was above all a delight in language, language serving parody, and parody sometimes serving as protection. I'm too much inclined now, as I recall our past alone, to evoke the graver significances of the details I describe. He took me out of the familiar, showed me new interests, new ways of being. But he also made me—we made one another—laugh.

The blacktop became a regular meeting place, a time for talking and being silly that counterbalanced the stifling, tedious hours of the classroom. At that time, in 1957, Jim Lowe's recording of "The Green Door" was a popular song. We got worked up about it one day, on that crowded blacktop, Jerry leaning against the outer wall of one of the classrooms, pounding with his fists and entreating, then demanding the Green Door to let him in on the secret it was keeping:

*Midnight—one more night without sleepin',
Watching—till the morning comes peepin',
Green door—what's the secret you're keepin'*

(This was a routine we were to reprise often in the next few years.) Because we were so often together, and because our behavior was sometimes so outrageous, we became somewhat notorious at school—not a good thing for teenagers to be.

We got in serious trouble once. Every Friday (or was it Monday?) morning, there was a devotional given by students and broadcast over the school's PA system. I don't remember now whether Jerry and I volunteered to give one of these or whether we were asked to, but it was a debacle. We were huddled close together over the microphone in the vice principal's office, reading aloud some text or scripture, and one of us got tickled, setting the other one off and making it impossible for us to finish. In fact I think someone in the office had to switch the PA off. We were chastised by several teachers and ostracized by our fellow students for days. A classmate even came up to us while we were standing in the lunch line to tell us how ashamed of

ourselves we ought to be.

It has never occurred to me until now, I'm a little sorry to admit, to wonder what my mother thought about this incident. She would have been there, I'm almost sure, since she worked in the school's cafeteria. Always eager for the A-student's praise, I must have told her about my turn to give the devotional. What did she think when she heard us break down, tittering over Holy Scripture? And what had she been thinking in general about her son and his new fast friend?

Although I don't remember the details, I know Jerry and I suffered some abuse by other boys who found our behavior suspicious. We were always together, and they did comment on that. I'm sure our affects were somewhat "sissified," particularly when we were in the throes of some 'production' or other. I used to walk around dangling a limp right wrist; Jerry got to where he'd reach over and slap it down, especially when we were going along in front of the stores in our neighborhood shopping center. (He used to claim credit for having 'broken' me of that habit, in later years.) It's curious, but I think true: *joie de vivre* can be expressed as prissiness, but this kind of camp in boys discomfits onlookers not similarly disposed. (Years earlier I had happily greeted the arrival of one of my aunts and her family by prancing just ahead of their car coming down our driveway, exclaiming in a melodramatic tone "But I'm not dressed!")

Our gym teacher, Mr. Gaddis, apparently recognized how hopeless Jerry and I were at sports. We didn't spend our free time playing catch, practicing dribbling, and shooting baskets.

On the baseball field we were O.K.—not a liability to teams or a nuisance to the teacher—because we were always allowed to wander far out into the school yard, not even coming in when our 'team,' whichever it was, came up to bat. We often stood talking, or being silly, at the chain-link fence along the school's perimeter. (I can remember gazing into the residential neighborhood, wistfully watching the people coming and going there, wishing I were free.)

It was in the gymnasium itself where I think Jerry and I must have presented a problem for Mr. Gaddis. He figured out what to do with us, though, by making us locker boys. Whenever P.E. was held indoors and the boys had to suit up, Jerry and I took up our duties inside the wire cage that held the hundreds of numbered baskets with gym clothes in them. We issued and collected these baskets through a Dutch door at the beginning and near the end of the P.E. period. The rest of the time was ours, and we studied

for upcoming tests or, usually, did the homework thus far assigned so as to be able to take fewer books home. We had a good time together there, amid the sounds of locker doors slamming, showers running, and the smell of stale, sweaty shirts, shorts, and socks.

Thirty-five years later, during Jerry's last year of life, our locker-room memories came back to us. Shortly after his emphysema had been diagnosed and his loss of lung function measured, Jerry was prescribed a course of pulmonary rehabilitation which we began together in a hospital in nearby Tyler. This time, though, we were suiting up. The locker room and its sounds and smells, our gym bags, and our being in such an environment again, might have made us laugh had it not been for the serious purpose at hand. Actually, we did begin to laugh about it all a little later, when we'd finished the training program in Tyler and had begun to exercise twice a week in the athletic center in Athens. If there were any heart or lung patients using the center when we were, we never realized it. The young men and women we exercised with were building muscles, losing weight, and gaining tone. We'd get tickled, in the locker room, at some of the pumped-up men who'd come to look like pieces of massive furniture. But more than that, we'd be amused at ourselves, taking lifting weights, riding bikes, and walking on treadmills so seriously now, at this point in our lives.

Sometimes Jerry had breathing problems while exercising. A spell of labored breathing might subside on its own (he snapped his fingers with a steady beat to help restore the breathing cycle and to keep himself calm). At other times, and more and more often, he'd have to stop exercising and use an inhaler to administer medicine to relax his bronchial muscle. My response to these crises was to keep exercising, finishing my own number of repetitions or minutes, thereby encouraging him to resume and finish as much of his as he could. Of course I was acutely aware of his difficulties. And I do remember people coming up to him occasionally to ask if he were all right.

I never knew how closely we were being observed, though, until after Jerry died. In a month or so I went back to the center alone; I wanted to be where we had been, and I hoped that a little exercise might help me feel better (as indeed it did and continues to do). The young man who checked me in didn't comment about my being alone (I had always gone with Jerry); I suited up and began with a little time on the treadmill. In just a few minutes one of the fellows working out came up to me to ask where Jerry was. I told him about his

dying, and the man expressed his sympathy.

Others came up, then, one by one, during the hour or so I was there. I'd never realized they'd been watching him so closely, monitoring his decline, and admiring his willpower. The last person to speak to me was one of the coaches for the community college in Athens, and I learned that it was his son who had been checking Jerry and me in at the center for the last eight

months. Sometimes when Jerry didn't need a shower, and that was the case more and more frequently, he'd dress and go out front and visit with this young man. He spoke to me, then, when I left that day, telling me how much he admired Jerry's determination and how much he had enjoyed talking with him, even when they discussed, and Jerry joked about, dying.