

Chapter 40 - A Brief Immortality

The gymnasium in the main building on the Harley School campus served many purposes. It was an enormous, cavernous room with a balcony at one end and a large collapsible stage that was fixed to the wall at the other end. Tucked under the balcony was the school's kitchen facility. High caged windows ran along the length of the room. Two stories above the floor were long horizontal steel braces that supported the building's roof. The area would begin its day as a lunch cafeteria, then in the afternoon it was usually converted into a gym for games, practice or other activities. School meetings and assemblies were held there, as were plays and dances. And graduation every June.

During a school assembly my attention wandered and I found myself staring at the roof. The walls just below it were covered with large panels of beige wallboard. Years before some adventurous students, now long forgotten, had left their marks on that wallboard. Several large initials had been carved into it and someone had added a simple design. While I had noticed their handiwork many times before, I wondered just how did they do it two stories up? And how would a distinctive "J" look among the other marks?

I began to mentally map out a route. Start in the balcony above the kitchen. Climb out onto the ledge running above the windows that supports the roof braces. Move along the ledge until I reach the roof brace that runs across the room to where the others had been able to mark their presence. After school that day, I ran into Kermit and told him what I had been thinking about. We went back to the gym and I pointed out how I expected to carry it out. It made sense to him and he liked the idea. If properly executed, it wouldn't take long and we would then have joined the small group of daredevils who had left their marks for future generations of Harley students to marvel at - and to envy. How often did one have the opportunity for immortality?

The following Sunday afternoon we ride our bikes to Harley and leave them out of sight. We check the string of doors at the building's front entrance. Everything is tightly locked. But the exit door for the boys' locker room in the back of the school is not. A good beginning. We enter and quietly walk through the halls, carefully checking for other signs of life. All is quiet. We are alone.

Then quickly up the stairs to the balcony. I climb out onto the ledge that supports the roof braces. I move along it until I reach the roof brace that runs across the room to where the others

have left their marks. The brace's structural shape allows me to use it for support as I slowly inch my way across it to the opposite wall of the gym. I am two floors up and I do not look down. While cautious, I am sure of foot. I briefly consider a career as a cat burglar, but then reject it as I am no Cary Grant.

It is tempting to introduce a little high drama at this point. *As I reach the midpoint in my perilous journey, I move my free hand to the next support spot and grab it. There is a sudden, searing pain. I shift my gaze to my hand and it is bleeding. A jagged metal edge on the brace has sliced open my palm. I can see that some of my tendons have been severed. My hand is becoming slippery. The bleeding must be stopped; I am starting to feel faint..... Or..... As I reach the midpoint in my perilous journey, I hear a scurrying sound. I look ahead of me and there is a large rat working his way along the brace towards me. It is then that I notice that the brace is covered with small rat droppings and that I appear to be in the middle of some sort of rodent freeway. We are both surprised. My fellow traveler bares his teeth. I cannot retreat without taking my eyes off of him.....*

But no, the trip along the brace is uneventful. Previous adventurers had probably used the same route to safely reach the place where they had left their marks and I am about to become one of them. Within my reach is ground zero. One hand is firmly on the roof brace to secure me; with the other I carefully reach into the pocket of my dungarees and slowly remove my jackknife. ("Dungarees" – another word now interred in the Lexicon Boneyard. *Footnote 1.*) The largest blade is opened and I begin to scrape away a "J" about a foot high.

The job finished, I slowly retraced my route. Once safely back in the balcony, it was then Kermit's time for his immortality. A "K" of similar size soon joined my "J." We were then quickly out of the balcony, down the stairs, through the boys' locker room, outside and away. Unseen.

Monday, back at school, patiently waiting for lunch. The noon bell rang and we joined the rest of the lunch crowd. I filled my tray and sat with a group of friends. As I ate I casually looked up and there were "J" and "K" engraved two floors above us for eternity. Others also noticed and there was some quiet comment and speculation. Quite a few Upper School students had a first or last name that began with a "J" or "K." Some were even girls. Kermit and I said nothing. It appeared to be a *fait accompli*.

Later that week there was a school assembly. Larry Utter, Harley's Headmaster, made his announcements and discussed some school matters. Then before the program began, he paused

and commented on the new graffiti. He pointed out how dangerous it had been for “J” and “K” and that their rash actions had just added to the ugliness of the other marks. He talked about immaturity and school responsibility. He did not name us, but Kermit and I could feel him speaking directly to us. He ended with an old quote from Anonymous - “Fools names, like fools' faces, are often seen in public places.” He had made his point.

Our hoped for immortality didn't last very long. A few days later “J” and “K” disappeared. In each's space was a white square slightly larger than the previous occupant. Pix or Pat from the school's maintenance staff had probably used an extension ladder to safely reach the spot and had quickly obliterated them.

While none of us would know it at the time, our immortality was never meant to be. In 1974 Harley began to rebuild its entire Clover Street campus. The old buildings were to be razed and the facilities rebuilt, updated and expanded. As the main building was being readied for demolition, it caught fire and was destroyed. Had “J” and “K” not been removed from the wallboard, they would still have disappeared with the rest of the building's rubble.

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Footnote 1: Author's Note: the “Lexicon Boneyard” is the place where old words go when they have died. Interred there are once common words like “dungarees,” “vestibule,” “galoshes,” “haberdashery,” “actress,” and “sparkplug.”]

