

Rhinebeck, NY
Beekman Arms
Washington's room

13 June 2014
Astor visit

I returned to Rhinebeck to see how much has changed and to visit Arnie's grave in the veteran's section, where I will also be laid under. Then, I visited Astor. They had me wait to get approval by staff to be on the grounds. I sat and waited, looking upon the stairs that led up to the Marist dormitory as if upon an old friend from long years past.

It was after a bus ride back from Port Authority and a visitation weekend in '70, when I sat on those stairs with Lori. She was waiting for her ride back to the Setonite group home in Staatsburg. Sister Ann said I could sit with her. It was one of the first times I'd held hands with a girl and felt my body react to the female touch. On those stairs, she'd asked me if I would marry her one day.

As I sat there reminiscing, I felt a sadness; Lori didn't make it through. She no longer remembers stolen kisses behind the tall pines at Astor while the nuns called out for us. She no longer remembers shoplifting as we held hands in Schemmy's – early wedding gifts between 12-year-old orphans who still dreamed. She no longer remembers me. This I saw gazing upon the ol' steps, filled with a lifelong soul-yearning for the first pretty person who saw beyond all the ugliness in me.

Then, a sharp looking woman, Jackie, took me for a tour of the facility. She and a gentleman took me through the new Marist dorm. The dorms are coed now! The nuns would have never comprehended that. But in the same way the staff here would not likely comprehend giving an axe to a severely disturbed boy to 'workout his anger in the forests around Astor.'

They then took me to their old Marist dorm; the old rooms, the usual day room, and the stories of then. I thanked them. "This wasn't my dorm." She smiled brightly, "Oh, you're from way back. When the nuns used to sleep up in the roof." I wouldn't have put it that way. We made our way, stopping to see the new things.

There is now an inground pool where the old pool used to be. The long sloping hill that ran down to the creek, providing so much joy in winter, was hardly recognizable. The new Marist dorm was built on the black top where once we played basketball, baseball, and every year there was a bazaar where we could buy stuff with our \$5 monthly allowance.

We walked through the old school building. I didn't recognize most of it. I saw the door to Mr. Kelly's old woodshop and Mr. Grenon's classroom. Then there was the door at the end of the hall. The last on the left where all the psychological testing and all the questions got asked, and we all learned to tell them what they wanted to hear. So they'd stop asking. As my guides walked in front of me in the present of their time, I was transcending decades.

We came to the Marist dorm, but on the way we stopped at a door at the top of the stairs; our padded treatment room. I really wanted to look in there and gaze out that window to see that view one more time. I've been visiting on-and-off for nearly 40 years. In all that time they've never let me back in that room. They're trying to forget. I'm trying to write my story.

I had spent more time in that room than any other Marist. I have the scar of three stitches above my left eyebrow from slamming my face into the small glass window. Also five stitches in my right hand; the only boy to crack that thick chicken-wire glass. I could not see the room: it was locked. I have a pen, a comp-book, and long seasons of unfinished business. Someday, they're gonna let me see my padded room. I would even pay the rate of the Beekman for just those few long, long overdue hours onto these pages.

Then, we walked the eight steps over to the old Marist dorm which is now a centralized admin center with a series of office spaces. Quite drearily post-modern in its effect. Of course the place seemed far smaller now. Even the hardwood floors have been covered. Some walls were taken down. Others had gone up. The door to the nurse's office still stood. I placed my hand upon the place where my door had been. A ghostly outline of the door frame lingers.

How out of time that scene appeared to me. As what I have kept with me is from a different time and place. My time and the present clashed to make sense inside. Of course I could still see what my guides could not see. I could still sift on the history of tens of boys who'd once walked these halls in winter and summer and departed in spring. From behind my curtains I watched them go. A desk now sits where those moments were lived.

I asked Jackie if I could go into the room. She said it was okay. She and the gentleman were disagreeing about the Grammy song of the year. The gentleman sweetly sang, 'Stay with me,' with horrible dance steps to persuade her. I entered into that space, remembering the bunk beds, remembering the bully Danny who slept atop.

He used to cry himself to sleep at night calling out for his mommy. I didn't hate the bully as much when he cried. Sometimes, I cried with him because I didn't know what that word meant. I remembered Angel, a boy from the Bronx. One of the toughest Marists when I was there. He had the top bunk.

He had this habit of banging his head up and down at night as he slept in diaper rash position. Night-after-night he'd fall asleep banging his face into his pillow as I sang myself to sleep. I sang to block out my foster mother's footsteps on the floor outside our door.

But singing could not stop her perfume from getting in. I sang and he banged his head. Then one night he looked over the side, "Couldja sing louder? My ma use'ta sing'na me." And so I did. It helped him fall asleep. He didn't bang his head as much. He also liked the song. It was the only one I wanted to sing, *Yesterday*.

Sometime later he said, "Could'ja come up here'n sing to me?" And so I did. We'd lie side-by-side. Sometimes he put his face on my chest. I stroked his hair as I softly sang. He had an Afro like a soft sponge and it tickled my nose. Then one night I was climbing from the top bunk and my pajama pants snagged the ladder. I got caught up and slammed onto the floor, ladder and all. I heard the black shoes coming fast. One or two seconds later the door opened. Sister V flicked on the lights.

When I fell, the ladder had pulled my bottoms down. The fall knocked the wind out of me but she didn't try to help me. She demanded, "What is going on here? What were you doing in his bunk?" I was still trying to catch my breath when she yanked me to my feet. "I asked you a question, young man. I better get an answer." I looked at Angel. He shook his head and stared at the floor. "I-I was just singin to him, Sista."

She led me to the nurse's office and called Mother Superior. We jokingly called her Bulldog because she was mean as a dog. *If you cracked wise.* As we waited, Sister said I should pray and think on my sin. I had no idea what she was talking about. "Singing's a sin now?"

After Bulldog arrived she went right to work; questions hard and fast to confuse me and a good Christian slap upside the head. She was all bark. I only told the truth. The night ended. I spent a day in the treatment room for spitting in Bulldog's face. Angel was reassigned to the cottage. I was told not to have contact with him. No one ever said what I did wrong.

Instead, I was sent to see a psychiatrist who asked me if I got hard when I looked at boys. He asked if I watched the boys in the Marist shower. He asked me if I masturbated. I didn't know how to do that. He asked me how long I'd been attracted to boys and said it was all right if I was. I never felt any of the things he'd said I felt. He didn't believe me either. The only mention in my Astor records from that night is one line, "This boy appears to be sexually confused."

After they put Angel in the cottage, from where most of us transitioned, something worsened in me. That churning heat in my core took on that glowing whiteness: the heat and the white light melded inside. That white heat exploded.

One afternoon I excused myself from the table, taking with me a butterknife. I went back to my room and unscrewed most of the screws from the hinges. Then, back in the dining room, I caused a scene to get locked in my room. I laid on the floor waiting. Watching. Then I saw the black shoes: a nun sitting directly across.

I leaned back against the windowsill and bolted for the door with a screaming roar. Air born, slamming my entire body into it, it flew from the hinges. It hit her shoulder and knocked her from the chair to the wooden floor. She uttered such a ghastly scream that everyone came running from every direction.

In my heart, I know what I'd wanted to do. But something favored her. Something not in that room with me. My records indicate it must have been a tough November night for the Daughters of Charity. It took 400 mgs of *Equinol* to settle me down in the padded room. Followed by two weeks of 150 mgs of *Thorazine* twice a day. 12-years-old.

As I stood in that small space forty-four years later, I felt in my heart the sadness that comes when people take things from children. All kinds of things. I felt ancient tears rising, but luckily Jackie was fully engaged. It was in that small room that I began to write my thoughts on scraps of paper I took from Grenon's classroom. I'd spent hours rewriting the words to everything: *Beatles'* songs, prayers, books, commercials and on. Searching for something. In the morning, I flushed them in the toilet so no one would know I had tried to say something.

I gazed out the window as Jackie and her coworker moved away from the doorway. The view out the window was the same except the Astor dog of long ago, Noxie, is buried out front. We couldn't even have a whole dog. But when that black dog hobbled into the dorm on a winter night to cuddle for warmth, we trapped it, hugged it, and tussled over who got to sleep with him. Imagine a three-legged black dog on his back with twenty eager hands gently caressing his belly. Dog heaven.

I fell into a reverie in that moment. I thought of the boy who'd looked for hours through the glass watching the seasons pass. I remembered how uncertain I felt about everything. I saw myself hiding behind the curtain on Visitation Sunday as the Greyhounds rolled in from the city. Waiting to see if my mother would step from the bus. In my 17 months it never happened. Even after the drivers turned off the engines I lingered behind the curtain, 'Maybe she just fell asleep.' It took ten months behind the curtain. Then hope went out of me.

I wondered if the people who work there ever feel the history, the energy of a place where the dreams of so many children came to an end. Did they feel the lingering prayers, the tears in a space where so much was born and died? It was at Astor that for me and many others, any adoption hopes were laid to rest. 'Too disturbed for future placement.'

It's a tough thing to take into one's heart that no one wants you. A tough thing. It was in that room at 12-years-old that I began to understand that another six years in the system lay ahead and Holy Cross, known to us as Hell-Cross, was just around the corner. Morton Road.

They broke boys at Holy Cross. Like they drugged, beat and destroyed my brother at St. Agnes in Sparkhill in 1970. He was just fourteen. His next 8 years were spent locked-up in Creedmoor Psychiatric Hospital. They finished him there. My sister had her trials at the Wayside School for Girls. I had mine every place they sent me.

The history of a place never dies even after those who'd lived chapters there are no more. We are all passing out of history. But most certainly, the energy of all the boys who'd lived and cried in that place still remains. Such traces leave an impression in the structure, in the very essence of what that space holds. The same way an electrical cord can leave a scar on the face of a boy tied into a chair. Even as a man, while shaving, he must see that scar every day.

Standing silent in that moment, divided between two dimensions in time, I felt what had long lingered there rejoin inside me, as if it had been waiting for one of its sons to return. They were young and tender boys, broken beyond what any counselor could ever understand.

They see pain relative to the moment that the details are revealed. But as to what resides in that pain - the years, the roads, and all the broken places ahead - they do not hear or see that. It is strange that they offer solutions and pills for a pain they couldn't possibly grasp. But a theory helps.

In those places, in that small room, deep in the night, interrupted only by the nun's occasional bed checks and the bell tolling from the Dutch Reformed Church, we children whispered dark tales of what others had done. Some nights we held each other. But these were things we could never speak of to the nuns, counselors, or psychiatrists. These were our secrets: we held them as dearly as bouquets of thorn.

None of us could quite decipher the labels we were given or the pills: *Haldol*, *Thorazine*, and on my worst days, *Equinol*. But we broke enough toys and other things before arriving at Astor to know something was not quite good in us. Some of us knew that we were rotten to the core. We also knew there were things that prayer could not heal or make better. Dark places the Holy Sacrament could not reach.

The things we could not speak of were settled by the rage they carved in us in the boxing area outside the Marist locker room. It was also in that little space, now someone's office, that I laced on boxing gloves too big for my hands and walked down the back staircase into the tunnels that led to the ring with a silent nun at my side. It was then that child-rage had a purpose and was allowed expression in all its Glory. When two boys who'd not learned to whisper brokenness to the night tried to bash it out of each other.

The nuns watched. Children cheered, and puffy white clouds danced lazily across the blue Dutchess County sky. In the end, the nuns could only raise one hand in victory. The other boy, well, he was escorted back to his room with a nun by his side espousing how he'd, 'Fought the good fight in doin the Laaawd's work.'

Later, that boy alone on the lower bunk unlaced the gloves. A nun brought ice for the swollen eye and fat lip. Then she'd depart. The boy, he'd stare out the window looking long into the shadows of the present season wondering if the pain ever ends. Then, he'd lie down at night, cry-singing himself to sleep. Now he had one more reason: failure with gloves on.

In '72, I met my dear friend Angel in the Bronx. He was taller now and quite handsome. He was making ends meet around Gunhill Road. He'd offered to take me in if I would do 'some things.' He knew a man, Buddy Love, who had a warm and safe place for street-boys and runners near Evander Childs. Angel was a street-boy. I was still a runner. I thanked him but decided it was better to stay hungry.

Beneath the shadow of the el' we held like brothers. It still breaks my heart when I think of my friend. The nuns were always right about some things. But they had all asked the right questions of the wrong boy so many years ago.

I thanked them for the tour. They had been most generous with their time. Walking the path out the main door past Noxie's grave (lived 15 years), it was hard to think about the girls and boys I'd loved and lost. It has stained my soul with a sadness I've never been free of. In many ways there were some dark and terrible places.

Astor Home was the last place my heart ever held a gentle human dream. I have tried to live my life through the rare goodness I was shown by the few because sometimes, that's all you get. From that, one must try to build a life and hope that past never bleeds through.

