St. Louis Pilgrimage

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

The thick white tablecloth under my little hands and the white cloth napkin tucked stiffly under my Adam's apple reminded me of the linens I had once touched on the altar at our church at home. We had taken the long train ride from out-of-state to St. Louis, my young beautiful parents showing me off in my new clothes wherever we stopped. As we tramped, amazed, through the city, they marveled at my keen observations (for a five-year-old!) and winked proudly at the strangers that I precociously engaged. Weary from the day's wandering, we finally reached the ultimate mecca of the trip, a restaurant co-owned by my father's boyhood-baseball hero. The year was 1960.
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Upon entering, my father asked immediately if the Man would appear tonight, and the waiter patiently replied that his appearances weren’t predictable, but with the day’s game over and it being a Friday night, it was likely. My Dad reported this encouragingly to my Mother and me, and he strategized nervously as to how to spend the time until the Man materialized.

There was no room at the crowded bar, so we stood with drinks, the adults shouting above me and through the smoke, perfume, food smells, and music mixing in the rarefied air. I put my head down, closed my eyes and held the cold glass like a candle, as if in prayer, trying to protect myself from the over-stimulation.

My Dad tried to stall, but eventually we were seated at a small table in the busy dining area. The waiter brought out a St. Louis phone book for me to sit on as I was too big for a high chair. I was stripped of my coat, the starchy napkin was carefully tucked under my chin, and I touched
the fine tablecloth and all of my pieces of silverware. My Mother hung my little red sports coat with the faux coat-of-arms stitched above the pocket on a vacant chair at our table as if saving the place for someone in spirit.

The smells and sounds and sights of the bar competed with those of the restaurant, and I tried to take it all in and, according to my father, I was asking too many questions: “Will other Cardinals be here?” “How many people live in St. Louis?” “How did Pinocchio become a real boy?” His agitation grew as he waited for his miracle.

Absorbing the excitement, anxiety, and vigilance like a tuning fork, and loaded up with Pepsi, I started acting up. My legs bobbed rhythmically above the phone book, occasionally kicking the table. I knew better, but something else seemed to control my legs. The silverware felt heavy in my hands and I was told to stop playing with it as I struck the goofy pose of a nursery rhyme prince—bibbed and cow-licked, tongue sticking out sideways—waiting for his supper. When the waiter came, I ordered a hot open-faced, roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes, which was not on the kids’ menu.

A relish tray and bread arrived. I ate quickly, which of course ran counter to the plan to linger, and was told to slow down.

The food came. I don’t remember if the hot roast beef was cold on delivery or if it became cold because I wasn’t allowed to eat it fast enough. Fatigue was setting in as the night sky insinuated itself into the windows over by the bar.

A burst of light, movement and air... “He’s here!”

My Dad rose as the Man tried to breeze by. “Stan, could we get a picture?” The Man agreed in a split-second as if this happened every other split-second, and pointed us toward a coat room in the back. I was extricated from my phonebook throne, helped back into my red sports coat, and we followed the icon.

I was handed over to the future Hall of Famer as if I were a gift, a sacrifice. He held me like Edger Bergen held Charlie McCarthy. The two men met shoulder-to shoulder and all eyes were on my beautiful mother who was silently star-struck, nervously stamping a foot on something invisible as she fussed with the camera.

She nodded that she was ready. I felt the adoration shift and touched the Man’s hand with my forefinger to see if I could absorb some of his athletic powers. (It was not to be.) Still, I smiled
broadly, mugging like a ventriloquist’s dummy, my shiny saddle shoes dangling floppily below me.

Snap!

Light bulb shadows on my retinas, I’m released and don’t really see the Man anymore. I said, “Thanks, Stan” blindly. I couldn’t feel my legs beneath me.

Back at the table, there was no flavor left to my food. A smile possessed with future bragging rights glowed on my father’s handsome face. I was dethroned again and my legs felt heavy and wooden. I’m carried, limp and silent, into the warm St. Louis night, defeated by the day’s pilgrimage.

Ron Wischnowski, Stan “the Man” Musial, Mike Wischnowski.