

# **Self Portrait a memoir by Jack Gunter**

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Cover by Jack Gunter

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## Born Without a Face



At 2:00 am in the morning of November 17, 1947, I was expelled into the earth's atmosphere at the hospital in Winthrop, Massachusetts across from Logan Airport and took a breath. The air smelled of amniotic fluid, the ocean, airplane fuel, and antiseptic. They say when my little reddened, wriggling body was handed to Ruth, my mother, she smiled at first then screamed at the sight of the creature she'd delivered. "He has no face" were the first spoken words I heard upon arrival on the planet. To be born with the placental membrane obscuring the eyes and nose and mouth is a rare occurrence, happening once in a hundred thousand births. The veil is called "the caul."

"This child is blessed with good fortune," the attendants told my freaked-out mom. "He is going to live a magical life." She would tell me later that sea captains of old would try to acquire these dried, parchment good luck pieces to ensure safe voyages, since a person possessing a caul could not drown. According to legends, the life of a caulbearer would be more complex than other humans. These special beings were known to have the ability to find water, predict climate changes and plentiful game, and heal others from a distance and were said to possess insights unknown to others. Certain Buddhist groups would seek out young caulbearers to train them to be Dali Lamas. Caulbearers were frequently misunderstood by others

because of their spontaneous utterances, often leading to persecution. Boy oh boy, does this explain a lot of what's to follow.

My dried-out birth hoodie was one of mom's prized possessions. She kept it in the top dresser drawer with the silk underthings. That can also explain a lot of what's

to come in the following pages. I lost track of my neonatal head sack when my parents died three thousand miles from my Pacific northwest home. It could have ended up in some Value Village clothing bin with the rest of Ruth Gunter's panties, but I prefer to believe it sits near the compass of an ocean liner or a freighter and is responsible for tight lines and calm seas.

## A Memory without Words



Early childhood recollections are often colored by other people's words more vivid than the memories themselves. The story of how I was known to fill the toy dump truck with fresh poop and haul the fecund load around, my two-year-old voice humming diesel engine sounds, would haunt me for years, though I have no memory of this early industrious behavior. My family would trot out this story when I

brought new dates home to meet them. I'm thankful digital social media had yet to have followed me through life like toilet paper stuck to my shoe.

My best friend in those formative years was Richie Garrity who lived two houses away from the first Gunter-owned home on Brentwood Road. A red-painted, wooden, barracks-like structure that served as a Girl Scout camp in the summer occupied the lot between us. Our rural street sported a vast swampy wetland, an ice skating wonderland in winter, and a huge forest preserve at our back. The Girl Scout camp between the Gunter and the Garrity homes was an endless source of amusement for us. Joined by my younger brother, Steve, and his friend, Ed Farrey, we salted the forest behind us with traps and snares to capture or otherwise befuddle the young scout-ettes as they ventured into Forest Park for their weeklong summer stay at camp. We never did snag a forest female with our pine needle-covered chick-pits that made foot travel through the park a hazardous mission, but we had no clue what we would do with one once she fell into our snare anyway. We captured ourselves more than once, though, so good was the camouflage. It's possible my later success as an antique restoration junkie was fomented by our early attempts to match Mother Nature with our manmade forest floor camouflage.

## First dance with a girl



Somewhere in the family photo albums there's a black and white photo of Mr. Doherty, the roving phys ed grammar school teacher, joining Cynthia Carne's hand with mine in our first grade introduction to the square dance. I sort of thought of her as my girlfriend after that forced intimacy, but back then, girls were kids who wore dresses. The first time I felt a swelling boobie against my chest was at the Y dances downtown. The TV show *Seventy-Seven Sunset Strip* introduced a generation to the "Cookie, Cookie, lend me your comb" pompadour. Slicked straight back

on the sides with a bow wave hanging precariously over the forehead, eighth graders would walk the line of seated young females. They would surround the gym floor at the walls like centipede-edge molding, legs akimbo, having not yet learned to cross them and knowing more about the laws of attraction than the herd of clueless, strutting Bobby Rydells milling about at the foul lines and center court, combing their hair and checking out their choices of dance partners. My favorite



was a swarthy Italian beauty with Annette Funicello hair and some rock-hard peaches that had developed earlier than most of her peers. My little electric meter started spinning as she pressed them against me to the twang of *Twilight Time*. The

fact no one had yet to teach her about personal hygiene didn't distract me for a minute. The heady aroma of adolescent BO was easy to ignore as we did the two steps over, one step back waltz we had all learned at Mrs. Kay's dance studio over the Kiwanis Club building behind the town library. I was still years away from knowing how to parlay these intimate contacts into anything more than an olfactory bump and run. Drive-in theaters, submarine races along the shore of horn pond, and hot tub parties on a cliff above the moonlit waters of Puget Sound were four years, six years, and twenty-six years into the future respectively.

## Losing my virginity



I lost my virginity as an artist at age six when the *Boston Globe*, Sunday Edition, published my drawing in the kids pages that accompanied the comic strips, once a week, in color. The Sunday art contest presented a squiggle of a line called a “curlicue.” The challenge was to continue that non-representational doodle into a recognizable drawing—a face, a flower, a boat on a wave swept sea. I don’t remember what my prize-winning interpretation was in those early artistic years.

Suffice to say a check for the sum of one dollar arrived in the mail, followed by the Sunday paper as an elaborate fifty-page, six-section, color-filled frame to my first professionally printed drawing, an edition maybe fifty-thousand prints strong, distributed door-to-door to the residents of greater Boston with enough good taste to prefer the *Globe* over the redneck, working-class tabloid rag called the *Herald*. My drawing was also available at a newspaper kiosk near any Catholic Church after mass and in pay-to-open vending machines across New England.

I had arrived.

That positive bump to my first grader's self-esteem never left me, though it would take another twenty years for me to duplicate that feat with a paintbrush.

Today, whenever any sprout tells me, in scary, little-kid honesty, that they're a painter or an artist or that they wrote something great, I stop everything else surrounding that moment—seal that second in amber for that child to have, still intact in their pocket, for that time in the future when they will have to reach back into his amulet bag for the courage to take a giant step into creativity.

## The poison pen



The ability to draw personalities in a caricature served me well during high school. In Woburn, a blue-collar town nestled among the blue-chip cities of Winchester, Lexington, and Concord like a whitehead on a pretty girl's chin, toughness and occasional fist fights were part of the 1960 high school experience. The DeLorenzo boys would brag about driving to Revere Beach to look for bar fights. Revere Beach, for Christ's sake—an oceanside boulevard of low-down dives like the in-

famous Squire and Arthur's Farm, where those "connected" could purchase new leather coats that "fell off the truck" at the Logan Airport cargo hangers.

In this sea of pugilists at Woburn High wearing fist-fight stitches and new leather coats, I fell upon drawing to insure my safety. Since my moment of fame on the *Boston Globe* kids pages, I found myself talented in drawing faces. By focusing on the most prominent aspect of a sitter's face, I could create a freaky likeness resting on a tiny body like the caricatures of David Levine. My weapon in the corridors of WHS was the pen. Any issues I had with my circle of thug friends was resolved with my caricatures. Imagine a drawing of a parked car at lover's lane on Horn Pond, the likeness of someone on my shit list kissing the girl of an even more dangerous associate, complete with incriminating word clouds. This is art at its most dangerous. I would walk by the cork board for announcements besides the principal's office armed with thumbtacks, and one push on the tacked drawing as I walked by and the problem was usually solved. I took no art courses in high school; didn't see the need to.

I floundered about in my junior year, no clue of or interest in my future. As long as I was on the good side of the bad guys and could go fishing for horn pout and snapping turtles with Ed Farrey and Richie Garrity in the Mishuwam Pond, life was fine. My grades were good. I played second team on the junior varsity squad and never scored a point.

## Science Rears Its Head



When a chemistry teacher named Mr. Cohen offered a Saturday chemistry class I decided to try it. The first Saturday changed my life. Mr. Cohen, a stocky, bubbly chemist willing to give up his weekends to jump start some young minds, started the class with a jar of Vaseline. “We’re going to do glass blowing today,” he announced. “You can make some of the lab equipment from these Pyrex tubes and a Bunsen burner. I’m going to show you how.” He placed the Vaseline jar on his desk. “Glass glows at 900 degrees. Please remember that at 800 degrees the glass

looks like the rest of the tube. When you accidentally touch the 800-degree glass, come get some Vaseline for your finger and consider that a college education.”

I switched from the do-nothing, expect nothing, general high school population and enrolled in college courses for my senior year, leaving my buddies to break into houses and prepare for lives of crime. Chemistry that year was hard, and I loved it.