Letter from 50: A Memoir

by James Como (October 2018)

The Walk, Marc Chagall, 1918

Very soon Alexandra and I, our marriage that is, turns fifty (along with the Big Mac). A few weeks ago, our progeny and son-in-law, with our oldest friend and two grandchildren, gave us a lovely dinner. Each toasted us, and we ate very well

indeed. Peter, the son-in-law, put our wedding film on a flash drive. Following a Marcello Mastroianni movie running on wall-size screen behind us, our daughter had the server display it. Everyone toasted, including the grandchildren. Can it get any better?

Now our plan is to cross the Atlantic on the Queen Mary 2. We luxuriate at the London Savoy Hotel for four days—Alexandra has scheduled much, including a day trip to Oxford, lunching there at the Trout with an old friend, then meeting my editor at the Bird and Baby, the Inklings' old haunt—then we're off to Edinburgh for three days at and about the Waldorf Astoria Caledonian Hotel, finally flying back to Newark Airport, where the coach turns back into a pumpkin.

At sea for seven days, there is no telling what we will do. 'Smart' dress is required every night after 6pm, and there are three gala nights. My diet has paid off so well that not only do I fit into the tux I wore at my daughter's wedding fifteen years ago but it's actually loose on me. (Bets off, though, after the cruise.) We will dine semi-privately at sea on The Day, which also happens to be a Twenties-themed gala evening. That is here and now . . .

1.

There and then, I lived with my family in the James Weldon Johnson Housing Projects in East Harlem until we moved just before my eighth birthday in December of 1954. The Projects, a set of twelve-storey brick blocks embedded in a concrete crust, were what they remain: pissholes. Literally, the stair wells and the elevators and, for some reason, by the mailboxes. I was never allowed to be alone.

If I descended to what passed for a playground on the pavement below my own Building Five, it was always in the company of my brother, Joey, four years older than I: font of knowledge, wit, adventure, every now and then some mischief,

and my protector. Once, when in kindergarten, I left the school at dismissal and in direct violation of Mother's strict order did not wait for him. A huge woman took my hand and began to drag me across Lexington Avenue—until Joey showed up screaming and kicking at her. "Let go of my little brother! Let him go!" And she did, actually fleeing across the street.

On another occasion we ventured across Third Avenue on a snowy Sunday morning to the local bakery located under the Third Avenue El (which went all the way into the Bronx, right to the nearest Alexander's department store). There in the snow was a kitten with one eye, shivering. Joey pushed through the taunting onlookers (mostly kids his age), picked up the kitten, told me to take out of our cloth shopping bag the paper bags with rolls and buns that we had just bought, and put the kitten inside the shopping bag to take home, where there was a strict No Pets policy. Father told us he wanted the cat gone "by the time I get home from work tomorrow": not only would we have the cat for years but that exact scenario would play out thirty years later between my daughter and me.

These were not routine events. A routine event was watching *Howdy Doody*, *Rootie Kazootie* and *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* (when we finally got a TV, though radio—*The Lone Ranger, Straight Arrow*, *The Shadow*, *Inner Sanctum*—endured, always listened to with Joey) and every now and then stealing some salami from the fridge in the middle of the night and eating it, he with flashlight in hand, under the covers. Father would sometimes join in, but when Mother found out she was not amused.

Father and Mother. He was a first generation Italo-American of good humor and good nature, not quite 5'9", handsome, with wavy black hair. His mother was Suzie, whose actual name was just that. She had diapered our cousin Perry Como, who few readers will remember (he is well worth a Google). A salesman by profession, Father was also an unschooled musician who could pick up any instrument he came

upon and make it obey. His favorite was a guitar, which he sometimes played while singing along or while playing a harmonica hooked to a device mounted on his shoulders. As a teenager he had won a short-story writing contest and the Golden Gloves. By our Project days he had put on considerable weight, which he blamed on the Army, claiming that he had never eaten better than during his service as a medic at a field hospital in the English Midlands during World War Two. He had eight surviving siblings, five brothers and three sisters. (One brother had died in the mid-thirties; a girl, “baby Mary,” in infancy, taken by the influenza of 1917.)

Mother was a slender first generation Russo-Polish beauty with hazel eyes (like my own), athletic and with a temper, never directed at Joey or me, though occasionally at Father. He was not exactly a spendthrift, but she was a penny pincher, and when he arrived home one day with a new catcher’s mitt that he had “found on top of a garbage can” she let him have it. When Joey was at school I would be home, napping in the afternoon on a pink chenille spread with her next to me, both of us bathed in a golden late-afternoon glow, or she swaying in a floral house dress to Artie Shaw’s “Begin the Beguine” and later bathing me, after which she would swaddle me in a huge towel and dry me as I stood on the toilet seat.

She had two older sisters, a violently alcoholic and dissolute father, and a mother who approached sainthood more closely than anyone except, perhaps, for my other grandmother. I would spend much time with my Slavic grandmother, who lived in a tenement on 127th Street, a straight bus ride from the Projects. A highlight when I visited was listening with her to her “stories,” especially *Stella Dallas*. Her name was Suzanna: Grandma Micky, from Kuzmicky. She prayed much, and I often prayed with her. From her I learned a bit of Polish, far more than any Italian I learned—or, actually, didn’t—from Father’s side of the family. In those days Mother might put me on the Lexington Avenue bus (then running uptown) to ride alone over

the fifteen blocks to Grandma Micky's, because we all knew the driver and he knew us, and he would watch out for me, delivering me into the hands of my grandmother waiting at an unscheduled stop.

Mother had undergone a small ceremony to convert to Roman Catholicism, and my brother and I received the sacraments. Pieties were respected, though I do not remember any regular church-going as a young child. But I do recall much family fun: Central Park jaunts (especially in the region of the statue of a panther, always menacing), Saturday morning hotdogs with Father and Joey, and visits to a Kiddie Park on Bruckner Boulevard in the Bronx. In short, I had a marvelous early childhood. Over-protected? Perhaps, but I was filled with well-being inside and out, which in early adulthood I would realize I had taken for granted. The lesson is simple: having known only the Projects, it never occurred to me that I wasn't in a unique personal Paradise.

2.

Never, that is, until I found myself in a better one, a pastoral world wrought by that move before my eighth birthday. Father used his G.I. Bill to buy a new house—a house standing alone! —at 15 Scooter Lane in Hicksville, on Long Island. A grassy front yard, a grassy backyard, a huge farm behind that backyard that went on as far as my eye could see. And a very big hole, like a crater, a 'sump' I was told, the mysterious purpose of which eluded me and therefore fascinated me: my imagination sometimes went wild over that hole.

Mother would plant a weeping willow in front of the house and surround it with violets, Father and a friend (a co-worker who bought a new house across the street) would build patios, Joey would join a Little League baseball team (much power, good glove at first base) and acquire his first girlfriend, Carmela Marone, and I my first friend, Jimmy Giuliano, who lived next door. Hardly any sidewalks, hardly any concrete at

all, very little traffic (you really could have napped at midday in the middle of Scooter Lane), and no big buildings. Nothing but separate houses surrounded by grass. All together a change beyond my limits of understanding.

But not the whole story. The missing piece that made this world whole was—freedom. Instead of walking to school with Joey or Mother, I rode a bus. I could roam freely, not only on the grass both in front of and behind the house but *in the street*. Joey taught me to ride a bike. (That almost ended in a messy disaster, but just before I got to the expansive and deep mud hole at the end of the lane he shouted, “peddle backwards!”) Of course, I could not cross Bloomingdale Road by myself. It was wide, two-way, and heavily trafficked, until you turned onto Scooter Lane, the mouth of which was bounded by two brick pillars, “like the Pillars of Hercules,” I would think, much later. Once past those the world changed, becoming the stereotype of a fifties small town.

The vehicular menace on Bloomingdale, though, was not the only reason for the prohibition; the other was a huge empty lot pockmarked with hundreds of small sand piles. At the front of that lot was a long, low, wide concrete building that looked like a warehouse; somehow it stood on cinderblocks, had broken windows, and was unoccupied. Across the vast expanse of the lot was a Grumman aircraft factory where many locals were employed, but that report was by word-of-mouth, from Joey who, feeling his oats, went wherever he pleased.

My world was by far cozier than his, but I invented an adventure or two. For example, outside I would peddle my wagon around my street and the one adjacent to it, copying down license plate numbers: one never knew, they might come in handy. Or I rode my bike in front of the house as though it were a Sabre jet in aerial combat with MiG 15s. I could be *alone*, an entirely new mode of being. Inside I could hear “Rock Around the Clock,” “Earth Angel” (both pivotal in pop music history), and my favorite, “The Naughty Lady of Shady

Lane," who in the last line turns out to be a nine-day old baby girl. And Joey and I could have bb gun fights in the basement (aiming from the waist down . . .).

And read comic books. We never threw them out. When visiting Grandma Micky, I would carry along a bunch, re-read them, then sell them to the stand tucked under the El staircase on 125th St. and Third Avenue—and buy some more. What matters here is that very many of these comic books pre-dated the Comics Code, which would regulate both the stories and the art. 'Lurid' would be too mild a term for many of them. We loved them. Mother did not. Soon after the move we—actually she—threw them all away: a collection that probably would be worth six figures today. But that was Mother's only mistake (though one cannot know what sort of craven pervert I might have become had I continued to read them, right? Still, the trade-off might have been worth it.)

From time-to-time Grandma Micky would visit, her room being the dormer above the garage. Except for a hatch in the back wall that opened into a crawl space that led—led where? —the room held no attraction for me. She was the attraction. How Mother had never become a good cook with a mother like hers, a mother who could make her own kielbasa and the best chicken soup in the cosmos, and slather butter on huge chunks of pumpernickel bread (something Mother would never do), is a perplexion to this day. And, oh, could she tell stories, especially a Polish version of "Hansel and Gretel," which she would repeat as often as I asked. (It was up there with Father's version of "Jack and the Beanstalk," at the end of which the giant's fall makes a hole big enough for a swimming pool, around which Jack's mother builds a motel and so they live happily ever after. You never heard that?)

Images abound. My own first Little League ball-playing, number ten starting at shortstop with the Blue Jays; missing the bus home and, when being driven by a pair of teachers, pretending that I knew left from right; the Big House, so

huge, old and rickety that I thought it would collapse when I went along with Mother to pay the mortgage (later I would learn that our house had cost $12,000); playing in a partially-constructed house, after being forbidden to do so (*uh oh* for sure); acquiring a dog ("Poochie") to go along with Abby-the-one-eyed-cat: that mutt would bite my hand hard when I reached for his rubber ball; a pet rabbit ripped to pieces when the neighbor's dog (than which only the neighbor's daughter was more vicious) got loose (as did the daughter, when she trampled our lawn); being saved by a lifeguard at Jones Beach, where we visited frequently; Joey being sent to the farm behind our house an hour before dinner to "find" lettuce . . . and so much, so much more.

But nothing more than Mother. On a small scale I was coming into my own, or so it felt, such was that relative freedom I enjoyed compared to Project life. But I could enjoy that exaltation *only* because I intuited that, at home, Mother was refuge, humor, guidance and love—unconditional, never failing. Joey was now less prominent in my landscape, and Father left early and returned just in time for dinner (his office being in Brooklyn and there not yet being a Long Island Expressway). So I spent very much time with Mother. She helped with my homework, read to me and with me, and watched TV with me after school. The best times were when it rained, and I, jumping from the school bus and splashing puddles, was swept inside the house, undressed, wrapped in a towel, served hot chocolate, and watched *The Cisco Kid* or *Hopalong Cassidy* or the 15-minute Perry Como and Kate Smith programs, always with Mother.

If I were too naïve not to know that the Projects weren't paradise, I was not so clueless as to not know that 15 Scooter Lane was the real thing. Every time I saw the weeping willow and the violets, I knew it, and the wide-open streets, and Father taking us to a carnival, where he worked a second job, or playing his guitar. (He would run a Saturday morning

ukulele club for the children on the street.) But more than anything when Mother was nearby, attentive, still singing, watching over us, absorbing me into her warm world while permitting me my own, I knew: here was *joy*. This was paradise.

3.

I vividly recall the exact moment when the headaches became unbearable, six or seven months after the move. I was at the dining room table doing some homework when I heard Mother moan. I looked to my left, and there she was, her elbows on the kitchen table, her head in her hands. “What’s the matter mommy?” Her head lifted slightly so that I could glimpse a grimace that very quickly turned into a wan grin. “Oh, just a little headache, sweetheart. I’ll take some aspirin.” I turned back to my work. That is the last visual memory I have of my mother. Within two weeks she was gone. We all got the news from Father while waiting at Grandma Micky’s. Paradise was lost.

After that was Grandma staying with us (and I, later, spending much time with her in Harlem), then a funeral Mass, at which my Father wept and the priest told us that God surely needed one more beautiful flower for His garden in Heaven. For me there was no explaining, no hospital visit, no visit to the wake: one of Father’s few mistakes, I believe. I heard a female voice say, “Jimmy’s too young to understand.” I later learned that owing to the brain surgeries Mother had undergone, the casket was closed. I did cry, but somehow I didn’t discern the permanence. Most relatives were kind and helpful. I found the priest’s platitude comforting and still do.

My mother’s oldest sister, a troubled and troubling woman, came to live with us (she and Father eventually marrying, many years later). Though she did the right and noble thing, continually, and though I loved her for that and for our shared past, she nevertheless (even in the company of

many small kindnesses) had the aspect of the Mean Stepmother to me, though never to Joey, whom she had helped raise while Father was in the Army.

With the help of neighbors, especially Freda, the mother of that monstrous little girl, we hung on in Hicksville for several months. One chill dusk, after all the other kids had gone in for their supper, I stayed outside digging in some dirt at curbside with a popsicle stick. I had no good reason to go home. It became too much. Father sold the house and we moved to Astoria, in Queens, to be near my Italian family. It would be a while before I realized how full this valiant man’s hands had been and that withal he never—and I mean ever—let me down.

Every terrible event in any life has a fuse, some shorter—in fact, much shorter—than others. Overnight (close to literally) Joey turned into Mr. Hyde, though unlike that monster my brother became self-destructive. Not until late middle age and early old age (after a long estrangement from each other) did he recover his best self. Along the way we had some fun—playing ball, going to the movies—though there was much violence, too. Withal, he always had my back. We never stopped loving each other, never stopped understanding the invisible tether that bound us. When he succumbed to lung cancer at the age of seventy-three I was bereft, and I miss him.

Mother’s death numbed me. Then, for a spell, I became fearful (for example *en route* to and from school, or on the subway). I actually thought that my aunt would kill me. I would have crying fits out of the blue—right there in music class, so mournful that even the most insouciant students expressed their sympathy and asked what ailed me. Father took me to a local doctor. How small, trivial, things can help: I found real comfort in the cleverness and congenial humor of *The Phil Silvers Show*—Sergeant Bilko! The one thing I could not abide was pity, which to me seemed like a judgment against

Mother. Eventually I had my first street fight, learning that I had a pretty good straight right hand; and once, when Paul Vitek made a snide joke about me having nothing to do on Mother's Day, I decked him, but not only decked him; I continued to bang his head against the concrete. My most pusillanimous friend pulled me off. Other fights would follow.

The literature of childhood bereavement, owing especially to early parental loss, is both considerable and uniform. In the pre-adolescent, mourning is delayed, as is the formation of identity: development is often fixed at the stage during which the loss occurred. Shame, guilt and, eventually, some sort of conversion may follow. Almost certainly the child is embarrassed by expressions of pity and becomes intolerant of pain and sadness in himself and others. As I look back at this period of my life, I see, so clearly, that I was, if not the poster boy for childhood bereavement then certainly a simulacrum. I do recall that I became over-scrupulous (but not judgmental of others) in word and deed, not at all affectedly but sincerely. I became something of a spectator, a sort of student of life around me, as though there were something to be figured out that everyone else already knew.

Of course, I realize that the violence that had irrupted from Joey was in me, too: spokes on the same wheel. What rescued me from the abysm was playing baseball (from stoop ball to stick ball to baseball) and watching it (in 1961 Mantle and Maris worked a greater miracle than merely hitting a monumental number of homeruns), school (!), Joey's negative example (I could not go where he had gone, causing Father such misery: once again my big brother, though unknowingly and ironically, had had my back), and Father. Good, abiding friendships, too, but they would come later.

And accordion lessons: eventually Father and I would play music together. He would die at age fifty-four in 1974, so altering my interior landscape that every aspect of my outer life—for example, my teaching, that he had nothing to do

with—changed, and not for the better. I had been in Oxford on sabbatical with my wife and son. What I recall vividly is the unresponsiveness of most colleagues when I returned for the funeral and stopped at the college for some paperwork. There was (with three exceptions) not a word of condolence, notwithstanding that the news had spread. Another fuse, a different sort of explosion. I dreamt of him in many permutations, recording one hundred. Then I stopped, and so did the dreams.

So here this story might end. More anecdotes and insights could make for a coming-of-age memoir, but writing that would be of little interest to me. Even though for about three months (as I read and re-read *An American Tragedy*) I thought I was Clyde Griffiths, I really was no Huck, or Holden, or David Copperfield. Writing this much, as compactly and as unsentimentally as I am able, reminds me that when human nature does not fulfill its ordained patterns there is a price. Along the pot-holed, tortuous road that is most lives, I know that Mother should *not* have gone "so young, so lovely and loving," as Joey would say, so horrifically and sadly, so unnaturally and with no good reason, and with no goodbye: what greater pain that must have brought her.

4.

What is it about *50*?

When I turned forty, Alexandra sprung upon me a surprise party to end all surprises. Of course, another would be impossible, until I turned fifty. (Even our dear mailman was in on the conspiracy.) We arrived at the home of dear friends, and there, beyond the open door, were folk who should *not* have been in the same place at the same time. The merry-making, like Alexandra, was a wonder. Last year I finished fifty years of college professing, forty-nine of those at York, a senior college of the City University of New York; then I retired. Next year I and a number of friends and associates will mark

the fiftieth anniversary of the New York C. S. Lewis Society, which I and an additional baker's dozen helped found in 1969. It is the first, and remains the largest, of such societies, and we have made our mark. It is a source of pride; none of us is retiring.

Of course these—a career and the founding of a landmark group—are sideshows to the center ring, the fiftieth anniversary that matters most. It never occurred to me that paradise could ever be regained. Providentially—and that I do mean literally—the process would begin with an event, on January 2nd, 1965, when (during an Artic snow storm) I went on a blind date. In college I did office work part-time. I was congenial but not quite as congenial as I seemed to my co-worker, Stella, who spoke only Spanish and therefore thought me, the only other Spanish-speaker, the kindest person in New York.

She has this roommate, I demurred, she showed me a photo . . . Alexandra and I were married on August 31, 1968, in the Church of Our Saviour on Park Avenue, where thirty-five years later I would give my daughter away. Here there are stories within stories—for example, about that first date, or me shaking until my best man, Joey of course, put his arm around my shoulder at the altar, tight, and said, "you're not going anywhere," and then becoming blissfully calm when I saw her, a vision at the top of the aisle (or me, decades later, actually thinking, halfway down the aisle as my daughter and I approached Peter, that I could just turn around and walk her out, because I did *not* want to "give her away," no matter how good a man Peter is). As it happened, that good wife, who could make a home anywhere, of anything, would give me our two children, James Emil (the man I'd want in my foxhole) and Helen Alexandra. (You could drop a straight plumb line of character, intellect, and temperament from my mother-in-law, to my wife, to our daughter, and then to Scarlett, her daughter. (I hope I'm around to meet the man who woos her.)

That little girl and her older brother, Luke, have turned me into a grandparental cliché.

We note that people seem generally impressed by this number, 50, which, from the outside, these days, seems a strange improbability: nearly an entire adult lifetime? Some even ask, How, or even more strangely, Why? —a very big change from my growing-up days from the late Forties to the early Sixties. And, maybe, *that* is what it is about '50'. Longevity—I mean of commitment, not of mere presence—now seems not only rare, frankly, but more than half nuts to some people: less an achievement than sheer obstinacy.

Well, of course. Does anyone believe a work-in-progress is always smooth sailing? Sometimes you tie yourself to the mast as the sirens sing, or do battle against Scylla and Charybdis. Or do you suppose marriage is a five-star hotel in Wonderland with all wrinkles ironed out by the good housekeeping fairy godmother? Rather, it often is what Samuel Johnson taught us it can be, the grit in the oyster: "concordia discors, that suitable disagreement which is always necessary to intellectual harmony . . . sometimes condensing the gloom it was intended to dispel."

And, of course, the more complex the spouse the greater the challenge. I will not fully describe Alexandra, a Franco-Peruvian beauty still with an hourglass figure, except to note that she combines at least four famous women (whom some readers should google): Hedy Lamarr and Margaret Dumont along one axis, on the other Gracie Allen and Madame Curie. There are a bunch of others in the mix, too. (Think of a sort of muted Sybil.) So, you see, *baked into* a prudent decision to marry must be *permanenc*e. And at the end of the day, it is, as Dr. Johnson taught, "the strictest type of perpetual friendship." To apply a useful distinction from C. S. Lewis, her Gift-Love (unlike my Need-Love) is continuous: she cares for me body and soul, always.

When they hear of our anniversary, many young people, women in particular, being touched and, frankly, incredulous, congratulate us. I know how they feel. I feel the same when I meet couples who have been married sixty years and more. Which moves my perspective from the outside to the inside, revealing a view that does not seem strange at all. Ten years ago a student in my public speaking course asked if she could run by me a central idea for a speech. It was, “a long happy marriage requires love, respect, trust, and communication.” I said, “well, three out of four is pretty good.” And she asked, “really? Which doesn’t matter?” And I said, “why, communication, of course. I haven’t understood my wife the first *or* the second time around since we’ve known each other” (hypberbole is often useful). The young woman said she couldn’t believe it. “Professor, you *teach* communication!” To which I asked, “haven’t you ever heard the one about the shoemaker’s shoes?” The upside: Alexandra never bores me.

Is there, though, some secret sauce? When asked that I sometimes answer, one-third jokingly, “yes, separate bathrooms.” The actual answer, in our case, is a shared religious faith. On that blind date nearly fifty-three years ago I mentioned that I preferred an early night. “Why?” she asked. “Because I prefer an early Mass.” She asked, “oh, your parents make you go to church?” And I thought, a bit nonplussed: *my parents*? “No,” I answered. “I go alone.” Later I learned how deeply this impressed her, it not being the fashion in Peru for young single men to go to Mass at all.

By the way, when I arrived home that night Father was up, waiting, curious, since I didn’t date. In my version he kept me up for an hour; in his, I wouldn’t let him go to sleep, such was my blabbing. He later would claim that he knew then I would marry this girl. “How could you *possibly* have known that?” I asked. “Because,” he said, “when you insisted for the third time that you wouldn’t, I figured it out.”

Father was always quick. I, on the other hand, am not.

For the past several years I've been trying to figure out Mother, Father, Joey, my grandparents, my stepmothering aunt, the past and my memories of it, and myself (though not Alexandra, for that way lies madness). Withal, the lesson is both simple and—depending as much on will as on emotion—unsentimental. Abiding love, heavily seasoned with *agape*, is always in the present tense, and that coach never turns into a pumpkin.

. . . thank you, Mother.

James Como is the author, most recently, of