

*Excerpt from Rebel: My Life Outside the Lines by Nick Nolte*

CHAPTER 1

*The Crack-Up*

HIS LIFE'S PURPOSE, he was sure, was to become an actor. It was something he wanted more than anything else, and I thought it was cool that my good friend Chuck Freeman's parents supported his artistic passion and determination, or at least they did up to a point. Their family was extremely wealthy, and his folks had given him two years after graduating from high school to go to Hollywood and make it as an actor, after which time they would summon him home to Omaha to take his place in the family business.

I admired Chuck's vision and his steadfast belief in himself. His imagination and creativity really connected us and we did our best to outdo each other with outlandish pranks. I had inherited my mother's nonconformity and propensity for imaginative living. Schools, churches, institutions of every kind were bullshit as far as she was concerned—and she taught me well, concerned that school might otherwise turn me into a robot.

I knew I didn't want anyone telling me what I was going to be, and I craved every kind of experience I could get. Yet, unlike Chuck, I didn't envision myself as an actor—or anything else but an athlete. As far as the future was concerned, I felt destiny would take hold, so in the meanwhile I would concentrate on fishing and football and good-looking girls.

It was 1962, and I'd made my way to Los Angeles and Pasadena City College, playing football in my third junior college in as many years because coaches were delighted when an athlete of my caliber walked on. But I didn't last at any of the colleges because I never intended to go to class—and never did.

It was great to reconnect again with Chuck, my fellow high-school athlete and partner in crime. But his two-year acting apprenticeship was about to come to a close and he soon proved good to his word and returned home to Nebraska. I hated to see him go, but I liked southern California and sure as hell wasn't heading back to the Midwest any time soon, and one day our mutual friend Tom Connelly, who was

an actor at the Pasadena Playhouse, suggested that I come watch a play in which he was appearing.

I agreed to go. The play was okay and Tom did a fine job, I thought, but I didn't really think about acting again until a few weeks later, when Tom asked me to join him for an acting class led by Bryan O'Byrne, who had been a successful character actor for many years and who now coached a number of studio-approved young talents. Tom was being considered for a major role in a new television series based on the steamy novel *Peyton Place*, and he hoped his work with Bryan would help him get it.

Bryan lived near the top of Laurel Canyon, and on the day he ushered us into his house, Tom turned out to be his only student that day. I was welcome to stay for the session, Bryan told me, but when Tom told him I just wanted to observe, Bryan wouldn't have it. Only participants were allowed at his sessions, he informed us, and if I wanted to stay, I'd need to read for him, too. I wasn't really comfortable with the notion, but neither did I want to cause Tom problems, so I reluctantly agreed.

Inside Bryan's house, I simply observed as he worked with Tom for a while, the two of them discussing the family life of the character he was reading, imagining where he would have grown up and what his relationship with his brother would have been like, and I had never considered before that an actor had to know more, imagine more than simply the words the playwright had given him to speak.

When they took a break, Bryan offered me something to read and I studied a bit before we reconvened. I can't remember what it was except that it was some famous soliloquy that young male actors cut their teeth on in those days, and when I started to read I was nervous as hell and I knew this was not going to be my ball of wax. If I'd been trying out a new sport or meeting a girl or something, I would have been fine, but this was scary stuff—simply reading lines from a play in front of Tom and his acting coach. But then I thought, fuck it, I can read this thing, and I did and there was silence after I finished before Bryan finally said, “Well, that was good, Nick.”

He motioned for me to follow him, and out of earshot of Tom he added, “You don't know it yet, but you're an actor, Nick. When you realize you are, if you do, I'll be happy to work with you, or you can go to classes or do whatever you choose. But you've got this gift, this thing, that someone either has or he doesn't. You've got it.”

I was still sure I had some football in me, too. I continued to define myself—to the small degree I gave the subject any real thought—as an athlete, and Bryan's encouragement was interesting, yes, but I didn't make too much of it that afternoon. Besides, I had a good job at the moment.

Jim Nelson, who was a fullback at PCC, was a young guy with a persuasive personality and quick wit, and he had enthusiastically informed me that the local ironworker's union was hiring. There was lots of work to be had, he said, because the

city of Los Angeles was installing storm drains throughout the city, and big, strong kids like us could quickly learn to haul pipe and hand rebar to the fellows who tied it. It would be hard but satisfying, and the best part, Jim contended, was that we could work for three months at fourteen dollars an hour—a fortune in those days—then draw unemployment and find other adventures for the rest of the year.

President Kennedy was still in the White House and that storied decade had really begun to rev up. The established order of things was teetering and verging toward its collapse, and you could feel the terrible stranglehold on every truly interesting pursuit—the demand for conformity that had driven me mad in my early years in Iowa and Nebraska—beginning to loosen. Change was in the air, but none of us had a clue where we or the times were going. All that was clear to me was having a bit of money in my pocket and a few good fellows to travel with from one bar to the next seemed to be enough. Yet as my interests began to widen, I started to wonder whether I'd made a few wrong decisions along the way.

Jim was always entertaining, to say the least, and the leader of the team of guys we worked with was an H.L. Mencken-aficionado named Conrad Monte, a cynical son of a bitch who hated everyone and everything and was always eager to tell anyone who would listen why. I didn't like Conrad, but it seemed as I listened to him all day and long into most of our boozy nights that he had read every book ever written. And it was Conrad who unknowingly spurred my desire to begin educating myself a bit

about why the world wags and who wags it, and, like he did, I began to spend lots of my free time in bookstores—very much a new pastime for me.

It was in a Hollywood bookstore, too, where I smoked my first joint. I knew the store's owner from Barney's Beanery, a ramshackle Santa Monica Boulevard restaurant that had been drawing high- and low-life clientele for several decades already. The bookstore was nearby and all of us who frequented Barney's acted as if were fast-friends, and the bookstore owner, whose name I can't remember, invited me into his stockroom, where he casually lit up.

A few puffs later, I knew weed and I were going to go steady for a while. I felt both calmer and clearer headed and began to think about things in truly intriguing ways. I noticed that I wasn't anxious when I was stoned and was at ease with myself—at peace with the person who otherwise made me so uncomfortable—in ways I never otherwise was, except perhaps on the football field.

I liked the ways in which marijuana could make the mundane truly interesting, the way it encouraged my already fertile imagination, and I remember going back to the bookstore a day or two later and buying a whole ounce of pot from the store's proprietor. I took it home, locked myself in my bedroom, and stayed stoned for most of a week, getting to know myself in entirely new ways and pondering just whom this Nicholas King Nolte might be.

I didn't have any answers yet, but I was getting better at framing the questions. I liked the hard work of punking steel—a chore that involved lugging giant pipes from trucks to huge holes in the ground. I liked having some money to spend on each evening's entertainment, and I liked Barney's and the carnival of people it attracted. The story was that Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Rita Hayworth, Judy Garland, and many others all had been regulars at Barney's in their day. I didn't know about that, but an array of characters was always in-house in the early 1960s, including art-world up-and-comers like painter Ed Ruscha, photographer-painter-and-actor Dennis Hopper, a character actor and truly epic drinker named Lawrence Tierney, and the always gregarious but deeply troubled figurative painter John Altoon.

The son of Armenian immigrants, Altoon had been born in Los Angeles and was immensely talented, and many people in the southern California art world predicted he would have an extraordinary career by the time his days were done. But he was also beset by demons that presented as deep depression and schizophrenia, and we all sadly knew, too, that John had a wretched tendency to destroy many of his finest pieces.

He was also a man with a storied libido—a trait I had all-too-personal experience with one day when, in the process of having his hungry way with my roommate Joanne in the bathroom of the Laurel Canyon house I had begun to share with her and her sister Jan, one of his particularly insistent thrusts tore the sink on

which Joanne was perched from the wall, ruptured the plumbing, and sent water streaming throughout the house, and I was the dumb kid who was tasked with putting the place back together.

I had met Joanne and Jan at Barney's some months before. They both were still in their thirties but they were already legends of sorts. Together, the two seemed to generate a bright light, a kind of aura that all sorts of people were drawn toward. They took a quick look at me and called me "Younger Brother", a role I took on with both eagerness and some real success, and crashing at their bungalow in lower Laurel Canyon was wonderful—until somehow it wasn't any more.

Although I was never invited to sleep with either of them, both gals were very liberal with their romantic alliances, and in addition to Altoon's regular visits, Tierney actually lived at the house for a while as well, and lots of characters called the place a kind of second home. Joanne and Monte Budwig, the bass player at a Hollywood jazz club called Shelly's Manhole, were a semi-regular item, and all kinds of musicians, artists, and party people rolled in and out of our pad at all hours.

The job of deciding who was welcome and who had to be shown the door belonged only to Joanne and Jan, and I became their unofficial bouncer, sending dozens of wannabes and trouble-makers back down to the city. Over the course of my months at the house, every time either gal said a quick word or simply signaled to me with their eyes-- that son of a bitch was toast.

One of the perks of my position was that people who visited the house were always eager to stay on my good side, and the revelers were quick to offer me every mood-altering tablet or pill I could imagine. Upper, downers, twice-arounders, Joanne would inspect them all and inform me which I could keep and which required a pilot far more experienced than me.

The sisters' house was always happening; one night a trio of musicians so stoned they couldn't talk would play jump blues for hours on end; then the next evening the gals would host an impromptu art show. You never knew what the evening would hold except that it wouldn't be conventional and that everyone would be partying hard.

It was the coolest scene I'd ever been part of, that was sure, and Joanne in particular was a fascinatingly liberated woman—someone living far before her time, in many ways—and I loved her energy and her dedication to saying an enthusiastic yes to just about any proposal that sounded intriguing, if not downright fantastic.

I was barely twenty-one and strong as an ox, and I'd already become very well-acquainted with alcohol before my arrival in Southern California. I loved adding other kinds of inebriates to my recreational repertoire and exploring where it would take me, but even I struggled to hold my own with the incessant, over-the-top kinds of insanity that were standard fare at Jan and Joanne's, and I knew my tenure there likely would be brief.

It was at about that time when a Rolls Royce slowed to a stop one day as my buddies and I were punking steel at the intersection of Beverly Glen and Sunset Boulevard. A well-dressed but chubby man who didn't have much of a chin rolled down the car's window, caught my attention and asked if I was an actor. I told him I was not, and that seemed to be the answer he hoped for.

If I wanted to be one, he informed me, he could help, promising to put me in the movies because he was a Hollywood agent. What he didn't explain was that his name was Henry Willson, or that he had paved the way for Robert Mosely to become Guy Madison, for Arthur Gelien to morph into Tab Hunter, or that he, too, was responsible for turning an awkward Chicago-born truck driver named Roy Scherer into Rock Hudson.

Bryan O'Byrne's recent revelation to me that I had what it took to be an actor still was simply that—a bit of encouragement I couldn't turn into either cash or a career—but neither did the idea seem like a terrible one. So, when Willson continued his introduction by handing me his card with his home address scribbled on the back and inviting me to come to dinner that night to discuss possibilities for stardom, I couldn't refuse.

Willson himself answered the door at his Bel Air home a few hours later and only the two of us had drinks and dinner and yes, he was absolutely certain that I could be a big star—if it was something I truly wanted. When I agreed that the

prospect intrigued me, he excused himself for a moment and returned wearing only a silk dressing gown. “Hi, Snugglebunny!” he said. It was all suddenly clear and finally I understood. A feeling of deep unease shot through me from head to toe; I awkwardly excused myself and was quickly out the door, thinking that Hollywood could wait if that was the way a guy got himself into the movies.

It wasn’t until much later that I learned that most of the would-be actors Willson represented were homosexual, bisexual, or simply cooperative with him in order to get gigs, and that if a young and handsome actor had Henry Willson for an agent, virtually everyone in town assumed he was gay. My early departure from his home that evening ensured, of course, that Willson would not become my agent and that my movie-star days were a long way away—if they were ever to come.

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Bryan O’Byrne, it was clear, had no interest whatsoever in creating a similar kind of apprenticeship with me. Bryan was a fine man, I soon came to understand, and he was a good acting coach and his appraisal of my latent talent had been an honest one.

I thought about it regularly as life at Jan and Joanne’s continued to be unpredictable at best, and often so destructive of everyone who frequented their home that it felt like the place might simply explode. Joanne struggled with deep depression, something I could recognize because I was no stranger to that paralyzing

fog in which every element of your being grows numb and afraid and crushingly inarticulate.

Some mornings the house would be such a godawful mess following a particularly bacchanalian night that Joanne would tell me she wanted nothing more than to die, and she meant it, I know. But for some reason, as long as I simply quietly chatted with her as she sat in a kitchen chair and watched me dive into a mountain of dishes, her deep anguish would finally subside and she could imagine living a day or two longer.

One day soon after she had discovered she was pregnant—and did not want to be—she sent me to the Laurel Canyon store where someone would be waiting, she explained, to give me some special sugar-cubes he had prescribed for her. I did as she requested, then discovered that each one contained a heavy hit of LSD. Joanne planned to consume so much of the drug that she would miscarry, she said. She told me explicitly that I was not to touch or taste the sugar cubes and I trusted her and left them be.

I don't think the LSD had its desired effect on Joanne, in the end, but the memory persists because I was tied up in knots about whether something terrible might happen to her. Anxiety lurked inside me like a latent virus, and almost every day my lifelong fears threatened to turn me into pulp. There had been ample early

evidence in the twenty-one years that led up to now that I was in for a bumpy ride, and so it now was proving to be.

I was in danger of leaving my third junior college in as many years, and my one true passion in athletics was fizzling out. Football had beautifully fed my adrenaline addiction. My adolescent habit of being so jacked up during a game that I would either foam at the mouth or sob uncontrollably continued. My old identity was tightly tethered to the gridiron, and the possibility that football was about to be absent from my life forever was one I hadn't begun to consider until now. And when I was allowed myself to truly consider it, I was deeply unnerved.

What I did in response to the fear was to continue to party at a level which might have killed otherwise healthy horses. Barney Anthony, the owner of Barney's Beanery, literally lifted me out of Santa Monica Boulevard in front of the restaurant on more than a few occasions when I had passed out and was in danger of being run over. I had a bizarre tendency to head-butt parked cars—and this is true—perhaps simply because they were temporarily immovable objects and far bigger than me. Yet I wasn't one of those kids who is compelled to pick fights, I'm happy to report, and something in me recognized that I needed Bryan O'Byrne's concern and counsel in ways that I didn't yet recognize. I needed to get a clearer view of how to begin making a life for myself, but all I really knew was that I was at a loss for how to proceed.

I began to spend lots of time with Bryan, and, thank God, he continued to see an actor somewhere deep inside the man I was struggling to become, and he attempted to get me to focus on acting as a method of simply studying the human soul. “Where did that thought come from,” he would ask of the character I was reading. “Why does he feel the way he does?”

Bryan’s own acting philosophy centered on scene study and repetition in the manner of the legendary Sanford Meisner, who taught aspiring actors about the essential “reality of doing.” Both Meisner and Bryan believed that acting, like prayer, bores your ego into complacency, a trick that lowers an actor’s guard and enables him to bare himself in front of an audience—or the whole of the universe. This, I learned, is why the most vulnerable among us often make the finest actors, and it is also why saints get mistaken for fools. Humility doesn’t guarantee success or revelation, but it makes each of them possible, which otherwise they simply never are.

With repetition and the conquering of ego, Bryan was convinced, an actor can become open to pain, humiliation, and degradation—all risks that you must open yourself to in the performing arts. I remember loving the idea that actors—and everyone—can learn how to construct a selfless grace in the face of the daily grind. But for the moment at least, as a washed-up football player, uninspired ironworker, and an already-well-on-his-way young addict, I simply could not.

I began spending as much time in Bryan's orbit as I could, often spending nights on his couch at the top of the canyon instead of farther down the hill among the wild revelries at Jan and Joanne's. Then, one day Bryan offered me a bed and I gratefully said yes, knowing that I was very rapidly unraveling, careening toward a date with humble pie or death. I didn't know it at the time, but my manic energy for adventure, mixed with that life-destroying anxiety whose needle was always pushed way past eleven, had pushed me to the edge. I'd made the young man's mistake of challenging the darkness, and now each day inevitably presented one or a half-dozen negative epiphanies.

It was curious, as I think back on it, that although self-exploration became my utter obsession amid that existential crisis, my acting studies with Bryan apparently didn't have anything to do with actually performing or forging a career-path. All I needed—and now wanted—was to feel each feeling, and experience every emotion. Contradictory thoughts no longer felt like character flaws; instead they were doors to a series of different rooms in my head, and I wanted to visit them all. Every bit of make-believe, every role I took on in Bryan's book-cluttered living room, seemed to offer me a chance to be reborn, although on far-too-many days I was quite literally on the cusp of death.

Then, once more Bryan came to my rescue, although all that he actually did was to recognize how close to its end my young life had traveled and he call my parents, who were living in Phoenix.

“He’s going to fall completely apart if he stays here,” Bryan explained. “You need to get him to a calm place.” Their only son was cracking up—that’s what Bryan conveyed—and they took the telephone call for the weighty notice it was because my dad showed up in just a day or two, tossed me and a few possessions in his car, and drove us back to Phoenix. I don’t remember him saying a single word as his sedan rolled across the desert, and it would be a long and consequential decade before I danced with Los Angeles again.

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The silence that had consumed the car didn’t turn into labored conversation when we reached my parents’ house in Arizona. My mother didn’t want explanations any more than my father had, and my maternal grandmother, who had begun to live with them, was simply happy to see me and told me what a good-looking boy I’d become. But I didn’t look good; I was little more than a remnant of the confident young man I’d been the last time she had seen me, and I escaped into a bedroom my mother had prepared for me and closed the door, presuming I’d be in solitary residence there for a long while.

My memories of that time remain surprisingly vivid, perhaps because it there has been no other stretch like it in my life, and perhaps, too, I simply carry that feeling and its memories with me. I remember the fear-fueled anxiety that whirled on a debilitating loop inside my brain. The panic would come slithering under the bedroom door like a vaporous swarm, taking my breath away as it consumed me and strapping me to the bed as if I were tied to it with ropes.

When I tried to escape by burying myself beneath the sheets, suffocating hallucinations overtook me, including a recurrent one that virtually convinced me I was drowning in a sea of shit. The cesspool in which I struggled to survive smelled so awful that it induced projectile vomiting that was as real—or perhaps a bit more so—than the sewage itself. It was harrowing, and it was grisly, and only occasionally would I get a few minutes of relief before I grew panicked once more by the certainty that I would drown, and I had to accept the awful fate that I would die in shit. My efforts to hog-tie my fear, to wrestle it and control it and will it away always backfired. I could control absolutely nothing, and when I tried I'd simply find myself flushed down that hellish toilet all over again.

My room became a cell of sorts. I held the key and no one confined me to the cell except me, yet I virtually never left. My mother would leave food-trays outside the door that sometimes I nibbled from, sometimes not, and it was only in the middle of the night that I could briefly screw up my courage and grant myself permission to

leave, creeping down the hall to the kitchen in search of milk or a glass of juice. On occasion, I'd find my senile grandmother, who my mother described as "charmingly vague", in the kitchen, awake and in a rush to begin her day. She would call me Matthew, which had been her husband's name, and for her sake I would take on my grandfather's countenance and demeanor as best I could. She was always worried that she was late for work, but I would gently take her by the hand and suggest that her alarm must have rung too early. I'd escort her back to her room and help her settle into bed again, and it was strangely soothing to me to pretend to be someone I was not.

Almost a lifetime later, I recognize that often the best remedy for my own problems is to offer someone else a helping hand. I haven't always remembered this trick, but it was the one way in which I successfully connected with another human being for the many months in which I lived in that self-selected exile.

In time, I began to jot down my thoughts and experiences, making a record of the depths in which I found myself and writing out a tortured self-appraisal or two. "I'm a petty lunkhead, unskilled, and socially awkward," I scribbled. This was true, and something of a breakthrough, although it certainly didn't feel like it at the moment I wrote the words. I read, then re-read, the bundle of acting books and plays I had purchased a few months before at the Samuel French bookstore on Sunset or had "borrowed" from Bryan.

I devoured Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, wonderful stories and plays by Anton Chekhov, and, almost as if it were meant to become my Bible—which it did in many ways—Konstantin Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares*, a monumental autobiographical work that's the diary of a fictional student named Kostya during his first year of training in Stanislavsky's hugely renowned “method” acting system, a means both of mastering the craft of acting and of stimulating an actor's individual imagination and creativity.

I know I was at least vaguely aware that Stanislavsky's ideas had initiated a revolution in the theatre and the ways in which actors approached their roles, but what mattered most among my budding epiphanies in that Phoenix bedroom was the notion—not unique to Stanislavsky—that we're all actors, onstage or off, a simple idea that slowly began to quiet my self-loathing.

All the while, of course, my parents were scared to death, yet they never showed it, offering me comfort and privacy throughout my ordeal as they held their counsel and simply hoped for the best, I presume. I might have had a very different kind of experience once I was living at home with them again.

Electric-shock therapy was very much in vogue in that era, considered a cure-all by many psychiatrists, psychologists, and general practitioners and prescribed for non-ailments like homosexuality and hyperactivity and often wrecking otherwise promising lives. Had my mom and dad taken me to doctor, who knows what he might have

prescribed or whether I might have been brain-shocked or even lobotomized as a way to make me “normal” again?

I was lucky in the first place because “normal” was a word my parents never had been likely to apply to me, whether I was in the midst of a crack-up or not. They treated me with truly remarkable acceptance, then patience, and over the course of my many months in their house, I rewarded them with dramatic ingratitude, I’m sorry to confess. Over time, I did begin to grow a bit calmer and less terrified of the dreams I somehow knew were simply my own creation, yet the only real result of that minor improvement was a willingness to venture outside my bedroom a bit more and wander around the house in the wee hours of the morning.

On one foray out into the darkened house, I came across a reel to reel tape recorder and moved it to my room, sure that it was exactly what I needed. I began to record hours of monologue focused on my growing up in Iowa and Nebraska. For hours on end, I raged about every conceivable slight or wound I had received from birth till graduation from high school, and I levied the worst of the blame for my problems on Mom and Dad. They were responsible, I tearfully told the tape recorder, for stunting my growth, inflicting terrible emotional damage, and boxing me in so thoroughly that I had no notion of how to interact with the world I encountered. They were the reason my childhood had been so traumatic; they were culpable for

sending me off to college woefully unprepared; they were wholly responsible for my crack-up.

As I held the machine's little microphone close to my lips and spewed out my pent-up fury, I imagined playing the tape for them and watching as they uneasily squirmed. They would finally have to confront their failings as parents—and never mind that none of what I ranted about was true.

## CHAPTER 2

*Corn-Fed*

HIS NAME WAS Franklin Arthur Nolte, but because of his height, everyone who knew my dad called him Lank. He was a farmer's son who almost dropped out of high school, then lettered in football three years in row at Iowa State beginning in 1929. He was six-feet, six-inches tall and weighed 260 pounds or so when he played ball—at a time when men in America just didn't get that big. People called his brothers Poob and Beaner and they were gigantic, too, and the Nolte brothers were known for their gentle spirits as much as for their size.

Yet Dad didn't seem easy-going so much as simply a shell of a man the first time I remember meeting him. My older sister Nancy and I knew someone special was about to arrive, and our house in Ames, Iowa buzzed with anticipation that day. Our mother was all dressed up and everyone in our extended family waited eagerly in the living room. But when the front door opened and the man I was told was my father entered, he seemed to me to be something of a walking skeleton.

He had spent the past four years fighting the Japanese in the South Pacific, but the terror of war and the relentlessness of malaria had reduced him to little more than a sack of bones. He had lost at least a hundred pounds since he had said goodbye to us, my mother later explained, and although she didn't tell us much more, she did want us to know that now he was quite different from the robust, confident, and very handsome guy who had kissed us all goodbye those several years before.

The war took a great toll on my dad, but I couldn't understand what exactly he had lost during the months he spent in bed, and Nancy and I would sneak into his bedroom as he napped, staring at him and trying to make what we could of this man we were told we now should love. I wouldn't understand until much later that damaged soldiers like my dad had kept our country from falling to tyranny, yes, but their sacrifices had deeply affected American culture as well in the late 1940s and 1950s.

They had witnessed in profoundly personal ways the horror of what humankind was capable of and it scared the hell of them. They lost faith in the basic decency of people, so they clung to rules and conformity as the best ways to survive—something they had learned well as soldiers. I observed this pervasive need for structure and orthodoxy in my dad, coaches, and authorities of every kind while I was growing up. They were men who had grown desperate to repress their emotions, and they became callous, uncommunicative, and rigid. The suffocating tone of 1950s America was something for which they were in large part responsible—but for which it was very difficult to fault them. Dad wanted no more fighting. He wanted quiet and he wanted peace, and when I looked at him I knew I never wanted to be in a war.

My father had graduated from Iowa State University with a degree as an engineer. He was enough of an athlete, too, that he might well have been able to play professional football, but the war had interrupted his life—and our lives with his—in very dramatic ways. He and my mother had met, courted, married, and made babies by creating a dynamic early bond that was fueled by energy and passion, but the war sapped my father's zest for seizing the most for his life, and he chose to spend his entire, post-war career traveling the Midwest selling big irrigation pumps for a company called Fairbanks Morris.

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If the war muted Dad's spirit, it emboldened my mother's. Like many wives left at home in 1942, she had gone to work while her husband fought overseas, and she had absolutely no interest in returning to homemaking when the war finally ended. She was genuinely glad to have her husband home, we knew, yet her anger lingered a long time over his decision to leave the military.

Officer's wives had a degree of freedom that was rare for conventional housewives in those days, and she was eager for as much liberty as she could carve out of her life. Yet Dad did not want the constant mobility that staying in the service would have demanded, and he had lost whatever career drive he once had had—something with which Mom's ambition was in a constant state of tension over the years.

Helen King Nolte also had a problematic relationship with her parents and her sister. My grandparents were engineering professors at Iowa State, and Mom's older sister Harriet, with whom she remained competitive throughout her life, taught at the University of Oregon. Because she had grown up surrounded by educators, and because her competitive streak was an essential element of who she was, Mom developed a rebellious disregard for teachers at every level of education. They were people who couldn't make it in the real world, she insisted, and she made certain to hammer into the heads of both Nancy and me her staunch belief that imagination

could teach you far more than you could learn in any classroom. Imagination was the only crop worth cultivating, she was sure.

Despite her lifelong contempt for what Midwesterners labeled “book learning,” my mother earned a degree from Iowa State before heading to Chicago in her twenties. She had striking blonde hair and the kind of face and figure that labeled her a “knockout,” and she worked as a model in newspaper print ads before she took a job at the city’s renowned department store, Marshall Fields, developing an interest in retail fashion that would grow into a long career that she loved. While there she was asked out by a member of the Capone family. Luckily, my father found out and drove to Chicago to propose.

My mother had an eye for clothes and, without spending a lot of money, it was easy for her to create the sophisticated look that was enormously popular in the late forties. Dressing well was a kind of creativity, she understood, and she applied the same sense of good contemporary design when it came to furnishing our home. She expertly upholstered virtually all our furniture, and was a fine tailor, too, and I grew up knowing how to use a needle and thread and was very handy with a sewing machine. From her, I developed an interest in making my own clothes, and although it was difficult to find a way to stand out in that cookie-cutter era, in high school I managed to do so by wearing my own custom-made shirts that featured sleeves that were fully six inches longer than normal and sewn flowers on the pockets.

In time, Mom became a retail clothing buyer for major department stores in all the towns and cities in which we lived. The male-dominated auction floors of Chicago and New York never intimidated her for a moment. She was supremely confident in her unique sense of style and taste and would battle anyone who doubted her vision. Merchandising managers, almost all of whom were men, drove her mad. Their lack of real interest in the products they sold and their utter absence of respect for women galled her, and the fact that she had to do battle with them virtually daily exacted a heavy price.

The rage she was forced to stifle at work would boil over at home, often as she cleaned up after dinner and railed aloud about the prejudices against women she experienced and observed. Racial discrimination and its terrible corrosive effects made her blood boil, too, and she would punctuate her fury by smashing dishes and battering our kitchen appliances, outbursts that would shock Nancy and me and deeply embarrass and irritate our father.

Yet when Mom would fly into one of her fits, Dad simply would shepherd Nancy and me safely to our rooms, always presenting a calmness that we could nonetheless readily see through.

I don't remember words like "permissive" or "liberal" ever being used in Iowa in those days, but my mother was undoubtedly both. On the occasions when she had trouble rousing me from bed, either because I wasn't feeling well or simply didn't

want to go to school, she would offer me what she labeled a “vitamin.” The pills were Dexedrine in reality—speed—and taking one would invariably have me bouncing off the walls in no time, eager as hell to get to school and set fire to whatever havoc I could.

Mom prided herself on her absolute honesty, something that would often be hurtful, both Nancy and I could attest. She never really wanted either of us, she told us numerous times, and that revelation really wounded my sister and me. Were we that bad? we wondered. Did she really wish we were never born?

No. She gave us a mountain of motherly love, and her affection and support for us never wavered. All she meant, at last we came to understand and accept, was the truth that she had never longed to have children before we were born. Nancy and I were the products, plain and simple, of the lust she and my father had shared for each other before he went off to war.

More troubling was Mom’s regular assertion that she would divorce Dad once the two of us were grown. This was something she was happy to predict in front of him as well as her children, and although my father was silent whenever she repeated her plan, it worried Nancy and I enough that we always met her confident claim by begging her to stop kidding around.

My mother took a Dexedrine tablet of her own every morning before work and drank two or three vodka tonics each evening. She loved to entertain, and friends, in

turn, were always eager to join the storied parties at the Nolte's. Young or old, when people were at our house they could be themselves, free from expectation or judgment, and she demanded them to be, in fact. Booze was a vital social lubricant during that era, and I was permitted to drink at home as soon as I turned fifteen.

Women admired Mom's strength of character and her self-determination; men, in turn, admired just about everything about her they could identify. She was great fun, and always had an opinion on every topic. People with whom she was close—even my buddies from school—sought her counsel on matters large and small, and my ability to tell a decent story also came from my mom, of course.

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Nancy was two years older than me, always taller, and the better athlete of the two of us. If she had been born a couple of decades later, she would have been an Olympic swimmer, I'm certain. The water just seemed to part before her. But women and sports were believed to be an odd combination as she and I were growing up, and virtually no public-school programs existed for athletic girls.

However, when we moved to Waterloo, a small Iowa city that wasn't much bigger than Ames but was far more urban, we discovered a fine aquatic center, an excellent swimming program, and a great coach named Dick Malone, under whose tutelage Nancy thrived. She never lost a race that I can remember, and I think her competitive swimming days were the happiest of her childhood.

We had left Ames and made our way to Waterloo when Dad accepted a transfer with Fairbanks Morris, and Mom got a position as a buyer for Black's department store that she viewed as a great new opportunity. I still remember that on our first day in town, Mom marched us from house to house in our new neighborhood, introducing herself and Nancy and me to the housewife who answered the door, explaining that she was a working woman and that because of her busy schedule they could expect to see the two of us regularly playing without a chaperone. Nancy was old enough to look after us both, she said. It was embarrassing for us, but Mom wasn't about to let anyone think for a moment that she was a negligent mother, and it was just like her to speak to people about any conceivable subject before she would dare let them make an erroneous assumption about her or her family.

Much about Nancy's upbringing was a raw deal for her, I know. Not only was she routinely saddled with the thankless task of looking after me—a chore that wasn't always easy—our parents were unquestionably stricter with her than they were with me. Yet she rose to my defense time and again throughout our childhood, and somehow, she could simply accept that her little brother was eccentric at a time when a child who was unconventional was about as welcome in any Midwest community as a kid who had head lice.

I was lucky that my parents generally tolerated my eccentricities, even accepting without argument my announcement one day that I would no longer be attending church. In fact, it wasn't long after that they stopped attending church themselves.

They weren't particularly religious people, in point of fact, they had initiated our church-going habit believing, as lots of parents did, that the experience was one from which Nancy and I would greatly benefit. Yet when I was done, I was done, and that was fine with them.

The only times my mother demanded attendance and our best behavior was when she wanted the whole family to attend a graduation or retirement ceremony at the university. She would scrub Nancy and me to a high shine and force us into uncomfortably formal attire, insisting on our best behavior no matter how terribly boring the event happened to be. "Sit up straight, don't fidget, and look everyone in the eye when you shake their hands," she would instruct, and it was curious that despite her scorn for education and all its trappings, there were times when it was vitally important for her to demonstrate what a fine mother she was, as well as to show off the couple of obedient and good-looking kids she was raising.

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Once or twice a week Mom would take Nancy and me out into the woods, which always felt like paradise. We would hunt for mushrooms, and she would

encourage us to splash in the creeks, and although we never got to know him, she made sure to regularly point out the cave where a solitary man lived.

Mom was a nature girl and always had been. She was proud of a photograph of herself taken when she was five or six and out in the woods—a photo that’s now a prized possession of mine. In it, she’s wearing bib overalls and with one hand holds her dog by his leash, and the other is balled into a fist and planted on her hip. “Take your damn picture so I can get back to exploring!” her expression seems to say, and she carried that same defiant attitude with her throughout her life. Freedom meant everything to her—she could admire a man who was free to live in a cave, if he chose to—and she worked hard to face down the fear that people would take her freedom away and force her to live by rules that seemed ridiculous by her reckoning.

Even when I was young, I understood my mother’s fear of being restricted, restrained, entirely prevented from living the life you chose, and I could tell, too, that some adults shared that fear. Yet most simply shut themselves down and did as they were expected to do. My mother most certainly was *not* one of those people, and I grew up molding myself in her image both consciously and somewhere deep in my soul.

I called myself a River Kid, because the big rivers on whose banks we lived were my soulmates, in many ways. I could sit under a tree for hours and look out at the moving water and do nothing more than *imagine*. Rivers and their banks were both

fun parks and refuges throughout my early years. Society's rules, which really flummoxed me from the get-go, meant nothing out in the wilderness, where it never mattered if your shirt-tail was tucked in or your hair was combed, and Mother Earth had a wonderful way of punishing arrogance and stupidity. The Skunk, the Cedar, the Iowa, and the Missouri were wide ribbons of water in which I didn't so much observe nature as become part of it—swimming without giving a thought to submerged trees or currents, collecting snakes and other reptiles I kept in jars and boxes in my bedroom, fishing for carp, and feeling wonderfully alive. I imagined myself as a twentieth-century Huckleberry Finn, with a bicycle instead of a raft.

Like my mother, I had my own keen sense of style, and I liked to bleach my jeans until they were virtually white. I remember the time that I waded into the water to retrieve a fat carp I'd caught. But my jeans—their fabric weakened dramatically by all the bleaching—ripped apart as I lunged for the fish. So, I had no option but to wrap my shirt around my middle and march downtown to Black's Department Store—big carp in hand—where I found my mother and announced, “Hey, Mom, I gotta get some pants!” She laughed, and was quick to help, and her pride in me was unmistakable.

Anybody who seemed to disrespect nature, or who failed to be moved by it some elemental way, risked having me toss them into the river as punishment for their

arrogance. But Mom was like me; nature and she were powerfully bonded, and I loved how she encouraged me to love everything that was wild and unrestrained.

It was fine with my mom that I was fiery and forceful—I received those traits from her—and I discovered that I possessed a kind of intensity that was both internally and externally powerful. When fear welled up inside me, I'd simply summon a kind of outrageousness that was always inside me. With it, I'd swim the widest stretch of water I could find, mindless of the dangers, or I'd pull a big prank without concern for the trouble in which it might land me.

When I felt that overwhelming kind of intensity, I also felt free, and I remember that on summer nights I would purposefully go at whatever game we were playing with such total abandon that suddenly the whole world would slow down, and I would get dizzy, then nauseous. It was strange—and a little scary—but I never told anyone about it because I was sure they wouldn't understand. I could almost count on it overtaking me when I let my intensity build to the shouting point. If I pushed just a bit harder, I knew, the world would shift into this *tick, tock*, slow-motion time, and everything would take on a surreal shape and speed that was intriguing and attractive.

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By the time I was old enough to be playing junior-high football—a game I loved and was really good at, one that offered me my first real tastes of accomplishment and pride—the intensity with which I *had* to approach the things in

which I took pleasure no longer seemed capable of slowing down time or making me feel sick. Instead, I often found myself playing with such passion and concentration that I simply started to cry.

I was a punter—I could kick the hell out of the ball—and I also played defensive end, where I was something of a heat-seeking missile when it came to chasing down quarterbacks and sacking them behind the line of scrimmage. I had supreme confidence in my ability to reach the opposing quarterback and drop him before he got off a pass, and part of me wanted to bring that confidence and single-minded passion to every play. Yet football was a team sport, and for the sake of the team I had to remain vigilant in case the quarterback I was chasing suddenly handed the ball to a half-back who would run a reverse to my side of the field, or in case something else unexpected occurred.

I wanted nothing more than to chase down the son of a bitch and drop him like a bad habit. But I had to restrain myself and watch for surprises, too, and the competing demands—my intensity versus my responsibility to protect my side of the field and be ready for whatever happened—were so great they would bring me to tears. I cried out of frustration that I couldn't simply unleash myself and let loose my canine desire to capture the quarterback and tear him to shreds.

It was odd and I'm sure it was downright comical at times. My teammates were often completely perplexed—particularly when we were winning by two or three

touchdowns and were on our way to *crushing* the opposing team—about why there were tears running down my face. Friends on the team would come up to me and lay their arms on my shoulder-pads and suggest, “Man, maybe you should stop playing if it bothers you so bad. It’s just a game, man, it don’t matter that much.” And it was impossible for me to explain, of course. Sure, it was a game, but *that* wasn’t the point. The passion it engendered in me was enormous, and passion felt better than anything else in my life, and I hated to throttle it back in any way. I *craved* big desire; I wanted it more than I wanted anything else, and it just happened to be football that lit my passion like a fire that was virtually impossible to extinguish.

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I was a good enough player that I captured a lot of attention among coaches and scouts and serious fans, and it looked like I could play high-school and college ball and maybe take my game even farther. I was gifted enough, in fact, that I was invited to attend a summer football camp run by Bud Wilkinson, the legendary coach at the University of Oklahoma whose teams were always national powerhouses.

I would be entering eighth grade that fall and attending with me was my best friend Charlie Freeman, who went to a different junior high in Omaha, Nebraska—where my family now lived—and whom I had met the year before at a football camp in Minnesota. Wilkinson and his assistant coaches invited twenty Oklahoma kids, who would get special attention because they were homies, and twenty more from nearby

Midwestern states. Charlie and I somehow got our dates mixed up and arrived a day early and had nothing to do. We couldn't find a rowboat with which we would have been delighted to ferry ourselves to a girls' camp across the lake, so we had to otherwise occupy our time, and Charlie loved a good prank as much as I did.

The Oklahoma boys would be housed in one dorm, with the other half of us in another dorm nearby. We knew the Okies would arrive with some serious attitude, and we wanted to figure out how to take them down a notch or two right from the start, certain that we could beat them over the course of our days at the camp if we got into their heads a bit. We were struggling to figure out what might work when a brilliant plan suddenly came to me.

To set it in motion, the first thing was for both Charlie and me to take a shit in a single plastic bag—and that was easy enough. Then, we sealed it up tight and squished it until it was as big as a plate and no more than a half-inch thick. We used a knife to poke it full of little holes, then lifted a mattress and placed our little pancake on the springs and covered it with the thin canvas that protected the mattress from the springs. I lay down on the bed and Charlie got on his knees to check to be sure nothing was visible from below. Everything was perfect!

After about five days, the Oklahoma boys were complaining constantly about the smell, some suspecting a skunk had died under the floorboards, others certain that their dorm had some sort of plumbing problem. But whatever the source, the smell

was *bad* and was getting worse, and, on our day off, the Okies tore their dorm room apart and finally found our little flattened sack of shit. And oh, were they pissed!

A group of them marched immediately up to Charlie and me and said they knew we had arrived early, and knew, too, that we were just the kind of Cornhusker smart asses to pull a shit-prank like that. “I don’t know whether to cry or knock the hell out of you,” I remember one of them telling me as he poked his fat finger into my chest.” Both Charlie and I denied knowing anything about awful smells or a hammered sack of shit or anything of the sort, and Charlie was the kind of guy who exuded strength and success and honesty, so the Okies all *believed* him when he swore he’d had nothing to do with the plot. That left me as their only suspect, and I began to sweat it because they were all mighty angry and somebody—somebody named *me*—it appeared, was going to have to pay.

A couple of days later, I was asleep in my bunk when one of the Bud Wilkinson’s assistant coaches tip-toed into our darkened dorm and made his way over to my bunk. He sat on the thin mattress beside me, shined a flashlight in my face, and whispered, “You’re a son of a bitch, Nolte, and we know you shat in that bag and put it under the bed, and you know what? I’m going to make sure you never play football in any school you go to—anywhere! I’m going to follow your ass wherever you go and I’m going to be all over you like your fucking stinking shit smell. You might as well give it up now, ‘cause your football days are done.”

With that, he quietly made his way out of the dorm, and I lay awake in my bunk most of the night and cried because he was an adult, and a coach, and surely his threat was something he could make stick. I wanted to keep playing football more than I wanted to do anything else. Nothing else similarly focused my intensity and gave it meaning and purpose, and I cried because in the long hours before dawn it seemed that I had ended my dream with a stupid, stinking prank.