

STOCKHAMMER

Chapter One

Advice is free, except when you fail to heed the wise guidance of others. I admit I ignored the sage counsel contained within that simple pearl of wisdom.

There was one particular piece of advice I heard on three separate occasions. One would think I would have allowed it to seep into my subconscious like a fine wine ebbing its way into the cranial fissures of my brain. It wasn't that I refused to listen; sometimes I just can't stop being involved.

I heard this particular piece of advice during my young formative years, and once again as a teenager. It was told to me once more while I was attending law school. A man I respected more than any other took me aside and expressed his concerns. And then I thought I finally understood. But it was not to be.

It's not that I am a stubborn individual. I think it is because I possess a high spirited nature and have an inexplicable need to make a difference. At times I'm just too egotistical and think I know better than others. I truly believe my participation will always make things better. Part of it is unbridled curiosity. At times my meddling has led to unintended results.

The first time I failed to take note of this guidance was when I was seven years old. My best friend, Steve Rafkin, ardently stated, "mind your own beeswax." This was in response to my question as to why his parents punished him with the harshest of all sentences; he was to be sent to "reform school."

But even in those early years I didn't take "no" for an answer. I kept pushing. What egregious action could he have perpetrated to deserve being dispatched to that dreaded place? What horrible behavior would cause a separation from my very best friend? After all, he was a good kid. I knew he hadn't killed anybody. Why would Steve Rafkin, a nice Jewish boy from Fair Lawn, New Jersey be sent into the inner recesses of a place we could only imagine in our worst nightmares: "reform school?"

I, too, was judged by all to be a good kid. I hadn't killed anybody, never robbed a bank, and never stole anything in my

life – not even a piece of bubblegum from the local candy store. If Rafkin could be sent away, then what did that portend for the rest of us? I, Paul Horowitz, had never given my parents a moment's trouble. Rafkin's revelation got me quite worked up. I projected his predicament onto myself. I feared one little misstep, one bad deed, and reform school could also become my fate.

I sensed Steve's problem had something to do with me. I surmised his punishment was in response to events that transpired the day before when I came over to play. I was the one who convinced him to make a phony phone call. I was the one who convinced him to place his stubby fingers inside the holes of the rotary dial.

Even at a young age, I had a skill. It was actually more than a skill. It was something I truly discovered in my teens. I gave my special skill its own name. The skill I possess has allowed me to convince most people to see things my way and to follow my wishes.

I've never tried to use it to lead large groups, or start a cult where we would all drink the Kool-Aid or better yet, my favorite brand of vodka. I've never had the aspiration to hold a high political office. No, my skill works better in a one-on-one encounter, although I have also used it with small groups of people, usually not exceeding twelve.

But, I'll tell you about it a little later. Right now I digress. Let's get back to my buddy Steve. It was I who egged him on to dial a phone number at random and cleverly ask the voice on the other end, if this was the "doody factory?" In retrospect, our immature prank was quite benign by today's standards. But this was 1961, and his parents didn't see it that way. But how would they have ever known about our misdeed?

Steve mentioned a man from the telephone company came over to his house that afternoon accompanied by two cop cars. They said they traced the call. I didn't quite know what that meant and wondered how Steve would know something I didn't.

He told me they handcuffed him and placed him under arrest. But then his mother started crying. She convinced the policeman that a spanking, no television for a week, and enrollment in reform school would be a just punishment. The police officer agreed and released Steve to his parent's custody.

I didn't know if I should believe his story. After all Rafkin fibbed many times before. This left me quite skeptical.

He once showed me a piece of paper with Willie McCovey's autograph. It was pretty obvious it was a complete forgery. It just didn't look like anything Stretch McCovey himself would have penned. We just learned cursive in school and I could tell that it wasn't an adult's handwriting. But it was certainly better than anything Steve could have written.

I suspected the falsity was carried out by his older sister who attended Thomas Jefferson Junior High. What really established its lack of authenticity was that it was perfectly centered between the blue lines on hole-punched loose-leaf paper.

Steve definitely lied about having McCovey's autograph. But he was my best friend, so I didn't call him out on it. I told him it was pretty cool and asked him where he got it. He told me his rich cousin Jonathan from Westchester gave it to him. I had never met his cousin and seriously doubted whether he even existed.

Rafkin was a San Francisco Giant fan on account of his father Irving, who supported the team before they deserted the Polo Grounds for the windy confines of Candlestick Park. Despite allegiance to the Giants, his father would always say "McCovey...he's a bum." I don't think he really felt that way about the tall slugging first-baseman. But, it would make Steve and I laugh hysterically, especially the way he puckered his lips like he was sucking on a sour candy as he enunciated the derogatory "bum."

Then Steve and I would steadfastly defend McCovey until Irving Rafkin would walk towards the door, waive his hand in disgust, and leave us with a parting statement that was half question and half fact. "Ah, what do you kids know?"

This routine was repeated whenever his father happened to be home while I was visiting the Rafkin household. But then, Irving Rafkin would quickly turn around and charge right at us, causing us to flinch. As he lunged from across the room he would chant an obscure football cheer. "Give-em the axe, the axe, the axe. Give-em the axe, the axe, the axe."

Each time the word "axe" was mentioned it was accompanied by a short chopping motion as the edge of his hand came within three inches of our Adam's apples. Then he would quickly run out of the room and not return. Once he left the room for good,

Steve and I would mimic the cheer along with the chopping motion. After about two minutes of imitating his father, we would resume whatever we were up to.

The more I thought of what he said, the more I believed Rafkin had to be lying. I hadn't seen any police cars on our street that day. Although this tale was more imaginative than his other untruths, I wasn't buying his story. My suspicions were that the telephone company never traced our call. Instead his guilty conscience could not keep his behavior a secret from his mother. He was the type of kid who told his mommy everything.

So I didn't mind my own beeswax. I pressed on despite my best friend's warning. I was prying into the matter to find out if I'd been ratted out as the instigator and co-conspirator of his actions. If he shifted the blame onto me then his mother would forbid us to play together and I would be ex-communicated from the Rafkin household. Worse yet, she would report the transgression to my parents. Since I was unaware of my mother receiving such a call from Pearl Rafkin, I figured I was safe.

I didn't know which I dreaded more: being unable to play with my best friend or the disappointment on my parent's faces when they confronted me with what I had done. How would I explain my conduct? The shame involved with being the creator and curator of the "doody factory" would have been unbearable.

So I pressed Rafkin for the truth. It was the month of March and we were still in second grade. Suddenly his story began to expand exponentially. His reform school enrollment would be delayed until September when he entered the third grade. He said it was a secret and that I shouldn't tell anyone. He asked me not to mention it to my parents or to his. I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew I was in the clear.

It didn't surprise me the following October when my parents returned home from "Back to School Night." They met my third grade teacher Mrs. Glanz. When I asked them if they liked her, my father made some comment that I didn't quite understand. His reply: "I was very impressed by Mrs. Glanz's glands." My mother glared at him and quickly changed the subject.

My mother mentioned she talked with Steve's parents at the school and Pearl Rafkin was so happy that our boys were in the same class. My mother told me Mrs. Rafkin always had such nice things to say about me. I wonder if her laudatory comments

would have ceased if she was aware that I called strangers to inquire about factories which manufactured human excrement.

I knew Rafkin made up the whole reform school scenario. However, it didn't matter to me. After-all he was my friend, and I was free of the albatross that was hanging around my neck. I would never be judged by my family, friends, and teachers, as a sick perverted young man who disturbs the peace of others by asking about the production of malodorous waste.

So I hadn't followed his advice. I didn't "mind my own beeswax" and hadn't suffered any consequences. In fact, the whole matter resolved itself quite satisfactorily.

The next time I was given similar advice; well, you guessed it. I ignored it. At the time, I believed all of my actions were justified. Now, after many years have passed and I have the luxury of maturity, reflection and better information, I believe my actions were inexcusable. It wasn't in my nature then to have acted any differently. However, this time the result of my interaction had dire consequences.

However, it did confirm I possessed my special skill. For sure, it was that ridiculously over used cliché some refer to as a "defining moment." On that day, I discovered that I had "The Power." I'm still not sure if it is more of a blessing or a curse. I'm still trying to figure that part out. But through the years I gained the ability to control it. My fervent hope is that I use it only for good. If you are patient, I will tell you all about it.

Chapter TWO

The second time I received advice about meddling occurred during my sophomore year in high school. The warning was imparted by my history teacher, Mrs. Vorster.

All the kids in school referred to her as "The Mean Bitch Witch." She never smiled. She talked with a German accent. The rumor was that her father was a preeminent member of the Nazi party and she'd been a member of Hitler Youth. I think that was because she often wore a brown dress and no one was mistaking

her for a brownie den mother. She looked to be about fifty, but I wasn't a great judge of age.

The truth be told, no one knew how old she was when she immigrated to the United States, or whether she was actually from Germany. From the point of view of a high school student most European accents sounded alike.

Intellectually, I had major doubts that she was really a Nazi. How would the Fair Lawn Board of Education have hired a teacher with such a tainted past? Fair Lawn had a large Jewish population. Certainly her background would have been investigated. Like my friend Steve Rafkin, most kids love to make up all kinds of nonsense, but if ten percent of these accusations were true, the adults of the community would have insisted on her termination long before she ever received tenure.

On a fateful Friday afternoon we were all watching the classroom clock. The bell signaling dismissal would chime in another twenty minutes. Our class was temporarily interrupted when a messenger entered our classroom and handed a piece of paper to Mrs. Vorster.

After reading the note, she called Melissa Steinberg to the front of the classroom and whispered something in her ear. Melissa's body began to quiver, as she let out an audible cry. She stood frozen almost as if a statue, and then burst into tears. She raced out of the room in uncontrollable hysterics leaving her purse and school books behind.

I was concerned for Melissa. I always had a crush on her since the first time I ever saw her. I think it was more than a crush. If I truly acknowledged my feelings at that time I would have admitted that I loved her.

She was a sweet girl, with an incredible body. Whenever I saw her waist long brown hair, short-skirts, and colorful blouses, a warm feeling of excitement always filled my senses. Years earlier, I attended Hebrew School with her at the Fair Lawn Jewish Center on Norma Avenue. Every time I saw the street sign, I internally proclaimed the street should be renamed "Melissa Avenue." My imaginary street sign signaled to me every time I pulled up in front of the building. I knew that today's unbearable two hour session would be palatable. The reason was uncomplicated. I would be sitting next to Melissa Steinberg. To this very day my adolescent crush remains unabated.

I invited her to my Bar Mitzvah and was thrilled when her R.S.V.P. proclaimed she would be honored to attend. At my party I had the privilege of being the beneficiary of one slow dance with the lovely Melissa.

Although only thirteen, she was very well endowed. I pressed up as close as I dared against her ample chest. As we held each other tight, I became increasingly embarrassed as my own body slowly betrayed me. I feared she could feel the extreme hardness in my pants growing uncontrollably as it expanded to a size of great proportions. I tried to pretend nothing was wrong as my newfound friend poked her below the waist of her white party dress.

But now it was three years later. I was concerned about her abrupt exit from the classroom. So I raised my hand and spoke politely in my best Eddie Haskell type voice. "Excuse me, Mrs. Vorster. What happened to Melissa? Why did she run out crying?"

Mrs. Vorster looked right at my face with a look of disdain. Her reply was direct and terse. "Keep your nose out of matters that are none of your concern."

Despite my public admonishment, Mrs. Vorster quickly reversed her recalcitrant position. Within twenty seconds, she couldn't contain herself. She decided to share with the class the fact Melissa's grandmother just died and that she compassionately broke the news to her. Melissa's parents were waiting in the principal's office to take her home.

At first I thought Mrs. Vorster's main fault was that she was simply an insensitive woman. It wasn't her place to deliver such heartbreaking news. It should have come from Melissa's parents. I remembered the talk of her being a Nazi and recalled my older sister Ilene telling me unequivocally Mrs. Vorster hated Jews.

I quickly realized the accuracy of my sister's claim. I caught the witch red-handed. I sighted the sick sadistic smile emanating from the corner of the teacher's mouth as Melissa fled the room. There was little doubt she took pleasure in Miss Steinberg's distress.

The second piece of evidence against this spiteful educator was right in the middle of my face. I was sixteen and my nose had doubled in size in the past three years. I was somewhat self-conscious about its expanse. It was instantly obvious that the

only reason she referred to my protruding mass was because of its immense size. I interpreted her choice of words as a disparaging attack on my large proboscis. I internalized her statement as being anti-Semitic.

Mrs. Vorster's declaration shattered my innocence and self-esteem. My inner being erupted and I whispered under my breath "Jew-Hater." She looked at me for what must have been a full forty-five agonizing seconds. I was filled with rage, but I never let it show. I simply held her gaze and did not waiver. My eyes bore into hers and I was unrelenting in the fierceness of my stare. She was the first to look away.

To this day I'm not sure whether she heard my whisper. I wasn't sure whether she was staring at me for my barely audible comment, or because she couldn't believe my snout was so large. I wished I said it louder so there never would have been a doubt as to why she held my stare. But she looked away first, a fact I counted as a victory over ignorance and hatred. Whose ignorance and whose hatred I'm not sure.

Until then I had never experienced anti-Semitism. At the time I didn't know how to label this particular episode. Regardless, it turned out to be a seminal moment in my life. It was the first time my special skill blossomed into something more forceful than simply exerting influence. I experienced "The Power." From that day forward that's what I called my special skill.

Did I follow Mrs. Vorster's advice? Did I keep my nose out of business that didn't concern me? I'm sure you can guess the answer. I believed within my oversized nostrils that this entire episode should most certainly involve me.

Although our loins had barely touched three years earlier, I felt a definitive connection to Melissa. I wanted to be her protector. It was simple. It was not Mrs. Vorster's place to impart the news of the grandmother's passing. That duty rested with Melissa's parents. This broken down excuse for a teacher, this "Wicked Witch Bitch" also known as Ingrid Vorster, had no right to do what she did.

Our stare down was over. She was shaken. "The Power" destabilized her. I was certain each and every one of my internalized accusatory thoughts had somehow been transferred into her consciousness. She knew what I was thinking. She knew I had exposed her. She knew I thought her to be a Nazi. She

knew I perceived her comment about my nose to have been a personal attack that I could never let go unchallenged.

The floor of the classroom was mine. I wanted to leave no doubt about my position. I needed to state it loud and clear so the entire class would hear.

“You got it all wrong, Ingrid. It is the business of everyone sitting in this room. You had no right giving Melissa this kind of news. It was her parents place to do so. You took pleasure in it, Ingrid. I caught you gloating. You’re an anti-Semite of the worst kind!

“You hide behind the mask of an educator. And then you have the audacity to attack me. You made a comment about my nose. You insinuated it is so large that I can’t keep it out of things that don’t concern me? Yes, it is quite large. It is a large Semitic, Hebrew, Kosher, Jewish nose. Do you have a problem with that, you Nazi?”

At first the class was dead silent. I gestured to them with my hands held out and my palms exposed. After pumping my arms three times, as if on cue, they broke out into instantaneous applause. Rich Portugal screamed out, “You tell her, Horowitz!”

The class started chanting my nickname. “Horry, Horry, Horry.” The room was suddenly in total bedlam.

Ingrid Vorster offered no response. The stare-down that occurred a few moments earlier left her staring into space as if a zombie. Her legs gave way as she collapsed to the floor. As it turns out, she suffered a minor stroke and needed the rest of the school year to convalesce. I sincerely believed she could have returned prior to the summer recess, but she bilked her illness for as long as possible.

I convinced myself that she stayed out the rest of the term because she was deathly afraid of me and my newly-found skill. Her subject matter was tenth grade “Modern European History.” The following year I would be a junior and she would never have to fall under my scrutiny again.

Did I regret she had a stroke? I had never used my special skill in such a raw manner before. If indeed I was responsible for blowing up her brain, then I was genuinely sorry. I didn’t think it was my words or the support I received from my fellow students that caused her medical malady. I truly believe her stroke was triggered when she could sense the thoughts inside my head. She saw the truth in my beliefs and the realization of

what she had done. I was convinced I hit a nerve and she was truly a Nazi.

I suppose I was responsible for initiating her stroke. After all it was the first time I used “The Power.” It was raw, untrained and unrestrained energy. Since that day, I learned to control its use. My intention never included an attempt to physically attack another person’s brain.

What I said in class was brought to the principal’s attention. My parents and I were informed that a hearing was set up for Wednesday morning to discuss my possible expulsion from high school. I had never been so nervous and apprehensive. However, my sense of foreboding was heightened because of potential consequences I perceived would extend far beyond my own circumstances.

Up until then, the only infractions in my entire academic career occurred in elementary school. These two missteps were minor at best. However, I always had a small sense of guilt since both punishments occurred simultaneously with major historical events. However coincidental these events might have been they were inextricably linked to my wrong doing.

The first occurrence was when my second grade teacher Mrs. Orndorf kept me after school for misbehaving, the details of which I’ve long forgotten. However, when I arrived home later than usual, I found Bill Mazeroski of the Pittsburgh Pirates just won the 1960 World Series by hitting a ninth inning home run. As a six-year-old, it was the first year I followed baseball. Because of my detention, I missed viewing on live television one of the most famous events in baseball history.

The only other time I had to stay after school was in fifth grade when our teacher Mr. Loccacio got upset with the entire class. He decided to give us all detention. Although our group infraction occurred on a Wednesday he decided to administer our punishment on Friday in order to give our parents proper notice.

“Tell your parents you will arrive home late from school on Friday. You will be required to stay after school for forty-five minutes of ‘stupid time.’”

That Friday brought a moment in my life I will never forget. As Mr. Loccacio was discussing the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Mrs. Leitner came into our classroom visibly upset. I could tell she was crying. She whispered something into his ear.

My teacher stiffened and waited for Mrs. Leitner to leave the room. Then, he made a startling announcement speaking off the cuff with great clarity.

“Class, I have just heard some tragic news. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was just shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. He has been assassinated.

“He was never supposed to have been the president. His father was grooming his older brother Joseph for our country’s highest office. But his brother was killed piloting a military mission over France during World War II. So his father informed him he was the next Kennedy in line for the job. As it happened, he became the thirty-fifth president of the United States. Now Lyndon Baines Johnson will become the thirty-sixth president of our country.

“Under the circumstances, ‘stupid time’ is cancelled. Upon dismissal I would like you all to go straight home without delay. I want you to pray for our country. I want you to stay home close to your parents. I want you to watch the television and be extra cautious. This is the chance the Russians have been waiting for.”

Other than Gerry-Gail Bernhart sobbing in the corner of the classroom, the class remained totally silent. We sat in disbelief that our president was shot. We all wished it wasn’t true. We would have all gladly spent that Friday afternoon serving our ‘stupid time’ sentence.

It was only a year since I was traumatized by the Cuban Missile Crisis. Now this teacher’s comments frightened me and possibly left a permanent scar on my psyche. But kids are resilient. About a half-hour later my friends and I were riding our bikes in the neighborhood, playing running bases, and listening to a transistor radio. The name Lee Harvey Oswald was mentioned. I pictured him looking just like John Wilkes Booth. I made a fist. I wanted to punch the man who killed our president.

I think that might have been what set me off against Mrs. Vorster. I already had one bad experience of a teacher making inappropriate comments after having information whispered in his ear late on a Friday afternoon. I felt extremely angry that sweet Melissa was caused so much pain by the whispers of the laughing hyena known as Ingrid Vorster. Once again, one of Fair Lawn’s finest educators had let me down. Instead of telling us to look behind every tree for a rampaging Russian, she took

pleasure and glee in communicating a secret written message as quickly and viciously as possible.

On Wednesday morning my parents and I shuffled into the office of Mr. Crothershed, the bald headed power who ran our high-school. He threatened me with expulsion. Since expulsion was a lot worse than detention, I couldn't bare to think what might happen to the world because of my latest misconduct. A classic New York Yankee loss and a tragic assassination had already taken place. What cataclysmic event might occur this time?

Because of the seriousness of these charges two members of the board of education were also in attendance. One of the attendees had served on the board for seven years and was extremely well connected with the mayor and the superintendent of schools. In his professional life he was a very high powered attorney. From the very beginning he was confrontational with the principal and seemed to take my side as the entire sequence of events unfolded.

You might wonder the reason for this man's support. He was Mr. Peter Steinberg, Melissa's father. He was extremely perturbed over Mrs. Vorster's actions and the manner in which his mother-in-law's death was disclosed to his daughter. He informed Crothershed that what was done to his sweet little girl was unpardonable.

I chuckled to myself. There was nothing little about his sweet daughter. As I sat there in the middle of my hearing, my concentration wavered. I fantasized about the curves in her breast that now as a sixteen-year-old captured my attention more then ever. I thought of her well-tanned thighs and imagined the unseen regions barely hidden under her short mini-skirts. I thought of the many ways I could comfort his little girl and how she might show her gratitude because I came to her defense.

Once again the bulge in my pants threatened to expose me for the horny teenager I was. I could almost hear the class repeatedly chanting "Horny Horry," as I slowly peeled each piece of clothing off my cherished Melissa.

As I contemplated his daughter naked, Steinberg continued to go to bat for me. After considerable threats of a lawsuit from my parents, and immense pressure from Mr. Steinberg, my expulsion was commuted into a two day suspension. I was

greatly impressed by his oratory. That was the day I decided to become a lawyer. I, too, wanted to eloquently support the cause of those who needed my help.

Fortunately, during my two-day suspension I checked the newspapers, the radio, and intently watched the evening news. No outside events took place that could possibly be associated with my punishment. I was relieved that the world would be safe and could survive this and any further transgression I might perpetrate.