“May the wind take your troubles away
May the wind take your troubles away
Both feet on the floor, two hands on the wheel
May the wind take your troubles away”
-Son Volt. May the Wind Take Your Troubles Away

“Jesus H Christ . . . don’t tell your mother this. She’ll get all upset. Then she’ll start worrying about you.”

“OK dad.”

We were sitting on my folks’ front porch, it was early afternoon, mom was out grocery shopping, I’d walked over from my apartment to get my motorcycle, which was stored in their garage, only to find my dad reading the paper in an unfamiliar spot.

I stifled the urge to ask what the H in one of his favorite expressions stood for. Not a time for levity. Dad had asked how my work at the Center was going. I’d made the decision to tell him. At first he was a little dismissive. “Some of the older kids are pretty tough, aren’t they, how do they keep them in line?”

“Yeah some of them can be tough to deal with, but that ain’t what’s goin’ on.”

Here goes.

“Hey dad, you remember Albert, kid I brought over for dinner last Christmas? Well there’s a kid about his size, same age, ya’ know, same first name too, lived in the youngest boys cottage. His social worker told me that the guy in charge of the cottage full of kids like both Alberts, they call them “Pop.” This guy, Sylvestri, found out Albert was smearing his
poop on the bathroom walls and decided to ‘fix’ him by hanging him over the toilet and then beating the shit out of him.”

By now my father’s face had taken on the same look as mine must have when Albert B’s social worker, Bob, related this to me.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and that ain’t even the worst part, ‘Pop’ Sylvestri bragged about doing this to both the social worker and Albert’s mother.”

My father had undergone a Laryngectomy in ’68 and after the surgery needed to learn esophageal speech, in essence, gulping air down his food pipe and ‘burping’ it out forming words. I remember him practicing for hours in front of our bathroom mirror after his release from the Boston Hospital where he’d had the procedure done. He mastered the ‘art,’ speaking in sentences and capable of clearly understandable verbal paragraphs.

The procedure rerouted his trachea. He breather through a hole in his neck, called a stoma, located right below his Adam’s Apple.

“What’d they do to that guy. Fire him?”

“Nothing. The kids’ social worker complained to the Administration. They did nothing. There’s a lot of stuff like that goin’ on there. I’m talking to people about how to stop it, make the place better ya’ know.”

Silence. Then, “What’s he doing about this (nodding to Bill’s house across the street) Is he helping you? Did he know about this?”

Dad knew Bill Connors, his neighbor for several years, well enough to say hello to. They were of different generations.

He missed the previous occupants the Dempseys, both families had migrated to the same neighborhood from the Valley View Projects
in the 50’s. The Dempseys returned to Providence after the patriarch ‘Mr. D.’ dad’s beer drinking buddy, was named the City’s Chief Plumbing Inspector, triggering a residence requirement.

“Be careful. Please . . . and don’t mention this to your mother, it’ll break her heart.”

“OK dad.”

Time to go riding.

During my years in exile I would journey north a couple of times a year and spend time with my folks. We never discussed the ‘Crusade’ or its aftermath. It was only decades later when my mother handed me a manila envelope stuffed with newspaper clippings and mementos dating back to my grammar school days that I realized how acutely aware of the ‘Crusade’ they were. The envelope contained numerous articles on the turmoil and subsequent closing of the Patrick I. O’Rourke Children’s Center.

I believe my folks, like many others, found it difficult to comprehend what was going on there and why it took so long to stop it.

In February 1979 I met my dad in Charlotte, NC. The Friars were playing the Tar Heels at the Coliseum and he was traveling with the team. I got to spend time with my father, hang out in the locker room, sit on the team bench during the game and meet Dean Smith after it.

The Friars got beaten soundly that Saturday night. It was Dave Gavitt’s last year of coaching and his focus had begun to shift from recruiting to the Big East conference and the USA Olympic Basketball team. The experience did, however, remind me of how central basketball and PC basketball had been to my life experience. It also reminded me of how much I admired my father.
“Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, by and by?
Is a better home awaiting
In the sky, in the sky?”
-Ada Habershon. Will the Circle Be Unbroken

“Do you miss coaching?”

For a moment I was stunned, the two of us were sitting in our hotel room after the game. Dad has never asked me a question about that part of my life.

I stumbled to answer. “I don’t know dad. Maybe . . . sometimes . . . Winning those championships . . . you know, I don’t think about it much, it’s like almost 10 years ago. I stopped doin’ it.”

Maybe it was what he saw in my eyes contrasted with the obvious way I relished hanging with him and the PC team.

“What do you think about?”

“I think about the kids who played for me, I wonder what they’re doing.”

“Yeah.”

“Armand (Tessaglia) you remember him, so talented first year I coached we won the State. It was like he peaked at 14. Good kid.”

“Eddie Reilly, smartest player I ever coached. Started for me in the 6th grade, you remember him right. Played for LaSalle and then Holy Cross. Think he’s coaching now.”

“Yeah, Bill Delaney, what a hard worker, best player, won two State Championships with him. Bill (Murray) told me he’s in med school.”
“Big Joe Delaney’s kid?” I nodded. “He played for the ‘Cross.”

“Do you miss it (coaching)?” My dad had coached from the time he got out of the service until he quit at 35.

“Nah, not really.”

Someone had mentioned to me that near the end of my coaching ‘run’ the North Providence School Superintendent had casually asked dad if I wanted to teach at the high school and coach basketball. My dad seemed to know and was friends with everyone. His reply, I was told, “maybe after he gets out of the Army.”

With that my dad was out of gas. “I got get some rest. You can watch TV, it won’t bother me.”

As we headed out the next day, me back to Richmond and dad to catch the team bus to the airport for the flight back to Providence, I remember thinking that J. Vincent had lost weight and looked frail. He was 57 years old.

That was the last time my father ever traveled with the team. His cancer which had initially disfigured him, kept recurring. He managed to go to his office every day he was not hospitalized. He never thought the cancer would beat him, until it did. He died two years later. He was 59 years old.

My father was a man who loved everything about his life. Not a day goes by when I do not think about him.