“May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
May you stay forever young
Forever young, forever young
May you stay forever young”
- Bob Dylan. _Forever Young_

I bounced the cheap, rubber indoor/outdoor basketball against the shit green cinder block wall two feet from the left baseline of the court, turned and fired up a J.

“Swish.” Nothing but net.
I couldn’t resist.

“Game man!” “Don’t even try.” “You’ll just embarrass yourself.”

Kurt’s “posse”, sitting in the stands joined in the chorus.

“Yeah man.” “Mr. C’s right. You got no chance.” “Give it up.”

“Mr. C.” “You can really shoot.”

Of course Kurt was having none of it. He grabbed the ball, dribbled to the corner, turned and shot. We all watched the ball bounce off the side of the basket’s half moon backboard.

Thus ended our game of HORSE; the chopbusting continued.

“Yo man, I need more competition than this out on the court, you got to deliver.”
“Next time Mr. Cuddy.” “I didn’t sleep good last nite.”

I deliberately tried to walk the line with Kurt. Pushing him, but never too far. He wasn’t bad, in fact he’d made his prep school basketball team.

Kurt Z had been part of the state system since his father was charged with assaulting him on his third birthday. Seventeen, tall, anglo, beginning to fill out with a tendency to “strut.” He’d settled into an interesting routine. Boarding school during the school year, the Center during school vacations and holidays with occasional family visits to Narragansett where part of his fractured, troubled family lived.

Razor cut dirty blond hair, he fancied himself a “surfer dude.” Stayed in N or M when back at the Center, hung around with the black kids. Since his latest return, he’d become a “king,” my label for the group of older kids who had the run of the place since discipline had disappeared in the wake of the Report.

The offenders in the older kids cottages just sneered at me. The houseparents who cared were bewildered and on some levels felt betrayed. I’d heard that the assholes who had charge of the younger kids, specifically Biafore and Sylvestri, had resumed their old ways. What could I do?

What I had been doing a lot of lately was fantasizing about using my Infantry training to exact revenge! “If I put an M16 round between their eyes I could watch their heads explode like a fuckin’ pumpkin,” had morphed into “That’s way too easy, I’ll target their kneecaps and while they’re wailing and writhing on the ground, I’ll walk over and piss on them.”

“STOP.”

I’d ended my most recent fantasy by screaming that out loud in a quiet room completely unnerving one of my poor co-workers.

No wonder I was trying to stay stoned, all day, every day.
Kurt became part of my caseload last spring when he returned from Becket Academy. Most of our conversations occurred on the court, shooting hoops. He was well aware of the abuse that went on, in fact had insisted on making a statement for the Report, but mostly floated above the fray.

“Hey Mr. Cuddy, can I play on your team this summer?” “You know like Carl did last year.” That was JB, Kurt’s roommate and running mate referring to Carl S., another 17 year old in my caseload, who I’d made a part of my community league team last summer, part of an attempt to connect with an angry, sullen kid who loved basketball but had dropped out of school and seemed headed for a life of crime and eventual residence at the ACI.

“I’m not sure I’m gonna do it this year, JB, but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

Kurt knew better than to ask. I wasn’t going to organize any community basketball league this year. He also knew I was probably leaving. He was cool with it, or at least pretended to be. Existentially I was just another adult who wandered in and out of his life.

I suspected JB was more interested in me helping him to push his caseworker to get the same deal I’d gotten Carl S: Emancipation; Independent living; His own apartment paid for by CWS; then he was in playing for my basketball team. Strategy wise it was good thinking on JB’s part.

I liked the older kids who wandered the grounds, aimlessly often, provocatively on occasion.

I’d formed an easy rapport with most of them and found myself relying on that rapport to deliver a message during the past few months. Namely

“Hey guys, it’s not cool for Mr. B. to use you as his muscle to enforce rules in the cottage”, followed by “hey guys, you know the new kid Johnny in Q, how about showing him the ropes instead of scaring the shit out of him. He’s a good kid.”
More often than not these entreaties fell on deaf ears. Anything that got in the way of their ability to swagger did not go over well. Frankly, I was surprised that they listened at all. They were really just little kids in big bodies changing in ways that bewildered and bedeviled them. Their fragile psyches covered with bandaids from the bruising received in short lives filled with rejection and ridicule.

“Hey guys, I’m heading over to Providence College to watch the game. They’re playing URI. I think my brother’s pitching. You wanna’ come?”

As a solo act, Kurt would have hopped in the car. As part of a group no way. To his gang it was like suggesting a trip to the moon. I’d notice another wonderful tendency of CWS since returning. White kids seemed to get more opportunities than black kids. The entire casework staff was white.

“Nah, no thanks Mr. Cuddy.” “We got stuff to take care of.” “Hey, could we borrow some change to get Cokes at the canteen?” That was Frank.

“Sure.” “Here.” “Take care guys.” “I’ll see you later.”

I suspected that the “stuff they had to take care of” consisted of finishing the “roaches” that they managed to filch from the ashtray of my state issued sedan. I’d noticed recently that my supply had dwindled.

On the five minute trip over to PC’s Hendricken Field, I mentally started ticking off the names in my caseload and the casework plans for each of them.

My youngest brother Michael was having a great year for the Friar baseball team. His pitching performances were attracting scouts. Not today though, his start had been pushed back to Friday. I made a mental note to return. I’d pretty much given up sports since last summer’s community league ended. Hadn’t followed the PC basketball team, stopped playing “sandlot,” just wasn’t interested.
On my way back to the parking lot I ran into my father and Dave Gavitt walking over to the field to catch the game. My dad’s greeting was the routine “Stop by, your mom would love to see you.” Dave Gavitt’s was more amusing, he treated me like a lost disciple. “So Jim, ‘Games’ (his nickname for Michael) isn’t pitching today.”

Then Dave, whom I knew since he arrived as Joe Mullaney’s assistant in 1963, turned serious.

“Hey, Jim, I ran into Judge Gallogly last week, he told me you put together a heck of a plan for some state ward. He didn’t go into much detail, but said it was real impressive.”

Pulling out of the parking lot I resumed my review.

Kurt was in good shape.

**2015**

“When I leave this world behind me to another I will go
And if there are no pipes in heaven
I’ll be going down below.”

— Mark Knopfler. *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*

“When ‘N’ Cottage closed for vacation I moved to ‘M’ Cottage. One afternoon right before supper I had words with ‘Pop’ Bruce right next to the tables. He turned and hit me in the stomach with two quick punches. I fell to the floor crying.”

• Kurt Z., age 16. *Ad Hoc Committee Report*

The image of Kurt Z. crying is an unsettling one.

Finding Charlie T. on the net emboldened me. I started tracking down other kids. Many inquiries came up blank. With Kurt I thought hey he’s got an uncommon last name. I’m sure there’s some reference to him. There was. I found his death notice in a data base.
Kurt had been dead for 32 years. Suicide.

When I think of Kurt, Mark Knopfler’s beautiful dirge starts playing in my head. I can easily envision him in kilts, carrying pipes, marching in formation.

While Kurt’s last name led me to the assumption that his ancestry was far from of the British Isles, the fact is that he, like many of the Center’s residents, were stateless persons, refugees, rooted to no place, existing as pieces of baggage stacked against an aging concrete wall in a long forgotten railway station, left to the mercy of the elements.

NOTE: Dave Gavitt
Dave Gavitt was the real deal and a class act. Founder of the Big East Conference, Coach of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Basketball Team, President of the Boston Celtics and, most importantly, a true friend to my dad and step-dad and our families.

My favorite memories of Dave, who passed away five years ago at the age of 73, were of playing sandlot ball with him at Evans Field when he arrived in the summer of 1963 to serve as Joe’s assistant coach. He was 25 years old, the same age as me when I started the Crusade.