

**THE HAND OF GOD**  
**Naugatuck, Connecticut - June, 1998**

As soon as I pick up Route 8 South out of Waterbury, I start dredging up memories. What did the house look like? When was the last time I was here? Was it '54, 55, when we came to visit my grandmother, before she moved in with us in '58, and died less than a year later. I know the house was on Cherry Street; it's not there any more. A fragment of a steep incline behind the house with a grape arbor after the ground levels off drifts across my consciousness; other than that, nothing.

I've been thinking about making this trip for at least two years now. Returning to where my father grew up, where both of my grandparents and some of their extended family are buried. I want to drive up and down Cherry Street where they lived, visit the cemetery, just go there. I had agreed to be on a panel that afternoon in Springfield, so the opportunity presented itself. I told my wife that morning, as I was still debating as to whether to go, "You know, I've talked about doing this for two years. If I don't do it today, I'm not going to do it before the Fall. It's a perfect time." Somehow, that thought propelled me out the door.

**"NAUGATUCK - NEXT 4 EXITS"**

My father grew up in this town, finished high school in '39, went to UConn on an athletic scholarship, finished college, went to War, came back, got married, went to graduate school, arrived in Providence in '49, died there in '81. I don't guess he ever came back here after he moved his mother into our house and sold the family homestead to the town so they could put up an entrance ramp to Route 8.

I decide to take the Maple Street exit, figuring Maple, Cherry, it's got to be pretty close by. I get off the exit, go under the underpass to a light, look to my left, see an old pharmacy on the first floor of a brick building. I'm right near the downtown. I'm thinking I'll stop there for directions as I take a left at the light, hook around the corner to park in front of the store. A big green Caddy eases to the curb in front of me. As I sit there, an

older guy, who looks to be the same age as my dad would be if he were alive, gets out of the car and goes in. I glance at the license plate. It's a Connecticut vanity plate, "SPEC2". It can't be Spec Shea, I think. I follow him into the store and hang back as he picks up the paper and goes to the counter. I walk up behind him and say, "Excuse me, can you help me. I'm looking for Cherry Street." The old guy is trim, about my height, nice green windbreaker. He starts giving me directions, I'm half listening. My heart feels like it's in my mouth. He says, "You know, I grew up on Cherry Street, #253. Yup." I say, "Geez, maybe you remember my family. Maybe you remember my dad, Vin Cuddy." He stops, stares at me for a moment and says, "You're Vin Cuddy's son?" I hear the person behind the counter, a little woman with gray ringlets, with an audible gasp, say "Oh, my God." "Yes, he was my dad," I stammer. I feel my eyes flood with tears.

"We won the state baseball championship in '38. I was the pitcher, Vinny was my first baseman. Your dad was a good ballplayer. He was a real good guy. You know, seven guys from that team lived in the neighborhood." Spec goes off and starts naming them, O'Brien, Sullivan, he throws in an Italian and what sounds to me like a WASP name, throws off the names of the streets. "The next year we lost it in the finals. I struck out 22 guys in 9 innings. Damn shortstop throws the ball over Vinny's head. The run scores, we lose. Wow, we had a great team. That state championship team was unbelievable. Sorry about your dad. I know he's been gone for a while."

"You know, Mr. Shea, it's wonderful that I ran into you. I remember meeting you when I was 6 or 7 years old. You were with the Washington Senators. You took me out to eat. My dad took me to a Red Sox game. We were on vacation at the Cape and he brought me up to the Red Sox game. It was a night game, and after the game, I rode in a cab with you and a bunch of the other ballplayers, and you took me out to eat. I still remember it."

Now it's Spec's turn to gulp. He just stares at me. "I'll be. Yup, I finished up in '55 with the Senators. It was a hell of a lot easier pitching for them than it was for the Yankees. Christ, you throw 5 or 6 decent innings, they loved you down there in Washington. No pressure. New York, you're expected to go 8 or 9 innings and win every game."

We walk outside the store, we talk baseball, a guy even older than Spec walks by, "Hey, come on over here, you know who this is? You remember him, he was my first baseman." It turns out that the former Chief of Police doesn't have a great long-term memory, but his short-term memory is excellent. We talked about his and Spec's pneumonia. I give them both some advice about how long it takes to recover from pneumonia.

"Yeah, you know, the house isn't there any more."

"I know, I just want to drive up the street, and go over to the grave and pay my respects to my grandparents." He's standing in front of his car talking to the Chief. The Chief leaves, Spec and I talk a little bit more, I shake his hand. He looks at me and says, "Your mom still alive?" When I nod and say she's doing real good, he says, "Give her my best." In that moment, I think of my dad, going off to college, bringing home the WASP Homecoming Queen and winding up marrying her. Now it doesn't mean shit; back then it must have represented an enormous gulf to folks here, and I feel the gulf in the tone of the statement, "Give her my best."

Spec ambles to his car, motions to a guy who has been standing by the passenger side door the whole time we've been talking, says, "You going up the hill?" Our eyes meet before the passenger gets in the car, and I know in a minute that he knew my dad, but just didn't know how to talk to me.

It takes a few tries to find Cherry Street. I ride up and down the street a few times. Not much comes back, but I do catch a glimpse of a grape arbor in one of the backyards. Sure enough, part of the street is on a steep incline. As usual, I'm not dealing with a whole lot of time here, I've left myself about an hour for this experience, so I head for the cemetery. I get hopelessly lost and start going around in circles. Pretty hard to do in a town of no more than 15,000 with one main thoroughfare. I go back downtown and ask a couple of different people for directions and just get lost again.

In my criss-crossing, I notice an old gas station on one of the side roads off the main thoroughfare, CHARLIE'S. Looks like an old roadhouse with a new pump. The first time I

ride by, I notice an old guy out there pumping gas. Something draws me back. I make a loop and I find myself in front of CHARLIE'S again. I've gotta stop. I walk in and it's like I've gone back in time 60 years. In the middle of a rectangular room filled with stuff that must be from the 40's and 50's, sits a guy that I quickly judge to be around 80, deep creases, eyelids that, even with his eyes open, cover most of his eyeball. He looks up at me and waits for me to say something. I ask him for directions to the cemetery. He gives them. Then I blurt out, "Did you grow up here? Are you from here?" He nods. I said, "Maybe you knew my family. The Cuddys, Vin Cuddy." He stares at me and says, "I saw your dad put in a shot from half court in 1939. We won the state championship that year. Your dad was a hell of a ballplayer. We were playing Bristol. He was a lefthander. Your dad shot lefthanded. Boy could he shoot. He took a shot and must have put it in from half court. After that, we rolled over those guys and won the state championship. Then he went off to coach Providence." He says, "Your granddad was a cop."

"So all the stories my dad told me about how good a ballplayer he was, he was telling me the truth?" I said, kind of joking. "Your dad was a straight guy. No fooling around with him. He knew what he was doing. He was a good man." I just nod. The guy looks at me. I take him to be Charlie, although I don't remember if he told me his name. He says, "Yeah, your dad died the same year as my brother, you know, '81." This catches me off guard, I don't know what to say. I say, "I'm sorry." He says, "Yeah, my brother was from California." We're both uncomfortable.

He starts talking about how things have changed in Naugatuck, how kids take school busses. "Yeah, those were the days. We walked everywhere." He looks past me to the doorway. "Hey," he says, "come on in." A guy of about 60, with a kind of a flattop. He says, "Hey, you wouldn't believe who this is. Vin Cuddy's son." The new guy looks at me and says, "Your dad offered me a scholarship in 1949." Charlie chimes in and says, "Yup. Hank Mattis here. One of the Mattis twins. Man, they were good ballplayers. Just like your dad. Boy, could they play ball." I say to Hank, "Oh, wow, did you go there?" He says, "No it was Korea and I didn't want to fight, so I joined the Navy. Yup, your dad had me all set to go to Providence, offered me a scholarship." He turns to look at

Charlie, they talk about something, and he says, "Nice to meet you."

Charlie and I chat for a few more minutes. I thank him and walk out. I know he gave me directions, but I've already forgotten them. I find myself in front of the drugstore where this incredible journey started no more than an hour ago. I go in again. I want to talk to the woman behind the counter, the one who made an audible gasp when I told them who I was. She is stocking the shelf when I walk over. I can see she is shy, real reticent. I move to introduce myself. "So you knew my family and you knew my dad?" She's real short, she kind of looks up at me and says, "Everybody knew your dad. Everybody knew your family. Everybody knew the Cuddys." She tells me her name. I can tell that that's all she wants to say, not because of anything else but that fact that she's so shy. I can see her scurrying away and watching things from the sidelines, 30, 40, 50 years ago. Just watching, noticing, never intruding. I say, "Thanks, that's nice to hear. By the way, can you tell me how to get to the cemetery?" That makes her the seventh person in the last 25 minutes that I've asked for directions to the local cemetery.

This time I find it. I feel I've got about 20 minutes if I'm going to make this panel back in Springfield. I say, "Oh, wow, it's not even noontime yet. The office is closed." I wander around some of the headstones, but chance does not lead me to my grandparents' resting place. As I hop in the car, I feel a gentle hand pushing me right in the small of my back, pushing me to come back.