

# Poster Boys ©

JK Savoy

*Poster Boys was derived from my memoir, Night Bird.*

*Night Bird was inspired by the lives of Muhammad Ali & Robert F Kennedy*

Some of us stop living long before we pass away. Others never begin living 'til it's almost too late. Then there's me, in my near life existence, managing the graveyard shift at The Castle Diner, a 24-hour New Jersey greasy spoon. Manager? Ain't that a laugh,' I thought. Looking along the counter at my ten stool kingdom, thirteen if you count the three by the window, I often wonder, 'Who's to manage? Only one person works the midnight shift, so I'm in charge of ... me? And so what if the world takes this 'Joey boy' as seriously as it does anyone who would greet it while wearing a paper hat and a food stained apron.

It seems that lately, I keep thinking about a customer who asked me if I ever read a novel by Franz Kafka called, The Castle. He said, "*Kid, it's a story about guy who couldn't break into one.*" The most notable thing about my castle is its Seeburg juke box, chock full of 1968's extraordinary songs of America's year of protest, enlightenment and very hard choices.' As I flipped a quarter to him, I said, "Jake, play The Animals for me, and your "Moon River" blast from your past."

Old Jake spun on his stool then headed for the Seeburg saying, "Joey me boy, how the hell can y'all keep listenin' ta them songs 'bout high on hemp hippies holed up in rat infested communes while our boys are fightin' their asses off over there in Vietnam, protectin' our freedom? If I could break their doors down, ya know what I'd tell them useless hippie, freak friends of yers?"

"I got all night, what would you tell them, Jake?"

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“I’d say: Don’t just set there an’ sing ‘bout how yer life’s fer shit. Clean the hell up, git the hell offa yer welfare, move the hell outta yer communes an’ git some real jobs! Let me tell ya somethin’ Joey boy, back in my day ...” As The Animal’s Eric Burdon sang, *“We gotta get outta this place, if it’s the last thing we ever do...”*, I zoned out on a fogged up window thinking, ‘I’d go along with that!’

At The Castle Diner, questions and answers would come to this short order cook between hungry mouths waiting and bites taken. Somewhere between reading the headlines or watching for a bus, folks might hear me for a short time: Except for Jake, he’s like that old time Seeburg, always there for me and always loaded with noise. Sometimes he’s there to listen, if only so I might hear myself. He would tell me, *‘What ya say makes no sense ta me er to a customer who’s ‘bitchin’ that his eggs are runny er a burger is burnt, raw er jest plain stinks!’* Hey, aside from an occasional mouse running past me, Jake’s usually my only company between two and four AM; so I get plenty of time to simply ignore him.

Speaking of burgers, reaching into the refrigerator, and finding that the burger tray was more than half empty, I shouted, “Stupid son of a bitch! That goddam wino, middle shift manager never leaves me enough eggs, burger patties or other stuff to get me through the night. No shit, Jake! Next time I have to run downstairs to restock ‘cause lazy-ass Randy didn’t, I’m gonna find his hooch ...”

Interrupting his singalong with Andy Williams, halfheartedly he mumbled, “There ya go agin’ kiddo ... so tell me, yer gonna do what?”

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“I ain’t lyin’ Jake, when I get done with his hopped up grape juice, he’ll either hook up with the nearest AA or plain swear off the damn sauce! Hell yeah, I’m gonna teach that drunken jackass a really good one!”

“Ya didn’t hear a word I told ya, did ya, boy?”

“Of course I did, Jake. What do ya take me for?”

“Ah! Ya’d never know proper music like Moon River if it bit yer dumbass ear. An’ what’s that Randy baloney bustin’ outta yer mouth ‘bout now?”

“Same old bullshit! That goddamn Randy’s boozin’ it up on the job and leaving me short of everything to work with, Jake. Yeah, I tell you night after night what I’m going to do to him, but dammit this is it! I’m gonna find the bottle he stashes in the cellar and ... he’ll never sneak out and drink down there again!”

“Calm down an’ leave him the hell alone, Joey.” Jake grumbled, “Instead of messin’ with a veteran’s means ta forget, maybe ya oughta think about pissin’ in a cup at the recruitin’ station ‘stead of waitin’ fer them ta come fer yer sorry ass.”

At that point, I thought, ‘Let the sermon begin,’ as the muttering wandered through its usual enlistment poster phase with Jake going on to say, “Back when them krauts was kickin’ our butts in the trenches, no one had ta come lookin’ fer me an’ me boys. We was even fightin’ one ‘nother to get ta the head of the line so we could teach them a lesson er two! Let me tell ya, boy...” With him praising his yesterday, he went on to rip apart my today: “... what ya gotta do is, stop listenin’ to them commie protesters all over yer TV. Do yer God given duty! Sign the hell up, get some discipline an’ fight fer our flag like yer supposed ta ...”

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Halfway through his nightly homily, just as they did throughout high school, my ears began to close off to the world outside of me. Deep in my safe place, the voice of Bill Langley, my eleventh grade Natural Science teacher, rang through loud and clear to say, *'When threatened by airborne predators, some tree creatures intuitively adjust their color to their immediate surroundings, thus camouflaging themselves in order to survive the moment and live on.'* I guess that's what my brain learned to do as it switched to listening to The Animals' desperate lyrics groaning from the Seeburg, while avoiding Old Jake's nightly tirade. I thought, 'Hey, thank God some lessons weren't lost. It always comes down to a good news-bad news thing. Good news, The Castle's open 24 hours, so I do have a job. Bad news, sometimes, the only customer for most of the night is this self-righteous geezer in a dilapidated VFW hat who thinks every war's worth fighting because Washington says it is. I wondered, 'Washington? Yeah, this condescending coot's so old he probably served under George himself!'

Whenever Jake would begin his rant, he'd place his upper denture into his shirt pocket. He always did that when he thought he was on a roll. I guess it made it easier for him to talk. What Jake didn't know was, all I saw was a bigoted fossil's gums flapping away as if lip syncing to an off key jukebox. 'Old Jake? At what point in his life did Jake become Old Jake? Maybe at, forty? Yeah, forty's pretty old. It's a bit less than twice my age. If World War One ended in 1918, and he got out at let's say twenty, he has to be around what ... seventy? That means he's been old for about half his life. Shit! Why spend all those years under a crumpled old hat ranting and raving at

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people about the same thing that got your head messed up in the first place? As if his fighting Germany did any good: Japan joined them twenty years later and killed Jake Junior.'

Promptly at 10PM, Randy cried out, "*Another day, another dollar!*" With half closed bloodshot eyes, he handed me the spatula; threw his grease stained apron at the laundry bag; missed it and headed for the exit. The screen door slapped shut behind him. Hearing something sizzling on the grill, I ran to it and flipped the burger he had started and griped under my breath, "A whole dollar? That's twice what you're worth you useless, drunken piece of shit!" Turning to matters at hand, I asked, "This burger and fries for you, Jake?"

Scowling, he answered, "Do you see anyone else in here beside that drugged out hippie sleepin' off his merry-wanna at the other end of the counter, Joey?" Throwing him a quarter, I said, "Hey Jake, play "We Gotta Get Outta This Place" two times, and you know the rest ..."

"Ya ain't gonna be goin' nowheres, boy. Only a matter of time b'fore Uncle Sam gets 'round ta ya. Boy, yer gonna serve yer country an' git yer sorry ass on over ta Vietnam. Like it er not!"

A voice rang out from the other end of the diner, "Hey my man, just who's that sorry ass dude going to serve? The pigs in Washington, who don't give a rat's ass about how many American kids they kill, or their Saigon puppets? All those pigs give a shit about is putting more orders in for pork barrel priced planes and napalm so they can bomb the shit out of villages and hike up their body count. Fuckin' US media loves to hear about

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the latest body count. Those story hungry news whores eat that shit up. And we count on them for our daily dose of truth? Only truth we ever get comes to us through The US Information Agency's reality filters. Ain't no freedom of the press when all they're free to do is report CIA screened lies. But hey my man, another day another pile of bodies to count." Standing, the hippie shouted, "Body count? Now ain't that a laugh an' a half! To the war pigs in Washington, any dead body will do. Half their fuckin' count is Viet Cong: Half is chickens and cattle. The other half is women and kids. Fuckin' mercenaries: That's all America is these days. North or South, the Vietnamese people don't want Yankee trespassers on their turf," said a face beneath a beard.

"Shut yer trap, ya goddamn long haired ungrateful radical! Yer so damn stoned on that shit ya been smokin', ya can't even count right! 'Nother thing, draft dodgers like y'all ain't earned the right ta say shit 'bout what's goin' on over there. Boy, get yerself a goddamn haircut an' go fight fer yer flag."

Sticking a burning filter cigarette into the space where once there was a tooth, the hippie shot back at Jake, "Hey, my man. Like, maybe I would fight if it were the fuckin' Viet Cong landing on the beach at Seaside Heights or they were sky diving through the trees at Washington Square Park. Man, all we're doing there is keeping those people from having the government they want. We're not their liberators, we're a hit squad of trespassers who invaded someone's back yard. America's not defending itself over there, it's defending the fuckin' interest of multinational corporate pigs, military pigs and the pigs in

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Washington! Bunch of filthy fuckin' pigs! It's all one big fuckin' pigsty!"

"Something with your eggs?"

"Bacon or ham, Joey. Same difference."

Rising from his stool, Jake took aim with his finger at the hippie and hollered, "Ya see? This is what happens when them goddamn television turncoats lets them commies spit their swill inta our livin' rooms. The kids hear them shoutin' their propagander all over the place an' when they gets big enough to carry a gun fer their country, all they do is carry on 'bout how the war's wrong! Wrong? Only thing wrong is callin' ya bunch o' scaredy-cat draft dodgers men. Youse kids today are jest plain afraid ta fight. That's it! Ya ain't men at all. Yer jest a bunch o' little mamma's boys full o' shit an' excuses. Let me tell ya somethin,' boy. When they called me for WWI an' they called my Jake Junior for WWII, all we could say was, '*Mine is not ta reason why. Mine is but ta do an' die.*' An' some of us sure as hell did! Whether it's right er wrong, ya gotta do what yer president says is right! That's what bein' an American's all 'bout."

Politely the hippie sat back, waited for me to fry his eggs while allowing Jake his time to rant. And that's just what Jake did: "Look what happened, good as the job we did with finishin' them Japs off in the Pacific, one of them still walked away an' turned them Vietnamese aginst' us! Ya see, we can't give up. We gotta finally take that Jap out an' git done what we started."

As I placed his bacon and eggs before him, the puzzled hippie asked, "Hey my man, what the hell do you mean when

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you said that a ‘Jap’ was the one who turned the Vietnamese against us?” With the upside down Ledger before him, Jake yelled, “Smarten up an’ listen ta what the news is really tellin’ us, ya draft dodgin’ jerkoff! There’s a Jap general out there leadin’ them Vietnamese against America. What’s the matter with youse hippies? Don’t ya know anythin’ ‘cept how ta burn our schools down?”

Totally baffled the hippie and I looked at Jake as the battle hardened veteran jabbed his finger at the paper’s gory front page photos. After the hippie swallowed his toast, his jaw dropped. Then he exclaimed, “Jap? My man, hold on just a New York minute! Did you hear the news refer to a Jap general or a General Jap?”

Jake said, “Clear as a bell. Heard it with me own ears: ‘*General, Jap!*’”

Launching a mouthful of home fries, the hippie threw his head back, laughed aloud then shouted, “Hey my man, that’s G-i-a-p, not J-a-p! They’re talking about General Vo Nguyen Giap. He’s the legendary Viet Minh patriot who coined the phrase, “*Volcano beneath the snow.*” Dig this shit! He drove the French out at Dien Bien Phu so Vietnam could make their choice to be communist or whatever. Ya gotta think this shit through, my man: Why wouldn’t an elected socialist regime make sense in an impoverished agrarian country? How did choosing Vietnam’s form of government become Uncle Sam’s choice to make? So now we’re over there trying to shove freedom down their throats? Some freedom: Freedom to choose a stooge of a candidate dangling from Uncle Sam’s right hand or the one



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dangling from his left? Or choice three, fight the fuckin' mercenary invaders and die free while doing it!"

Jake replied, "Big deal! No matter how much commie malarkey ya mouth off, a gook is still a gook. Call him what ya will. They're still all a bunch of goddamn commies over there, an' yer their traitor comrade right here at home!"

With a smoke puff billowing around the cigarette stuck between his teeth, the hippie rose exposing two campaign buttons. The largest of them read, '*Bobby Kennedy in '68.*' the other said, '*End This Stupid War Now!*' Since Jake and the hippie had been involved in a heated argument, the hippie's mellow look toward my friend seemed to be out of place. Jake's expression was his usual cantankerous grimace as he matched the hippie's ascent from his stool, move for move. After the drama ceased and the hippie left, I noticed one of his 'Bobby' buttons laying on the floor. After his Minibus' taillights faded from view, I figured, 'what the hell' and pinned it to my shirt while wondering, 'Bobby Kennedy is a bit older than me, yet a whole lot younger than Jake. Gazing at my blurred image in the darkened window, I reopened the clasp so the pin's point would remind me that: "*We can be better than this!*" Here are two know-nothing chumps running their half-cocked mouths and there's Bobby Kennedy, running to be America's next president!"

What can be more miserable than looking forward to four more hours of working the graveyard shift?' I thought, then said to myself, 'Yeah, right! Here's an easy answer: All I have to do is to watch the stiff's parading in and out from the Castle Diner's ever-slapping screen door. Should I be toting a shovel rather

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than a spatula?’ I watched their reflections in the darkened windows and mused: ‘There’s Old Jake, slurping away at his fourth cup of coffee. No wonder he sits so close to the men’s room door. Then there’s his wartime buddy, Old Phil, standing his usual nickel tip on its end on the counter before taking his usual two containers of light and sweet and two sticky-buns to his drawbridge attendant job. He’s been alone, sitting in a tiny shack, watching trains ride past him and boats float beneath him twelve hours a night, six nights a week for the past forty years. Perhaps Phil may have it right: If another Great Depression hits America, his job is safe since he’s the senior bridge attendant because my friend Eddie Flynn, who was recently hired as the relief attendant, recently graduated high school with me.

There have been a few times during my short life when good news comes my way. But sadly, if I’m within earshot of anyone anywhere, the least likely person would bring me a dose of shitty news that would steamroller any rare time of serenity. It was during my night of hoping that someone, somewhere could pull some strings and save my sorry ass from being drafted into the meatgrinder that was the Vietnam War that I got the word about my friend, Tom Jazinsky.

On his way to cover Phil’s shift on the drawbridge, Eddie stopped by The Castle for his breakfast. and to lay the bad news on me. Stunned, I asked, “Tom? No! How can that be? Don’t mess with my head, Eddie. I didn’t even know that Tom joined the Marines, never mind he was in ‘Nam,” Eddie’s eyelids lowered as he reached across the counter. We grasped one another’s hands in my recently learned soul shake as I asked, “Dammit to Hell, Eddie! As if it fuckin’ matters now ... did they tell you how Tom got it?”

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“Word has it, he took one in the head. Only good thing is, it had to be quick. What a fuckin’ waste.” Overwhelmed with grief, I spun around as Eddie shouted, “Joey, take it the fuck easy!” as I landed a rock hard punch on a recently polished stainless steel panel.

“Yeah! Take it easy on Mike’s buildin’, ya un’preciative brat. Yer here ta work, not bust up his joint!” hollered Jake, peering over the top of The Ledger.

“Shut up, old man!” I shouted, “You of all people? Just shut the hell up!”

Puzzled, Jake looked to Eddie. While I sat on a step stool behind the counter and buried my head into my arms, Eddie went to Jake to explain what happened. Jake sprang up, came over to me, rubbed my shoulders and said, “The boy gave his all fer a thing that’s bigger than any of us. Yer friend died a hero. Ya gotta be proud ya knew him, Joey.”

“Is that how you see it, Jake? Is it really?” He backed off while I yelled, “Fuck you, and fuck your never-ending ‘martyrs for the greater good’ bullshit! Tom was just a friggin’ kid. He should’ve been taking road trips or just doing, whatever! Sorry to tell you this: It’s people like you, believing in the shit you’ve been handing me night after night that make guys like Tom go off and get wasted for ... fuckin’ trespassing?” Recalling that Tom was somewhat younger than Eddie and me, I added, “Shit! That poor kid wasn’t even old enough to vote for the son of a bitch who sent him over there to take one for the team!” Jake turned away as I added, “Thanks for the shoulder massage, but leave me the hell alone, Jake!” While Eddie walked Jake to his stool, I shouted, “In the fuckin’ head? Why?”

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Flashing back to my times with Tom, what came immediately to mind was our graduation night: The end of our high school days and the beginning of that thing we'd been preparing for all those years dubbed as, 'our future'. Officially, graduation was called commencement: Conventional wisdom's launching pad for our adult lives; the first steps of our walk in the sun. Yeah, right! What a laugh. There was a walk in store for us alright, providing we could stagger out of the parties on graduation night. Sorry, I should say, commencement.

During my high school days, things were pretty good for Mom and Dad. Back then, they owned a diner that was a roaring success. Mom managed the day shift, our home life and managed to keep Dad on the straight and narrow. Her doing all of that kept her from her depressions, if we were all lucky. As long as Mom kept the bottle a foot from his reach, Dad could manage the night shift leaving us with a few hours for living our lives. All in all, Dad didn't do badly for being the son of people with barbed wire scars along their backs as proof of passage from Canada and into the land of opportunity.

In Acadia, a region in the Atlantic provinces, Dad's people were a mix of Native Canadians and everyone else who may have hopped over or crawled under fences to get away from everywhere but there. Mom's folks emigrated from Poland to Pennsylvania where my grandfather would work in the coal mines, only to die of black lung at the age of thirty five. He did save enough to buy a small farm before he passed. My grandmother died of the Spanish flu a few years earlier. His new wife took over the farm, kept the two kids from him and shipped Mom and her two older sisters to New Jersey to work as domestics. Mom was twelve: Tough times.

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Commencement! There I was, at the cusp of winning the prize our ancestors dreamed of, the high school diploma! As they would always say: *'It is the key to unlocking the doors standing before our kids, so they can seize The American Dream'*. Disregarding all existing options, I couldn't dream up a dream worth seizing. Conventional wisdom's prize at hand was, Mom and Dad would commence to find happiness in the Florida sun: I would get the keys to the cash register and Dad's new Caddy, commencing to take the reins of the family diner. Sadly, grease fires do have their way of laying dreams and dreamers to rest.

Finally, it was high school commencement night. Maybe the three of us were the last in line to get our diplomas, but we were the first to commence with post-grad partying. There we were, hoisting a few and then a few more at Eddie Flynn's house. There's that time when you get so damn drunk that the worst decision seems like the best idea. Beer bottle in hand, I said to Tom, *"I don't wanna get my dad's Caddy all stunk up with beer breath and puke, so follow me to my house and I'll park it: Then drive me back to the party so we can get totally fucked up and barf our asses off at our leisure."*

Great minds thinking alike, Tom said, *"Right behind you, Joey. Let's go!"*

Things were going absolutely great. We did everything one might expect of kids with alcohol content easily surpassing that of hemoglobin. Tom turned when I turned, slowed down or speeded up when I did. Absolutely great, until I stopped at a red light. Tom didn't. Before the cops arrived, all I could see was my friend spreadeagled on the hood of his Crown Vic' with glass chunks stuck into nearly every inch of his face.

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Numb from head to toe, I grabbed my swimming towel from the back seat. Carefully, I placed it under Tom's head. Then I took a pair of needle nose pliers from my glove compartment and meticulously pulled each and every glass piece from his face and scalp while yelling, "*Hey, Tom! We can't let the guy voted Best Looking Dude go to the emergency room lookin' like shit!*" Next, I sopped up the blood from a head wound while being sure not to move his body one inch for fear of spinal injury. By the time an ambulance came, plastered as I was, I had gotten all of the windshield glass out and had his entire face looking showroom new. Recollecting the last time the three of us were together that insane night, I yelled, "They shot Tom in the head? Hell no! Not in his face! Those motherfuckers!"

Hearing that, Jake muttered, "Then git yer ass on over there an' git even with them godless gooks!"

Before I could fire back at Jake, I looked at the wall my fist had visited. Four little knuckle indentations were embedded in the stainless steel. I mumbled, "That's mature," realizing how my rage could shatter another's American dream. Reigning in my testosterone surge, ever so calmly, I stated, "Tell me Jake, if I go over there to get even, exactly which 'gook' should I shoot first?"

Shaking his head from side to side, he hollered, "Don't matter! Ya jest fire away 'cause every damn one o' them'll be shootin' back at y'all. There ya go agin, Joey, questionin' what ya shouldn't. War ain't supposed to be personal. War's everyone's business, an' everyone's duty. Ya should be more like yer friend an' fight fer yer flag."

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Eddie turned to Jake asking, “Fight for a flag? A fucking flag? Shouldn’t we be asking who’s waving that flag at us, and why?” He kicked the screen door open yelling, “And maybe stick the pole straight up his ass!” while the door slapped shut behind him. Watching Eddie walk to his car, I recalled a customer friend’s words to me the night before, ‘*Sometimes our insight gets clouded over by our vision,*’ and asked Jake, “If that goddamn flag’s wrapped around your goddamn’ head, will you finally see the goddamn light?”

Slapping The Ledger shut, he said, “Ahh! Ya see yer goddamn God given duty an’ ya do it. Period!”

There are times when I should stop talking to parrots, especially parrots who have been trained by other parrots. Those were the times I needed to be alone with my thoughts. After Jake went back to checking out The Ledger for yet another storewide clearance sale at Bamberger’s, I went into the kitchen and shut the lights. Sitting in the glow of the oven’s pilot light, I flashed back to our junior year. Tom, Eddie and I had been buddies since kindergarten. During our high school careers, we weren’t ones for sports, schoolwork or trying to be like the cool-kid ass kissers. We were plain old screw ups. Screwing up can be a full time job and we worked hard at it. True, we weren’t much for studies. But there was one class that made suffering through five periods a day worth it. Oh yeah, period six was the carrot at the end of the stick. Period six was when we would spend forty minutes with the most amazing Social Studies teacher to slip through the system. His name was Luis Mendez. He said we could call him Louie but on one condition: Only when the door to the classroom closed and the hallways were clear of ass-kissing hall monitors or roving vice-principals.

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Louie would say, “*They ain’t princes, and they ain’t my pals!*” as he gave one last look down the halls before shutting the door. Then he’d stand before us and let us talk about the shit going down in Washington, the shit going down in Alabama, the shit burning down in Newark, Harlem or other places where we the little people might catch one for being just there. And yeah: The latest buzzwords that were on all of our minds like, Vietnamization, escalation and so on.

One day, Louie shut the door and said: “*I read something shocking and sad this morning in The Ledger’s obituaries. Ritchie Sinclair was somewhat ahead of you kids, but possibly your older brothers and sisters knew him. Ritchie was my student. I knew him and his writings well. He graduated six years ago. After high school, he went to West Point and became a cavalry lieutenant.*

“*Three days ago, Ritchie died as a captain. He was sitting in a barber’s chair in Saigon waiting for a shave. Unknown to him, his barber was a Viet Cong assassin. He slit Ritchie’s throat. I want to read something that Captain Richard Sinclair wrote for our weekly poetry reading just before his graduation:*

*Clouds of war in skies of strife  
Visions of the end of life  
Those who hunger in our land  
Pray to their god, but answer to man  
They raise their banners and state their claims  
They shout the words: “We’re not to blame!  
God is on our side. Within our chariots, he  
rides  
Silence the infidels who claim our land!*



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*Destroy the godless in our righteous stand!”  
The young of the world with chests held high  
The colors they wear, for them they’ll die  
But behold Merlin, who has their eye ...*

I left the kitchen to go out front while wondering, ‘What is Louie telling his classes today?’ Considering the body count between then and now, there are other students to talk about besides someone who wrote poetry and went to West Point. For instance: Tom Jazinsky never wrote poetry nor went to college, but he sure could shout out a tune or two as the front man for a Four Seasons tribute band. Tom was just one more immigrant kid who finished high school believing the things his folks raised him to believe. After a few six packs with the guys went down, things did come up. One of the things Tom would say to us was: *‘Americans should be ready to pay the price to have their shot at the American Dream. So wake up and dream the fuck on!’*

Perhaps there was a deeper meaning to Tom and the Jazinsky family’s singing along with Mitch. I recall a night when we were all hanging out at Tom’s house. I was never much for singing, but Tom sure was. He excused himself from our card game so he could join his folks and follow the bearded one’s baton as they sat on their brand new Castro Convertible sofa while belting out: “ .... *to fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into Hell for a heavenly cause...* ” Perhaps Tom heard those words and saw the stars above but not the bullet coming at him. Tom and I never talked about feelings nor beliefs. I’ll never know if he had

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thought those lyrics through or, like the night he sang them loudly, he chose to follow the bouncing ball.

Perhaps Tom wore his uniform proudly because it was the pinnacle of the steps guys like us were taught to take on our pathway to being good and proper Americans. It was all made quite clear: Becoming an American warrior followed becoming a Boy Scout, which followed becoming a Cub Scout. It was up to us and all we had to do was follow along step by step on the path laid out before us. It went back to an inspirational U.S. Government issued poster on our high school's gymnasium wall: A dreamy eyed kid in a blue uniform with a gold neckerchief and blue and gold cap looked upward to a bigger kid in a beige uniform decked out with ribbons and merit badges: He looked upward to an even bigger kid smiling in combat fatigues like there was no tomorrow, while holding his U.S. Government issued M-1 rifle. Starry eyed, all gazed skyward in hope of their reward from Heaven, never seeing what awaits them beyond the edge of a precipice to Hell.

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