

CHAPTER ONE: 13 Christopher Street

John Lake woke up alone in his new studio apartment.

It was a Sunday, a day off, because the coming week's issue of Newsweek had gone to the printer late last night. No more edits, no further changes were possible. The magazine, including John's sports feature for the upcoming issue, on A.J. Foyt's racing season championship, had been put to bed.

He surveyed his nearly empty new space, still foreign to him. There was nothing on the white walls, no photographs of his children, no favorite souvenirs from championship games past or his Navy days in Hawaii, no comforting familiarity at all. There was no phone. He had no food or a way to cook it; not even any booze. There was just a small pile of his possessions in the middle of the unfurnished room.

John had moved in – if you could call it that – to this Greenwich Village studio 10 days ago, on the first of December. Never the type to keep his trophies or frame his cover stories, he didn't have much to bring, just a typewriter and a couple of suits, really. White shirts and ties. Razor, toothbrush and comb in the small bathroom, some books and notepads and his book manuscript were scattered on the few surfaces available: some cardboard boxes, a small desk and a big clunky bookshelf. He had a small cot for sleeping.

There were more clothes at his girlfriend's apartment, a half-mile down Bleeker Street, as well as a few other personal items. John had given Jean his Phi Beta Kappa key, which now sat atop her dresser with some of his cufflinks and tie clips. He had been staying with her when he wasn't traveling, but he needed a place to write, and they thought that he ought to have his own place for the sake of appearances. Besides, things had not been going that well with Jean lately.

The rest of his possessions were at John's house in New Jersey, where his soon-to-be ex-wife Alice and his two small children lived. Other than during two brief reconciliation attempts, John hadn't lived there for almost two years. He had grabbed a few things from there, mostly books, the previous weekend. Alice and the children had been off to a museum in the city, so there were no arguments or tears on this visit, but he hadn't seen the kids, either. Alice was being difficult about that. He left a note.

John was tired of fighting all the time, but he recognized that he never failed to get ugly himself during their contentious phone calls. They just couldn't get along any more, too much had happened, and far too much had been said, which is why they finally agreed to a divorce settlement around Thanksgiving. He'd called to arrange picking up some of his things the week before last and they argued. He'd tried to reach her last week, but couldn't, which frustrated him. He finally got a hold of her on Friday and they bickered again.

Despite his troubles and a long week at work, John felt okay on this morning. His arm still hurt slightly from a liquor-assisted fall a week or so prior, but otherwise he felt fine. His ability to function well the day after a bottle of booze had kept him employed – actually, it was almost a requirement at Newsweek – but this was not one of those mornings when he peered in the mirror and looked better than he ought to, or needed a beer for breakfast to take the edge off.

No, he hadn't had that much to drink the night before; he'd been too tired – it was another tough week – so he just slept. The tranquilizers his psychiatrist had prescribed helped with that, although he needed to be careful about mixing them with booze. With the late nights embedded in the weekly editorial process at Newsweek,

avoiding alcohol was near impossible, but it was rest, not martinis, that John's therapist had recommended.

Hung over or not, well-rested or over-worked, John was always privately amazed by the restorative effects a shower and shave had on his dark, swarthy mien, as well as his sense of well-being. A physical examination in September had verified him to be quite healthy, in fact. At just a hair over six-feet tall, he weighed an optimal 180 pounds. His pulse and blood pressure were excellent; all routine lab-work, blood tests and x-rays had come back normal. His dark-rimmed glasses corrected his only physical problem, near-sightedness.

It gave John satisfaction to know that, despite his sedentary occupation, a little attention paid to his diet and donning his running shoes when he got the chance had maintained the toned, lean form that helped him perform as a gifted athlete in his younger days. His long limbs and thin waist were smaller individually than they seemed as an ensemble, for his physical presence was large. Even those who dealt with him solely on an intellectual basis noticed his loose but expectant posture, unpracticed in demeanor yet somehow attuned to his surroundings. He just seemed ready, for whatever, and those around him felt it. Acquaintances thought him to be reserved, but even the subtleties of his countenance were demonstrative to those who knew him well. If a man could be simultaneously laid-back and intense, it was John Lake.

Having his belongings scattered among three addresses didn't please John, but it didn't paralyze him, either. He was pretty simple in his requirements for a man in his position, the sports editor of Newsweek who'd been hired at 34, and though he certainly appreciated the finer things, a typewriter, clean shirt and ham sandwich would easily meet his needs most days. A cigar was a bonus. He was a newspaper man after all, a sports writer, who preferred a smoky press box to a fancy restaurant and would take longer to savor a well-turned phrase than he would a fussed-over meal.

There were times, though, when his requirements were not easily met, when his ineffable sense of longing ruled his thinking. He didn't want to be alone, and this morning his sad restlessness felt particularly acute.

His girlfriend Jean was visiting her sister in Philadelphia for the weekend, attending a christening. John hadn't wanted to go, and she had thus been angry that he'd called her there yesterday, inquiring when she'd return. Since she'd been less tolerant of his recent needy behavior, he didn't dare call her again.

He knew he should work on the book – his second – that he'd been neglecting. He had already received an advance from his agent, Zander Hollander, who'd helped him publish his first biography, on the track star Jim Ryun. That one had come pretty quickly once he got organized and started pounding it out. It was due to be published in the spring. But his book on St. Louis Cardinals' pitcher Bob Gibson hadn't been started, despite a looming deadline.

Under normal circumstances, John did not have trouble writing. On the contrary, the struggle he most commonly had with telling the story was with brevity. He wrote intricate, clever leads to his stories, often setting the scene with three or four paragraphs, just as his idol Red Smith – a former co-worker at the New York Herald Tribune – had done. John had so much knowledge, experience and education, appropriate metaphors for the subject at hand were as accessible as the change in his pocket, jingling around waiting to be spent. This baseball book on an athlete he admired would ordinarily be the perfect venue for John's talents.

But all he had to show for his efforts thus far were the tapes of his long interview with Gibson. And they were at Jean's apartment.

So that settled it: He had a good excuse not to work, and he wasn't going to sit in this place all day. It was too depressing. He sure as hell wasn't going into the office, either – he spent too much time there as it was. He just needed to get out. Perhaps a newspaper and a plate of eggs, maybe a beer, would help him start his day. He could figure out from there what to do.

He had tickets to the Giants football game that afternoon – he always had tickets, as well as a press pass – so that was a possibility. The Jets were in town, too. Maybe he'd just find a payphone and call someone to go with him. Someone to talk to. Someone to listen, who'd understand. A friend.

He didn't want to be alone.

John Lake locked the door behind him and walked down Christopher Street. It was a nice day for December, partly sunny with temperatures in the 30s. Rain and sleet would move in later that night, but the day had begun cool and pleasant.

Anyone who noticed him leaving the area that Sunday morning would have seen a man come down the four brick steps with a lithe, easy grace; a fit, professional-looking fellow with jet-black hair and dark sport coat who moved down the street like someone younger than his 37 years, with a determined yet thoughtful gait.

Any friend might have been concerned: He was neatly dressed and freshly shaven, but his facial expression was slack and his gaze turned downward. He was a troubled man and his face betrayed the weight of his burdens to those who knew him well.

The December 11, 1967 issue of Newsweek was rolling off the presses for distribution the following day. The cover, featuring a dark-haired, bespectacled Robert McNamara, asked, "Why is He Leaving?"

PINKERTON'S, INC.

CONFIDENTIAL

Locate - John Lake

Report of XVG

Date Friday, February 2, 1968

Miss Sandy Robertson
54 West 58th St.
N.Y., N.Y.

On Sunday morning, Dec. 10, 1967, Lake telephoned Miss Robertson at about 12:30 p.m. and asked for a date. She refused and he telephoned again at about 1:30 p.m. and at 1:45 p.m. and said he just had to see her. Miss Robertson agreed to see him only because she said that had she not, he would not have stopped calling her all day. Lake arrived at her apartment at about 4:30 p.m. and she stated that he told her that he had not been drinking. He was not drunk at this time, but Miss Robertson feels that he must have had some drinks because of subsequent behavior. They went to La Popette, a restaurant on 58th St. near 2nd Ave. and each had a drink before dinner and wine with dinner. During the dinner, subject became quite drunk and afterwards he had several drinks. When it came time to pay the bill subject had trouble holding his wallet while searching for his credit card and dropped it on the floor several times.

Miss Robertson finally took the wallet and gave him the American Express card. While searching for this card she noticed he had other credit cards plus several press cards, all in his name. There were only several one dollar bills in cash in the wallet.

They took a taxi from the restaurant to 54 W. 58th St. and after paying the fare, Miss Robertson said she believes he had about \$3.00 left in the wallet. Lake wanted to come up to her apartment, but Miss Robertson declined because she said he was so drunk that he would just "pass out." Miss Robertson went into her apartment building door at about 9:00 p.m., did not look back and stated she could not really say which direction subject took when he left her. He had told her he was going back to his apartment on Christopher Street and when she asked him to take a cab because of his condition, subject said he would take the subway.

My father, John Lake, disappeared the evening of December 10, 1967. He had dinner with a woman in midtown Manhattan, took her home in a cab, which he then dismissed, and walked down the street toward the subway. He was never seen again.

I was five years old.

I was forty years old when I cleaned the attic of my family's home and began to learn some of the details surrounding his disappearance, and a great deal about him. A musty box in the attic served as an appropriate emotional metaphor for me: I opened it and dusted off what I knew and how I felt. In the process, I learned a lot about both of us.

The source of all that I had known as a young child about my father, apart from my own random memories as a five-year-old, was my mother. Your father worked in New York City, she told me. He was the sports editor of a big magazine. He was an important guy. He'd met Joe Namath, Cassius Clay and Willie Mays. He'd gotten a ride in a racecar.

He wrote a book about Jim Ryun, the track star, in which he'd mentioned me in the foreword.

My father was almost a mythical figure to me, but unlike the aforementioned sports legends, most of my dad's clothes remained in our house in New Jersey, which allowed me the opportunity to spend time in his closet, breathing in his smell, trying to remember him, to pull him back to me through some olfactory voodoo I knew wouldn't work, yet somehow comforted me anyway.

He was gone.

After a while, it seemed like he'd always been gone and that I'd always felt sad about it. His absence left me feeling exposed and different. I don't remember being told he had disappeared; I remember wishing he'd come home.

That was long ago. I have kids of my own now. Yet I'm pulled back to those old emotions as I sit amidst boxes of his letters and photos, legal documents and knick-knacks that belonged to him, all pieces of some odd, deeply personal mosaic I'm struggling to assemble, compelled to figure it out, to figure him out, 35 years later. The jumble has taken over my dining room completely; other piles sit next to my bed and couch and on my kitchen table. I study these clues intently, one by one, like an archaeologist. Often I realize I've been staring off into space, the object of consideration still in my lap. Everything I look at requires careful thought, and it is slow work.

I found many family treasures that week last summer, including photo albums and various correspondence belonging to my grandparents dating back to the early 1900s. Some old phonograph recordings, including one of my parents' wedding ceremony and some funny holiday greetings sent home by my dad during his navy days. A civil war bayonet. Wonderful old china. Birth certificates. Marriage licenses. Diplomas. There were lots of news clippings and scrapbooks because both my parents were journalists.

In the old family photographs, everyone is thin and lives in a still, black and white world, and it's difficult to imagine what happened just before and right after a picture was taken. The portraits and poses, just like those on the wall in my grandmother's house, seemed to me as a child to be set-pieces to some game, and these were the relatives I'd been dealt. But they were untouchable. They could not be moved or manipulated or brought to life, they were just there, in graduation caps, tuxedos, wedding dresses and military uniforms, to be observed, and perhaps, my grandmother had whispered, to observe me. I would study pictures of my dad for clues to his whereabouts and wonder if he was in heaven, and if he could see me.

There are people you know are special, even if you haven't met them before. You can feel it, sometimes, if you have spent time with them. But you can always tell by the way people talk about them. At the end of every anecdote or description, the person telling the story loses his vocabulary, ending merely with a chuckle or a melancholy shake of the head.

“John... hmm... he was something, that one.”

If I pushed for more details, I might get, “I think of him all the time, to this day. He was a treasure.” Generally, I wouldn't push beyond that.

I understood – from everyone who knew him – my dad was one of those special people. Thus, as I realized the meaning of the clutter surrounding me, 35 years later, it became important to me to preserve his memory, as well as the many disparate clues to his essence that poked out of over-stuffed scrapbooks and overflowing boxes of paper. There was no body, after all; these were his ashes.

I developed a curator's mentality that week, telling myself how important it was to preserve these memories for my family, for my children; that if I didn't do it, it wouldn't be done. My mother might claim she knew exactly where everything was, that she'd eventually get it all organized, but like so many of her assurances, it would never happen. After all, it hadn't happened in the 35 years since he vanished. No, it was up to me, and I had set aside this vacation week for the purpose of finally going through all the boxes in the attic.

At the back of the attic was an ugly maroon velour suitcase, small, like an overnight bag. It sat atop a cardboard box stuffed with typewritten pages, completely disorganized. Another box nearby held at least a hundred letters, still in their envelopes. I saw they were in my mother's handwriting. Next to that was a plastic trash bag, stuffed with empty wine bottles, left there long ago. Another old stash, hidden by my mother. She'd been back here, apparently, but I had not. I carried everything downstairs, as I had done all week, to sort and throw out and organize and re-box and label.

I knew I had found something interesting immediately, because near the top of the box of papers was a stapled sheaf of papers entitled, “STATEMENT OF DISAPPEARANCE.”

It was a form that had been filled out about my father: Lake, John Eric.

Date of birth, Place of birth, Address, etc.

Date he was last seen or heard of: December 10, 1967.

I knew it had been right before Christmas – it was a grim part of family lore – but here was the date. December 10th. A Sunday, it turns out.

Who last saw or heard of him? Sandy Robertson.

Relationship. Friend.

Who is Sandy Robertson?

Where did he intend to go? 13 Christopher Street, New York, N.Y. or Teaneck, N.J.

Teaneck is where we lived in New Jersey. Christopher Street must have been his studio apartment in Greenwich Village. He and my mother were separated and heading for divorce, I had learned that later on. But I'd heard he was coming home that night, that he wanted to see us, my sister and me, and he never showed up. That's what my mother told me many times. Why would she say that?

When and where was search made? 1967 – 1968 –1971 personally by Alice Lake.

Place. New York, N.Y. and Teaneck, N.J.

This is some sort of insurance form. It wasn't filled out when he disappeared, it was completed by my mother when he was declared legally dead, seven years later.

What other efforts were made to locate him? See attached summaries and report of Pinkerton's, Inc.

Pinkerton's. The detective agency. That's right, I'd heard about this, but forgot about it, too, long ago. They had looked for my dad.

PINKERTON'S, INC.

CONFIDENTIAL

Locate - John Lake

Report of CGB

Date Monday, February 5, 1968

**Mr. Zander Hollander
Associated Features
370 Lexington Avenue
N.Y. N.Y. Suite 606**

Arrived at captioned firm, where lobby directory indicated offices were in suite 606. Upon arrival at the firm's two room office, I interviewed Mr. Zander Hollander and after stating my business, he wanted to know who hired Pinkerton's to find his friend and associate Mr. John Lake. After assuring him I did not know, he, looking at Mr. Lake's photograph, said, "I guess we are all trying to find him in some way."

In my mother's handwriting was a list of people she had contacted after he had disappeared. I recognized a few of the names of old family friends, relatives or people she'd mentioned in another context. Who were these other folks? Many were undoubtedly professional acquaintances. I wonder where they are now? What did they think happened?

I didn't make the decision to try to contact people who knew my father for quite a while. For several weeks I would pluck a letter or a document out of the box at random, read it, perhaps grab another, more often just hold the first one, thinking. Wondering. Remembering being little. I had no plan, no method of research. I just kept picking at the pile lightly and then digesting what I'd read. Slowly, over and over, I repeated my trip to the boxes to see what else I might find.

It was a month-long addiction. The boxes were full of dangerous drugs, some of them capable of immense satisfaction; others, like narcotics, caused depression, mood swings and confusion. And if I took too much at one sitting, I overdosed.

After a couple of weeks of complete immersion, I thought, "I need to be careful with this stuff. It's powerful." And I realized as I stitched the few scattered memories I already had into this patchwork of new information, there was much more I needed to know.

I've always remembered that my father was a life-long New York (baseball) Giants fan. I knew this because of a memory I have that, while blurry, I have thought about often. Honestly, I don't know if I was there or if my mother told the story. Both, perhaps. But it goes like this: My father is reading the sports page at the breakfast table, muttering something about the Giants' poor performance of late.

My mother overheard this as she leaned over and set something down on the table. Since his complaints about the Giants were apparently as frequent as the daily newspaper, she said, exasperated, "Why don't you just root for the Yankees? The Yankees are good."

His hand slammed down on the table and he looked up, angry and disgusted. "What are you talking about? You don't just give up on your team because they lose! Christ!" He shook his head, exasperated, and went back to his box scores.

He hadn't given up, even when his beloved team moved to San Francisco. My sports-impaired mother didn't understand loyalty to one's team, even after 16 years of marriage to her sportswriter husband, and had further blasphemed by suggesting a defection to the hated Yankees.

At the time, I didn't understand any of the history behind each of their remarks. But I sure understood "don't give up on your team." I adopted it.

As I got older, and became a sports fan myself, I wondered where my dad might have been in 1951 – he would have been 21 – when the Giants' Bobby Thomson hit the pennant-winning home run dubbed "The shot heard round the world." What had he done, I wondered, how happily had he yelled out, who was he with? It would be the kind of story I like to tell my children today, one of many I wanted to hear, the kind of father-to-son oral tradition I had always bitterly missed.

I found the answer in a box of his letters to my mother from the Navy, written from Pearl Harbor in the early '50s, and as he affirmed his love for baseball and recounted his joy at the improbable news of the Giants' victory – he had been in boot camp in Great Lakes – I felt as if I had uncovered one of the Earth's greatest mysteries. I knew. I *knew!* Just this one little harmless bit of history made such a difference; it made me feel closer to him. I was back in the breakfast nook, looking up at him, listening to his story.

"...Bob Gardner sent his pennant predictions (we always exchange 'em) and strangely enough we differed on only one team in the whole American League – both picked long shot Cleveland for the flag. He went for the Giants in the National, I was scared and picked Bklyn. Interested? What the hell. You're gonna hear this all your life. I'm baseball-crazy, and especially out here where there's no good ball to watch, I'll go completely wacky once the major league seasons get going. Very irrational behavior, but very satisfying...

Happiest moment of my boot camp career came when Bobby Thomson whacked that homer that won the flag and beat Brooklyn – I'll never forget it. Jumped so high out of my seat I never quite came down...haven't yet."

After a few weeks, I was able to resist picking through the boxes when my kids were around. It was too hard to instantly snap out of my funk and attend to them properly. I told them what I had been doing, though, and some of the things I was learning. They were mildly interested.

"Cool," my kids would say. "But can you tell us some more stories about when you were little?"

That simply, they reminded me that I was the father now. Whatever lacuna remained from my own childhood, my children reminded me that the man standing before them was much more interesting to them than a grandfather they'd never met. It was a good grounding for me. We all wanted to know what the hell had gone on when I was a child.

Family history is passed along in increments, often incidentally. You're looking in the mirror, adjusting your tie, and your daughter wanders in and asks you a question. She lies on the bed, hands propping up her chin, watching you, asking questions about ties and suits and the people at work. And it goes from there. It reminds me of being little myself, and I realize that despite what I may have missed, I need to give them all the stories they want. I owe it to them. So I try to respond patiently to each inquiry, glad to provide an answer and amused at the thought of where she'll file away the information and how it will come out again.

I was little. I was curious, too. I wanted to know about a great many things, and many of my questions were unanswered, others never asked. I remember that acutely, and it guides my instincts as a parent.

"When I was little..." I begin an anecdote, and afterward, she is satisfied. In fact, she'll tell *me* the story later that day.

"Remember, Daddy?"

"Yep, I do."

I knew I had missed out on that interplay as a child, at least with my father. My kids won't. But I wonder, how am I different from him? He loved my sister and I, just as I love my children. He wanted the best for us, everyone who knew him told me so. So what went wrong? Did he meet with foul play? Could he really leave intentionally? Perhaps he committed suicide or went crazy. Something changed for him, and I wanted to know what it was, and if it could it happen to me, too.

My old sense of loss felt new and urgent, no longer dulled by the many years that had passed. The unique confusion I felt as a kid re-emerged – my dad felt closer to me than he ever had before, but he was very definitely still out of reach. Who was this man? What *happened* to him? I need to know, now more than ever.