

THE JOHN LAKE STORY

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. 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 race car.

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.

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 humorous 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 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, much 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, according to my grandmother, to observe you. I would study pictures of my dad for clues 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. You can 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 you pushed for more details, you might get, "I think of him all the time, to this day. He was a treasure." Generally, I wouldn't push beyond that.

I know – 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.

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, 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.

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.

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 (baseball) 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, 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 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, at least from 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 wondered if it could happen to me.

My 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.