

1: a lost boy

I don't have an exact date or time when I caught the music bug, especially when it comes to the Irish quartet, U2. Nor can I tell you my favorite song or album, U2 or otherwise; it changes daily depending on my mood. I can, however, point to my stepfather, Stefano, as the person who had the greatest impact on me when it comes to my passion for the band hailing from the Northside of Dublin. The irony lies in his scholarly work. He was one of the foremost leading scholars on James Joyce, the Irish novelist. With that in mind, you'd think his academic forte would be the gateway to this Irish rock band. Certainly, that is not the case here. It was the travel benefits of Stefano's academic career, not his specialty in Irish studies, which was my linchpin connection to U2.

We traveled to Europe on several trips, including two sabbatical years, where I witnessed events that also made an impact on the four young lads who founded U2: Paul Hewson, David Evans, Larry Mullen, Jr., and Adam Clayton. Others along the

way have spurred my interest in music in general, like my mother's musical gifts or my father's passion for 50s rock 'n' roll. Of course, this is all hindsight now, but the journey I'm about to take you on wouldn't have been possible if my stepfather hadn't entered the picture.

I was six years old on the fateful day when Mom married Stefano, fourteen years her senior, in Kent, Ohio. Mom had been divorced from Dad for three years and yearned to get on with her academic life. My father, a very loving man, who's influential in his own right in my life when it comes to music, had no ambition to travel to Europe, let alone partake in Mom's academic desires. Although ultimately the divorce would lead to adding Stefano to my family, it also took Dad away from me. I loved being a kid in the back yard in Iowa with Dad, playing with my Tonka trucks or building model airplanes in the basement. Stefano had no interest in such activities. He was a true academic who lived his life in the confines of the university and who then escaped to Europe during the summers. When he married my mom, who had scholarly aspirations of her own, my whole life changed. Stefano had two older girls from a previous marriage, but he saw me as moldable clay. He could make a young academic out of me by introducing me to his passions of travel and by feeding an adventurous appetite, something he couldn't do with his girls. Mom was already onboard with all of the new changes; I was the one dragging my feet. Having Mom marry someone who took over Dad's shoes was hard to comprehend, especially on the day of their wedding when all I really wanted to do was run a lemonade stand.

It was the first weekend of May, 1974. Spring had finally arrived. The weather was perfect for opening my first lemonade stand with my next-door friends Greg and Katy Wolzniak. Under a cloudless sky, Mrs. Wolzniak brought out their card table from

the garage, while Katy and I got the Dixie cups from the kitchen. Greg, who was older and finishing second grade, put himself in charge of making the lemonade. We set up shop along the sidewalk. Katy made a handmade sign, which Mrs. Wolzniak taped to the table. It dangled from the edge and fluttered with the passing breeze.

The street we lived on was fairly busy with traffic, but no one who was driving by was going to stop just to buy a glass of lemonade. However, having the A&P down the street was a benefit. We talked to prospective sales walking to the grocery store with the hope they would return to buy some of our delicious, citrus drink. After setting up and making only our first sale, mom's brown Buick Electra rolled up next to us from the back alley, which ran between our house and Greg and Katy's. The electric window on the driver's side retracted into the door, shuddering and squeaking.

"Eric!" mom shouted from behind the steering wheel. "Get in the car. We're going to be late."

"Why, Mom?"

"You know it's my wedding day. We're going to the Lombardi's house where the rabbi is waiting to begin the service."

"Mom! I can't go. I'm running the lemonade stand with Greg and Katy," I said, as I pointed blindly behind me. "We just got started."

"Eric, I'm sorry, but you've got to give it up. I don't want to leave you behind."

"But Mooooooooooooom."

My future stepfather, Stefano, leaned forward from his seat on the passenger side. He glanced at me from behind mom.

"Aheemm," he noised, clearing his throat. "Eric, get in the car now!"

"Yeah, the lemonade stand will be here when we get back,"

mom barked, looking through her oversized brown-tinted sunglasses, with her hair just a shade of blonde away from looking like Mia Farrow.

I quickly said good-bye to my lemonade-stand gang. By now, they were knee-deep in customers and probably wouldn't notice my absence. I ran around to the rear of the car, careful not to trip on any of the ill-shaped rocks in the alley. The open passenger door greeted me as my soon-to-be-stepfather leaned forward in his seat, allowing me to climb into the back. For a six-year-old boy, mom's car seemed like a small shipping vessel. The back seat was huge, with room for me to roam from side to side depending upon which view I wanted from the rear windows.

As I plopped myself down on the seat, mom hit the gas. I turned around in the back seat and stared out the rear window. The lemonade stand was fading from sight. We were on our way to the Lombardi's for the backyard wedding. Along the way, we had to make one quick stop to pick up Stefano's two daughters, Jolene and Roberta, who lived across town with their mother. Jolene was closer in age to me as she was in second grade and I was just finishing kindergarten. Roberta, on the other hand, was much older. She was in junior high. For the most part, they seemed to get along with each other and, unlike my parents, Stefano and his ex-wife Genevieve had a civil relationship, even living in the same town. Jolene and Roberta's only contact with me would be on weekend visits to our house. Life was going to be complicated enough with a new father in my life, let alone with two new siblings, but we made it work.

I only vaguely remember mom and dad as a married couple. Memories of their union stay alive in discolored Polaroids housed in musty, burlap-covered photo albums that are now scattered throughout both sides of the family. Most of the images captured relatives with my parents, as they huddled together around

a dining room table covered with dishes from that day's feast. I was never sure what purpose the dirty table played in the images, but it was always the central subject. At the last moment, someone must have thought it would be great to get a picture while everyone was in the same room. I'm not sure about my theory, but the images provide me a time capsule whenever I need to see my parents together during happier times.

Photography was a hobby for dad. He'd find a moment of my life to capture in pictures and the Polaroid camera would appear from out of nowhere. Most of the early shots caught me fascinated with new things, like playing with my grandfather's pipe or sitting with my Uncle Dan while he tape-recorded my voice. The images captivate me to this day, but I don't remember being an active participant. I do, however, recall a year or two after the divorce when dad would pose me next to his new Ford Thunderbird. While behind the camera, dad would squint one-eyed through the viewfinder with one finger on the shutter button while his other hand gently moved the bellows back and forth to get me in focus.

"Hold it," he'd say out of the side of his mouth while framing the picture just how he wanted.

Pop! The flash above the camera burst a shot of light toward me. Out of the back of the camera appeared a plastic tab, which dad tugged on as the camera made a grinding noise, revealing a piece of rectangular paper. He'd look at his watch and then vigorously waved the paper in the air. After he pulled the paper negative from the print, voila! I was bewildered, as if I was attending some kind of magic show. The image came to life. There I was, caught forever on a Polaroid print and frozen in time.

Dad's other interest was recording my first words on his reel-to-reel tape deck. In the deep reaches of his stereo cabinet are the tapes of my first spoken words. Every now and then, dad

still extracts a few when I visit. He places them with loving care onto the spindles and hits the play button. Out of the speakers rolls an interview shortly after I began to talk.

“Eric, how old are you?” dad asked.

A thumping comes through the microphone. Laughter arrives out of the left speaker followed by more thumping.

“Speak into the microphone,” dad prompts to my interest in the metallic object and not the question. There would be another pause.

“Two!” I shout with glee.

“Right on! Lookey, Eric, who’s that over there?”

Obviously, the pause after the question speaks volumes about my attention span. Laughter, again, breaks out in the background.

“No, who’s that over there?” he repeats the question.

“Mommy!” I say with determination.

“That’s right, Eric,” mom says with a chuckle.

These recordings go on for hours. I guess I was the opening act for any evening’s festivities. Other voices and laughter sporadically come in and out of the speakers. I wasn’t just doing my one act show for my parents, but for their friends as well. These were happy times. They just didn’t last very long.

Once the divorce decree’s ink dried at the Des Moines courthouse, mom pulled up to what would now be dad’s house and loaded her life, with the help of her graduate student friends, into the back of her rented van. For whatever reason, after only a few years of marriage, she was desperate to move on with her life, chasing academia. We moved into a tiny, cramped two-bedroom apartment on the other side of town, away from dad. The place had just enough room for mom and me. Left behind were reminders of happier times, my fire trucks and bulldozers that dad and I had played with, in the backyard, the previous summer. Mom could only think about herself and her need

to separate from the past. Once the move was completed, pain began to overtake me. I cried a lot and dragged my feet in resistance to this new life.

"Mom, I want dad back!" I'd complain over my cereal.

"You can go visit him next week. That's the plan," she said over her shoulder, as she plopped bread into the toaster. She was protecting me from the jargon and rules of the divorce decree.

"Mooooom, I want to be with dad right now!" I'd uncontrollably stammer.

She turned and looked at me. She knew I was too young to comprehend the intricacies of a divorce, but she tried.

"Eric, I'm no longer married to your father," she tried to explain through her own pain. "You're with me now. I have custody of you. Your father has you on the weekends."

"Mom, get dad on the phone now. I wanna to talk to him."

"Eric, Pickle, it's not that easy," she said, as she tightened the belt on her robe "You've to go get ready for preschool. We need to be at Margaret's in an hour. I'll pick you up at four this afternoon." She turned to the toaster, coffee cup in hand.

"Mom, it's not fair." I began to cry in earnest.

Mom put her coffee cup onto the counter, coming over to comfort me. She could not hide the grief of her decision. She too was crying, worried if she'd done the right thing.

I thought I could find some magic glue to bring my parents back together, but never did. My hurt wouldn't cease. I would see dad every weekend, but the pain just wouldn't go away. Nights were the hardest. Each evening, a sliver of light from the living room would enter my bedroom while mom played her Martin guitar. The light, combined with the sound of the guitar, was my safety blanket as I lay under a poster of Johnny Cash. Mom pulled tunes from Simon and Garfunkel, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* was heavy in the rotation. Her

harmonic voice made the suffering a little easier. There would be evenings when she would let me stay up for one song. Actually, I had a request list of one: Don McLean's *American Pie*. Why was I attracted to the song? I don't know. Maybe it was the lyric, almost nursery rhyme-like in its storytelling. More likely, mom made it that way by how she sung it. Unbeknownst to me, the song began with the death of one of dad's musical heroes, Buddy Holly. It was a song of loss and I was attracted to it. As mom strummed the tune, the Martin seemed to play by itself as her long fingers, moving with ease on its neck, formed the song's chords. Her voice was mesmerizing. She was always on key and in perfect pitch, something drilled into her from her own mother's insistence. My grandmother had been the church choir director. It would be an insult, even at mom's age of twenty-six, not to hit the notes perfectly. More amazing was her ability to play the song as if it was her own. For all I knew, Don McLean was playing her song.

It would only be another year before mom and I were once again on the move. Our vagabond lifestyle would lead us to Kent, Ohio, where she would pursue her doctorate and unearth the next love of her life, Stefano. As she worked toward her advanced degree, I honestly didn't know what dad was doing. Mom tried hard to sever her relationship with dad. In doing so, I became lost in what my role was in the bigger picture. Iowa and dad seemed a million miles away from me. The physical and emotional distance from my father only deepened my sorrow. I felt as though I was in a tunnel with a light at both ends. As I would go one direction, the light would become brighter. I would then turn around only to see the light behind me fading away. I knew I was loved, but lost in the shuffle of two people trying to put their own lives back together.

I saw dad on very rare occasions when I lived in Kent, Ohio. I

remember taking a trip with him to Rhode Island to see my aunt, uncle and cousins. It was one of the few times I was allowed to see my father. He met me at the tiny Kent airport and we hopped the last leg of the trip together. As I sat in the window seat next to him, tears rolled down his face while he caressed my head, so happy to be with me. Flying was new to me. I stared out the window at the sky and asked if we jumped out of the plane, could we hang out on a cloud. Dad told me we would fall through to the ground. Tears were still streaming down his face. To me, tears were a sign of pain, not joy. Dad had me for four days. Mom was not making our relationship easy. Her separation agreement only allowed dad and me small windows of time together. We made that plane ride our time and escape from the hurt we were both feeling. I knew he was crushed. As I write this, I cannot imagine what it would be like to have your family taken from you. Somehow, dad forged on. He probably dug himself deeper into his career of architecture or one of his many hobbies such as woodworking. But, whatever he immersed himself in, it wasn't enough to flee from the pain of losing his son.

As the marriage ceremony and the festivities came to a close that May afternoon in the Lombardi's back yard, it was clear to me, even then, that my life was in flux yet again. After dropping my newly anointed stepsisters off at their mother's house, our car pulled into alley where my day's journey began. Dusk was encroaching and the lemonade stand was long gone. Whether I wanted to think about it or not, I was forced to open a new chapter in my life. Mom was now remarried. She, once again, chose to wed someone older by at least a decade. I'm not sure if this is more telling of mom's need for a father figure or her search for stability. Stefano's career as a professor was saner than dad's career as an architect. Architecture induced long hours and demands outside of the marriage. As an architect, dad often

faced unrealistic deadlines, which meant he would stay up at all hours of the night playing some Johann Sebastian Bach symphony while executing drawings for the following day's client meetings. The career added to his creative mania, the up and down mood swings depending on how work was going. Mom couldn't handle the anxious behavior. It would only induce her anxieties. She deeply desired to pursue her education beyond her master's degree but more importantly, she needed emotional stability. In time, she'd profit from Stefano's academic status, creating a career of her own as an Edith Wharton scholar. Moreover, she benefited from his even-keeled persona. For me, however, I was on shaky ground, learning what it was like to have another father and to be his third child. I was attached to mom's hip and obviously her little boy. It wasn't easy. I still wanted dad back. I walked on emotional eggshells because the pain inside hurt so much. I was a very expressive young boy who came from emotional parents. I would sometimes cry at the drop of a hat. My stepfather was the opposite. He was not an openly demonstrative man.

Within days after the wedding, the three of us were in Europe for the summer. Jolene and Roberta didn't join us because they had already been abroad. It was now time for Stefano to step in as a second father and give me my first taste of international travel. We were not hotel rats. Instead, we visited Stefano's friends and colleagues, who would take us in for days at a time. Some, not all, had previously met my mother but she, and I, charmed them all. For me, it was a whole new experience. I became an explorer. I was off to new lands where no one except mom and Stefano spoke English. With the kids I befriended, spoken words were not needed. When it came to communication, hand signals and unified gestures, whether for hunger or for wanting to go outside to play, were the name of the game. Without realizing it, I

was starting to break my own boundaries and fears. Cannes, in the South of France, and stonewalled villages isolated by water, like those along the Adriatic coast near the former Yugoslavia, were the highlights of the three-month “family” honeymoon. Picturesque villages like these offered me opportunities to start leaving my mother’s side and explore on my own.

Klaus, Stefano’s good friend in Switzerland, often traveled with us and, like dad, always carried a camera. But, Klaus was subtle with his single-lens reflex. He often captured me at the right moment, as I was investigating my new world. Stefano knew I was at the right age to soak in all of the culture. He was a first-generation American. His parents emigrated from Poland a few years after World War I and he was born in Brooklyn shortly thereafter. He longed for culture and found it traveling across Europe. He may not have spoken his love for me, but I realize now that travel is how he professed it, by giving me the opportunities to voyage at a young age, offering Paris, Zurich, Bologna, and the like, which became familiar territory for me.

In the coming fall, after our return from Europe, we began anew in Champaign, Illinois, where Stefano had been hired as the chair of the Modern Languages Department the previous spring. Sadly, mom, with a freshly minted doctorate in hand, had to accept an administrative position at the same university. She was deeply frustrated being a secretary in the Political Science Department, but she didn’t let her push for a professorship stop her from being a good mother. She always walked me halfway to school in the morning, where I would meet up with other kids in my school. When I arrived home in the afternoon to our stately Victorian mansion, she wouldn’t be that long behind. Her boss, Phillip Cullinan, lived only a half a block away with four boys – Michael, Dylan, Alan, and Paul. I was Michael’s age, and two years younger than Dylan. The other two boys were quite older.

Michael, Dylan, and I became instant friends, riding our bikes through the neighborhood or playing army on the Cullinan's sprawling lawn. They helped with the pain of missing dad, but beginning first grade was still difficult.

I was again a new student in a new school. I had separation anxiety as I entered Mrs. Blum's classroom at South Side Elementary School. I bawled when mom dropped me off for kindergarten in Kent, Ohio, but this year, I tried to hold back the tears. I didn't succeed. They rolled down my face as class began. The emotions were a reaction to the separation. Once again, I had to forge onward. Luckily, a few of my fellow classmates were even more emotional than me. I could empathize with them; the comfort of familiar surroundings being taken away as you're thrust into a room with nineteen five-year-old strangers. The separation is not finite like divorce, but acts upon the same emotions. When the school bell rings, you head back home, unlike when the judge's gavel falls deciding your fate in the court of law. Mom leaving dad resulted in my separation anxieties as a young child, which made first days of school, or first anythings for that matter, harder on me. Knowing dad was now only a state away, instead of three states, made the first day of first grade more bearable.

Mom started to ease the restrictions on dad. First, dad and I were allowed to have once-a-week phone calls, which eventually lead to a once-a-month visit, thanks to mom and dad working out an agreement through the courts. On one of his first visits, he brought me my very own stereo console, giving me a gift that grew my love of music, though I didn't know it at the time. There was a turntable, an 8-track tape player, and an AM/FM radio, all built into one unit. Added to the stereo gift was a pair of oversized KOSS headphones, which I could plug into the headphone jack and blare my records or dad's favorite 50s tunes

without disturbing mom or Stefano. I had a bevy of my own records, including The Beach Boys, Elvis, and The Osmond Brothers, along with albums of Canned Heat and The Who that I had inherited from Stefano. It wasn't the greatest collection of albums...yet...but it was a start. As the tunes blared into my audio cortex via the squiggly headphone cord, music would soon free me of the pain of my parents' divorce and the confusion of working out a relationship with a stepfather. Music was becoming my outlet, my escape. It taught me how to be alone without being lonely.

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