

After the surreal experience at the gallery opening with Alan, I took a step back from my digging and searching. I told myself there was no rush, that I could spend the rest of my life learning about my father and I didn't have to go any faster than I could handle. That moment in the gallery, where everything blurred around me except for the woman who didn't know my father was gone, had brought my grief even closer the surface, like it was tingling just under the skin of my whole body. I was afraid of bringing it out any further, afraid it would consume me. So I tried to keep myself busy with college classes and bar shifts and friends.

But every time I stepped out of my bedroom, the dog masks above the door stared at me. Where before they had watched over me, now they were watching me; waiting, wondering when I was going to come back and finish the conversation we'd started. As months passed, I began to feel the same guilt as when my father had sent me a letter and I knew he was waiting for my response. I couldn't leave my questioning unfinished.

And while I was shaken by the gallery experience, I also noticed that in the weeks after talking to Alan and starting to put the dog masks into the context of my father's life, I could see his face in my mind more clearly. I could almost feel him near. It was a feeling I couldn't resist, even if it meant walking a narrow path high above a dark pit of grief.

So I called up Mark Rounds. Mark was my father's best friend from art school, and his roommate for most of their young adult lives. They had the impenetrable, intoxicating bond of friends who were used to being seen as a pair: Mark and Joe, Joe and Mark. They spoke in coded jokes from their time living together, running a construction company together, converting an abandoned factory into a giant loft and workspace together. They had seemingly endless rituals around the shows they'd watch (*Hawaii 5-O*) and the scotch they'd drink (Johnny Walker), and were always talking about the next camping trip, the next road trip, the next big art project.

The review that mentioned the dog masks was from 1984, when I knew my father and Mark were living together in Brooklyn. So when I couldn't stand the expectant stares of the masks any longer, I took the Bolt bus from New York to Philadelphia to talk to Mark. When I got to his door, he was standing on the front steps, waiting to give me a big hug, enveloping me almost as completely as when I was a little kid.

When I was about two, Mark started dating my mom's sister Rachel, and became a stepfather to her daughter, my cousin Sabina. With her birth father out of the picture, Mark stayed in Sabina's life as her father figure, even though his relationship with Rachel was short-lived. So he's family to me on both sides; my double uncle, my non-religious godfather.

My earliest memory of Mark is from a roof-top barbecue in Brooklyn where he grilled chicken over coal, wrapped me in his giant flannel shirt when the sun went down, and sang along at the top of his lungs to the tinny boombox. I was enamored. When I was little and we would go see his band Mild Thing perform, he always made sure to dedicate a song to me, the only three-year-old in the bar. Later, when my mom and I would visit Rachel and Sabina in Philly, Mark would always come by and take us girls swimming, or to a movie, right when we were starting to go stir crazy with boredom after being in an apartment with our mothers for days on end. And when I first started to take my writing seriously, he took me out for a beer and told me, solemnly, "Be careful getting a job to support your art, because it's easy for the job to take over and not leave you any time for the art you wanted to support in the first place." It was a piece of advice that came close to satisfying my constant ache for advice from my father. I tucked it away in my mind, and I return to it still.

“Hey! How *are* ya?” Mark greeted me at his door, in the distinctive booming voice that made me believe him when I was three and he told me that Johnny Cash’s voice coming from the boombox was his own.

Mark took my backpack and led me into the big open kitchen where a fluffy white cat was eating wet food out of a little ceramic bowl on the counter. He asked how my bus ride had been and grabbed two bottles of beer out of the fridge. As we settled at the long kitchen table, Mark opened one and handed it to me, before opening another for himself.

“So,” I said, trying to sound casual even though starting this conversation felt momentous. “Tell me about when you first met Papa. I know you’ve told me some of these stories before, but... tell me again.”

He chuckled. The way it came out of one side of his mouth, the way he looked down like he was keeping half of the joke to himself: a flash of my father. Mark reminded me of him so much—by association, by shared mannerisms. I felt the weight of the fact that this might be the closest I’d get to a real face-to-face conversation with my father. Big, Johnny-Cash-voiced Mark looked at his hands, fidgeting in his lap, and exhaled sharply before he started to speak, and I knew he was thinking a version of the same thing—carefully choosing his words, aware of the pressure of speaking for his friend.

“It all started at Tyler School of Art, right here in Philadelphia, back in 1976,” he began, in an exaggerated *once upon a time* voice. He told me about how he and my father, who he sometimes referred to as “Joe” and sometimes as “your Papa,” bonded over the pool table in the student lounge freshman year of art school, where they’d play during lunch and late at night; a love of biscuits and gravy; and Frank Sinatra’s cover of “Winchester Cathedral.” He said they used to sing it in a British accent, “for some odd reason I don’t quite recall.”

He told me about the classes they liked and didn't, the people they liked and didn't, and about the first apartment they shared, sophomore year. He told me about the stuffy still-life paintings Joe was doing when they met, and how he slowly developed his own style when he branched out and explored other mediums. And about how Joe went to a summer program at Yale before his junior year. "That was where he met Cathy," he said, off-hand, like of course I knew that already.

"Wait, you knew Cathy?" I interrupted.

I remembered whispers of the name Cathy from when I was a kid. Nobody had ever told me anything about her directly, but I'd heard her name spoken like a secret by the adults when they shared stories of the old days. Electric and hushed. Eventually I'd pieced together enough to understand that Cathy was a woman my father had loved before my mother.

As a child, the idea of a parent's first love, an alternate-storyline love, feels unreal, mythical. Now that I was searching for new ways to understand my father, the idea of his first love was more enthralling than ever. I was fascinated by the idea of Cathy; I wanted to sit down with her and have her tell me long stories about my father in those early days. I wanted every detail of what he looked like and sounded like back then, just entering adulthood, like I was now. I wanted a level of detail about his facial expressions and interests and particularities that only a lover would remember.

But I couldn't ask Cathy for these stories, because one of the very few things I knew about her was that she died a long time ago. But now, I thought, maybe Mark could bring her to life for me. And then I had another ghost to chase.

“Cathy Wehrli!” Mark responded enthusiastically. “We were all madly in love with her. She was just so friggin’ cool. She was a stunningly attractive girl,” he leaned in to confide, raising an eyebrow and nodding to make sure I got it. “Really, really, monstrously pretty.”

He described her as “beautiful, blonde, rich, and reckless.” Disappearing into a hall closet, he returned with a few photographs, one of Cathy and Joe, in the middle of screen-printing t-shirts. He looked so young in the photo, maybe 22—like we could have been in classes together. Cathy’s back was to the camera and her face turned to the side so I could see less than her full profile, but it was enough to see her soft full lips and upturned nose, her square, Germanic jawline and short, shaggy, blonde hair. A wholesome, classical beauty, with that round quality of both Renaissance art and Middle America.

Mark told me about Cathy’s husky, Travis, and how the first dog masks were based on him. I remembered the round-faced husky mask above my door, the one I’d stared at, searching for my father’s eyes, and imagined it anew as a real dog he’d known. Imagining Travis, a loving pet with his tongue sticking out of his mouth, added a layer of sweetness to the mask, softening the mystery and unattainability of it. Mark said Travis was also the subject of many paintings Cathy and Joe collaborated on. The large-scale dog paintings they worked on together feel jubilant, full of bright reds and yellows, with dogs leaping across the canvases as if chasing tennis balls or soaring through the sky. I remembered staring up at one of these dog paintings as a child, not knowing the story behind it, following the shapes across the canvas as if they were animated.

Joe and Cathy made big, clunky bracelets and necklaces together out of trash which they wore until they completely fell apart, not taking them off even to sleep or bathe. This trash-art jewelry must have been the precursor to, or maybe the origin of, the bottle-cap-and-razor-blade

horseshoe crab pins my father was still making years later, which became a trademark. When I was little, if I saw someone wearing one of these pins, I knew that he had officially accepted them as one of “our people”—a highly selective and special group.

The one my father wore on his leather jacket would scratch my arm when he picked me up, so I called them “ow pins,” which he adopted as their official name. He collected rusty bottle caps in a jar in his studio, and whenever I saw one on the street I’d pick it up, spinning toward him with triumphant glee. Every time, he’d say, “Oh, thank you!” with genuine delight. My mother didn’t like me picking up trash off the street, but the excitement on my father’s face outweighed the concern on hers.

Joe and Cathy snuck into construction sites at night and left big sculptures for the workers to find in the morning—guerilla installation art. I pictured them on a chilly night, the traffic lights reflecting on dark streets, quiet except the occasional newspaper truck or scurrying rat. He’d be wearing a leather jacket, of course; maybe she would too, looking like Debbie Harry with her short bright hair. They’d have tools with them, and materials, probably in a canvas Army surplus backpack, which he called a knapsack. They must have scoped out the site during the day, knowing exactly where they were going. When they arrived at the chain link fence, he’d chuck the knapsack over first, looking around to see if anyone noticed the loud thud as it hit the dug-up dirt on the other side. A gentleman, he’d kneel down to give her a boost, weaving his fingers together into a step for her and helping her hike her weight over until she landed with an even louder thud. She’d laugh, the thrill of trespassing too much to stifle. Then he’d heave himself up, the fence jerking with his weight, making way more noise than it had when she went over with a boost, as the black steel-toed boots he wore every day, scuffed and creased, angled for a grip.

When I pictured him landing I winced a little, remembering that he always had bad ankles. But if it hurt he wouldn't have let on. He'd pick up the knapsack and maybe grab Cathy around the waist and kiss her before they set to work. I wondered how much sculpture material they brought with them, and how much they relied on what they found on the site. They wouldn't have been able to resist stacks of fresh-cut boards and metal rods, cinder blocks and wire. Did they work fast like thieves, or linger and take their time, confident in their right to be where they shouldn't? Did they scurry away as soon as they were satisfied with their creations, or did they hang out in their new kingdom and appraise their work? Maybe there were cans of beer in that bag of tools, and they'd cheers triumphantly, sitting on cinder-block seats.

My father was always on the look-out for sculpture materials, his notebooks full of notes about exciting finds, which he called "obtanium" ("major obtanium: two large cow bones" or "great find today: sheets of newsprint paper") followed by several pages of lists of possible ways to use the new material, and notes on behavior he noticed as he started working with it. This way of looking at the world, like a giant art supply store ripe with possibility, was so central to who he was, and it started with Cathy. This was why Cathy was so important: She was his love and also part of his art, helping to invent his whole style and ethos.

But that didn't mean their relationship was perfect. Cathy had something to prove, a rich-girl-playing-the-starving-artist chip on her shoulder, Mark explained as he opened another beer. She was insecure, wondered if her trust fund made her a less authentic artist. Always sanctimonious, Joe did nothing to reassure her. I remember him being loudly dismissive of anything he deemed fake or unoriginal—he didn't even want me to have coloring books, expecting me to draw my own pictures if I wanted something to color in. This sounds so rigid and exacting now, but I don't remember pushing back against it as a child. *Ok*, I'd say, and draw

elaborate outlines of princesses and their various exotic pets (parrots, lions, dragons) and then color them in with colored pencils, perfectly happy with my homemade coloring books. And then he'd ask me where the princesses were standing, why there was no background behind them, leading into a lesson about perspective and using the whole page. I can see how it would have been stressful to be his partner, to try to keep up, to always wonder if he thought you were doing enough.

After that summer at Yale, Mark said, Joe dropped out of Tyler and moved to New Haven to be with Cathy. I'd mostly been nodding along up until this point, taking notes, sipping beer, occasionally asking, "And then what?" But when I heard that my father dropped out of school because of Cathy, I sat up straighter, demanding, "Wait, what?"

This was not the story I grew up with. All of that self-righteousness about how everyone in art school was taught to draw the same and think the same, and how he had to leave to preserve his own artistic integrity, his grand proclamations of the drop-out's honor, which I'd adopted and adapted for myself. And now Mark was telling me that the whole philosophy of "art school kills the artist" was actually just a cover for my father giving up school for a girl! My jaw dropped and I could almost hear myself saying "Papa!" in the exasperated voice I used as a kid when he insisted on eating half of my box of cookies "to make sure they weren't poison:" part outraged, part amused.

Thinking of the father I knew, who drew while I played in the playground, who talked a bigger game than anyone about commitment to one's work, I was stunned to hear that he dropped out of school for Cathy. And he was self-critical enough to be very aware of the choice he was making, to doubt himself before he chose love over his education. I started to think that even if the imagery had started with something as simple as Cathy's pet husky, maybe the dog he



was depicting over and over wasn't really Travis—it was him. Following Cathy like a loyal hunting dog following Artemis into the woods. Maybe a little self-mockery, or maybe romanticizing and rationalizing the idea of following and devotion. And I was even more curious about Cathy than before. Who was this woman my father would put before his work?

I felt like I'd caught him in a lie, found the first little rip in the mythology of him. The real reason he dropped out of school may not have been a deep, dark secret, but it was exactly the kind of perspective-shifting, humanizing revelation that I'd thought I couldn't have without him here to talk to. And I was finding a way.