

San Carlos, across the hill from Half Moon Bay, California

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Brittan Acres Elementary School, San Carlos, California

Dad bought a three bedroom house in suburban San Carlos, across the hill from Half Moon Bay, and I started kindergarten at a school close by. Again my sisters shared a bedroom, and I had one to myself.

I don't know if there was redlining and such, but the town was lily white. Our entire school had exactly one Hispanic kid, the son of a diplomat.

I attended Brittan Acres for seven years, crossing the street each day to reach my classroom. The local Catholic parish built a large church at the far corner, and when I got older, I'd see if I could get home for lunch before its noon bells ceased ringing. I suppose that made me an early 'latchkey kid,' though I don't think the term had been invented yet.

Every day for lunch I had the same exact thing, Campbell's Beef and Barley soup, one can heated on the stove. (Hey, I'm old; home microwaves hadn't been developed yet.) I also watched the same two half-hour game shows, for some of those years *The Price is Right* and *Treasure Isle*.

School was easy, almost too easy. Marilyn, Elaine, and I already knew how to read, when we enrolled, and the lessons were not difficult. Not until 4th grade did they offer fast-track learning, so we had plenty of time to daydream in class.

I never cared for sports, but was reasonably skilled. For softball they always put me way out in left field, which was fine. But I did hit a game winning home run once, and was literally hoisted aloft and carried off the field.

Back then I was tested for IQ and such, and placed in what's now called a fast track program. About four other students, all girls, also qualified. I must admit, Vera was smarter than me, and I sometimes frustrated her with odd notions I'd pick up somewhere.

Thankfully, public school funding wasn't yet in its current form, with Special Ed students bringing in a lot more money. As such, in more recent years, those schools began to hand out Ritalin prescriptions like candy. Weird as I proudly was, it's a near certainty I'd have been pharmaceutically muzzled. Thank God for my dodging that!

There were other physical challenges, like I'd count the seconds it took me to scale the school's chain-link fence. At night I'd sneak over there, and prowl the grounds. Once I found the office door open, and hid inside while adult staff chatted nearby, then snuck quietly away. Only once did friends and I get busted, when a school janitor was working on the roof, and could spot us easily.

Our best friends were the Klebofski kids next door, two boys and a girl, about our age. Their mother had just divorced, and her very cool younger brother Leon helped out with things. He had a convertible sports car, and in that pre-safety-obsessed era, sometimes he'd give us kids a ride. My other good friend was Gary, who lived around the corner. He was a couple of years older, a fellow nerd, so we got along well. It was at his house that I watched Ed Sullivan introduce a new band from England, four long-haired guys called The Beatles.

My nerdiness came on early. I'm not exactly certain when I began, but I was waking up at 4AM Pacific time to watch the Mercury and Gemini space launches, broadcasts hosted by Walter Cronkite.

My favorite indoor activity was playing with a big assortment of Tinker toys, with which I built space rockets, and using string "cables," long suspension bridges.

My sisters and I collected trolls. The first one we got became the elder, a gray-haired Dam Things troll doll we named Filosopher Troll. (Misspelling deliberate.) We kept at it, buying them with our allowances at Talbert's Toys in San Mateo, until we had more than a hundred. Every one had a name, and a role in their little village, which we made from shoe boxes.

San Carlos was far enough inland we didn't always get the Pacific marine fog, but one some winter days we'd get the famously thick tule fog. (Pronounced too-lee, it's a native marsh reed.) I recall one time, I held my arm out, and literally could not see my own hand. Not dangerous, it would thin out again soon enough.

It was on such a foggy day that I heard about President Kennedy's assassination. One kid had a newfangled transistor radio, and began to spread the tragic news. The school cancelled all classes, and everyone gathered in the multiuse room to watch the sad news on black-and-white television.

The room usually had better connotations. One later year, I was asked to participate in a school play. It was a spoof called "The Hound of the Baskervilles," which is still making the rounds, sort of a bizarre cross between the Sherlock Holmes setting and the Addams Family TV show. We put a lot into this, with costumes and more.

I got to play the hound. Less pressure, I needed to learn my cues, but my only dialog was WOOF GRRR GROWL. We put on two shows for our own students, then another in the evening for our parents. It was well received, and we did one more show, for students bussed over from another school.

I was also in the school choir, and one year, in a choir organized by the town's recreation department. I sang pretty well, I was assured, but nowadays folks are glad I'm not singing much.

Mom continued her New Age involvement, and I met teachers who went on to become minor league gurus. No frauds, that I'm aware of, actually a lot of sensible advice. I did see one man, attending a meeting, who claimed he was from Jupiter. I did not believe him, and I hope, neither did the other folks, almost all housewives, in the room.

One time mom got a newsletter which spoke breathlessly of the recent discovery of "a lake on the moon," and bemoaning the NASA coverup. Yes, conspiracy theories based upon scientific ignorance. That very month, National Geographic an a color photo of that same feature, an odd-shaped crater. I knew that, in the lunar vacuum, open water could not exist.

Mom knew some of the early MUFON people, sincere UFO researchers. Fascinating stuff, although then as now, it was only individual testimonies and distant blurry pictures. I wanted there to be aliens, and to this day, no believer has answered by plea to introduce me to their Galactic Federation buddies.

From a different angle, there was a darker side. Mom's friends were eagerly passing around a document which purported to be a true, but secretive, account of Admiral Byrd's exploration of the north pole. Supposedly he flew a squadron of planes, and instead of merely crossing the pole, flew on inside the Hollow Earth, through the big opening up top. Where he encountered an advanced civilization.

What did not realize until later, is how awful this was. because these hidden superhumans were described as white Aryans, who'd fly their saucers to bases on the Moon and Saturn. Please note, mom was no racist, far from it! But she did not catch the implications, at the time.

This did not sour me on spirituality overall. Quite the contrary, my -- not only belief, but understanding -- of spirituality continued to grow. My mother would host small, New Age themed, evening gatherings. One time the featured guest was a women who claimed to do aura readings. As far as I know, she'd never been to our house before.

For a little background, some evenings I had a practice of sneaking out of my bedroom to see what was going on in the living room. Our house was heated via wall vents, set low within the interior walls. That way, I could creep into the darkened hallway and look through the metal slats. All I could see was people's feet, and it was physically impossible they could see me. No shadows, no creaking floors, and no noise!

Only one time did mom jump up and head for the bathroom, catching me in the act, so she was aware of what I'd do. Thinking about it, I don't think she explicitly forbid me. On this night, the psychic lady sat

across the living room, with her subjects taking turns in a chair in front of the heater vent.

I crept forward, and heard the lady begin. "I see wavy lines, some such-and-such color there, another color there." And so forth. As I came up and saw their feet, she suddenly said, "Wait a minute, there's interference."

My mother called out, from her chair, "Paul, is that you back there?"

I screamed, mostly in frustration, and ran back into my bedroom. How many of my friends got caught in such a fashion???

That didn't shake my respect for science, either. Decades later, I obtained copies of my K-6 school records. One teacher wrote of me, "He reads the encyclopedia like a novel." Yes, and I enjoyed every page.

I picked up mom's science fiction paperbacks, so around ten years of age, got to know Asimov and Clarke and others. Including Kornbluth, some heavy stuff, though I had no comparisons to make, at the time. I also read the Hardy Boys detective series, so Dick and Jane were far in my mental rear view mirror.

Star Trek launched in September 1966, and of course I watched every episode. By 1968, I was collecting signatures to send to NBC, petitioning for a third season. One lunch period I was watching my usual game show when William Shatner strode on to the studio set, and told the audience the network received 300,000 signatures, and decided to air a third season. So I, and nerds everywhere, cheered.

It wasn't all good. Mom and dad's strong differences began to tell, and strain their marriage. Dad was practical and pragmatic, mom impulsive and terrible with finances. She had no serious bad habits, just could not handle money well.

They began to argue, and to see a marriage counselor. Whose terms and concepts, such as "red herring," became fodder for ongoing arguments. After a while they'd fight while we kids were home, even getting somewhat physical. (No injuries!) This was shocking to me and my sisters, and deeply saddening. Mrs. Klebokski next door, having experienced worse, became a great comfort.