

The Pleasures and Regrets of

MANHOOD FOR AMATEURS

a Husband, Father, and Son

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HARPER PERENNIAL

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The Losers' Club

I typed the inaugural newsletter of the Columbia Comic Book Club on my mother's 1960 Smith Corona, modeling it on the monthly "Stan's Soapbox" pages through which Stan Lee created and sustained the idea of Marvel Comics fandom in the sixties and early seventies. I wrote it in breathless homage, rich in exclamation points, to Lee's prose style, that intoxicating smart-ass amalgam of Oscar Levant, Walter Winchell, *Mad* magazine, and thirty-year-old U.S. Army slang. Doing the typeset and layout with nothing but the carriage return (how old-fashioned that term sounds!), the tabulation key, and a gallon of Wite-Out, I divided my newsletter into columns and sidebars, filling each one with breezy accounts of the news, proceedings, and ongoing projects of the C.C.B.C. These included an announcement of the first meeting of the club. The meeting would be open to the public, with the price of admission covering enrollment.

For a fee of twenty-five dollars, my mother rented me a multipurpose room in the Wilde Lake Village Center, and I placed an

advertisement in the local newspaper, the *Columbia Flier*. On the appointed Saturday, my mother drove me to the Village Center. She helped me set up a long conference table, surrounding it with a dozen and a half folding chairs. There were more tables ready if I needed them, but I didn't kid myself. One would probably be enough. I had lettered a sign, and we taped it to the door. It read: COLUMBIA COMIC BOOK CLUB. MEMBERSHIP/ADMISSION \$1.

Then my mother went off to run errands, leaving me alone in the big, bare, linoleum-tiled multipurpose room. Half the room was closed off by an accordion-fold door that might, should the need arise, be collapsed to give way to multitudes. I sat behind a stack of newsletters and an El Producto cash box, ready to preside over the fellowship I had called into being.

In its tiny way, this gesture of baseless optimism mirrored the feat of Stan Lee himself. In the early sixties, when "Stan's Soapbox" began to apostrophize Marvel fandom, there was no such thing as Marvel fandom. Marvel was a failing company, crushed, strangled, and bullied in the marketplace by its giant rival, DC. Creating "The Fantastic Four"—the first "new" Marvel title—with Jack Kirby was a last-ditch effort by Lee, a mad flapping of the arms before the barrel sailed over the falls.

But in the pages of the Marvel comic books, Lee behaved from the start as if a vast, passionate readership awaited each issue that he and his key collaborators, Kirby and Steve Ditko, churned out. And in a fairly short period of time, this chutzpah—as in all those accounts of magical chutzpah so beloved by solitary boys like me—was rewarded. By pretending to have a vast network

of fans, former fan Stanley Leiber found himself in possession of a vast network of fans. In conjuring, out of typewriter ribbon and folding chairs, the C.C.B.C., I hoped to accomplish a similar alchemy. By pretending to have friends, maybe I could invent some.

This is the point, to me, where art and fandom coincide. Every work of art is one half of a secret handshake, a challenge that seeks the password, a heliograph flashed from a tower window, an act of hopeless optimism in the service of bottomless longing. Every great record or novel or comic book convenes the first meeting of a fan club whose membership stands forever at one but which maintains chapters in every city—in every cranium—in the world. Art, like fandom, asserts the possibility of fellowship in a world built entirely from the materials of solitude. The novelist, the cartoonist, the songwriter, knows that the gesture is doomed from the beginning but makes it anyway, flashes his or her bit of mirror, not on the chance that the signal will be seen or understood but as if such a chance existed.

After I had been sitting at that big empty conference table for what felt like quite a long time, the door opened and a woman stuck her head in. I can still see her in my memory: her short blond hair parted in the center, her eyes metering the depth and density of the room, the tug of disappointment at the corners of her mouth.

"Oh," she said, seeing how things were with the Columbia Comic Book Club.

A moment later, her son pushed past her into the room. He was

a kid about my age, blond like his mother, skinny, maybe a little girlish. For a moment he stared at me as if I puzzled him. Then he gazed up at his mother. She put her hands on his shoulders.

"I have a newsletter," I said at last, sliding the stack across the table.

The woman hesitated, then urged her son toward me, figuring or hoping, I suppose, that something could be salvaged, some kind of club business transacted. But the boy pushed back. That multipurpose room was not anywhere he wanted to be. God knows what kind of Araby he had erected, what fabulous tents he had pitched, in his own imagination of the event. A wordless argument followed, conducted by the bones of his shoulders and the fingers of her hands. At last she gave in to the force of his disappointment or to the barrage of failure rays that were pouring from the kid across the room.

"One dollar," she said seriously, considering the sign I had taped to the door with the same kind of black electrician's tape that was holding my eyeglasses together. "I think that might be a little too much for us."

I don't remember what kind of shape I was in when my own mother returned, or how she comforted me. I was a stoical kid, even an inexpressive one, given to elaborate displays of shrugging things off. In looking back at that day, I see now how much the brief existence of the C.C.B.C. had to do with mothers and sons, what a huge, even overwhelming maternal task is implied by that worn-out word *encouragement*. In spite of whatever consolation my mother may have offered, that was the moment when I began to

think of myself as a failure. It's a habit I never lost. Anyone who has ever received a bad review knows how it outlasts, by decades, the memory of a favorable word. In my heart, to this day, I am always sitting at a big table in a roomful of chairs, behind a pile of errors, lies, and exclamation points, watching an empty doorway. My story and my stories are all, in one way or another, the same, tales of solitude and the grand pursuit of connection, of success and the inevitability of defeat.

Though I derive a sense of strength and confidence from writing and from my life as a husband and father, those pursuits are notoriously subject to endless setbacks and the steady exposure of shortcoming, weakness, and insufficiency—in particular in the raising of children. A father is a man who fails every day. Sometimes things work out: Your flashed message is received and read, your song is rerecorded by another band and goes straight to No. 1, your son blesses the memory of the day you helped him arrange the empty chairs of his foredoomed dream, your act of last-ditch desperation sends your comic-book company to the top of the industry. Success, however, does nothing to diminish the knowledge that failure stalks everything you do. But you always knew that. Nobody gets past the age of ten without that knowledge. Welcome to the club.