



Half-Century City

by Benjamin J. Stein

Monday

Here I am in Baltimore, Maryland. It's nighttime. I'm staying at the wonderful Stouffer Harborplace. My room looks out on the harbor and a giant aquarium and some big ships. I like Baltimore. It's got a homey, friendly feeling about it. My mother went to college here for a time, at a place called Goucher. I, as a high school student in nearby Silver Spring, used to come here to the Gayety Burlesque house and watch the strippers and the comedians. The last time I came here it was with Ace Warren, now a law professor at Harvard; Bill Silverman, now a major lawyer in D.C.; Jim Thompson, whose whereabouts I do not know; and Barry Walker, a businessman in Palm Beach. I recall that we got horribly lost and someone hid my keys when I left the car to ask directions at a gas station.

I still remember how furious I was. Teasing is really a cruel thing that young people do to one another. In particular right now, I'm remembering how a boy in junior high school, at a hellhole called Montgomery Hills, used to tease me because my real first name is Jeremy. He would call me "Jeremiah," and for some reason that drove me absolutely crazy. Even today I get uneasy when people use that name. Now that I think of it, all anyone did in junior high was tease. Wow, it's hard being a kid. You're so sensitive, and you can't take anti-depressants or anything.

Anyway, for some reason, this is all coming to me as I stroll along the pier in Baltimore at night in a fine mist. It's a warm evening, and there are knots of kids out and

about, shopping, eating, laughing, and yes, probably teasing each other. Every so often, one of the kids says "Bueller, Bueller," and I smile obligingly.

I went into a crab restaurant called "Phillips" and ordered two crabcakes. Every time I do this, I'm aware that someday a doctor will tell me that I have eaten my last crabcake. But for now, I love them. My waitress was a German woman. After she took my order, some of the other waiters whispered to her. She came back and said, "I am very sorry. I did not know you were a TV star. If I had, I would have behaved more respectfully. You must excuse me. I am from a foreign country."

This is getting ridiculous. "I'm not a star," I assured her. "I'm the lowest on the Hollywood food chain, a character actor, well known, but no star. Only a freak of nature."

The crabcakes were delicious. Afterwards, I bought a cinnamon roll (another sin against correct eating) at a

cinnamon-roll stand. The young woman who served it to me looked like a child. "Are you a child or an adult?" I asked.

"I'm 20," the woman said. "But the people in my family all look very young until they die. That's because they're all alcoholics. My father is the worst, really bad. I sometimes worry I'm going to go the same way."

The cinnamon roll was stale, too, but I only discovered that after I got back to my room and was preparing for bed. Before I sleep, I usually have a snack, call every single person I have ever known, say many prayers, carefully read the *Wall Street Journal*, and then listen to Bob Dylan's "Idiot Wind" on my Walkman.

Then, to sleep, to dream of how much fun I'm going to have tomorrow when I do my commercials for WMAR, the local TV station that's shifting from CBS to ABC. Having me do five commercials in two days—which is my task—is like asking me to eat five crabcakes in two days.

Tuesday

Here I am, on the set in a remote corner of Baltimore. It's humming. There are lighting people, sound people, a hip-looking director named John Parlato, a pretty and capable producer named Claire Hartman, and a great—super-great—makeup-and-costume woman named Terry, and everyone has a sort of a Maryland accent, a Tidewater slurring of consonants. Terry has actually brought sheets and blankets so that I can take a nap on the tiny fold-out chair in my tiny dressing room. I love the feeling of being taken care of.

My first scene is set in a chemistry lab (surprise!). It has me watching a Bunsen burner brew



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coffee while at the same time talking about how important it is to get your early news from WMAR.

The script woman, a beautiful young thing, inspects some prop chemicals nearby and tells me in a soft voice, "When I was in high school, I helped my teacher clean out the chemistry closet. There was a can of arsenic powder. I brought it home and showed it to my father. I told him that if he didn't start acting better, I was going to poison him."

"How did he take the news?"

"He was quite calm about it," the script woman said. "But then he died not long afterwards and I always felt bad about it."

"I see," I said. Baltimore—City of Shared Confidences. I couldn't wait to hear what the sound men and gaffers were going to tell me.

I love just listening to the voices of my colleagues. They remind me of growing up in safe little Silver Spring. Where I could ride a bike into town at the age of eight, and my parents were sure I would be safe. Where there was never violence worse than a fistfight. Where there was not one divorced family on my street. Where it was assumed that you would do the best you could in school, to justify the hard work your grandparents and parents had put into becoming middle-class Americans.

As I watched the sets getting shifted about, I thought of a basic notion: wherever I go, people older than 25 talk about *how it used to be*. I sometimes think that the whole reason the Republicans won by such a landslide is simply that Americans are saying, "Make it like it used to be. Do what it takes, but make America safe again. The Democrats have shown that they can't or won't do it, so now you Republicans will have a shot. After that, it's just every man for himself."

Wednesday

Up at the crack of dawn at the fabulous Stouffer, where a smiling man brought me my *Wall Street Journal*, my bacon (yet more forbidden fruit), and a grapefruit (which is very acceptable fruit). I got dressed and went to meet my driver, a young, well-spoken assistant director who was also a restaurateur, and roared off to the set. I have gotten to love being in Baltimore, a city that's really a very friendly large small town.

On the way to the set, the driver told me about his Persian girlfriend (I love Persians), about his ambitions to move to L.A. and become a director, about his car with 140,000 miles on it. We were close to running out of gasoline. That prompted me to tell him that I was going to be 50 in a few days. It didn't really seem to make much of an impression on him. He is only 29 or something equally ridiculously young, so what could he know about being 50?

The life on the set was even better today. I had a simply perfect Sloppy Joe made by a mother-daughter team of caterers. It was completely lean and delicious. I could barely stop eating it. Simple food made by loving, caring hands. It brought tears to my eyes. I love this life. I don't want to get old. I don't want to leave this world, not ever.

In the afternoon, I got to do a scene with a woman in which I play a soap opera character talking to another soap opera character about the new soaps on WMAR.

I got to hold the woman in my arms, sweep her off her feet, and even got to say my favorite soap line, "Quiet, Vicki. There's . . . no time for that now." This is a line I learned from listening to Bob and Ray, those two perfect geniuses of radio back in my youth. How I laughed at their acts, especially the dramatic actress "Nattily Attired," and their imitation of Edward R. Murrow. Anyway, I inserted the "Quiet, Vicki" line, and the audience *loved* it. I guess I'm just a big fat ham actor. It's valuable to know who you are.

We finished doing our thing, and started on our still pictures (I told you this was a fairly big campaign), and the producer, wonderful Claire Hartman, pulled me over and said she had to talk to me about something. There she was with a beautiful birthday cake she and John Parlato, the director, and Neil Potts, the crafts services man, had bought for me.

This time I really started to sob, so I had to hide in my dressing room and calm down. People here are so kind.

Thursday

Thanksgiving dinner with my Ma and Pa at the Cosmos Club. Yummy turkey and stuffing and cranberry sauce. Lots of people eating their meals with their grandchildren and chil-

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dren. Out the window, over Massachusetts Avenue, the spindly branches of November.

My parents and I talk mostly about what great hopes we have for the new Congress, and what sobering realities the Congress faces. Yes, one branch of government is in Republican hands, but there's still the Executive, the fourth estate, the academy, all in the firm grasp of people who basically like to make trouble for normal people.

Plus there is a lot of sadness in the land. Gangs. Drugs. Violence. In a way, there is a civil war going on. My own feeling is that we should have a huge tax *increase* to pay for a real war on crime. I pay a ton of property tax, but I would cheerfully pay more to get more cops on the street and more prisons and more courts. Most important, I would love to have some appreciation of the police and how hard their jobs are. I think police should be paid as much as actors. And get as much appreciation.

There are all too many people in this country who lead extremely disorganized, spiritually empty lives. As I get older, I become more and more convinced that the problem of disorganization in human life is overwhelming. Why are our cities so depressed and violent? Because kids out of school do not organize their lives to work or save or have security. But how can a kid brought up with gunfire and rats and a mother on drugs ever get any organization in his life?

Spiritual means, that's the only way. I often think that if instead of the Supreme Court making prayer illegal, it had made prayer mandatory, we would be in far better shape. Maybe that should be the constitutional amendment: make prayer compulsory. Forget the atheists. They'll never be satisfied anyway. Anyway, let it start with me. Thank you, God, for having such good friends in Baltimore and for letting me spend one more year with my parents. And for my little angel and my big wifey and my dogs and my wonderful sister.

Friday

My birthday. I am 50. Wow. The first thing I did was study a list I had asked my father to prepare for me. In his usual understated way—he is an economist, after all, not a circus barker—he entitled his list “Advice from H. Stein to B. Stein on his 50th

Birthday.” It came from his brain and his word processor and his dot-matrix printer (because he's the kind of guy who does not just run out and buy a laser jet just because everyone else has one):

- (1) (This one I learned from you.) Do not fight over small matters with the ones you love.
- (2) Keep high aspirations, moderate expectations, and small needs.
- (3) Liquid assets equals freedom.
- (4) Invest in your health.
- (5) Don't fight on every street corner.
- (6) Be open to appreciate history's legacy of beautiful things.
- (7) If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I?
- (8) Do your best and don't worry and don't feel guilty. You are not God.
- (9) It is good to be a member of a team but not only a member of a team.
- (10) The nuclear family (spouse and children) is invaluable.



I like this advice a lot—except the part about not spending money. Anyway, my mother had already given me some really fine advice: “When we buy stock, we hope for the best, don't expect a lot, and don't cry if it goes down, and that goes for everything in life.”

After thinking about that, I went back to bed and slept for a long time. The great guru of free-market economics, Frank Knight of the University of Chicago, had a maxim: Never waste any time you could spend sleeping. Sound

advice. He also said (and he was a smart guy), “I wonder how long it will be before doctors cure more people than they kill.” He also had a word of advice that explains much of modern behavior. “Accept all subsidies.”

I have my own adages for middle age, including the vital advice that when time in this earthly life becomes short(er), then it's time to start thinking about the next life. The way to do that is exactly the way to get through this life: Accept God's will. Attempt to do His will. Don't hurt people. Help people. Share God's gifts, and try to live by the Commandments He laid down a very long time ago.

You wouldn't know it, but I'm really a religious maniac.

In the afternoon, I had a visit from Hilda, the nice woman who had a baby to help make it up to her mother that her brother was killed by the Nazis. Hilda has come upon a difficult patch. It turns out that the baby was not fathered by the man she thought, but by the man she had an affair with about the same time she was having the insemination. That was very careless of her (and goes back to what I was saying about people being excessively disorganized and paying for it). It now turns out that the real father wants nothing to do with his baby.

What an idiot. The whole subject makes my head spin. How stupid can a man be to not want to spend time with his child? It's not just selfish and mean and anti-social—it's self-defeating. Nothing on earth can give you the self-esteem that spending time with your kids does. Nothing makes you happier than when your son asks you to tell him a story. There is no Mercedes so shining as the look in your boy's eyes when he sees you walk in the door and hurls himself into your arms, clutching at you for dear life, and all the while saying, “Let me go, daddy.” He grabs tighter to your lapels and says, “Put me down, you big daddy.” There is no stock that can make your heart pound like watching your boy's eyes widen and glow as he sees you walk up to pick him up from school. There is no touch that means as much as when your little boy reflexively takes your hand when he comes to the street corner. There is no praise from Caesar that matches hearing your little

boy use the same phrases you use. "Can you believe that, Daddy? That man just opened his door when cars were driving by on a busy street. How stupid can you get?"

My friend Irving Kristol likes to write about how important fathers are to children, and he's totally right. But the real point is just how vital children are to parents, and how desperately vital kids are to their fathers. I really think I never had a clue what it meant to be a man until I had Tommy.

Off to dinner with Alex and a group of people for my birthday. At Morton's. There were Al and Sally, my wonderful producer/sociologist pals who are great buds of Newt Gingrich through Al Toffler; Jim Bellows, my great editor at the *Herald Examiner*, and his beautiful wife, Kevin; Michael Chinich, who made me almost a movie star, and his ace cook wife, Mottie; and Sid Dauman, a plutocrat/artist and his wife, Leslie, an actress; and gorgeous Juliette Capretta; and devoted, genius salesman Barron Thomas; my super agent and guardian, Marcia Hurwitz, and her musician hubby, Richard. At a neighboring table, but not part of our group, was Seinfeld, and then at another table Ted Forstmann, probably one of the only people that Seinfeld envies. They both wished me happy birthday.

Alex had bought me a sort of Caligari-esque birthday cake. I blew out the candles and prayed for peace, as I always have done.

Then, I went home, and thought of my Trixie. A reader from the Midwest wrote me a letter asking how long it took to get over losing a dog that you really love. I think the answer is never.

I took Ginger, the beautiful substitute dog, the best present I ever got from Alex, for a walk. I noticed that the lobby of our building was graced with a lovely Thai woman who was the concierge. I talked to her for a long time. She's also a single mom. Her husband abandoned her. She has a nine-year-old son who loves to play video games. (Do any kids not love to play video games?) She and her boy have been living in her car, which is itself long overdue as a rental from a rent-a-car company. Disorder. Chaos. My father told me a few years ago: live prudently. God, it makes sense.

Friday

I'm in New York. I flew in last night, business class, on American Airlines. I was sitting behind an English couple who looked as if they were having a nervous breakdown. The wife actually pulled aside a stewardess to complain that "It's disgusting that business class has to use the same loos as coach. Those people are *dirty*."

I'm staying in a tiny, clean room at the National Republican Women's Club. Manhattan is packed to the gills with shoppers and visitors, and it was the only place I could find. But I love my room. It's cheap and clean, and right across from Rockefeller Center. I heard revelers and merrymakers passing by all night long. I was wrong—as I so often am—to speak so badly about New York last summer. At Christmastime, it's a treat.

Lunch with my wonderful pal Lothar, a well-to-do Englishman whom I met years ago at a party of wealthy people where I did not belong. He's a brilliant surgeon who works now as a fashion designer under an assumed name, which happens to be a woman's. He's a very smart guy who really could have done anything. Right now, even though he's making money at fashion design, he wants to write a novel. We worked our way through a fine meal at Michael's, a publishing hangout on 55th Street where Bob Tyrrell used to eat years ago when it was the Italian Pavilion.

"I have an idea for a novel," he said. "It's about a man who was a student at Eton years ago and was caned by a poor boy from a Welsh coal-mining family who was at Eton on a scholarship. The whole thing was that the Welsh boy caught the boy from an old English family in flagrante delicto with another boy from a wealthy family, and he had them both caned for poor attitude.

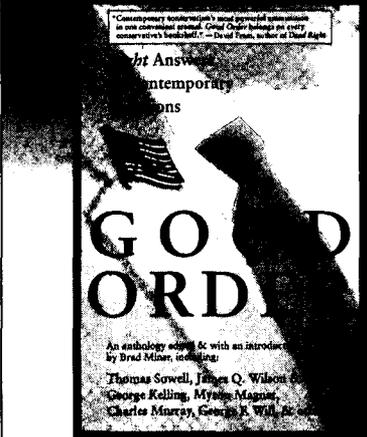
"Now it's forty years or thirty years later, and the well-to-do boy is a famous writer, but he's dying of cancer, so he decides to murder the Welsh boy who humiliated him all those years ago. Only the Welsh boy is now a famous judge, a Q.C., in London. What do you think?"

"Great story," I said. "Filled with possibilities."

"I won't say who it's patterned after," he said, raising his eyebrows suggestively. "Let's just say I know the principals."

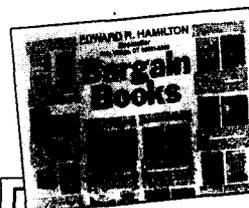
He had several glasses of wine at lunch and then a port with coffee, and

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was happily buzzed as we walked back toward the Rockefeller Center. Wow. I have a lot of friends who drink heavily. I think maybe it's me who's out of step for *not* drinking. Very often, they're extremely amusing folks. Maybe I am missing something.

After a nap, off to my sister Rachel's apartment in Brooklyn Heights, to attend a lavish party she's giving in my honor on my fiftieth. She's a great sister. She did the single kindest act anyone ever did for me until I met my wife. When I was a junior in high school (speaking of drinking) I came home drunk for the first time in my life. I was not used to drink, so I fell asleep and then awakened, barfing madly.

My parents were so understandably angry at me and unhelpful. My sister, who was home from college on vacation, I think, wordlessly came in, cleaned up, and allowed me to go to sleep on clean linens. That was a miracle of human decency. I don't blame my parents either, as I think of how I would feel if Little Perfect came home drunk, as he surely will one fine day.

Anyway, this same saintly woman, my sister, is having a party for me. Many

pals from the New York area are there, plus Lothar, who has flown up from Nassau, where he lives. I arrived by subway with my dear friend Ona, who came up from Philadelphia. The subway was and is immaculate compared with how it was when I was living in New York twenty years ago. At least something has improved.

At the party was my hero, Peter M. Flanigan, Navy flier, investment banker, former Nixon aide, and mover, who got me started as a White House writer years ago for RN. Also Lowell Harriss, my fabulously good college econ teacher and a U. of Chicago classmate of my parents. There was Larry Lissitzyn, a Vietnam war hero and friend of Larry Jekyll, another war hero; Susan Sgarlat, who introduced me to my college girlfriend, the unforgiving Mary Just, who's now a big pal of Hillary; Billy Farhood, a high school friend who's now a shrink; my editor from *Barron's*, the unbelievably witty Jim Meagher; my fabled editor from the *Wall Street Journal*, Bob Bartley, one of the most influential men in America and one of five people who shaped the new political landscape; my old law-school pal, Roz Fink, a real char-

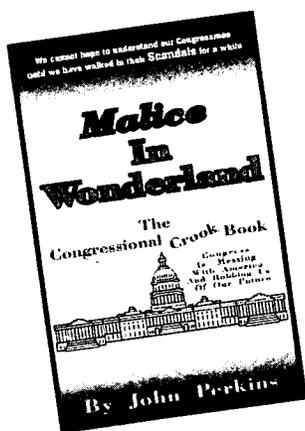
acter; the ineffably kind Peter Bloch, my editor from a man's magazine called *Penthouse*, where I contribute about how to be successful and live without stress killing you; my dear buddy, Joel Block; my agent, Lois Wallace, a good person to have on your side; and most of all, my *sœur* and her husband, world's hardest working, most devoted family man, Melvin, and their two brilliant kids, Jonathan and Emily.

I felt euphoric. I was in the bosom of friends and family who had known me all of my life. It amazes me that I've been in L.A. for more than eighteen years and still don't have nearly as many friends as I do in the east. I think I have more friends in Sandpoint, Idaho, than I do in L.A. Anyway, no point in making comparisons. I'm just not a Hollywood kind of guy. I'm an Idaho/Brooklyn Heights/Washington, D.C./Arlington, Virginia/Silver Spring and Baltimore, Maryland kind of guy.

I wandered from person to person and caught up on life. This one has just gotten divorced and is broke. That one is divorced but has a nice boyfriend. Another is making more money gambling than he ever did working. Still another one has jokes about Ireland. By and large they can talk and listen to other people talk. They don't look insane with ambition and anxiety. They all, without exception, look as if they give something of a damn about other people. This is not a Hollywood group. In Hollywood, self-obsession and nurture of the fractured self are what life's all about. That allows very little room for interest in others.

After the party, Lothar and I took a cab back to Rockefeller Center. I made some drug addicts near my room be quiet. They complied sullenly and said Happy Hanukkah in a weird voice. I guess that's an anti-Semitic thing. Then we walked around Rockefeller Center and then to the China Grill and then back to the Republican Women's Club. I noticed another group of obviously not Jewish kids shouting Happy Hanukkah in drunken voices. I guess that's all an anti-Semitic thing, but maybe not.

I went to sleep very happy. Yes, there is the Russian mafia. Yes, there is random killing all over America. Yes, I am 50. But it's safe and secure at the Republican Women's Club, and I have family and friends. And what a great sister I have. □



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In the early 1980s, Newt Gingrich organized the Conservative Opportunity Society to promote his vision of an alternative to the liberal welfare state. House Republican leaders, who for years had been collaborating with the Democratic leadership in return for pieces of the pork barrel for their districts, were uncomfortable with Gingrich. They viewed him (and fellow travelers like Bob Walker of Pennsylvania) as a “gadfly” and “bomb-thrower” for challenging the feudal hierarchy of Congress. Roughly a decade later, the Republican caucus has unanimously elected Gingrich to be Speaker of the House, and voted Dick Arme y in as majority leader.

For the 139 Republican newcomers elected in 1990, 1992, and 1994, the team of Gingrich and Arme y seemed a natural choice. But for pre-Reagan Republican “old bulls,” as well as other members of Washington’s establishment elite, the ascension of this dynamic pair has turned the world upside down. What was once thought impossible—and intolerable—has come to pass.

After Dick Cheney resigned as Republican whip in 1989 to replace rejected defense secretary nominee John Tower, Gingrich announced he would run for the number two Republican leadership slot. Gingrich had the backing then of both conservative activists and “moderate” Republicans such as Steve Gunderson and Olympia Snowe, who liked his aggressive style. The entrenched Republican network, led by Bob Michel, campaigned hard against Newt in favor of Ed Madigan of Illinois. As Vin Weber, then Gingrich’s campaign manager, says, “It is sobering to remember that the decision that guided

Grover G. Norquist is president of Americans for Tax Reform.

the last five years of the Republican Party and brought Republican control of the House of Representatives was won by a two-vote margin: Newt defeated Ed Madigan, 87-85.”

Gingrich won re-election as whip in 1990 unanimously, but activist conservative control of the House leadership wasn’t assured until 1992, when Arme y defeated Jerry Lewis of California for the leadership position of conference chairman. Arme y’s margin of victory was similarly slim—he bested Lewis, 88-84.

Two years ago, Michel was told that if he didn’t retire, Gingrich would challenge him for the leadership position. Michel realized that the increasing number of younger, post-Reagan Republican congressmen spelled the end of his reign. He announced his retirement, and within days, Gingrich had won majority support and become the presumptive leader.

An equally important (if underappreciated) fight for the soul of the Republican Party has occurred in the contest for Senate whip between incumbent Alan Simpson of Wyoming and Trent Lott of Mississippi. Lott’s one-vote, 27-26 win on December 2 was as radical in its implications as Gingrich’s 1989 victory. Trent Lott is now Republican heir apparent, and his triumph is a repudiation of Bob Dole’s vision of the party.

Dole chose to make the race for whip into a showdown. Although personally not that close to Simpson, Dole lobbied hard for his election, twisting arms and threatening incoming freshmen, demanding loyalty on this vote in return for recent campaign support.

Simpson has been particularly hostile to pro-family conservatives, leading many to see him as a William Weld-style social liberal and fiscal conservative. But Simpson hasn’t been

a friend of taxpayers or the free market. In 1965 he argued unsuccessfully for repealing Wyoming’s right-to-work law. He has not only refused to make a commitment against income taxes, in 1990 he also tried to stop then-congressional candidate Craig Thomas from taking an anti-tax pledge on the grounds that the door should always be left open to higher taxes. Simpson, of course, was a cheerleader in 1990 for the Bush tax hike. As one Senate aide has observed, “Some people who watch C-Span think Al Simpson is conservative because he was supposedly nasty to Anita Hill. Not so—he’s nasty to everyone.”

Lott supporters believe he would have garnered as many as 35 votes if Dole hadn’t weighed in behind Simpson. In any case, Lott’s victory signals more than a conservative ideological majority and a willingness to confront the present leadership; it also amounts to an endorsement of a more aggressive challenge to Democrats and the status quo. The win also signals a strengthening of ties between Senate leadership and grassroots conservative groups.

One Lott supporter said that the best way to characterize his victory was that it proved Senate Republicans had embraced the activist agenda outlined in the Contract With America. If Dole had wanted to support the contract, and had truly desired to fight aggressively for the conservative agenda, he couldn’t have asked for a better lieutenant than Lott. Instead, he backed Simpson, who would not understand how to play that role. It leaves many in Washington wondering what Dole planned to do about the contract—which voters expect him as a Republican leader to embrace.

Dole’s 1996 presidential chances have been heavily damaged by Lott’s victory.