

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid

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Extract

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Chapter 1

HOMETOWN

SPRINGFIELD, ILL. (AP) – The State Senate of Illinois yesterday disbanded its Committee on Efficiency and Economy ‘for reasons of efficiency and economy’.

– *Des Moines Tribune*, 6 February 1955

IN THE LATE 1950s, the Royal Canadian Air Force produced a booklet on isometrics, a form of exercise that enjoyed a short but devoted vogue with my father. The idea of isometrics was that you used any unyielding object, like a tree or wall, and pressed against it with all your might from various positions to tone and strengthen different groups of muscles. Since everybody already has access to trees and walls, you didn't need to invest in a lot of costly equipment, which I expect was what attracted my dad.

What made it unfortunate in my father's case was that he would do his isometrics on aeroplanes. At some point in every flight, he would stroll back to the galley area or the space by the emergency exit and, taking up the posture of someone trying to budge a very heavy piece of machinery, he would begin to push with his back or shoulder against the outer wall of the plane, pausing occasionally to take deep breaths before returning with quiet, determined grunts to the task.

Since it looked uncannily, if unfathomably, as if he were trying to force a hole in the side of the plane, this naturally drew attention. Businessmen in nearby seats would stare over the tops of their glasses. A stewardess

would pop her head out of the galley and likewise stare, but with a certain hard caution, as if remembering some aspect of her training that she had not previously been called upon to implement.

Seeing that he had observers, my father would straighten up, smile genially and begin to outline the engaging principles behind isometrics. Then he would give a demonstration to an audience that swiftly consisted of no one. He seemed curiously incapable of feeling embarrassment in such situations, but that was all right because I felt enough for both of us – indeed, enough for us and all the other passengers, the airline and its employees, and the whole of whatever state we were flying over.

Two things made these undertakings tolerable. The first was that back on solid ground my dad wasn't half as foolish most of the time. The second was that the purpose of these trips was always to go to a big city like Detroit or St Louis, stay in a large hotel and attend ballgames, and that excused a great deal – well, everything, in fact. My dad was a sportswriter for the *Des Moines Register*, which in those days was one of the country's best papers, and often took me along on trips through the Midwest. Sometimes these were car trips to smaller places like Sioux City or Burlington, but at least once a summer we boarded a silvery plane – a huge event in those days – and lumbered through the summery skies, up among the fleecy clouds, to a proper metropolis to

watch Major League baseball, the pinnacle of the sport.

Like everything else in those days, baseball was part of a simpler world, and I was allowed to go with him into the changing rooms and dugout and on to the field before games. I have had my hair tousled by Stan Musial. I have handed Willie Mays a ball that had skittered past him as he played catch. I have lent my binoculars to Harvey Kuenn (or possibly it was Billy Hoefl) so that he could scope some busty blonde in the upper deck. Once on a hot July afternoon I sat in a nearly airless clubhouse under the left field grandstand at Wrigley Field in Chicago beside Ernie Banks, the Cubs' great shortstop, as he autographed boxes of new white baseballs (which are, incidentally, the most pleurably aromatic things on earth, and worth spending time around anyway). Unbidden, I took it upon myself to sit beside him and pass him each new ball. This slowed the process considerably, but he gave a little smile each time and said thank you as if I had done him quite a favour. He was the nicest human being I have ever met. It was like being friends with God.

I can't imagine there has ever been a more gratifying time or place to be alive than America in the 1950s. No country had ever known such prosperity. When the war ended the United States had \$26 billion worth of factories that hadn't existed before the war, \$140 billion in savings and war bonds just waiting to be spent, no bomb damage and practically no competition. All that American

companies had to do was stop making tanks and battleships and start making Buicks and Frigidaires – and boy did they. By 1951, when I came sliding down the chute, almost 90 per cent of American families had refrigerators, and nearly three quarters had washing machines, telephones, vacuum cleaners and gas or electric stoves – things that most of the rest of the world could still only fantasize about. Americans owned 80 per cent of the world's electrical goods, controlled two-thirds of the world's productive capacity, produced over 40 per cent of its electricity, 60 per cent of its oil and 66 per cent of its steel. The 5 per cent of people on Earth who were Americans had more wealth than the other 95 per cent combined.

I don't know of anything that better conveys the happy bounty of the age than a photograph (reproduced in this volume as the endpapers at the front and back of the book) that ran in *Life* magazine two weeks before my birth. It shows the Czekalinski family of Cleveland, Ohio – Steve, Stephanie and two sons, Stephen and Henry – surrounded by the two and a half tons of food that a typical blue-collar family ate in a year. Among the items they were shown with were 450 pounds of flour, 72 pounds of shortening, 56 pounds of butter, 31 chickens, 300 pounds of beef, 25 pounds of carp, 144 pounds of ham, 39 pounds of coffee, 690 pounds of potatoes, 698 quarts of milk, 131 dozen eggs, 180 loaves of bread, and 8½ gallons of ice cream, all purchased on a budget of \$25

a week. (Mr Czekalinski made \$1.96 an hour as a shipping clerk in a Du Pont factory.) In 1951, the average American ate 50 per cent more than the average European.

No wonder people were happy. Suddenly they were able to have things they had never dreamed of having, and they couldn't believe their luck. There was, too, a wonderful simplicity of desire. It was the last time that people would be thrilled to own a toaster or waffle iron. If you bought a major appliance, you invited the neighbours round to have a look at it. When I was about four my parents bought an Amana Stor-Mor refrigerator and for at least six months it was like an honoured guest in our kitchen. I'm sure they'd have drawn it up to the table at dinner if it hadn't been so heavy. When visitors dropped by unexpectedly, my father would say: 'Oh, Mary, is there any iced tea in the Amana?' Then to the guests he'd add significantly: 'There usually is. It's a Stor-Mor.'

'Oh, a Stor-Mor,' the male visitor would say and raise his eyebrows in the manner of someone who appreciates quality cooling. 'We thought about getting a Stor-Mor ourselves, but in the end we went for a Philco Shur-Kool. Alice loved the E-Z Glide vegetable drawer and you can get a full quart of ice cream in the freezer box. *That was a big selling point for Wendell Junior, as you can imagine!*'

They'd all have a good laugh at that and then sit around drinking iced tea and talking appliances for an hour or so. No human beings had ever been quite this happy before.