

VALUE

Mona Lisa and Me in Miami

By Jonathan Hulsh

“We know the true worth of a thing when we have lost it.”

---French Proverb

“The best things in life aren’t things.”

--John Ruskin

I was seven when I first met Mona Lisa - Leonardo’s girl. It was a blazing, jungle steamy day in Miami Beach, 1958, when my third grade class boarded a Bluebird¹ school bus to go to the world-famous multi-million-dollar Fontainebleau Hotel to see what we were told was the most important work of art in the world - the girl with the secret smile. It was on exhibit from France and it was our first exposure to fine art. Big deal. At least it was a chance to get out of our stifling² classroom where the day had gotten off to a less than artful start. An errant³ seagull had smashed its fluffy white head smack through our classroom window. Crash! A spray of glass, a flutter of wings, and hysterical squawks. For a few seconds, the teacher Mrs. Kay and the rest of us sat in horror watching this miniature nightmare unfold. Even the freckle-faced kid with the knife sheath on his belt who had moved from the Everglades⁴ and never, ever, did a lick of school work, stopped doodling swastikas⁵ in his notebook. He looked up and grinned. It was his moment to shine. “Ah’cn take care’a it Mrs. Kay,” he drawled, happily volunteering to climb up on a chair and remove the bleeding critter⁶, take it outside and put it out of its misery. The buses were ready to roll, so Mrs. Kay bit her lip, took a deep breath, and accepted young Daniel Boone’s⁷ offer.

Like the other kids in my neighborhood, I rarely wore shoes. My mother could afford them, but I preferred to swarm⁸ barefoot with the local savages, climbing palm trees, hunting for land crabs, fishing for mullet in the bay, stomping on people’s roofs at night, and throwing nickel firecrackers at cars. It was *Huckleberry Finn*⁹ meets *Lord of the Flies*¹⁰. My feet were the happy free feet of a little sherpa¹¹, well calloused by the naked ground. At school however, I had to wear shoes, so I chose cheap one-dollar rubber flip-flops¹². When the teacher turned to the blackboard to torture us with yet another math quiz, I would slip them off to touch the cool floor with my bare skin, snatching a few precious seconds of soothing coolness and freedom.

The bus ride to the famous Fontainebleau Hotel to see *Mona Lisa* was an opportunity for us

¹ Bluebird: A well-known maker of school buses.

² stifling: suffocating, smothering.

³ errant: wandering.

⁴ Everglades: a large swamp in southern Florida.

⁵ swastika: symbol associated with Nazi Germany.

⁶ critter: slang for “creature”; a small animal.

⁷ Daniel Boone: famous American frontiersman (1734-1820)

⁸ swarm: to move in large numbers, throng.

⁹ *Huckleberry Finn*: A famous story by Mark Twain about a teenage boy who runs away from home.

¹⁰ *Lord of the Flies*: A story by William Golding about a group of British schoolboys stranded on an island.

¹¹ sherpa: a Tibetan people, famous as mountain climbers.

¹² flip-flops: sandals secured by two straps in the front grasped by the big toe.

savages to huddle around comparing trade goods and trinkets. Out came the PaperMate¹³ cartridge ink pens from blue stained shirt pockets, then the Pez candy dispensers¹⁴, Commando Cody¹⁵ signal rings, baseball cards¹⁶, a cherry bomb¹⁷, even a CO₂ cartridge¹⁸.

“How much did that cost?”

“I’ll trade you.”

“Let’s flip for it!”

“Heads I win!”

The banter was timeless, the kind heard in smoky merchant stalls for eons¹⁹. The only difference was that as we learned the value of worldly goods, we were cutting deals over stuff made of plastic and cardboard instead of gold, silk, rice, and frankincense.

For some reason I brought my tiny crystal radio²⁰ to school that day. It lived in my pocket and was shaped like a rocket. I think it gave me a sense of purpose and helped me feel safe. I had good reason to feel otherwise. Recently, my father had moved out and left my family devastated, my older brother’s life purpose was devoted to facilitate my suffering, and I had a stutter²¹ that guaranteed that simplest verbal exchange would be filled with unexpected surprises. This marked me as a target. I was often bleeding chum²² for the mean feeding frenzy²³ of the other kids.

The previous year, for a school assembly, I sat with 800 other kids in a cavernous auditorium to see the Miami Symphony Orchestra perform. When they asked for a volunteer to conduct the orchestra, my hand shot up along with everyone else’s. The odds were impossible, but out a sea of little screaming faces, they picked me. The thick gobs of white Noxzema cream²⁴ my mother streaked across my sunburned face must have had something to do with it. I looked like a complete idiot, standing out from the crowd like a large hot cross bun²⁵.

Scared as hell I walked down to the podium and up to the conductor who wore a tux²⁶. He handed me the baton and over the microphone asked if I knew what I wanted the thirty-piece orchestra to perform. I lied and nodded a silent yes, knowing that with my stutter, trying to say the word yes was always dicey and might sound as if I was doing chipmunk calls. I raised the baton and as it came down the musicians launched into an explosive rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*. Brass, kettledrums, cymbals, the works. Instantly, I realized I really meant for them to play that, and obviously, the baton was there just for show. I was controlling the

¹³ PaperMate: one of the first brands of ball-point pen.

¹⁴ Pez: brand name for small rectangular hard candies which came in a plastic dispenser.

¹⁵ Commando Cody: character in science fiction movies and a TV show.

¹⁶ baseball cards: cards depicting various baseball players given as a premium with certain brands of bubble gum.

¹⁷ cherry bomb: a large, powerful firecracker shaped like a cherry.

¹⁸ CO₂: a small steel cartridge containing compressed carbon dioxide gas. Used to power guns and some toys.

¹⁹ eon: a very long indefinite time; thousands and thousands of years.

²⁰ crystal radio: a very early type of radio which used a galena crystal as a detector and needed no batteries.

²¹ stutter: stammer; to speak with involuntary pauses, often with repetition of syllables.

²² chum: fish cut into small pieces thrown into the water to attract fish to a fishing line.

²³ feeding frenzy: violent activity of a group of sharks (or other animals) while eating.

²⁴ Noxzema: a popular brand of salve used to treat skin ailments, including sunburn.

²⁵ hot cross bun: a bun decorated with a cross traditionally eaten on Good Friday.

²⁶ tux: tuxedo; a man’s formal black suit.

orchestra with my mind! At that moment, my little world burst to life with infinite possibilities.

I ran home from the bus stop and excitedly told my mother what I had done. “Oh, I’m sure you did a terrific job of conducting the orchestra,” she snickered, passing off the entire episode as just another of my wild fantasies, like my incessant²⁷ growing pains and stomachaches that had kept me home from school more times than I could count. Strangely, her distrust, besides making me feel bad and more alone than I already felt, only encouraged me to crawl under the covers every night, secretly tune my rocket radio to a classical station, and diligently practice my conducting skills until I drifted off into dreams.

Without thinking, I put my radio onto the bus seat and the bargaining heated up. I didn’t want to part with what could be my ticket to an exciting career which included wearing a tuxedo and leading orchestras all over the world with the power of my mind. But the kids were pushy. When one of them produced a rare and coveted Sandy Koufax²⁸ baseball card, the pressure was on for me to make a trade. They said I was a sucker²⁹ to pass up such a good deal. So I caved, but not because I wanted the card. (I only bought baseball cards for the bubble gum.) It was simple. I just wanted to be accepted. We made a deal -- the radio for the card, but either one of us could back out before the end of the day. I handed over my rocket radio, and tried to feel excitement as I took Sandy Koufax and slid him into my pocket.

The Fontainebleau Hotel, a giant and elegant sea shell, seemed to sprawl out to greet our bus, which had turned into a steam bath on wheels. The driveway was filled with limos and Cadillacs. At the time, The Fontainebleau was considered the premier hotel in the U.S. Movie stars hung out there. The Jackie Gleason³⁰ show was filmed there. Now *Mona Lisa* was in town. Before we got off the bus, Mrs. Kay gave a little speech reminding us all to be on our best behavior, talk in whispers, and keep our shoes and flip flops on at all times. No bare feet!

The door opened and the cool refrigerated air felt like soft ice crystals on my skin. In T-shirts and shorts, we filed into the marble-floored lobby - a moderm kitschy version of the Palace of Versailles. It was half-filled with men in silk sharkskin³¹ suits and women in designer dresses. Most of the kids were wide eyed with mouths agape³². We were visiting another planet. We were ushered into the viewing area. And there she was, *Mona Lisa*, surrounded by armed guards, raised up on a platform, and protected with glass. Every kid got quiet and looked up - even the swastika kid from the Everglades - as we listened to the curator.

“*Mona Lisa*, painted by the master, Leonardo da Vinci, is a priceless work of art.” A kid shouted, “Priceless? How can something be priceless?”

“That’s a good question. Priceless means that *Mona Lisa* cannot be bought for any price.”

“Even a million dollars?”

“Even a million. Even ten million! She is so valuable, so rare, so special that there is no amount of money in the world that could buy her. She is a treasure beyond the value of money.”

²⁷ incessant: never ceasing, continuing.

²⁸ Sandy Koufax: famous baseball player in the 1950s and 1960s.

²⁹ sucker: a person easily cheated; a dupe.

³⁰ Jackie Gleason: famous American comedian (1916-1987) with a popular TV show in the 1960s.

³¹ sharkskin: a cloth with a smooth silky surface used for suits.

³² agape: wide open, gaping.

The kids let out a collective gasp of amazement. The lady then launched into her art history lesson, talking about Mona's smile and what secret she was hiding. I let my feet slip out of my flip-flops and I felt the refreshing cold of the marble floor. I wasn't listening. My head was spinning. Priceless. Something could be priceless? Incredible!

And yet already the concept was making sense to me. Here I was standing before the most valuable work of art on earth on the marble floors of the world-famous Fontainebleau, and I was barefoot! The notion gave me courage.

I looked around room and sidled up to the kid who had my radio. Silently I handed him Sandy Koufax. He made a real ugly face, and handed me the rocket which I quickly slipped into my pocket.

As we boarded the bus - now transformed into a toaster oven with bench seats - for the ride back to school, I remember some of the kids shouting my name, calling me an "Indian giver"³³, and hurling other barbs³⁴. But my thoughts were elsewhere - under my covers at night, conducting a full symphony orchestra. The feeling that swept through me that moment was beyond wonderful, and well, hard to describe. If you've ever seen Mona Lisa smile, you know what I mean. •

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³³ Indian giver: slang term for a person who gives something and later asks for it back. A derogatory term.

³⁴ barb: a sharp cutting remark; insult.