



Dear Partner: Part Two

V

*Old soul mate dear partner how'd we get this far
In old cars and beer bars no one to blame
The dream was to stay young until we keeled over
We've been young together we've grown old just the same*

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In July when I got back from Spokane people continued to reach out and want to talk about Pat Sands. We needed to tell our stories and secure our memories. Some of them had felt alienated and disconnected from Sands after he became a Christian. Now that he was gone there was a need to somehow reconnect with the man they knew and loved. Sands had a gift of seeing life as a banquet and inviting everyone to share the feast. We were all wondering a little scared whether life without him could ever be as sweet or if we would savor it as much. The idea of keeping him alive in songs and stories that was easy for me. What I couldn't anticipated was how much of me that he held in his memory was now gone. I ended up buying a tape recorder to try to capture people's stories and memories. Thirty years ago it wasn't common to document our lives that way. Between the hemming and having and stumbling and mumbling I quickly gained a new respect for Studs Turkel and his Pulitzer Prize winning oral histories.

McCoy and his wife hadn't seen Sands a lot that last year or two. Still the adventures the three of them had were legendary. When I started working on new songs I loosely based and expanded their exploits into something that could be called "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the musical." The problem was the songs weren't very good and I was having more trouble than usual staying focused.

In the middle of August I got together with some extended family in Oregon. One evening one of my uncles and I were sitting outside under a covered porch on a couple of rocking chairs. He was a recently retired physician who went to medical school with my dad. I was actually named after him. We were relaxing and talking when he casually said that of my two brothers and me he was surprised it was my youngest brother who ended up in the psychiatric ward. Before I could catch my breath he said he was also surprised that my dad went on to such a full life after getting out of the mental institution.

My uncle was a good kind man who I believe was talking and trying to understand and share his opinions. And when I asked him about it later he didn't actually remember much about it. The difficulty was that I recognized a ring of truth in what he was saying. It was the first time I had heard that kind of thing said out loud. While it was disturbing it felt akin to fire. Useful and yet sometimes so destructive.

About the same time I got some amazing news from the publishing company in Nashville. I sent them a dozen songs after the concert in June. They offered me contracts on most of them. And now they were telling me that Johnny Cash wanted to record "Dear Partner." Not only that but he was considering using the song to bring June Carter Cash on stage when they did concerts together.

After knocking on the songwriting door for 15 years it appeared this would be the break and the breakthrough. What might normally be considered the biggest news of the summer became one more reason to hold my breath.

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By the end of September I was becoming more and more unmoored. I didn't know how to stop and where to stand. I called someone I thought might understand. My cousin, Joanne, immediately invited me to come and spend a few days.

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*It seems to take more work the harder we play
And tomorrow gets closer than some old yesterday
For the people we loved and the places we've been
I wish we'd known better but I'm sure glad we didn't*

Fifteen weeks before visiting my cousin Joanne I had put all my energy into a concert that included introducing a number new songs. A week later Pat Sands died and three days later we buried him. Ten days after that my brother was in the hospital and things I'd grown up believing about life and family were cast in doubt. Then a woman I'd kept close and yet somehow at arms length found someone else and the most important thing in the world became winning her back. In the midst of all of that it sounded like Johnny Cash was saying yes and my uncle was saying that instead of my younger brother it should have been me and on some level I believed he might have been right. It was as if I had lost a sense of both my inner and outer compass and in the midst of all that needed to find out who and where I was.

Fortunately Joanne was at a place and time in her life when she was secure in who she was and what she was doing. She had been giving wise counsel since she was a kid and now she was a trained child psychiatrist working at the University of Minnesota offering guidance and bearing witness to kids and families facing life-threatening diseases. Her apartment in Highland Park with views of the Mississippi River more than any place she lived before or since gave her a sense of being home. Because she was comfortable and confident in her life she stayed easily in one place as I was bouncing around.

It was also important she was both family and friend. Though only five years older she had a sense of family history and wasn't afraid to dig up skeletons or scare up ghosts. Because her dad had been the one who was there for two brothers who ended up in mental institutions while my dad was one of those brothers her perspective was more objective and less personal than mine. Most important her only agenda during that visit was to be there for me.

At dinner that first night Joanne asked how I felt being born the *Tainted One*. After giving her a combination of a blank stare and an incredulous look she explained that I was conceived in a time of great promise. My dad was in one of the last waves of military personnel to come back from the Pacific after World War Two nearly a year after the shooting had stopped. When he got back to University of Minnesota to continue his medical training he stood out even though he was among the youngest of a group of now grizzled veterans.

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His depression, those deep blues, came out of the blue. When my dad was twelve he learned his oldest brother, Peter, died of pneumonia. What he wasn't told was that Peter contracted the disease and died in a mental institution. A dozen years later my dad went from being a superstar at the University Hospital to being locked behind the doors of their psychiatric ward. Not responding to treatment he was transferred first to the VA and then to the state mental hospital in St. Cloud.

All these years later I can only begin to imagine the confusion and fear and shame he felt. My dad grew up poor. His father was a janitor. His mother was ashamed to tell the neighbors what her husband did for a living. If that's the case how does someone, anyone, talk even themselves about how their oldest and youngest sons ended up in mental institutions. The irony is how proud I am of my family and what a shame it is that it was something to be ashamed of.

When my dad was overseas my mom and older brother lived with her parents in a small town in Northwest Minnesota. With the future uncertain and now pregnant with me she moved back with her parents. My dad was in the hospital when I was born on the first day of spring. He attended the christening. Shortly after that he was released. The family was united and spent an uncertain summer near a lake in Northern Minnesota. My dad started practicing medicine with Joanne's dad in the town of Shakopee south of Minneapolis. Five years later my dad completed his specialty training and the family now including my younger brother moved to Spokane living as if that dark time never happened and must now be forgotten. When it was finally talked about when I was twenty-two it was discussed like something disconnected from any real life.

Now at the end of September 1983 at thirty-six years old the story finally includes serious mental illnesses, hospitalizations, shame and stigma, people making serious and important life decisions as best they can, one young man dying and another very sick young man getting well and going on to a full life. Suddenly everyone in that bigger story becomes more human and, yes, more heroic.

And at that moment I am asked how it feels to be the *Tainted One*. What I understand now that I didn't understand when Joanne asked that question is on some level as a newborn I made myself responsible for the anxiety and the uncertainty of that time and ended up anxious and uncertain. At the time making mental illness part of the family history would have meant acknowledging something wrong with the family. Because nothing was said in that way in my twisted logic I ended up thinking there was something wrong with me. Of course we're talking now in generalizations and simplifications. What I was only beginning to understand that night is how important it can be to understand and find our place in those bigger stories.

Those days that I visited Joanne I began to do just that. Joanne would get up in the morning and go to work. I would spend time writing. I took long walks along the high banks of the Mississippi River. Joanne would come back and we would talk more about the family. A lot of it wasn't easy. I had met my goal of not smoking for over a year yet after a day I was hooked again and stayed hooked for fifteen months before I finally quit for good.

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One day I visited Joanne at work. One of her young patients, Danny Moser, loved video games. In order to keep him safe from infection I put on a mask and gown before entering his room. We played Intellivision baseball for nearly an hour. Talk about perspective. While I was trying to understand my place in life better he was just holding on for dear life trying to stay alive. The fact is he didn't make it. Those times when I might want to feel sorry for myself all I really need to do is remember Danny.

The last night of the visit Joanne and I had dinner with her dad. After the oldest brother Peter died he became the family patriarch. I always got a kick out of Uncle Bror. I've enjoyed being around him. I had prepared some questions to ask. I somehow figured if I knew enough facts things would fall into place and life would suddenly make sense. I remember standing in the parking lot of the Lowell Inn in Stillwater, Minnesota, reading from carefully prepared notes:

When was my dad hospitalized? What was the prognosis? When did it look the darkest? When was I christened? When did my dad come home for good? When did he go back to work? When was he finally out of the woods? And to every question my uncle's answer was: I don't remember. It was raining lightly when Joanne and I drove back to her place. It was silent in the car except for the slow slapping of the windshield wipers.

That night I went to bed devastated and despairing but awoke early Sunday morning with a sense of peace. The calmness came in believing that though I might never know the facts that on some important level I could know the truth.

Ernest Hemingway believed that he could tell when something was false. He had a descriptive way of talking about his knack for recognizing when something or someone was untrue. That ability informed his life and his work.

That Sunday morning I woke up trusting that I could know when something was true and identify when something had that almost imperceptible ring of truth. At times I've had trouble trusting that gift. I've learned that it's not infallible and I've discovered how often the truth hurts. Bu that morning I simply believed. As I got ready to go home that was enough.

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*Thought we'd go out in a great ball of fire
Get shot or arrested fooling with desire
Thought we'd be gone when the piper came around
Before life filled us up and started slowing us down*

Life continued to be fragile and raw. Keeping with allusions to gardens and Bible stories I was now buoyed by the fact I could finally access what for me might be described as The Tree of Life and with that life giving knowledge.

Not long after I got home I began to share what had happened during the summer and early autumn. McCoy was the first one I told. We went down by the lake at his house and leaned against a canoe upside down on a couple of sawhorses. The story flowed along with some laughter and a few tears. In the telling this story became more alive. In the sharing it became more real. The telling giving it a perspective and that perspective aiding

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in the telling. What I was beginning to understand was that for so long the story had defined me and as I stood there talking with my friend in the fading October light I was beginning to define the story.

Somewhere in the middle of this 25th of 49 campfires *One of Those Times in a Life* has gone from a journey outward and become a journey home. I am continually amazed at the alchemy of memory and discovery. I am filled with an abiding sense of delight and joy and wonder and gratitude for a chance to use a lifetime of stories to search for the story of a lifetime and a lifetime of songs to create the soundtrack for such a journey.

*Dear Partner and soul mate we've come a long way
Down fast roads and dirt roads crossed an ocean or two
Shared adventure and danger with friends and strangers
Doing the best that we thought we could do*



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