

Confession

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Gentlemen, our president may have misspoken.

In what may be an historic first in the long history of The Literary Club, a presenter – in fact, a supernumerary and a first time presenter - stands before you without a paper.

I realize that this heinous breach of tradition is inexcusable. Having said that, this is my excuse.

You've probably all heard that old canard about Groucho Marx, who, when offered membership in a prestigious country club, declined, saying that he would never join a club that would have him as a member. That's somewhat how I felt some three or four years ago, when Bill Friedlander first proposed that I stand for membership in The Literary Club. I was sorely troubled. Was I worthy of membership in such an august group? If the members knew my background, would they really want me as a colleague? Would *I* want me as a colleague?

I could see the black balls cascading through the hole in the ballot box.

But in the end, I said nothing, and my credentials were accepted, apparently without challenge. Although I did check the photo gallery out in the hallway when I came in this evening. My picture is still not there. Jerry Malsh's picture is there, right where I should be. He resigned two years ago and never gave a paper. Maybe you're trying to tell me something.

In any event, a few months ago, when Albert Pyle asked me to fill in as tonight's presenter, my doubts re-surfaced. I re-examined my copy of the

Proposal for Membership that was submitted in support of my admission. I wanted to be sure that nothing that I am about to disclose to you tonight would conflict with any information I disclosed in that Proposal, or might be construed as less than full disclosure.

I am satisfied that I answered each question fully and fairly – name, address, occupation, education, readings, writings, expected contributions, attendance, etc., omitting nothing that would bear on any of those issues.

The problem is that the Proposal didn't ask the right questions.

Had it asked whether I was ever guilty of smuggling, the answer would have been "yes". Had it asked whether I ever administered an illegal substance, or violated any other laws relating to drugs, alcohol or tobacco, the answer would have been "yes". Did I ever help fix a horse race? "Yes". Did I ever help defraud an innkeeper? "Yes". Have I ever done jail time? "Yes!!"

Yes, I confess to all of it!!

But I plead innocent, innocent by reason of.....

Well, perhaps I should tell you the whole story and let you be the judge.

I suppose every family has that one special member. You know, that odd-ball relative - the one we all love, or maybe hate. The one we laugh about, or cry about, or want to hide in a closet.

In my family, that relative was my Uncle Joe, Joseph Binstock, my mother's younger brother.

It's hard to describe Uncle Joe in words that don't sound exaggerated or make him seem like a cliché. He was a lovable scoundrel, capable of the most wondrous kindnesses and the worst mischief, a free spirit and non-conformist who lived life his own way, without regard for the consequences.

Joe looked like Cary Grant – dark, handsome, electric blue eyes, radiant smile, sparkling, suave personality. He was excitement personified, bursting

with energy, constantly on the move and moving quickly. When he walked, you ran to keep up. When he entered a room, it brightened.

As their “gelibte zindel”, Yiddish for their beloved and only son, Joe was my grandparents’ pride and joy, the center of their universe. At times, my grandmother would rage furiously at him for his antics. But she would rage with far greater fury at anyone, in or out of the family, who ever uttered a negative word about him.

My mother worried about him constantly. More often than not, she had no idea where he was. She was always concerned – sometimes correctly – that wherever he was, he was in trouble. If she didn’t hear from him for more than a few days, which occurred regularly, she automatically assumed that he was dead. Or even worse, in jail. Then, she'd call my grandparents, unless they called her first. Either way, the conversation was the same.

“Have you heard from Joe?”

“Of course not.”

And then the whole family would go into mourning. But eventually, the phone would ring, and a long distance operator would say, “I have a collect person-to-person call from Joe Binstock for Doctor Hirsch. Will you accept the charges?”

In those days, as I’m sure many of you will recall, both parties could hear the conversation, along with the operator. “Where is the call from,” my mother would ask. Before the operator could intervene, Joe would say, “Hi, kid. I’m in Albuquerque.” Or “Toronto”. Or “Havana”. Or wherever. “Sorry”, my mother would say, “Dr. Hirsch isn't here”, and hang up, leaving a bewildered operator wondering what the hell had just happened. The same call, seeking “Dr. Hirsch”, would go to my grandparents, and they would respond in the same

manner. But everybody knew that Joe was alive, and not in jail, and their world was right again. Temporarily.

Don't ask who "Dr. Hirsch" was. Certainly it was no one in my family.

Joe was popular with everyone – especially women. He may have been married as many three times, but that was never clear. Nevertheless, everybody loved Joe. Everybody, that is, except his creditors. Joe never – well, almost never - cheated anyone. But he often made promises he couldn't keep. My mother and grandparents constantly received calls and letters from strangers all over the continent, asking for Joe and claiming that he owed them money. Joe never kept anything in a bank account, but he always carried wads of money in his pocket and paid for everything in cash. Other than the cash in his pocket, his assets consisted mostly of cars, trucks and racehorses, frequently registered in my mother's name. Or my sister's name. Or sometimes even in my name.

That was us – a widow and her two children, subsisting not too comfortably above the poverty level, in a rented flat in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey, the ghetto made famous by Philip Roth. We were the owners of a string of a race horses.

Joe would show up at our house sporadically for a meal or a night's stay on his way to California or Canada or Cuba, or coming back from Florida or Mexico, always on short notice. The phone might ring anytime, day or night, and the familiar voice would sing out, "Hi, kid. I'm on the road and I'll be there ____". Well, he might say "tonight", or "tomorrow morning" or "tomorrow night at six", or whatever. And as the promised time of arrival approached, my mother would start fretting and look out the window every five minutes until he pulled up – always later than promised. He'd burst into our flat with his

radiant smile and call out “Hi, kid, how are you?”, and once again, all would be right with her world.

He always arrived with horses. But usually he came with other pets as well – a pony or two, a midget donkey, always named “Jenny”, a few goats, a monkey, a parrot or some other exotic pet. He'd bring parakeets, smuggled in from Mexico in wooden Philadelphia cream cheese boxes wrapped in cheesecloth. Once he had a zebra. He always arrived with at least one dog, usually named “Lady”. And sometimes, he arrived with a real lady. You never knew until he got there.

My maternal grandparents immigrated in the late 1880's from Bujelia, a shtetl in the western Ukraine, in what is now probably Moldava. Somehow, they found their way to Holliston, Massachusetts, a small farm community about 35 miles southwest of Boston. There, with the help of a handful of small diamonds that were stuffed in my grandmother's down pillow, one of the few items they managed to bring with them from Bujelia, they bought a 320-acre farm, where they lived and worked until 1946, when, on a bitter December night, a fire, started by a fireplace spark, destroyed the farmhouse and everything in it, except two large diamonds, which my grandmother retrieved from the ashes by sifting through the area where the bedside cabinet in which she kept them sat.

By that time, they were too old to start over, and my grandfather's heart could no longer take the cold New England winters, so they sold the farm, and once again took their meager belongings and, with the two diamonds, made a down-payment on a small house in Hallandale, Florida.

Until that December, to the extent Joe ever called anywhere home, it was the Holliston farm. And until then, the Holliston farm was my second home. Although my immediate family lived in Newark, before my grandparents left, I

spent every summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter, and recovered from an appendectomy, broken bones and a variety of other illnesses at the farm. Chicken soup was my grandmother's standard remedy for adult ailments. But her concept of health food for ailing grandchildren was what she called a malted – a mid-afternoon concoction of three fresh raw eggs, a ripe banana and several tablespoons of Hershey's chocolate syrup blended into a large glass of freshly separated, heavy sweet cream, whipped to the consistency of mud and eaten with a spoon.

The farm was my private playground, and when Joe was there, he was my playmate. We rode horses. We drove carts pulled by ponies, dogs, goats and any other animal to which we could attach a wheeled vehicle or a sled. We played with countless dogs and cats and a never-ending supply of puppies and kittens. There was a large pond, full of easy to catch turtles, frogs and fish, and good for swimming in the summer, if you didn't mind the leeches, and ice skating in the winter.

My swings were tires Joe hung from branches of apple trees. On summer afternoons, I'd ride in the rumble seat of his car or the back of his pick-up, or I'd stand on the running board, and we'd drive into Holliston for an ice cream soda and comic books.

I milked the cows, fed the horses, collected eggs, picked corn and stacked hay. When the sows had litters, I held the new-born males on my lap, belly up, with their legs apart, while Joe castrated them with a rusty razor blade and smeared my grandmother's chicken schmaltz on their tiny wounds as a salve, while "Lady" ate the little morsels as they fell to the barn floor.

By the time I was six or seven, I drove the large workhorses working in the fields. When I was eight and tall enough to saddle it, Joe gave me my own horse, a gentle mare named "Chocolate". And when my foot could reach the

clutch pedal – I wasn't more than 10 or 11 - I was driving his old pick-up around Holliston running errands.

But what has all of this to do with my qualifications for membership in The Literary Club?

Well, as I suggested earlier, there was another side to Joe. His early education was in the Holliston public school system, such as it was. Under pressure from my grandparents to become a doctor or a lawyer, he went to Tufts for a year and then entered Boston University Law School. But his heart wasn't in it, and he left without his degree.

His passion was horses. At one time or another, he owned almost every kind of horse – trotters, pacers, jumpers, Shetland ponies, Arabians, work horses, you name it. He once owned one of the giant Budweiser 8-horse Clydesdale teams and an authentic set of the ornate silver-plated Budweiser harness gear.

But what he loved most were the thoroughbreds. He was a happy-go-lucky gypsy who spent most of his life on the open road, criss-crossing the United States, Canada, Mexico and Cuba in a maroon and silver van, or pulling a maroon and silver trailer behind a large limousine, moving race horses from track to track. Maroon and silver were his racing colors.

He actually owned a few good horses during his career. One of them, "Blade Edge", won several big stake races at major tracks in the mid-30's. "Ladfield" was another. But most of them were "platers," cheap horses that ran for small stakes at second and third rate tracks and county fairs and carnivals.

Joe wasn't above doing things to help a horse perform better than its natural ability allowed. He often stood unsound horses in ice for hours before the race to numb their legs. Sometimes, a numbed horse would break a leg. But then again, sometimes it might win.

His stimulant of choice was Dr. Bell's, a dark, highly-toxic liquid concocted somewhere in Canada and sold in small brown bottles by furtive characters who lurked around the stables after dark. A few drops of Dr. Bell's on the back of a horse's tongue, or, depending on the vigilance of the track officials, injected into a chest muscle, sometimes produced surprising results. Doping horses was not uncommon at the tracks where Joe raced, and to the extent that he needed a rationale, it was that he had to do it because everyone else did.

And, of course, there were the "boat races", when Joe and all the other the owners, trainers, jockeys and most of the stable hands knew which horse would win before the race was run. Strangely, Joe was not a gambler, and never bet more than a couple of dollars on any horse, even when he knew the race was fixed. Nor did he drink.

Starting each winter in Cuba and Florida, Joe followed the meetings at the major race tracks as they worked their way north. At the end of each meeting, he would buy the unsound or unsuccessful horses that the big time stables no longer wanted, and sell them as fast, sound horses at second and third-rate tracks as quickly as he could, occasionally with new names and forged papers. That was long before the modern era of tattooed upper lips.

One horse whose name he didn't change was "Whiskolo", who finished third in the 1935 Kentucky Derby. Joe bought "Whiskolo" for a few hundred dollars at Belmont Park in 1941, but by then, he was a 9-year old with a long history of "also rans". Nonetheless, he sold "Whiskolo" at Blue Bonnets in Montreal a few months later for four or five times what he paid for him.

There always seemed to be some sucker willing to buy a horse that showed a little promise, or finished third in the Kentucky Derby, even if it was 6 years earlier.

But for the horse that didn't sell after a few races, the next stop usually was the nearest dog food factory.

On January 29, 1940, a few weeks after my 12th birthday, my father, a World War I veteran, a Colonel and the then commanding officer of the New Jersey National Guard preparing for what he was certain would be World War II, was killed in a weapons firing range accident. My mother became the family breadwinner, and took a full-time job as the manager of maternity shop in downtown Newark.

In those days, full time meant eight hours a day, six days a week. Holding down a full-time job and looking after an active prepubescent son at the same time was frequently more than my mother could handle. I don't think I would have qualified as a juvenile delinquent, but I did have my share of stupid adolescent adventures. It was particularly difficult for my mother during the summer, when school was in recess, and by the summer of 1941, she was ready to put me up for adoption.

Until Uncle Joe called.

Joe was getting ready to go to Canada for five weeks of racing - two weeks at Blue Bonnets in Montreal, a week at Connaught Park, near Ottawa, and then back to Montreal for two weeks at Mount Royal.

"I'll take Lenny with me," he said.

I could see my mother sorting out visions of disaster in her mind, counting the few pros and the numerous cons. But ultimately, I'm sure with misgivings, but with no other practical options, and perhaps, with more confidence in me than I thought she had, she agreed.

A few days later, I boarded a New York, New Haven & Hartford train at Grand Central Station in New York bound for Boston, with a stop in

Framingham, where Joe picked me up in his maroon and silver van, and we headed off for Montreal.

There were six horses in the van, three in the front stalls facing back and three in the back stalls facing front. In the center, between the front and back stalls, were his Dalmatian, "Lady", a goat, bales of hay and straw, racing paraphernalia and several large barrels filled to overflowing with oats.

But there was more than oats in those barrels. In each barrel, below an eight or 10 inch layer of oats, were dozens of cartons of American cigarettes, which could be sold in Canada for a huge profit, provided that you didn't pay the Canadian import duty on cigarettes.

The drive to Montreal took about 12 hours, with a stop at the Canadian border to go through immigration and customs, and to pay duty on any goods being brought into Canada for re-sale - like cigarettes. We reached the border after dark at a remote immigration and customs station north of St. Albans, Vermont.

Joe jumped out of the van and jogged toward the customs window, just near enough for the customs officer to see him, and shouted, "Hi, Maurice, I'm back."

"*Bon soir*, Joe," the officer answered. "*Comment ça va?*"

"I'm fine," he said, "but I've got this kid with me, my nephew. We've been on the road all day, and he's dead tired. I'd like to get him to Montreal as soon as I can."

"Anything to declare?"

"Nope. Just the usual. Six horses, tack, feed, couple of dogs." Actually, one was a goat.

"Okay, go ahead," Maurice shouted. "*Bon route*".

"See you next time," Joe shouted back. And off we went, six horses, a dog, a goat, tack, feed -- and countless cartons of untaxed cigarettes.

But not before Joe had dropped a few of those cartons on the seat of Maurice's car.

Coming home at the end of the season, we went through the same ritual at U. S. customs, except instead of American cigarettes, the oats concealed untaxed bottles of Crown Royal Canadian whiskey and cartons of Dr. Bell's. And a couple of bottles of Crown Royal remained behind on the seat of the U.S. customs official's car.

The world I lived in that summer was a place apart from the real world, called the "backside". Its boundaries were the fences that enclosed the stables along the far turns and beyond the backstretches, away from the grandstands and the finish lines, and the winners' circles, where the real world watched the excitement and color of the races.

But the backside was colorful in its own way. It was inhabited by drifters and cast-offs – tough, hard-drinking loners, who seemed exciting to me then, but who I now realize were sad, lonely, mostly dysfunctional people, disconnected from home and family. They had names like "Bright Eyes", "Johnson", "Sally the Greek" and "the Cuban", but no last names. They drifted from job to job, working for a few dollars a day for whichever stable needed an extra hand, usually losing what they earned at the betting windows, or drinking it away. They ate in filthy cafeterias in the stable areas, and slept in empty stalls. Their social lives consisted mostly of sitting outside the stables at night, staring at a wood fire, playing stud poker, shooting crap, or drinking themselves into oblivion. The next morning, one or more of them might not be there, perhaps having drifted off to another job or another track, but

sometimes, in an empty stall, dead of too much alcohol or an overdose of Dr. Bell's.

Most of the jockeys used "joints". Today, of course, that connotes marijuana. But in those days, a joint was a small, battery-operated electric prod, about the size of a Zippo lighter. The jockey pressed the joint against his horse's neck during the race, shocking it into a faster pace. When you saw a horse's nostrils flare, its ears twitch back and forth and its tail flick up and down wildly, you knew the jockey was using a joint. Usually, the stable hand who led the horse from the paddock to the track would slip the joint to the jockey as he released the horse. Of course, joints were illegal, and a jockey caught using one could be banned for life. So on the last turn, just before the horses turned into the home stretch, the jockeys dropped their joints on the track. The stable hands waited at the rail, and as soon as the horses passed, they rushed out, retrieved the joints, and later sold them back to the jockeys.

That summer, at the age of 13, I lived and worked on the backside with the stable hands and grooms and hot walkers and exercise boys. I ate with them in the filthy cafeterias, and played poker and shot crap with them at night. I fed, watered and exercised the horses, mucked out their stalls, iced their legs, dropped Dr. Bell's on their tongues and injected it into their chests. I led them to the paddock before the race and back to the stables afterward. I slipped joints to the jockeys and waited at the rail to retrieve them and later sell them back. I knew when a race was fixed.

I was part of the backside, but still, every few nights, I placed a collect person-to-person call for "Dr. Hirsch" to hear my mother's voice.

While we were at Blue Bonnets, in Montreal, Joe and his friend, Dave, another race track gypsy, became friendly with what seemed to me to be a couple of very nice young ladies. When the Blue Bonnets meeting ended, Joe

and I drove the horses to Connaught Park, the next stop on the circuit. When we arrived, Dave and the nice young ladies were there waiting for us.

At Blue Bonnets, “home” was a cot in an unused stall. But not at Connaught. When we got to Connaught, Joe and Dave checked into a large suite at the posh Lord Elgin Hotel in downtown Ottawa.

Every evening, after the races, Joe, Dave, the two ladies, "Lady", the dog, and I drove to a side street near the hotel, where the van was parked for the night, with "Lady", the dog, standing guard. Upstairs in the suite, after the others had a few cocktails and Joe had his obligatory sip of wine, a waiter served us a sumptuous meal, the cost of which, plus a generous tip, was charged to the room.

There being sleeping accommodations in the suite for only four, I slept happily with my “Lady”, the dog, on a bed of fine straw under a warm horse blanket, outside in the van.

Each morning, I woke to the sound of the van motor starting. It was daylight, and time to get back to the track. Except for Sunday morning, after the last day of racing. When I heard the motor start, it seemed to be the middle of the night. In fact, it was the middle of the night. Joe and his friends had slipped quietly out of the hotel, and off we went. After a quick stop at the track to load the horses and gear, we took off and didn't stop until we were back in Montreal. It was - just as they describe it on television today - a fabulous, all-expense paid one-week vacation in beautiful Ottawa, Canada, courtesy of the Lord Elgin Hotel.

In 1946, I was attending Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Coincidentally, Henry Winkler and I overlapped there for about two years, although we didn't meet until many years later. Anyhow, during the 1946 spring break, I decided to visit my grandparents at their new home in

Hallandale. The Florida racing season had ended, and Joe was in the process of hauling the cheap nags he bought at Hialeah and Gulfstream north to the farm. They were going 10 horses at a time, six in the van and two each in trailers, each trailer towed by a 16-cylinder Cadillac limousine, one, a 1935 model, the other, a 1928.

When it came time for me to return to Rutgers, Joe was ready to send another caravan north, and since I was headed in that direction and came a lot cheaper than a hired driver, he suggested that I save the train fare and drive one of the cars and a trailer to New Brunswick. He would arrange for another driver to pick it up there.

It seemed like a perfectly reasonable proposition, and early the next morning, the caravan left Hallandale, Joe driving the 1935, I, the 1928, and a hired driver, the van. We became separated almost immediately, but that was not unexpected. We had in place an elaborate communications system by which we could stay in contact. My mother, in Newark, was Command Central. Whenever any of us stopped, we placed a collect person-to-person call to my mother's number for, who else? – "Doctor Hirsch" – who, of course, "Sorry, wasn't there". The caller then left the number for "Doctor Hirsch" to return the call, and hung up. If we really needed to talk, the call for "Doctor Hirsch" would be "urgent". Thus, my mother was able to keep track of our progress, and if the call was "urgent", she could put us in touch with each other.

Those 16 cylinders strained awfully hard to pull my Cadillac's 18 year-old body, plus two tons of horse and trailer, north, and by that afternoon, I was far behind the others. As I pulled into Vero Beach, not far from where I started in the morning, a cop pulled me over and gave me a ticket for failing to have operating brake lights on the trailer.

I placed an "urgent" call to "Dr. Hirsch" from a pay phone outside the police station. Joe called back in about a half hour. When I explained my predicament, he asked to speak to the cop. I could hear his voice echoing through the ear piece, telling the cop that the car and the trailer had been fully serviced just a few days earlier. The lights were working when I left Hallandale, he said, and he assured the cop that I would take it to the nearest service station as soon as we hung up to have them repaired.

"This car ain't seen a mechanic for years," the cop growled, and hung up.

Well, all right. I figured Joe would ignore the ticket, and started to get back into the car to leave.

"Hold it, young feller," the cop said, "you ain't goin' nowhere. You're gonna' be in court tomorrow morning. And to make sure you're here, you're gonna' post \$50 bail."

I didn't have \$50.

"Then you'll spend the night in jail."

Another "urgent" call went out for "Doctor Hirsch".

I knew before he called back what Joe would say. I walked, fed and watered the horses, and spent the night in jail.

The following morning, a Justice of the Peace found me guilty and fined me \$50, and ordered me to "get that heap of junk the hell out of town immediately". But then he waived the fine, I'm sure because he knew I couldn't pay it anyway.

Joe got a great kick out of the fact that I spent the night in jail free. But I can tell you, it didn't quite compare to our free vacation at the Lord Elgin Hotel.

My Uncle Joe died in 1968 after open-heart surgery. He was 64. The call came on a Friday morning while I was attending a meeting at a law office in

Amarillo. I left immediately, and arrived at the gravesite, in one of those big cemeteries near LaGuardia Airport, shortly before sundown. They had waited for me. A rented rabbi chanted the Kaddish.

Joe died with a few cheap horses, a 1948 Chrysler convertible Town and Country station wagon and \$65,000. I found the \$65,000 in small bills stuffed in a brown paper bag in the spare tire of his car.

Well, there you have it. Smuggler. Drug pusher. Defrauder of innkeepers. Race fixer. Jail bird. My criminal record in full.

I apologize again for failing to bring a paper. But if, with knowledge of all of this, you still consider me worthy of membership in The Literary Club, I promise that next time, I'll bring a paper.

But tonight, I bring only my confession.
