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FOR FATHER AND SON: PAT CONROY AND THE GREAT SANTINI 12-19-1979

"The truth is stranger than fiction" *For John Enloe & Conroy Family*

If everyday living is some kind of drama, then I've got my story to tell. There's no reason to dig down deep, no reason for a mental archeology of my intentions. Perhaps its only meaning will unfold on the surface and make it all clear; perhaps not. This is simply a story to tell, of a father and son and of our encounters, of the way the past inextricably arises in the present. It's the tale of the taming of an admiration, of making connections between the recessed and the actual, their hows and whys embedded in the mysterious chance and *mumbo jumbo* of everyday life. So on with this story of once upon a time…

We began that deep winter evening some five years ago with rounds of drink, jokes, and salutary amusements. Then he started getting down to the business at hand telling those fabulous stories of his, and I'd lay back now and then and try some of my tallest tales on him. Between the drinks and the talk I was mentally recording the whole ambience. For here I was, twenty-four, nasty and sassy and self-serving. *(wannabe, imposter syndrome) Here I was with an admirable man, a Southern writer of considerable distinction, a man whose talk could raise the frozen ground right up between the cracks of his hardwood floors. I was mesmerized. All the while that night, between his magic talk and incantations on everyday living, we ate them sweet goober peas and slowly sucked the ice out of our empty bourbon glasses.

We jowled some about kids and teaching, about growing up and out, about living on the edge and in the middle of things, about commonplace specials like basketball and sweethearts. He was always conjuring up an image and tying little vignettes together as his hands muscled the air. We always seemed to be in or close to a story. No matter how tangential it was, no matter how far removed his talk seemed at the moment, he could stitch and weave with the best. He could pull the most fantastic video image from the tiniest thread of tape. It was his gift, his challenge, and God did he love a challenge.

It was getting deep into the evening when the phone rang. I was starting to slip into the bowels of my sofa chair when he returned to say that his father was coming over.

I was excited. I had wanted to meet Pat's father for a long time now, ever since I heard he was an old fighter pilot, the meanest of the mean leathernecks. Finally, I was going to the flesh and bones of an image I had of this man, of this life-story I had been collecting and collating, piecing together items and bits for the last year and a half. Ever since I had become acquainted with Pat and his family I had heard a catalogue of off-handed remarks, anecdotes, and graphic characterizations about his daddy. The first time was innocent enough. We were standing around the playground fence where Pat had come to pick up his kids from school, and one of the *(girls) reminded Pat they were suppose to go out and eat lunch with granddaddy.

Pat looked down at the three of them, it seemed then without a trace of kidding, and told them that they better watch out for the old man; he was going to take them to

his favorite hole in the wall, a dirty little place under the streets in the sewer where the only thing they had to eat was horseflesh burgers. And they looked him straight in the face for a full second or two waiting for that knowing grin to appear. It did. Pat was always pulling their legs and pigtails.

Months later in a graduate school course in storytelling, Pat revealed more in an overwhelmingly vivid and personal tale, a story of a larger than real life USMC flying Colonel, of a father who never really knew his children. For a full hour he entertained us with the wildest of men, a story of a father who each Saturday morning he was home would wear his dress uniform with full insignia, and inspect each of his children's rooms They would stand attention outside their rooms in the hall and he would inspect their drawers to see of their clothing was folded according to regulations. He would rub his white gloved fingers and along the baseboards *(meticulously) checking for lint (*grunge), and then he would bounce a *(shiny, new) quarter on their beds measuring its trajectory *(with precision) to see if the tautness of sheets met the standards established in the USMC Handbook. Pat told the *(archetypal 20th c) story of a son whose only close relationship to his father was a *(frequent) slap on the head, or the closeness of the two playing one on one basketball. He described in *(imagistic) detail the occasional violent togetherness of the family when Dad battled the kids in living room *(re)enactments of such Marine battle classics as Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Good old Dad, of course, carried the USMC banner charging over the *(living room) couch to attack the Japanese *kamikazes* *(with a broom gun and apple grenades). And here I was, I was finally going to meet this *(B-movie)character, this hero of every kid reading comic books and playing fighter pilot in their backyards. It was amazing to me how Pat so often spoke of him with admiration and pity, with a hatred, and yet an understanding of the past. And it was even more spectacular when the mere mention of his name raised smoke in Pat's hot blue eyes. Here was a man both hated and loved with the experience and raw passion of an *(early morning) deer hunter.

Pat had gone upstairs to tuck his kids in and story their eyes shut. He was that kind of father. For some reason I kept thinking of how Pat didn't simply carry his liquor well, he rode it sky high. Here I was struggling to keep from slipping out after all those drinks, and hell if he didn't seem to bear down some more, level out, and fly on the edge with his talk. Here he was now, essentially sobered, going upstairs to read with his three girls. He was some kind of daddy. But Pat was wasn't just some genteel, good ole Southern boy, close to the earth, close to kids, who could propel his lips and brain with shot after shot of storytelling rye. He was Irished for sure, a man who could tie up a bottle as sure as he'd fight for the stars and stripes. He was deep feeling, deep thinking. How many men do you really know who'd go and make it through the Citadel majoring in English Literature? Many of these "girls" had left the Corps, some had even disappeared *(in their escapes) into the boonies and swamps

of South Carolina. But Pat had some of that killer instinct, not that he'd killed anything other than his own emotion. He was built like a bull, and played star

basketball with a linebacker's nose for he ball. He was as agile as a dancing bear, and every grunt head at that God forsaken Citadel knew he wasn't any pansy. He was a platoon captain, best in the Corps, and he could fire his M-16 as well as he could recall salient passages from Agee and Faulkner.

He was rough but gentle, authoritative and understanding. You could see him all bare-hearted with his kids. A lot of any man is reflected in how well he understands and relates to his kids. Pat was something special though because he took his parenting more seriously than most men. The Colonel had taken his fatherly role seriously also, what with his frequent inspections of rooms and shoes, his infamous dive bomber attacks for "fun" while his kids were eating breakfast, crawling through the living room to make a surprise attack on the little yellow bellied pissants as they ate their cereal. His was a worldview where his kids were at heart but not in mind. He was a drill sergeant, forget his silver wings, down to the bone marrow, and his children were dressed *(groomed) and paraded like the best of grunt offspring. But somehow they lacked the closeness together that each kid would have died for. There's only room for one in this here cockpit he often reminded Pat, as if to explain away their felt separation and constant distancing, as of to help Pat reformulate his shallow respect for his Dad. You see, Pat would say, good old Dad just didn't have any empathy for his kids. Why should he when they were little grunts, made in the image of the USMC, who were capable of handling the loss and pain like any leatherneck who made it through boot camp *(Paris Island)? Boot camp characterized the essence of their family life, in-house training for the hard breaks and tough shakes.

But the Colonel's baby bull, Pat, was paradoxically *(so) natural, symbiotically authentic. It was his sincerity, his wry humor which made the love and hate of his father so clear a picture of knots and twists of longstanding conflict, of wasted energies and lost desires, of dark hiding places for emotion. It was a love and hate relationship conceived so deep that the space of time had dug out the grain. But he had been laboring for some time, he had been working out this past in the sweat of writing, in a kind of psychic osmosis and spiritual cleansing. It was slow and painful, so painful the muscles of his *(soul) ached. I didn't know their relationship, but from all the vicarious fuzziness I had *(built) a sense of Pat's tearing apart and building over. It was some kind of rebirth, or at least renewal, putting all that past into the perspective of the present.

The week before he had given me a manuscript copy to read of his newest novel, *The Great Santini,* a product of all those years of hurt and aching affection. I immersed myself into it completely. I had been waiting a year for him to finish it, and perhaps let me read it, and here I was waiting all evening hoping he would bring it up. He hadn't said a thing about it over the past hour and neither had I, partly because I was afraid to praise him, partly because he didn't respond to talk about his daddy,

particularly *(especially) if he hadn't brought him up. I had already gagged on my big foot in my mouth; several times I had messed out of bounds in his personal life

like some naïve reporter, imprecise, indiscreet or thoughtless. So you see why I hadn't said anything to him that evening about his writing. But I was dying to… I had embedded myself, I was enveloped and wrapped every time I picked up the manuscript; I was buried in the deep of that story, into the wet and dark, the warmth and fire of every scene. I could invoke at will an image of the Great Santini, I could invoke Pat in his character Ben. I was focused full throttle commanding the ties between reality and fictive story. It pulled men into it, entranced. The tale was personal and I identified, making connections, feeling right between the lines. I was hypnotized with the kinds of transference that would make a psychiatrist eat his license.

It wasn't simply that Pat was a great storyteller. God only knew the extent of his power, of his voodoo talk and magic tricks with language. He could domesticate wild ears and jumbled heads; he could teach the sounds and rhythms of story talk; he could teach *(you) how to listen to what is heard; how to crack the cataracts of too much TV with a storytelling gift he had made, not inherited. He probably had his kids upstairs right then engulfed in the midst of woods and *(ghosts) or down where the beach meets the depths of sea and monsters, stories no doubt that will turn their heads and tame the dark. His secret was he could tell something of himself. It was in the telling of what he knew, of knowing what he had to tell. He was like a soft spoken preacher man filled with the living Spirit—he could make a deaf man walk on water. It was his body talk, the way that he moved his hands that could fire your head and cool your soul. Like the best of the deeply wrought, his stories grew out of the down under, out of the constant building and rebuilding of the meaningful, the hard felt. So Pat spoke to me true and direct, authentic as the water's wide, like the distant closeness felt by a younger brother. I had learned a lot from him.

Pat was some *(sort) of hero to me for sure, a living legend some would say, as humble as a rock is hard others would swear, but hell if I would ever let him hear me talk like that. You could have admiration written all over across your face and he would slowly refocus your thought, soothing your conviction. He knew all that you knew he knew. His humility would turn its other cheek, and then if need be, his eyes would knock you upside the head. It was all in the way he looked at you. Like at the end of some archetypal cowboy picture show where the good guy stares down the guy in black, and all the townsfolk run up to him to boo and coo. He twirls his pistol, turns around and says, "I ain't no hero folk…I'm just myself." He walks away from them into the sunset, the picture credits running over his receding, stoic figure. This is all pure bone here, no jive on my part. Anyone close to someone they believe in will tell you that their specialness is what thy do so naturally. That's how living legends are made and sustained. They don't have to work at it for public conviction grows wherever two or three are gathered. Pat didn't want himself seen as anything

important at all, like he should make a celebrity TV commercial, or like he should wear an identification badge when he went to a restaurant or out shopping: PAT

CONROY SOUTHERN WRITER. He didn't want himself perceived as anything more or less special than you or me.

But there are deeper currents to my admiration, more than meets the attentive ear; there's more to my identification with him, more to *(this) storytelling. I have a mosaic of memories of that evening, a gestalt reconstructed many times since, of waiting downstairs for Pat and gloating over the fact that I was going to meet this Great Santini. I was thinking, spontaneously perhaps, but consciously kept in mind, of how Pat and the Colonel and me were going to get down real hard and honest, and they were going to spill their guts to me. I anticipated that we would sit around and through perfunctory introductions and drinks, and then they would open their heads and talk all about the fact and fiction of *The Great Santini.* They were going to exhume the past, dig out their hearts and souls, draw al the tenuous connections between real life and the fictional story. And I was going to be there to record, dutifully mind you, for the rest of humanity, for my own glory, all the psychodrama between them that evening. My egotism centered expansively for a long time.. Here I was, me, some damned lucky graduate student majoring in textual criticism and the psychology of creativity, who was about to gather empirical data on a Southern literary phenomenon. I would be, of course, objective, detached, making copious notes on the *(ecology of the) whole event. This was perfect dissertation material I surmised, as I found myself noting a possible title, *"A Phenomenology of The Fictive and Authentic Personality in Contemporary Southern Autobiographical Fiction."* For a short while, very short mind you, I found myself after that thought with a bad taste in my mouth, like when you let down someone you didn't want to hurt, your best friend perhaps. But there I was by God, excited and *(egotistically) parasitic.

I couldn't wait for Pat to get downstairs so I could perhaps tell him how sitting here I thought I had it all figured out between him and his daddy, about the love and hate, about the cold and anguish of their relationship. I was all ready to psychoanalyze. I too had a dad upon whom the USC had left its indelible mark. Now he was a Christian missionary in Japan where I had continued the leatherneck tradition in a way by going to high school on a USMC airbase where I gave several years of my life to God and to country. Once a Marine, always a Marine, their sons would note, drawing out the evident similarities between the missionary and the fighter pilot. It was all too clear from their sons' points of view. We were always choosing between the clear-cut, between good and evil, between spit polish and scuffed shoes. And worse still, because it caught us at both ends, was the good old Marine Dad's code we operated under: "You can do anything you want to, son, as long as you don't do anything I don't want you to." We didn't have a chance. But Pat and I were closest perhaps, because we knew the same pain, had shared the same loneliness of wanting to be authentic and honest with our fathers, protectors and defenders of the Faith.

Pat had still not come downstairs when there was a soft knock at the door. Before I could up, this bear of a man, wearing an old flight jacket came walking through the door. I knew who he was before he said a thing.
"How are you doing son? Where's Pat? I'm Don Conroy."
"I'm Walter Enloe. Glad to meet you. Pat's upstairs putting the kids to bed. I figured you were Pat's dad."
"Glad to meet you son. How do you know me?"
"Pat said you were coming over. You have on a flight jacket."
"Well, well. That's what it is alright. Had it since my first birthday." He smiled and walked toward the kitchen." "You just sit there for a second and let me fix myself a little toddy."
There he was, I thought, he's something else. He was square jawed. red cheeked with the cold. He looked stronger than an ox. *(He had the barreled arms and the beer belly of an Irish dockworker). He wasn't the mean and nasty I had imagined, though he looked like he could hold his own anytime, anywhere. I kept trying to imagine how he, six four, two hundred and thirty pounds, could get in and out of the cockpit of a fighter plane. He was fifty five, and he carried himself like a man who was still able to do fifty pushups on his fingers each morning like Colonel Bull Meecham of *The Great Santini.* And there was something else, something familiar about him that I couldn't figure out. That Pat could write, so vividly I told myself, for here was the Santini as if I had known him before.

"What do you know that's any good boy?" he asked me settling down onto the couch.
"Not much sir." I couldn't think of anything to say though I already knew I was going to love this conversation encounter. "You know something sir, I just finished reading Pat's new book about you. You are the one and only, the Great Santini."
"Ha! The Great Santini! Well sir, I guess you could say I'm him or he's me. That book any good? I hadn't read t myself. Don't plan to neither."
"It's fantastic sir. Pat writes real well. Why don't you….?"
"He sure does son. He's gone and made himself famous living on that island with all them black kids, and now he's gone and written a book about his good ole Dad."
"He makes you out real good sir."
"He does does he? Well, yes siree. Pat says he wants me to read it."
"Why aren't you going to read it sir?"
"Might someday, son, just might. but you see I had a time just sitting down and making it through that book of his *The Water Is Wide.* It sure wasn't like that pretty boy Voight I just saw playing the 'Conrack.'"
"Maybe he'll make a movie out of *The Great Santini*."
"Maybe so, son, maybe so. Ha! That would be something wouldn't it?" His voice trailed off in thought. He was lounged out now, feet propped up on the coffee table, relaxed. "Ha! Ha! I think that old George C. Scott would do the Great Santini real well. Takes some kind of man to play a real leatherneck. I'm just guess but knowing some

of those stories Pat's telling, embellished a bunch you can be sure, well, George would do the good ole Santini a lot of justice, yes siree."

"That would be great sir. He was really wonderful as Patton. He really got into his character. Best actor Oscar."
"Wonderful? Wonderful? Best actor not to accept. You've got to be kidding boy. He was fantastic, right on target." He had raised his voice a bit. Wonderful was a sissy *(girly) word the Colonel would never use to describe an one hundred percent pure beef man like General Patton. Wonderful? Come on Walter, I told myself.

"Maybe that old man would be as close to the Santini as I am, whatever that is," he said, turning his glass in the palm of his hand. "Don't want to read that book though, no sir." He motioned with his hand as of to continue. "Don't really want to know if I'm…I not too sure how mean and nasty the Santini really is. Pat's been thinking about it for a long while and I'm sure he's got it all down there someplace. We'll see what his sister says. She's a writer, Past says better than him." He paused as if to acknowledge his next thought. "The man's got some stuff to workout. Every boy's got something to work out with his good old Dad." He laughed at himself with a smile. I sat there thinking this guy's something else, wonderful perhaps.
"You now Pat's made you out real good, sir."
"I know," he said, looking at me and staring me down some. "You know, there's something strange about you," he said getting up heading for a release and a refill. I wondered what that meant. *(I've talked too much. I think Around elders you should be seen and not heard much from even as an adult).

When he came back we sat there for a few minutes, and we started talking about how I knew Pat and his family, about his grandchildren and how I taught them, about how much they loved going to their Paideia School. He told me about his recent adjustment back to everyday civilian life, of how he missed the Corps but still kept up his flying; he spoke of his part-time job as a security officer for something to do and to help ends meet what with his former wife taking everything he had, the loss of love, the emotional pain. But he laughed it all off, happy and content he said with making some friends, and being close to his grandchildren.
"Where you from Walter?"
"Well Sir, I've lived all around the South and up in Princeton, New Jersey. I grew up some over in Japan."
"Your father in the military?" he asked if he was angered I hadn't told him before. I felt lucky he hadn't asked me if I had been in the service. "Where was he stationed?"
"No Sir, my father was and still is a Presbyterian missionary over there. He was in the USMC, Air Corps though in World War II."
"You don't say. What outfit was he with?"
"Don't know Sir. Fought on Guam and Iwo Jima. Sergeant. Plane mechanic. *We lived there five and a half years. Loved every bit of it too. Lived in Hiroshima. Went to a naval airbase school two hours away. For two years. Think they had some Marine squadrons there."

"Got nuked out, huh son? Sure did…Well, you don't ay. This is real interesting son." He sort of pulled himself up off the couch and gave me this strange smile, a gotcha focused right between my eyes. "Been to Japan myself, oh several times."

You know I found myself thinking. There's something to this Colonel. "Been to Japan. Ever been to Hiroshima?"
"Sure have son. Pretty place isn't it, now that they've gone and put it back on the map. Yes Sir, we sure wiped them skunks *(slants) clean. He looked at me hard and again smiled. "How's your brother doing, Walter?"

His question stung and knocked me back into the depths, the recesses of my mind search for a memory, a fragment, a connection. I had this sense but no association.
"Well, he's fine Sir…What? How in the…"
He cut me off. "You don't remember son. You don't remember the Great Santini?" he said grinning.
"No Sir, I don't…No, I just can't think of it. Have we met before?"
"Well son, I can not tell a lie. Ha! I knew there was something about you son, yes siree," he said, pointing at me as if to say I told you so. He pulled himself up off the couch, stood up and hitched his pants., "Yes sir!"
It was on the tip of my mind, I thought, like I should make the connection but I couldn't make the psychic hook-up. *Maybe this old cougar was screwing with me, playing a bit with my head. Could be just a lucky guess about the brother. Guessing how tall somebody was. Over under six feet? The Santini was here alright but what kind of hocus pocus. Shit, I should have come stoned. Next he's going to tell me he fought with my Dad on Okinawa, fixed his planes.
*Having fun he was. Rubbing his chin, beginning a gig. Gotcha. Eyes toward the ceiling. Hell if he wasn't grinning like some old coon dog. He twirled around, drew a long breath into his huge, barreled chest and let out a whoop like pilot Colonel Kong, Slim Pickens, when he accidently fell out the B-52 bomb door in Dr. Strangelove.
*"Come on son, Matthew C. Perry High School, The Fighting Samurai, Iwakuni Air Station 1965 or '66. I remembered you as clear as the day you were born when you said school in Japan. Yes sir, son, you and your brother, what's his name, played on the worst basketball team in the Far East!"
I was absolutely stunned, no knocked over and spaced out. I just couldn't believe it. Nine years ago? A lot had happened since then. "His name is Johnny." Truth is stranger than fiction I thought. Pat couldn't have made this one up. "Wow this is absolutely amazing. God dang, let me see….You…"
"Come on boy, you remember, you got it in there somewhere."
"Well Sir, I remember….Good Lord you were the basketball team's sponsor. Yes Sir, that's it, right?"
"Call me coach!" A pause. "I was the Operations Officer of the Air Station. Volunteered to get you maggots in shape."
"The Colonel!"
"Right you are." Smiling, extending a hand, pulling me up, he grabbed my arm." Good to see you again son. Small world!"

“It sure is Sir…God this is unbelievable. Amazing. Pat’s never mentioned Japan. He once said the family called you Godzilla but I never connected that to Hiroshima.”
“No connection. Just a mutant form of father.”
“I knew there was something about you but I couldn’t place it.”

“ A bit older, less mean, more handsome, grew out of my buzz cut for the ladies.
*“You know why I couldn’t remember you? The Colonel scared the living hell out of us. Must be a mental block, a deep repression of anxiety. You didn’t come to every practice. Most of the games I guess. You had two sergeants. M.P.s. One was named Donny. He coached us too and took us to games all over Japan.”
“That’s right. I did have my job more than fulltime with ‘Nam. Had those two sergeants; nothing can whip you in line like the military police.”
“Yeah they made it clear that our dads’ fate was in our hands; screw up and they get reprimanded.; that would be worse than the brig.”
“ I thought of myself as the conditioning coach. I’ll tell you one thing. You boys were the worst collection of misfits ever to wear a uniform. Never seemed all of you to have the same uniform. You boys were the worst bunch of sissies ever to play the game, the worst I ever saw…But we had some fun!”
“Fun?” I said. “I think we lost sixteen games in a row!”
“Come on don’t you remember all the good times? You remember when you got kicked out of the Far East Basketball Tournament after some of you got caught off the base at Tachikawa? Donny was arrested for punching out some referee after your first game.”
“Don’t remind me please!”
“The truth son, the truth doesn’t have to hurt.”
“Ok we were terrible. I mean the worst alright. Never won a game. Lost to Sasebo High School 100 to 25.”
“Come on, you were bad but not that kind of stink. You boys won one or two didn’t you, if you count those Japanese girl teams you played.”
“Well it prepared me for collegiate soccer; played at Eckerd College, usually against huge schools like Miami and Florida. Never had a winning season in four years.”
“Losing seasons, son, thy can be rich lessons for the ups and downs of the real world. If you have the balls to handle life.”
“Yeah, I keep telling myself that.”

*We sat there for a while and reminisced about Iwakuni, Japan and that school year 1965-1966. Most the Marine squadrons had left the year before to Vietnam and the high school was reduced to twenty nine students and six teachers. A seven member basketball team with several eighth graders who practiced with us but couldn’t play games. Most of our opponents were Japanese high school clubs, not teams. We’d have seven, they might have fifty. We tended to be taller and had more experience at the game. Usually we were ahead or a few points back at half-time. Then the kamikaze attacks began, wave after wave of fresh recruits flying their planes into the heart of our defense. We lost most games when the play was stopped. Fouling out, down to three players, the game was over. We talked about my brother, a former delinquent, now a wonderful teacher who had extraordinary empathy for

misfits, outsiders and prodigal sons. And the infamous "Mousie" Roberto Martinez, five foot five, jet black hair duck tailed, with an orange peroxide curl falling down the middle of his forehead. A kid who smoked Kools, who had a terrible shot,

holding the ball with two hands behind his head. A real gunner. Hell, the Colonel said, we were all gunners, especially me, the team Captain, perhaps the highest scorer with the worst percentage. Rub salt in the wound there Colonel.

And then I could picture him. The Colonel became clear. Saturday morning. Aircraft hanger gym, three ball courts. The Colonel- combat fatigues, boots, white sweatshirt, whistle, squadron cap. Running wind sprints. Even if we couldn't play we'd be in shape. This was wartime. Even if we couldn't win a fricking game we'd be the best damn grunts in the Far East. The Colonel would see to that.

I still couldn't believe it. Fifteen minutes seemed timeless. Here I was with the old bulldog, the Great Santini himself. In Atlanta. A chance encounter. He asked about my Dad who tried to make a few games. I said he was fine though at the time I didn't really know or care. A draft resister who refused his induction physical, the old Marine Puritan preacher wasn't talking to me, his son Job. They hit it off, the old warriors, lamenting the lack of talent, handing out points for grit and *gambate*- perseverance, never giving up. And for the coach who loved wind sprints for smokers and pushups for sissies, he never gave up on us. As the season progressed, a misnomer if there was one, the games started attracting spectators of Marines just a few years older than us, most sideline coaches, who were convinced they could beat the slants, gooks, nips, Japs or whomever, easier than the wimps on the floor. What did you expect from these soft doughboys, sons of officers for God's sake? No wonder the Colonel couldn't get us to win a game! Moreover two of the scumbags, Johnny and me, were not even official leatherneck offspring. The Colonel had a P.R. problem it seemed. He blamed the parents, not the coaching. And the crowds just kept getting larger, the longer our losing streak became. The Colonel's troops were being entertained at our expense and they loved it. The Great Santini? Well, he was pissed.

For some reason I now remembered the first time Pat spoke of his father, the fighter pilot. It was in that storytelling class at Emory. Pat recounted that the only time his father had ever written him when he was at the Citadel was from Vietnam. A postcard arrived several weeks before his graduation. It read- *Dear Son. Congrats. In Nam. Killing lots of gooks. Love Dad*

*And then I began making connections, associations, conjuring up memories and linkages between him and me and Pat and my own father. Rushing through a series of cathartic transferences and projections, aware of how all along and deep down and way back I had known the Great Santini. I rediscovered how he used to take out on us losers what he couldn't give to Pat and the siblings that year. Now I started to understand the taproots of Pat's stories in my life, the basis of authentic grounding

in those stories of the Great Santini. And to Pat, as he was to us that year, tough, no quarter given, fatherly love in the USMC tradition. All at cost to us, he was going to get us pissants in line, whether with the boot and whistle, or the fist. If our fathers couldn't mold us into a fighting corps, he would. He did about as much as any coach

could with this team, maybe more. At least we looked well groomed in our uniforms, even "Mousie," and we could run the length of that court time and time again all game long. He had made some kind of team out of third strong misfits. He was committed to us moral and physical deficients, out of a love of the game, we thought then. But here I was now, this night, and I understood it was because of the father in him, the loneliness of the soldier on the front line; we were his boys, his sons; his kids, his dependents were back in the States and we were his family at least on those days of practices and games.

Finally I recalled how, when he wanted to make a point, he'd put one of his huge hands gently, but deep into our collarbone, digging a bit, fatherly like I guess. And he spoke gently, tough, direct, a man of few words. I remember how the old fighter pilot would palm a basketball looking at the rim. And then he would turn, look, and spontaneously dribble stepping away from the basket, turn, hitting a soft twenty foot jumper. I never remember him missing that shot.

*Pat was still upstairs when I left. He was not going to believe this. Amazing grace, unusual ties, novelty in the commonplace. Don thought he had a picture of the Iwakuni team somewhere. He would be in touch. I went home to write my father.

 # Note: On my association/friendship with Pat Conroy. I first met Pat in 1973 when his family enrolled at the Paideia School in Atlanta. I was an assistant teaching in half-day 3-5 year old program and Woo (Melissa) joined our class. Over the next few years I also worked with Megan in the half-day and Jessica in one of the 5-7 year old classes; several years later Gregory and Emily Fleischer (later Conroy) joined my half-day class. Over he next years we instituted Wednesday night and/or Sunday morning basket-ball games and Pat often joined in. I was also a fulltime PhD student in Emory's Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts (ILA) in Human Studies: human development, semiotics, and the history of ideas. I introduced Pat to my faculty advisor and institute director Robert Detweiler (who had been my Jefferson House mentor at Eckerd College). Initially Pat was fascinated y the catalogue we had created in 1969 in St. Petersburg of he literary effects of recently deceased Jack Kerouac. In 1975-1976 Pat became a "special" student and we took two courses offered by Detweiler in narrative and story-telling and in autobiography. Beginning with those basket-ball evenings Pat and I would sometimes get together afterwards for a drink, and as one of his kid's teachers we would occasionally visit his and Barbara's home for lunch or a social gathering. During 1975 Pat gave me a copy of his manuscript for he Great Santana and thoroughly enjoyed it not realizing (and neither did Pat) that I knew his father from years before in Japan. My family lived in Hiroshima and in 1965 I had been expelled (with my brother) from the dorm at Canadian Academy in Kobe. So beginning the fall of 1965 my brother John (10th grade) with our sister Molly (9th) and myself

(11th) attended Matthew C. Perry School on the USMC Airbase at Iwakuni some thirty-five miles from Hiroshima. With the build up of the war in Vietnam, the base's fighter squadron were deployed to Vietnam, and the high school enrollment that year was 29 students and six teachers. The boy's basketball team had eight varsity players and three 8th graders who practiced with us but did not play. Our opponents were Japanese high school teams organized as "clubs" with 3-40 players. We played most of our games in the gym complex (Aircraft hanger whose bleachers could hold several hundred spectators). Marines would come to our games, not only to see ritual reenactments of World War II and to heckle and cajole us as with lost sixteen games a row. We often did well the first half of the game and were often ahead in scoring, but in the second half the opposition wore is down, often with a kamikaze strategy of sending in five fresh players at a time. Sometimes towards the end of the game we were down to four players and when a second player fouled out, the game was terminated. My father often drove the hour and half to watch us play and struck up a friendly relationship with the head coach. My dad was a fellow Marine during World War II and the assistant coaches who ran the daily practices were Marine sergeants). The head coach was the Operations Officer of the base: Colonel ("Colonel" is who we knew him as) Donald Conroy, "The Great Santini." Pat and I never made this connection until the evening (1975, early 1976) described in the following pages.

Inscriptions in my copy of the *Great Santini* (1976):

Walter- Doctor that is
To a very fine gentleman and former high school athlete par excellence from Iwakuni High School. To you and your brother- my star pupils- my fondest regards.
Don Conroy
Col USMC Ret
032233

To Walter-
A man whom I love and admire- a teacher I respect and a teacher I am glad is responsible for the education of my children.
And to Kitty- in hopes that we become fine and enduring friends.
Pat Conroy
April 27, 1976

Over the next months and year Barbara and Pat separated, publically Barbara wanting to go to Law School, Pat wanting her to stay at home. After the separation and eventual divorce Pat and I drifted a part seeing each other occasionally. He was angry, bitter, and embarrassed and "forced" I felt friends like myself to choose between him and the family that continued to be pat of the family community. I wrote this piece for myself (Pat once telling me that writing was a better catharsis and confession to a priest) but also perhaps as a token for reconciliation. I saw him a last time in 1978 in front of the Paideia School as I was preparing to move back to Japan.

***ADD** Photo of Mathew C. Perry Team 1966 w. Coach, "The Great Santini." The captain, W. Enloe, has been suspended# from the team for a week , and is not part of the picture (#missed practice)

***ADD** program of teams from Japan United States High School Basketball Tournament, Spring 1966, P. Conroy, Coach

* From Dec 12, 1979 manuscript *( )addition of handwritten notations *addition/deletion