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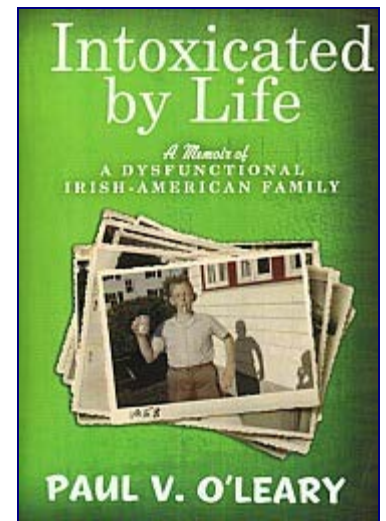


A READER'S JOURNAL

Intoxicated by Life A Memoir of a Dysfunctional Irish- American Family by Paul O'Leary

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2105

The Christmas Party of 1958 is the linchpin which holds this incredible story of the



O'Leary family together. Its telling fills the pages of this book, echoing the haunting images of its eponymous Chapter One, "Christmas Party". Take this scene, which could only be reported from a pre-teen eye witness to the event: it occurred in the hall closet where Paul was charged by his mother to hang the overcoats of the houseful of guests as they arrived. Unseen at first, he witnessed this scene unfold.

[page 1] "Drink it! Go on, drink it! It's not gonna kill you."

She pushed the half-full juice glass at him, the type once used for grape jelly. I watched as she shoved it aggressively at her brother's face.

"I don't wanna drink it, Deidre! It stinks! Plus, it's still wahm!" complained Jimmy. He pleaded in a low voice, "Please, Deirdre! Don't make me drink it. It'll make me sick!"

"Well, if you wanna see my cunt, you're gonna havta drink it. That's the deal. That's what we 'greed on. I'll show you my cunt if you'll drink my piss. Now drink it, you little shit, or I'll throw it at ya!"

Oh my gawd! What was this? My cousin Deidre had just uttered the C word! My chaotic thoughts were suspended like shattered shards of broken glass floating in the ether.

This paragraph is like the knockout punch Rocky Marciano blasted Jersey Joe Walcott with in 20 seconds of the first round of their rematch. It hits you with such a force, that you'd rather stay on the canvas till the count of 10 than get up for 15 more rounds of such a beating. Except . . . except . . . if this paragraph hits you with a jolt of reality and lands right on your funny bone, you'll know this is the right stuff, not some airy-fairy fictional account of a made-up family.

It happened at a Boston Christmas Pahty, fer gawd's sake, full of drunks, Irish-style drunks. You may joke about the Boston accent, "Pawk de cawh in de Hawahd Yawd" and all that, but I lived near Boston and our sweet real estate lady, Marge Lovely, would not turn her head in a gathering if I called her, "Marge". I had to learn to say "Mahdge" to get her attention. Best to put up with the curious spellings in the dialogue of this book, dear Readers, it's how people actually speak in the area, even polite people. But the Irish in this story are mostly rip-roaring drunk and their vocabulary is nothing, if not, at times, as salty as his cousin Deidre's proffered drink, as risqué as his Uncle Jim's popsicle, as obscene as an angry Irish sailor, and as downright rude as W. C. Fields was to kids. So enjoy this peek into a book which will shock you,

delight you, make you roll on the floor laughing, and leave you wondering how the author survived this upbringing. This is a story of a survivor, but he mostly appears as an observer, as this story is about how he outlasted his wonderfully dysfunctional family.

Paul was an innocent, at least before the closet incident.

[page 10, 11] "Was innocent" was the operative phrase, because the encounter with Deirdre and Jimmy in the closet, along with the other events of that evening, shook my childhood naïveté. They forced me to look at my family, at other people, and at life, in a new way. The events of Christmas 1958, encountered in innocence, endured in confusion, and absorbed as experience, led to a better understanding of the true character of my Irish Catholic family, whose story this tale means to tell.

His mother, Mary Ellen McCarthy O'Leary, hated the name O'Leary and Paul inherited her dislike of the name. She'd say, "If you're not careful, you'll grow up to be an O'Leary." (Page 24) Only on Christmas Day were the O'Leary side of the family allowed in Mary's home; the rest of the year, they lived in a place called Pine Court. The other epithet Mary would hurl at Paul was, "You're just like your Uncle Jim!" Here's a quick snapshot of the two uncles, Jim and Denis, two prime examples of the Pine Court O'Learys:

[page25] Uncle Denis, Son Number Four, was a diluted version of Uncle Jim, like a Scotch and water with too much water. I'd like to say that Denis was a colorless and odorless variety of Uncle Jim, but I'd be lying about the odorless part. He dressed like Jim, walked like Jim, didn't bathe like Jim, and like Jim was fumbling and incompetent with women. He didn't talk like Jim; Jim was garrulous. You couldn't shut him up, especially after a few drinks, when "loudmouth" was the better moniker. Uncle Denis, on the other hand, was quiet and rarely spoke. We never mistook his silence for introspection or depth; not all still waters run deep. Perhaps he was guided by Abraham Lincoln's adage: "Better to remain quiet and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt." We all knew Denis was stupid. Denis knew he was stupid. Being stupid is like being dead: everyone knows it but you. He sorted mail at the South Boston Postal Annex all his life. Never got promoted. Never changed jobs. Just sorted mail, manually, five nights a week, on the midnight shift.

Paul's father was John Vincent O'Leary, Vincent being the obligatory middle name for the O'Leary offspring thereafter, and one son escaped it because Mary was not there to enforce it. She had extracted a pledge from her husband, but his recurrent bouts of "liquid amnesia" his promises to his demanding wife were often overlooked. JVO, as he is called in this book, is a title that reminds me of an expensive cognac, but JVO rarely partook of cognac, as he was not a sipper, but a gulper. A gulper of booze, and a gulper of life. He was happy having worked himself up to Vice President of his bank, but Mary wanted him to be President. He maneuvered the board into electing him President, but was chagrined to find that what he envisioned as a crowning achievement of his life, his wife considered only to be a stepping stone. Becoming President meant a step up in their standard of living and a step down in their marital harmony from which they never recovered. She drank to be able to live with JVO, and JVO drank because that's what he did. His banking work as President was over by 10 a.m. and the rest of his day was spent schmoozing with his big banking clients in various country clubs, and getaways, from which he invariably came home barely able to stand.

Uncle John and Uncle Bill, Mary's brother, moved into JVO's home after returning from the War and remained there; two men who came to dinner and never left. John lived on the top floor and was rarely seen; heading off to work early each morning, and climbing up the rear stair to his bedroom, coming down only for dinner and returning back up. Virginia, Paul's sister (Vee for short), recalls John this way when she was a young girl, having only a vague idea how boys were different than girls.

[page 75] One of Virginia's earliest childhood memories involved watching Uncle John

through the keyhole in the hallway bathroom door as he jerked off in the shower. His daily appointment with Mary Palm and her five friends was Vee's introduction to the world of men. The little girl knew that boys had a "pee-pee," but she didn't know it squirted something other than "wee-wee" until she spied on Uncle John. His only relationship to me was that he liked to give me a friendly whack across the top of my head (ooh, that hurt!), or a "noogie" on my shoulder, anytime he caught me unawares, which was all too often.

Uncle Bill couldn't have been more different from his brother unless he had been a girl. They were like yin and yang, and John had all the yang. Even Bill's left middle finger was useless for shooting the bird because its top had been lopped off in a machine shop before the war. It became useful later to him in some Red Skelton-type stunts he pulled.

[page 79] After returning home at war's end, he'd tell all who'd listen that he lost his finger while testing the wind direction in a foxhole opposite the German lines. He used that half finger most effectively to get laughs the rest of his life by putting it in his ear or up his nose and pretending it was stuck. That he didn't take himself seriously was one of his endearing qualities.

JVO was a successful banker, a rip-roaring drunk, a productive if absent father, but he was not a womanizer.

[page 84] JVO was not a sexual creature. At some level men are sexual creatures, but a few have no affinity for the chase, no nose for the "the scent of the hunt." When it came to women, Father was a fumbler, an amateur, a tyro. He was the Mick in the old joke where the female victim complains to the police that she has just been raped by an Irishman. When the cop asks how she knows it was an Irishman, she replies, "Because I had to help him!" . . . He had no girlfriends, never had a lover, and flirted innocently at the margins. Mother was his first, last, and only.

Paul, as a member of the dysfunctional family, does get some mention when he relates how he was expelled from several elementary schools for "excessive laughing". His laughing fits in the second grade matured into stammering in the fourth grade.

[page 106] The next year, grade five, I was given one-on-one tutoring by a speech pathologist, a very kind man who helped my speech improve dramatically. He was a father figure, the first adult male I could confide in. By the sixth grade I could speak without a stammer much of the time, and I began to lose weight. By high school the stutter was mostly gone. I grew tall, thinned out, and left my Howdy Doody years behind me. I managed to get through childhood as only partially damaged goods. Who could ask for more?

Paul's life was drastically improved in grade six when he discovered the most unexpected possibility: Parents who don't drink! He was at a classmate's house on a Saturday night, a time when the O'Learys would already be drunk by then. He assumed his friend's parents were being polite because he was there. So he asked him out of curiosity, "When do your parents start drinking?"

[page 129] "They drink ginger ale or Coke. I've nevah seen my parents drunk. Evah!"

Parents who didn't drink? Who could believe it? I let the conversation move on because I didn't know how to deal with this revelation. I thought about it again and again over the following days and nights, repeating to myself. His parents don't drink; his parents don't drink. The idea that this could possibly be true seemed bizarre. After speaking with other classmates and questioning my sister Virginia, I learned that there really were grown-ups who did not drink, did not get high every evening, and did not get drunk at every party. It was possible to become a teetotaling adult and be accepted

by society. This was news to me! I thought that becoming an "adult" meant that you had to learn how to be a drunk when you grew up. The notion that this was not true made me so happy!

His own dad, JVO, was a 24/7 drunk by this time and his mother had turned into Vokarella, and she used Dixie Cups to disguise her circadian reality. When Mary was in her cups, it was Dixie Cups.

[page 131] As a throwaway designed for short-term use, it furnished less credible evidence of alcoholism than a tumbler. Vodkarella could not abide a glass. . . . Uncle Bill referred to his sister as the "Dixie Queen" (which *he* probably wanted to be, in another context). He would whistle, sing, or hum the refrain to "Dixie" when he saw her need for a drink or when he wanted one himself. "I wish I were in Dixie," hummed under one's breathe, had quite another meaning in our house. It signaled, "Time for some schnapps."

It was though Mary could see her reflection in a glass as a drunk, but not in a Dixie Cup. His mother never got drunk playing "vodka solitaire", but she couldn't face the fact she had become a drunk like JVO. She did become violent at times, like the day Paul came home from school and tried to avoid her, giving simple answers to how his day went as he continued walking out of her presence. She began batting him around and he responded with six-grader version of Ali's "rope-a-dope". Then Virginia, his savior, appeared.

[page 133] As Mother reared back for another blow — it's not easy to hold a broom by the straw end and swing it like a bat — Virginia ripped the broom out of her hands, threw it on the floor, grabbed Mother by the shoulders, and spun her around. With her right hand on Mother's throat and thrusting her left index finger between her eyes, Virginia roared, "Stop it, you drunken bitch! Don't you ever touch him again. If you beat him again, I'll kill you with my own bare hands!" She pushed Mother sharply against the stove, and Mother fell to the floor.

Paul writes later that the *Cynic's Handbook* defines "family relationship" as "a license to abuse." He explains:

[page 137] The above vignette is offered not so much to gain your sympathy, but to explain how I could have evolved a cool detachment from my parents at such an early age. My description of the 1958 Christmas party was, by and large, the way I saw it then. It is not a portrayal of an adult's view of a child's experience, but a recollection of my point of view at the time.

In the famous movie — "A Christmas Story" — it is seeing the events through the eyes of young Ralpie that makes it so charming and unforgettable, a real classic to return to every year and enjoy it over and over without it ever getting stale. For me it helps that I grew up in that era, the early 1940s portrayed in the movie, I was a red-head boy, I wanted a Red Ryder BB gun, and I was told, "You'll shoot your eyes out." I got one for Christmas and thoroughly enjoyed it, never once endangering anyone's eyes. Though I must admit my brother Stevie used it to shoot the grocer delivering groceries in his back, probably only causing a sting, but that sting was nothing to the stings Stevie received later when Daddy got home. I remember hearing the whacks that Stevie got from Daddy in the hallway he enclosed to mete out punishment for egregious behavior on our part. If he couldn't determine who did the deed, all four of us boys got whacks with his razor strop, but Stevie was immediately recognized by the grocer, and the rest of us were spared, though sternly warned against any repeat.

So much of Paul's life reminds me of my own, except for the rampant alcoholism. My parents drank for parties in their 20s and 30s, usually cocktails like "7n7" (Seagram's 7 and 7-Up), but rarely afterward. Dad gave up beer altogether at age 59, and the only wine we ever had at the house was Mogen David

blackberry wine for Thanksgiving Day. We went to the beach as a family and occasional picnics, and whenever someone had caught a lot shrimp or crawfish, we'd have a big seafood boil, with fried trout or catfish as sides. Our ping-pong table turned into a Cajun banquet table and the house was full of uncles, aunts, cousins, and other neighbors. We never went on long trips together, the one exception was when I was seven and my parents went to Milwaukee to visit my aunt's relatives. No room for me in car, so I stayed with my Grandpa Clairville in a small bayou town for a week, during which I learned to read and enjoy the daily comics in the Times-Picayune, Alley Oop, Lil Abner, Dagwood, etal. It is a love I retain today and cannot understand folks who disdain comics. Like Paul none of our birthdays were celebrated. I was really hurt by this the first time when I turned 16 and the party on the ping pong table was not for me, and no one even remembered my birthday. My Sour Sixteen became Sweet Sixteen when Brenda, a girl I had met the previous summer, had returned to her Aunt's home nearby and she called to rescue me from my despair. I invited her to the movies and we spent the night together. My best birthday present ever, my only one for several decades. We celebrated our kids birthdays but rarely ever our own birthday. Four birthday parties a year seemed to be enough.

After all of the "potty" language liberally sprinkled throughout this book, one would not be surprised if Paul were to describe JVO's bathroom etiquette. Nesting is the euphemism JVO used for the process my wife and I refer to, "I'm going to sit down and think about it."

[page 148] Let's begin with "nesting." Nesting, a term coined by JVO himself, was frequently heard around our house, as in "Don't bother your fathah! He's nesting." Nesting describes the prolonged, peaceful pleasure of reading a newspaper, doing a crossword, and smoking a Cuban while sitting on the John giving birth to a BM. A Zen master in the art of nesting. JVO could not and would not be disturbed once the "nest" had commenced. Not that he had any medical problems in that department: as a banker, "deposits" were his forte. Nesting was to JVO what meditation is to a Generation Xer: an extended interlude of tranquility. away from the irritations and distractions of daily life. He merely carried to extreme what we all do every day. He would not truncate or abort his nest, whether visitors had arrived or someone important was on the phone. Nesting, whether of ten or thirty minutes' duration, was sacred and inviolable. When he finally did vacate the bathroom, residual clouds of cigar smoke helped mask his colonic bouquet.

JVO wanted to open a new branch for his bank and made application through the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in Washington, D. C., a place where dreams go to die unless resuscitated by a large infusion of untraceable cash. Is there a cynic alive to prove that it's different today? Apparently the application was held up by JVO's buddy Tip O'Neill until JVO lubricated the bank account of an Irish buddy JFK. Something was clearly rotten in Camelot, a modern-day Hamlet might opine.

[page 186] "Good-bye." said JVO. shaking his hand and leading him to the door. He escorted Kennedy's bagman-in-chief down the stairs, across the empty lobby, and out the shade-drawn front doors.

JVO's cloak of naïveté was shredding fast. First, the betrayal by his mentor, the near loss of his job, and his own counterbetrayal and coup to become president. Now he was being asked to pay a cash bribe to a young man from a powerful local Irish family who had set his sights on the US presidency itself. All of this intrigue, stealth, and manipulation to get bureaucratic permission for something he, by law, was entitled to, depressed him and reinforced his cynicism and melancholia. Show me a cynic, and I'll show you an idealist who has lost his virginity. I'll show you John V. O'Leary.

Paul's maturation got another jump start from jazzman Sonny Stitt who told him what life was like for a jazz musician. This short story blew the bluesy smoke away from Paul's dreams of becoming a jazz saxophonist. Sonny tells Paul about his older brother who gave up a promising jazz career to become a doctor.

[page 216] "He's a doctor. He has a house; he has a wife and kids. He has a regular life, a steady job, and a steady income. He knows where he will be tomorrow, next week, and the week after that. He knows who will be with him and who will take care of him. He has a family who loves him, and he loves them."

He leaned across the table and spoke just loud enough for me to hear. "I have none of that. I have no home: I have no wife. I'm on the road 365 days a year. I have no life. You think I have jazz, and that's true. I have jazz, but jazz is my *art*. I have no *life*."

Later Paul found out that his idol, Sonny Stitt, died at age 58. By then Paul was on his way to being a respected lawyer and specialist in real estate transactions, doing something his father did by the seat of his pants without any degree at all.

JVO's propensity for going to sleep in his chair with a lit cigar in his mouth finally caught up with him, and it was Paul who suffered the most existential angst from the blaze which ensued.

[page 224, 225] My precious record collection, a veritable history of rock 'n' roll from Bill Haley's 1954 "Rock Around the Clock" through 1963's "Louie Louie" by the Kingsmen, was no more. Equally searing was the loss of my jazz collection: LPs by Basie, Blakey, Brubeck, Coltrane, Miles Davis, Ellington, Garner, Getz, Gillespie, Mingus, Monk, Mulligan, Parker, Rollins, Stitt, Tatum, et cetera. All gone. Melted into one great mass of black vinyl on the den floor beside the burned-out hi-fi and twisted metal of the album racks. God was I angry! I am pissed off even now, forty-five years later. I never saw the lava field in person: I only heard about it from Mother and Uncle Bill. JVO never said one word to me about it. Not one. No offer of replacement. No apology. Nothing.

No doubt this is difficult for millennials to appreciate, given that they can burn copies of these songs at will today, but it was Paul's musical treasure. You could hold each song physically and turn it over to see what song was on the B side. You could jump into the pile joyfully like Scrooge

McDuck into his swimming pool of money. Now it was all gone. . . On a sad note, the artist who made the song "Louie, Louie" into a rock and party classic in 1963 was Jack Ely, who died about a week ago. On May 3, 2015, I sent this email to Paul O'Leary re Jack Ely, the lead singer of the Kingsmen in 1963:

I just read where you mentioned "Louie, Louie" when talking about the molten lava of vinyl after your father's conflagration. I had just days ago read about the death, a week ago, of Jack Ely, the lead singer. It was a piece written by Roy Peter Clark, a favorite journalist of mine, on "Headlines from Poynter" — the title of his piece is '[Why "Louie, Louie" should be an anthem for journalists](#)'. He wrote, "The original lyrics, written and performed by Richard Berry in 1955, describe a sweet island romance."

Hope you enjoy the reasons for its transition from "island romance" to "greatest rock song of all time", as reported by someone who commented on Roy's article:

As The Daily Beast reported, "The sound engineer had hung the microphone from the ceiling. Ely had to stand on his toes, stare at the ceiling, and essentially scream-sing into the microphone." Ely said as much during an NPR interview a while back.

Years later, Paul was living with his parents in a town on the Cape, and they had acquired a pig who JVO quickly became attached to. One day it escaped from its pen and caused havoc running through the small Main Street and its stores. The Chief of Police called Paul to ask if it were his pig.

[page268, 269] **I called the chief back and confessed; the truant in the pink suit was my**

pet pig.

The next hour was spent with two police officers and several neighbors chasing Piggy across fields, forests, and marshes, scampering back and forth across Main Street twice more in the process. Believe me, a pig is clever and can anticipate your moves several steps in advance. She was no easy catch. Forget about capturing her in an open field; that's impossible. She was too quick, and effortlessly evaded us. She was easier to catch if cornered. but how to manage that? Several times she presented what looked like a good chance, but in close quarters she had the advantage and slipped away. That was part of her strategy: feigning easy capture, only to fly through our hands at the last moment. We almost caught her in the salt marsh when she stepped into a peaty pool and got briefly overwhelmed by mud, water, and salt grass. But she was wet and slippery and squirmed out of my and a cop's hands. Who knew what an adventure catching a "greased pig" could be!

My daughter Carla at the tender age of five *knew* because, at a Union Carbide company picnic, she was chasing a greased pig. She gave up and came back to me, exclaiming, "I couldn't catch him, Daddy. He had twice as many feet as I do."

Things went from bad to worse for JVO when he was arrested for drunken driving and no one was around to save him from the disgrace of spending a night in the drunk tank in jail. All his high-placed Boston buddies were gone and he was alone in his ignominious state. Mary's drinking got the best of her and soon she didn't have a leg to stand on, both having been amputated to save her life from gangrene due to poor circulation.

At one point Paul discovered that JVO who had been threatening to throw them out of their house had been paying both his mortgage and theirs as well, having been too drunk to notice. (Page 299) In the war between the O'Learys and the McCarthys, both sides lost. (Page 305)

Paul O'Leary gave me a copy of this book while my wife Del and I were attending a conference in New York City. Del began reading it first and I couldn't pry it from her hands, only wonder at her laughing at so many places as she read the book straight through. Once I got it, I did the same. Don't laugh, it can happen to you. Then you will laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

If this book were made into a movie, it might be called "A Christmas Story" which, as you may recall, stars a ten-year-old boy in his adventures growing up. I can imagine in some future decade, parents watching Darren McGavin with his "obscene sexy-woman leg" of a lamp in the original "Christmas Story" with their children on Christmas Eve, and then sending the kids to bed to wait for Santa Claus, while the two of them enjoy themselves watching the R-Rated "Christmas Story" based on this book, laughing uproariously when little Paul thinks aloud, "She said the 'C' word!" Or when the O'Learys pick up unconscious Uncle Jim, half-frozen and face-down, from the snow bank, into which he fell while peeing, revealing his snow cone of a dick. Or the 2:00 a.m. farewell when Aunt Jo slipped on the driveway ice, grabbed for Uncle Denis who was pushing Uncle Gerry in his wheelchair, and the three of them slid down the driveway into the street like a drunken Keystone Kops routine, ending up in the gutter, where Mary thought all the O'Learys belonged.

Paul writes, "It all seemed more like a family circus than a family circle." Perhaps the movie could be named "A Christmas Circus" complete with JVO and Mary as dual Ringmasters, three rings of liquid amnesia fun, a car with dozens of O'Leary clowns stumbling out, and that one slippery pig that no one could catch, namely Paul O'Leary, who escaped the clutches of the family circus, eschewed alcohol, made a life for himself, and outlived the rest.

