

# In search of the New World in Newport, Christmas 1966

CHARLES PINNING

It's Christmas Eve 1966, in Newport. My older brother is home from college, and he and my father are engaged in their lifelong antagonism. An argument over hair length shifts to the Vietnam War and then rips into marijuana.

I leave the room and deposit myself in the lavatory. That's when I hear myself ambushed.

"Dad — even Chuck smokes marijuana."

All my bodily functions freeze. I am 14 years old. My father is a naval officer. We are Catholic. I am a baseball star. I am a "good boy." Has my brother lost his mind?

"I don't believe that," my father says. "But when he comes back I'm going to ask him."

"What do you think he's going to tell you, Dad?"

"I expect him to tell me the truth. And if he tells me that he's smoked marijuana, he can pack his bags."

Pack my bags? I don't even own a bag to pack. What — my gym bag? Now what?

There's a small window high up in the bathroom. Standing on the toilet seat, I'm able to squeeze myself through head-first and scale down the outside wall like Spider Man.

Now what?

It's 20 degrees out and all I have on are jeans, a flannel shirt, and a pair of fake Bass Weejuns without socks.

I run around the side of the house and can see Anna Pasch through the sheer curtains on her bedroom window. She's lying on her bed reading and I tap on her frosty window.

She lets me in through the back screened-in porch and pushes me into her bedroom, stepping in step with me and shuts the door.

"What are you doing?" she says, her bright blue eyes electrified. Anna is well over 6 feet tall, two years older than I. She's a blond Amazon goddess, a terrific ping-pong player and has been in love with me from the day her family moved in next door, two years earlier.

I am very drawn to her — it's just that there's so much of her, I've always felt a little intimidated. Plus, she's intensely intelligent and full of energy. I have no doubt she's going to take over the world someday. One of her top front teeth has a slight chip, which I find oddly alluring.

I tell her what's happened, and we look out her bedroom window directly into my living room. My father and brother are still going at it.

"Pot's eventually gonna be legalized," says Anna. "People can only be stupid for so long."

"I wouldn't say my father's stupid. I think he's afraid of my brother being arrested."

"Everybody's afraid of everything. Your father was an enlisted man who never went to college and worked his way up. My father was privileged and went to Brown and then into banking. They're both bullies and they're both scared: one for what he wants, and the other for what he's got. They're afraid to take off their masks. It is a form of stupidity, if you think about it."

"Hunh," I murmur, my brain groping to catch up to hers.

"You're freezing," she says. "Here," and she hauls me down onto the bed and holds me close, breathing hot air against my neck and down my shirt.

"What should I do?" I ask her.

"Wait until they go to bed, then go home. Maybe your father will forget to ask you. Or maybe reason will take hold and he'll think better of it."

"How am I supposed to get in? They lock the front door."

Anna opens a bureau drawer and hands me a key.

"How did you get a key to our house?"

"Your mom gave one to my mom, just in



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Washington Square, Newport, from window of Juvenile Court, in 1957.

case. I copied it."

No sooner have my parents gone to bed, and I have sneaked in and closed my bedroom door, than my brother comes slinking in.

"Where did you go?"

"Over to Anna's."

"What do you two do together?" he asks in a way that's so annoying I ignore it.

"Why did you tell Dad I've smoked pot?"

"It was stupid of me. I'm sorry. He's crazy. He will throw you out. If he asks you, just say no. I'll just tell him I assumed you did. It doesn't matter. He doesn't like me anyway."

On Christmas morning, my father asks me where I went last night.

"Over to Anna's."

"Were her parents home?"

"I dunno."

"What time did you come back?"

"I dunno."

The opening of presents around the tree is pretty subdued, made sad by my mother playing into my father's forced gaiety. Finally, the moment of truth arrives.

"I'd like to speak with you for a minute," my father says, and he leads me down to the basement.

"Have you ever used marijuana?"

"No, sir."

"That's all I wanted to know."

In the afternoon, Anna picks me up in her car. We're going downtown to the Strand (today known as the Jane Pickens Theater) to see the movie "Blow-Up." As soon as I get in, Anna asks, "Did your father put it to you?"

"Yeah. I told him no."

"You had no choice."

"Blow-Up" is the first "foreign" film I've ever seen. We slouch low in our seats and delicately pick at the popcorn, letting it soften in our mouths before chewing it.

"Your father never should've asked you," whispers Anna. "It was so un-Christian, so un-what-Christmas-is-supposed-to-be-about."

We are silent after the movie, which itself ended in the silence of the main character. He has been persuaded to enter an imaginary game of tennis that becomes so real he can hear the ball being hit back and forth. I am captured by the new thought: Can we make something real by imagining it so?

Leaving the theater, we cross the street to Washington Square Park. In the stillness of the early dark, you can hear the chiming of the halyards against the masts of the boats in the harbor. Anna drags me over the edge of the shutdown fountain and into the snow, straddling me, pinning my arms above my head.

She leans over and kisses me, and we breathe in and out of each other. In our Kiss World, I am wearing my hair as long as I want. I am beaming because I can be myself.

"I love you, Charlie," she says. "If Vietnam is still going on when you turn 18, I'll take you away."

Nobody calls me Charlie, only Anna, from the first day we met. Everybody else calls me Chuck. I hate Chuck.

"Will things ever change?" I ask her.

"Only if we remember how we feel now," she says.

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