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MY TURN CHARLES PINNING

I wanted to twist and scream

On Saturday nights, the Teen Canteen at Fort Adams in Newport was a happening place. All age groups of teenagers listening to live bands in an Army mess hall overlooking Narragansett Bay. We had so much heaven and took it for granted because it was where we were lucky enough to happen to live.

John stood with his group of older friends, maybe 17 they were, and I was on the sidelines with my group of 13- and 14-year-olds.

The big songs were "House of the Rising Sun" and "Gloria." They both got played at least three times each night. It was 1966 and the Beatles, the Stones and the British Invasion were in full flower. We boys were trying to wear our hair as long as possible, and the girls their skirts as short as possible. We were in Full Flower Power. "G-L-O-R-I-A...Glorrr-ia that's what I say Glorrrrr-i-a-ya-ya-ya-ya...."

Tall and well-built with his really long, shoulder-length glistening chestnut hair. Handsome, olive complected, nice teeth. A handsome, easygoing guy.

A deep, "Woo-Woo-Woo-Woo" was the way he laughed.

He was always friendly to me. I was trying to be cool, he could see that. Our parents had gone to Rogers High together. Newport was just a little town back then, and everybody knew each other or of each other.

You grew up aware of everybody's older sister, older brother, parents. We were all just chuggin' along in paradise. There was a girl I'd recently noticed at the dances. She had long blond hair that was so straight and shiny that she probably ironed it. I admired her from the sidelines and finally got up the nerve to ask her to dance. I danced as cool as I could and she did her sway thing and step-this step-that thing in her blue mini-dress. We danced a couple times and then she went back to her girlfriends.

I was jazzed. I knew that next week I could ask her to dance again and maybe between now and then I'd figure out something cool to say to her. At the end of the night, I went outside and waited for my mother to pick me up. While I was standing there, a husky blond guy with a very unpleasant square face loomed up in front of me. He was maybe a year or two older.

"You were dancing with my girlfriend," he snarled.

It was such idiocy. I'd never seen him dancing with her.

"You were dancing with my girlfriend," he repeated, moving closer. God what a troll. It was like those were the only words in his vocabulary.

I could feel what was coming next. He drew back his arm and it started coming forward, but then it stopped. John had grabbed it from behind, and

began twisting it behind the guy's back. There is nothing in this world quite so satisfying as seeing a bully squeal. And squeal he did as John pulled his arm higher.

"She's not your girlfriend," said John. "She wouldn't be your girlfriend if you were the last person on earth." Then he tweaked the guy's arm and he screeched.

"Tell my friend you're never going to see him again," said John.

The toad was sweating and crying. "I'm never going to see him again."

John released him and he ran away.

My mother picked me up and I don't remember what happened to the girl with the long blond hair. Adolescence was taking over and every day presented some new drama. Life was a swirl of school and rock 'n' roll and avoiding my parents and sneaking cigarettes and booze and trying to make sense of girls and Clearasil, and watching the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement on TV, and listening to parents carp about all of it. The next year I saw John Paul Braga Jr. once at the Canteen, then he was gone and then I saw him once more there and his head was shaved. He'd been drafted. Then about two months later I heard he'd been killed in Vietnam.

— Charles Pinning, of Providence, is a novelist and an occasional contributor.