

## Chapter 2

### The Sixties – Cashman’s Road to Perdition

I started my senior year in college in September 1969, the final months of the tumultuous decade known as the Sixties. Charles Dickens began his classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the famous quote: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” That pretty much sums up the Sixties.



Martin Luther King speaking at the Mall in Washington DC

The Sixties started with great promise: John Kennedy’s New Frontier to eliminate poverty, inequality and racism and the Baby Boomers coming of age and seeking to build a free, open, egalitarian society characterized by love, trust, and brotherhood. The Boomers listened to rock music, grew their hair long, smoked pot, and liberalized attitudes toward sex and racism. Women demanded greater equality in the workplace, in the home, and in the bedroom. The contraceptive pill, introduced in 1960, expedited the latter. The civil rights struggle led by the Reverend Martin Luther King culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that

ended the South’s Jim Crow laws. It was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that eliminated the barriers that southern whites had erected to keep blacks from voting.

By 1969, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy had all been assassinated. Conservatives formed powerful constituencies to oppose the Baby Boomers’ permissiveness, lifestyle, and values. More than 500,000 US troops were mired in the Vietnam War, and the military draft was expanded to supply additional troops needed for the war. Social change for African-Americans was stymied by racist bigots in the South; and Martin Luther King’s non-violent resistance was replaced by the Black Panthers’ more virulent form of “black power.” Campuses across the country erupted in violent protests against the Vietnam War and racial injustice. The coup de grace was delivered in November 1968, when Richard Nixon, who epitomized the conservative antithesis to the counterculture anti-war movement, was elected as the 37th President of the US. This was clearly the worst of times.

I was oblivious to most of this. Oh, I liked the music and the promiscuity. The liberal sexual climate increased the possibility that I would ever get laid. I had been hanging around with black people and playing basketball in black communities since I was in high school, and never noticed their seething animosity towards honkies. But I was too immersed in my own little, insular world to notice the rest of it. Like every other college kid in 1969, I hated Richard Nixon and all he represented. But I was otherwise removed from the events of the Sixties and had little control over them. I tried not to waste my time with them.

As I started my senior year in college in 1969, I had one primary objective – applying to dental schools. This would not be easy. I had to somehow take my mediocre academic performance buttressed by my singularly unimpressive extra-curricular record and transform it into a résumé that would entice hallowed institutions of academic excellence to accept me. It was at this time that I discovered one of the talents that would serve me well throughout my life – the ability to bullshit, exaggerate, and obfuscate while still making the reader, or listener, think there was an element of truth or substance to what I was writing or saying.

Playing basketball in O'Connor and Van Nostrand Parks became “community efforts to improve race relations and build bridges with black communities.” My improprieties as fraternity treasurer became “building the systems and best practices required to assure sustainability and transparency in fraternal organizations.” My Ds in physics caused by cutting class to play basketball in the St. Johns’ gym were attributed to “difficulties understanding arcane scientific concepts before having either the intellectual maturity or mathematics foundation required to master them.” My decision to become a dentist was precipitated by “my altruistic desire to contribute to improving oral health among poor, disadvantaged communities.” By the time I was ready to apply, I looked like a superstar.

There were more than 40 dental schools in the US in 1969. Given my distaste for cold weather and my subconscious desire to get out of New York, you would have thought I would have jumped at the opportunity to escape the shackles of my cold, miserable existence in New York and flee to a school situated in more hospitable climes. You couldn't be more wrong. I lacked the initiative, the vision, and the balls to take such a big step. My plan to get to a warm climate was to have Captain Kirk from Star Trek beam me there. Instead, I applied to the schools closest to home – New York University and Columbia University in New York City; Stony Brook University on Long Island; the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; and the University of Maryland in Baltimore. Although Baltimore was a bit of a stretch, I could drive to all of these places. That put them all in my comfort zone. A candy ass does not stray far from the hearth. I assiduously completed all the applications, composed fictional essays extolling

my virtues of honesty, integrity, diligence, compassion, and altruism, and submitted them. The first students admitted would be notified in December 1969.

Much to my amazement, every one of those schools asked me to come for a personal interview. This presented another obstacle. At each interview there would be no fewer than five admissions officers who had studied my academic transcript, had read my essays in detail, had done hundreds of these interviews, and were expert at spotting a charlatan when they saw one. I was in big trouble.

This was when I learned that I was not only expert at bullshitting, exaggerating, and obfuscating in writing, I could do it in person too. First, I needed a tonsorial and sartorial makeover. I shaved off the beard, got a haircut, bought a suit, and ditched the Cowboy boots for wing tips and penny loafers. I studied all the fiction in those essays so thoroughly that I began to believe it myself. I stopped drinking and smoking pot and did some exercise other than playing basketball. When the makeover was complete, I looked like an all-American boy.

I nailed every one of those interviews. I explained away my mediocre grades with such sincerity that some of those idiots defended me under cross examination during the interviews. I emphasized my dedication to community service even at the expense of my grades. Selflessness was my only motivation for becoming a dentist. The more I exaggerated, the more they swallowed it. In the process, I realized that I was really good at this shit. Maybe I should go into politics. The money was good, and the opportunities for graft were limitless. Plus politicians lied all the time. But I might have to actually work hard in some office in a large city. And I would never be my own boss. I decided to stick with dentistry.

When it came to the school I wanted to attend, my objective was to choose the school where I could do the least amount of work in the shortest amount of time at the lowest cost so I could finish and start making money. And then I went for my interview at Columbia University. The Columbia University School of Dental Medicine was housed in the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in upper Manhattan, directly across the street from the Fort Washington Armory at the corner of 168<sup>th</sup> street and Fort Washington Avenue, the site of the indoor track meets where I competed every week for four years running winter track. When I



Fort Washington Armory

went for my interview, it was like coming home. While in high school, I had no idea that the imposing edifice across the street from the armory was the oldest and most prestigious medical center in New York City. I noticed that the buildings were old, stately, and architecturally unique, but I had no idea what this big complex was, nor did I have the curiosity to find out.



**Columbia-Presbyterian  
Medical Center**

When I arrived for my interview, I was astounded that the old statuesque building I had seen for all those years in high school was not only a medical center, but that it housed the Columbia University Dental School. In fact, it also housed the medical school. The hallways were paneled in dark mahogany. The lecture halls were steeply inclined amphitheatres reminiscent of those portrayed in movies about turn of the century medicine. Walking the halls, you could stop into strategically placed, glass enclosed viewing rooms where you could observe open heart surgeries in progress. The other dental schools I applied to were in modern buildings that reeked of disinfectants and fluoride gel, and were sterile in comparison. This place oozed history. I fell in love with the place. But Columbia was the most selective, the most rigorous, and the most expensive of the schools I had applied to. Not to worry, I thought. Columbia won't accept Larry Cashman.

During the first week of December 1969, before I had even completed the first semester of my senior year, I received five envelopes in the mail, one from each school. I had been accepted at all five. What did Bob Marley and Abe Lincoln say about not being able to fool all of the people all of the time? I guess it didn't apply to those morons on dental school admissions committees.

Getting accepted to all five schools meant I could choose the school I wanted. Unfortunately, the school I wanted was the most rigorous, the most expensive, and the most prestigious. When I chose to major in Chemistry in college, I paid a price for my cockiness and should have learned my lesson. Alas, once again, I let pride and prestige affect my decisions. Clearly, I would have to make the same mistake multiple times before I truly learned my lesson.

I consulted with my father about the cost, and he guaranteed me that we could somehow manage. I accepted Columbia University's offer to attend their dental school. It was a decision that would change my life.

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All I needed to do now was wrap up my final semester at St. John's, and I was home free. As I entered my final semester in college, I was walking on air. I was 20 years old, I had already been accepted to the dental school of my choice, and I only had to complete three courses that final semester to finish my bachelor's degree. Compared to the heavy academic load I had shouldered for my first three years, taking only three courses in a semester was like going to school part-time. It was true that Columbia still wanted to see those final semester grades, but it was only three courses, so I wasn't worried. I had two choices for that final semester – I could buckle down and finish my academic career with a flourish to impress Columbia, or I could party like it was 1999. I decided to party.

My final semester in college was a blur of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. I had always indulged in weed and alcohol, but my drinking was perfunctory – maybe some beer or wine, but I avoided the hard stuff. Now I started drinking whiskey. On weekdays I would go to the local bar at 4 PM and start drinking Canadian Club whiskey with my buddies. By 8 or 9 PM we'd head out to a concert, or a party, or a discotheque looking for female companionship. Needless to say, in our inebriated, degenerated condition, there were not many takers. On weekends I would start drinking and smoking pot on Friday morning and continue all day. The next day, Saturday, I had to work at Joe the Butchers. Yes, here I was, a senior in college, and still working for Joe the Butcher one day a week to make some money. I had been working there since I was 12. When you have no ambition, some things never change. At Joe's, the drinking continued unabated. We would open the first bottle of Seagram's Seven at 8 AM and drink all day. The only day I rested was Sunday.

What I didn't do very often was go to class. At first I wasn't worried. I could handle three courses in my sleep. As the semester advanced, and I missed more classes, and my exam results got progressively worse, it became clear that I was not doing very well in any of these courses. By the end of April 1970, the situation was dire. I might pass, but the grades would be horrendous and Columbia would be horrified. I was unwilling and unable to stop the drinking and debauchery, and there was little time to correct the situation even if I could. Now I was worried.

What happened next confirmed my suspicion that someone's misfortune can be somebody else's good fortune. On April 30, 1970 Richard Nixon announced that US combat forces had invaded Cambodia. This represented a significant escalation of the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. Protests and demonstrations against the war, which had been growing since the Tet Offensive in 1968, erupted after the Cambodian invasion. On May 4,

1970 a peaceful demonstration at Kent State University turned violent when National Guard soldiers fired on student protesters. Four students were killed and nine were wounded.

The spectacle of US troops firing on, and killing, American students galvanized the country against the war. Agitated students on campuses across the country raised their voices in angry protest against the war. Almost 500 colleges and universities across the US cancelled classes for the remainder of the academic year in fear of violent protests erupting on their campuses. St. John's University was one of them. But they didn't just cancel classes, they decided to give all students a pass/fail grade.



**National Guardsmen on Kent State Campus  
May 4, 1970**

You can imagine my surprise at this serendipitous turn of events. Here I was, on the brink of failing, with Columbia University waiting with bated breath for my final grades to see if I was a dedicated student or a laggard and a blackguard who would coast if given the opportunity, when I received this reprieve. Although my grades were abominable, they were still passing. So I received a P for my final three courses, and no one was any wiser. I felt bad about the whole Kent State tragedy, of course, but I never had much of a social conscience and what little remorse I felt was overshadowed by the elation of avoiding disaster by the skin of my teeth. Accordingly, my final semester grades, all Ps, were sent to Columbia; and Columbia was reassured that the glib, upright, well-dressed, articulate student they had interviewed had immersed himself in his studies during his final semester and would be entering their dental class in September 1970. Sometimes you just get lucky, even when you don't buy a lottery ticket.

Having dodged a bullet, I continued on my dissolute, self-indulgent path to destruction. The drinking became heavier, the pot smoking more frequent, and the carousing more intense. I was on the road to perdition. Then in June I caught a bad cold with fever that I couldn't shake. It seemed like a garden variety flu at first, but then I got this debilitating fatigue that immobilized me. I decided to go see my family doctor, that disheveled, stinking slob, Dr. Richman. He had no idea what was going on (not that I expected anything different from this imbecile) but he did have the good sense to send me to see a hematologist. Fortunately, she

was a lot smarter than Richman, and ordered the right blood tests. When the results came back, she told me I had mononucleosis.

Mononucleosis, more commonly called “mono,” is quite common among young adults and was called “the kissing disease” because it was passed by a virus in the saliva. That was definitely not the mode of transmission in my case because my romantic conquests were too infrequent to expose me through that route. You can also be exposed through a cough or sneeze, or by sharing a glass or food utensils with someone who has mono, the more likely route of transmission for me. Mono is not very serious, but it is very debilitating. And the only way to recover is rest. If you don’t get sufficient rest, serious complications in the liver and spleen can arise. I had a particularly virulent strain of mono, no doubt due to my compromised physical condition from all that drinking, smoking, and partying. The hematologist’s admonition to rest did not go unheeded - I could hardly get out of bed. Likewise, her admonition against drinking, smoking, and partying was also obeyed because I was simply too physically debilitated to engage in my former vices. I stayed in bed for two months that summer and dried out. In hindsight, it was the best thing that could have happened to me.