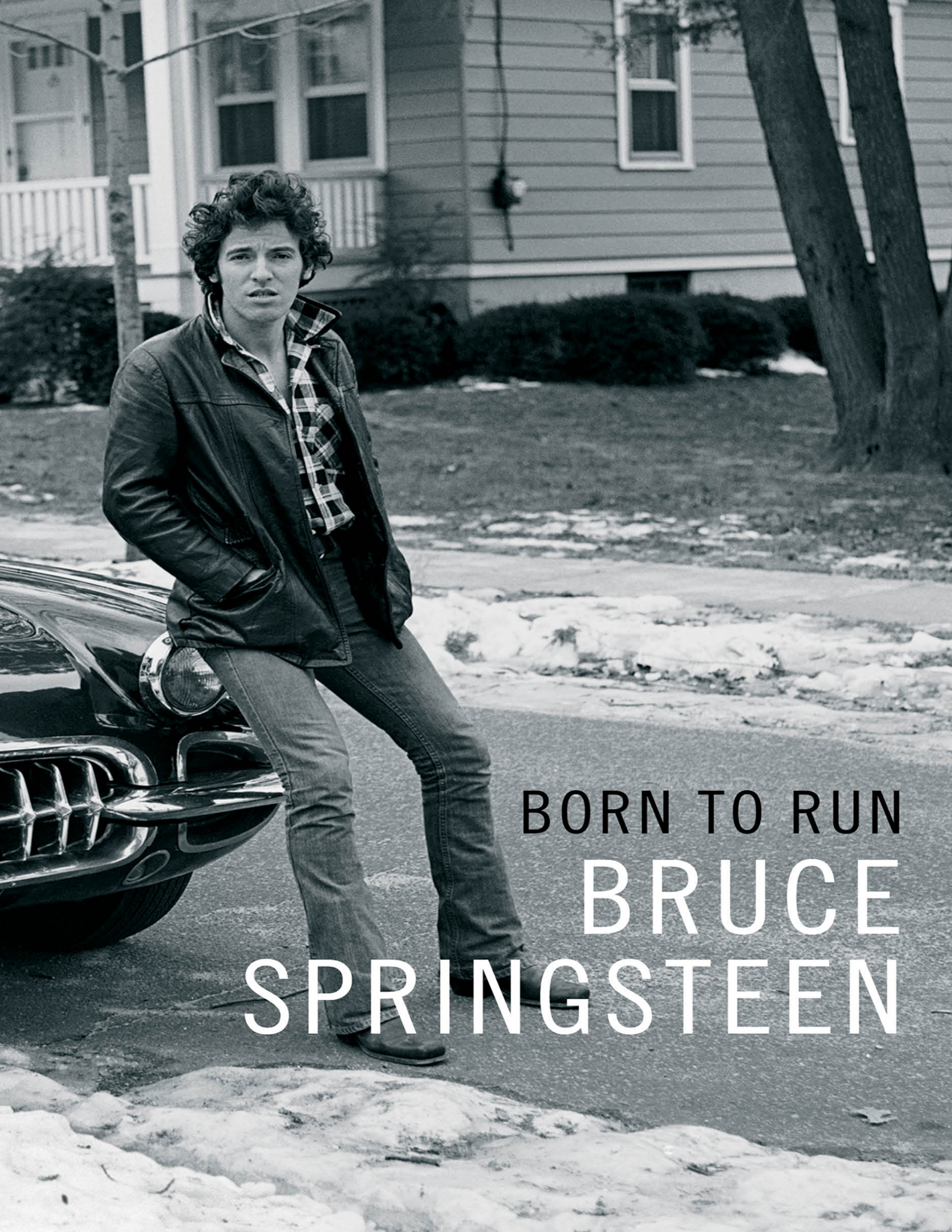




BORN TO RUN
BRUCE
SPRINGSTEEN

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BORN TO RUN
**BRUCE
SPRINGSTEEN**

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CONTENTS

Foreword

BOOK ONE GROWIN' UP

1. **My Street**
2. **My House**
3. **The Church**
4. **The Italians**
5. **The Irish**
6. **My Mother**
7. **The Big Bang (Have You Heard the News . . .)**

8. **Radio Days**
9. **The Second Coming**
10. **The Show Man (Lord of the Dance)**
11. **Workingman's Blues**
12. **Where the Bands Are**
13. **The Castles**
14. **Once There Was a Little Steven**
15. **Earth**
16. **The Upstage Club**
17. **Tinker (Surfin' Safari)**
18. **Steel Mill**
19. **Homecoming**
20. **Endless Summer**
21. **Beatnik Deluxe**
22. **California Dreamin' (Take Two)**

23. **It's a Bar, You Idiots**

24. **Onward and Upward**

25. **Losing My Religion**

26. **Road Work**

27. ***The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle***

28. **The Satellite Lounge**

BOOK TWO **BORN TO RUN**

29. ***Born to Run***

30. **Jon Landau**

31. **Thunder Road**

32. **Jackpot**

33. **The E Street Band**

34. **Clarence Clemons**

35. **New Contracts**

36. **Living with the Law**

37. ***Darkness on the Edge of Town***

38. **The Drop**

39. **Downtime**

40. ***The River***

41. **Hitsville**

42. **Hello Walls**

43. ***Nebraska***

44. **Deliver Me from Nowhere**

45. **California**

46. ***Born in the USA***

47. ***Buona Fortuna, Fratello Mio***

48. **The Big Big Time**

49. **Going Home**

50. ***Regresar a México***

51. *Tunnel of Love*

52. **Goin' Cali**

BOOK THREE LIVING PROOF

53. **Living Proof**

54. **Redheaded Revolution**

55. **Changes**

56. **LA Burning**

57. **Going to the Chapel**

58. **Earthquake Sam**

59. **“Streets of Philadelphia”**

60. *The Ghost of Tom Joad*

61. **Western Man**

62. **Eastern Woman**

63. **King of New Jersey (Hollywood Days)**

64. **Bringing It All Back Home**

65. **Revival**

66. ***The Rising***

67. **Wild East**

68. **The Seeger Sessions**

69. ***Magic***

70. **Super Bowl Sunday**

71. **Moving On**

72. ***Wrecking Ball***

73. **Losing the Rain**

74. ***The Wrecking Ball Tour***

75. **Zero to Sixty in Nothing Flat**

76. **Garage Land**

77. ***High Hopes***

78. **Home Front**

79. **Long Time Comin'**

Epilogue

Photographs

Acknowledgments

Photo Credits

About the Author

For Patti, Evan, Jess and Sam

FOREWORD

I come from a boardwalk town where almost everything is tinged with a bit of fraud. So am I. By twenty, no race-car-driving rebel, I was a guitar player on the streets of Asbury Park and already a member in good standing amongst those who “lie” in service of the truth . . . artists, with a small “a.” But I held four clean aces. I had youth, almost a decade of hard-core bar band experience, a good group of homegrown musicians who were attuned to my performance style and a story to tell.

This book is both a continuation of that story and a search into its origins. I’ve taken as my parameters the events in my life I believe shaped that story and my performance work. One of the questions I’m asked over and over again by fans on the street is “How do you do it?” In the following pages I will try to shed a little light on how and, more important, why.

Rock ’n’ Roll Survival Kit

DNA, natural ability, study of craft, development of and devotion to an aesthetic philosophy, naked desire for . . . fame? . . . love? . . . admiration? . . . attention? . . . women? . . . sex? . . . and oh, yeah . . . a buck. Then . . . if you want to take it *all* the way out to the end of the night, a furious fire in the hole that just . . . don’t . . . quit . . . burning.

These are some of the elements that will come in handy should you come face-to-face with eighty thousand (or eighty) screaming rock ’n’ roll fans who are waiting for you to do your magic trick. Waiting for you to pull something out of your hat, out of

thin air, out of this world, something that before the faithful were gathered here today was just a song-fueled rumor.

I am here to provide proof of life to that ever elusive, never completely believable “us.” That is my magic trick. And like all good magic tricks, it begins with a setup. So . . .

BOOK ONE
GROWIN' UP

ONE MY STREET

I am ten years old and I know every crack, bone and crevice in the crumbling sidewalk running up and down Randolph Street, my street. Here, on passing afternoons I am Hannibal crossing the Alps, GIs locked in vicious mountain combat and countless cowboy heroes traversing the rocky trails of the Sierra Nevada. With my belly to the stone, alongside the tiny anthills that pop up volcanically where dirt and concrete meet, my world sprawls on into infinity, or at least to Peter McDermott's house on the corner of Lincoln and Randolph, one block up.

On these streets I have been rolled in my baby carriage, learned to walk, been taught by my grandfather to ride a bike, and fought and run from some of my first fights. I learned the depth and comfort of real friendships, felt my early sexual stirrings and, on the evenings before air-conditioning, watched the porches fill with neighbors seeking conversation and respite from the summer heat.

Here, in epic "gutter ball" tournaments, I slammed the first of a hundred Pinky rubber balls into my sidewalk's finely shaped curb. I climbed upon piles of dirty snow, swept high by midnight plows, walking corner to corner, the Edmund Hillary of New Jersey. My sister and I regularly stood like sideshow gawkers peering in through the huge wooden doors of our corner church, witnessing an eternal parade of baptisms, weddings and funerals. I followed my handsome, raggedly elegant grandfather as he tottered precariously around the block, left arm paralyzed against his chest, getting his "exercise" after a debilitating stroke he never came back from.

In our front yard, only feet from our porch, stands the grandest tree in town, a towering copper beech. Its province over our home is such that one bolt of well-placed

lightning and we'd all be dead as snails crushed beneath God's little finger. On nights when thunder rolls and lightning turns our family bedroom cobalt blue, I watch its arms move and come to life in the wind and white flashes as I lie awake worrying about my friend the monster outside. On sunny days, its roots are a fort for my soldiers, a corral for my horses and my second home. I hold the honor of being the first on our block to climb into its upper reaches. Here I find my escape from all below. I wander for hours amongst its branches, the sound of my buddies' muted voices drifting up from the sidewalk below as they try to track my progress. Beneath its slumbering arms, on slow summer nights we sit, my pals and I, the cavalry at dusk, waiting for the evening bells of the ice-cream man and bed. I hear my grandmother's voice calling me in, the last sound of the long day. I step up onto our front porch, our windows glowing in the summer twilight; I let the heavy front door open and then close behind me, and for an hour or so in front of the kerosene stove, with my grandfather in his big chair, we watch the small black-and-white television screen light up the room, throwing its specters upon the walls and ceiling. Then, I drift to sleep tucked inside the greatest and saddest sanctuary I have ever known, my grandparents' house.

I live here with my sister, Virginia, one year younger; my parents, Adele and Douglas Springsteen; my grandparents, Fred and Alice; and my dog Saddle. We live, literally, in the bosom of the Catholic Church, with the priest's rectory, the nuns' convent, the St. Rose of Lima Church and grammar school all just a football's toss away across a field of wild grass.

Though he towers above us, here God is surrounded by man—crazy men, to be exact. My family has five houses branching out in an L shape, anchored on the corner by the redbrick church. We are four houses of old-school Irish, the people who have raised me—McNicholases, O'Hagans, Farrells—and across the street, one lonely outpost of Italians, who peppered my upbringing. These are the Sorrentinos and the Zerillis, hailing from Sorrento, Italy, via Brooklyn via Ellis Island. Here dwell my mother's mother, Adelina Rosa Zerilli; my mother's older sister, Dora; Dora's husband, Warren (an Irishman of course); and their daughter, my older cousin Margaret. Margaret and my cousin Frank are championship jitterbug dancers, winning contests and trophies up and down the Jersey Shore.

Though not unfriendly, the clans do not often cross the street to socialize with one another.

The house I live in with my grandparents is owned by my great-grandmother “Nana” McNicholas, my grandmother’s mother, alive and kicking just up the street. I’ve been told our town’s first church service and first funeral were held in our living room. We live here beneath the lingering eyes of my father’s older sister, my aunt Virginia, dead at five, killed by a truck while riding her tricycle past the corner gas station. Her portrait hovers, breathing a ghostly air into the room and shining her ill-fated destiny over our family gatherings.

Hers is a sepia-toned formal portrait of a little girl in an old-fashioned child’s white linen dress. Her seemingly benign gaze, in the light of events, now communicates, “Watch out! The world is a dangerous and unforgiving place that will knock your ass off your tricycle and into the dead black unknown and only these poor, misguided and unfortunate souls will miss you.” Her mother, my grandma, heard that message loud and clear. She spent two years in bed after her daughter’s death and sent my father, neglected, with rickets, off to the outskirts of town to live with other relatives while she recovered.

Time passed; my father quit school at sixteen, working as a floor boy in the Karagheusian Rug Mill, a clanging factory of looms and deafening machinery that stretched across both sides of Center Street in a part of town called “Texas.” At eighteen, he went to war, sailing on the *Queen Mary* out of New York City. He served as a truck driver at the Battle of the Bulge, saw what little of the world he was going to see and returned home. He played pool, very well, for money. He met and fell in love with my mother, promising that if she’d marry him, he’d get a real job (red flag!). He worked with his cousin, David “Dim” Cashion, on the line at the Ford Motor plant in Edison and I came along.

For my grandmother, I was the firstborn child of her only son and the first baby in the house since the death of her daughter. My birth returned to her a life of purpose. She seized on me with a vengeance. Her mission became my ultimate protection from the world within and without. Sadly, her blind single-minded devotion would lead to hard feelings with my father and enormous family confusion. It would drag all of us down.

When it rains, the moisture in the humid air blankets our town with the smell of damp coffee grounds wafting in from the Nescafé factory at the town's eastern edge. I don't like coffee but I like that smell. It's comforting; it unites the town in a common sensory experience; it's good industry, like the roaring rug mill that fills our ears, brings work and signals our town's vitality. There is a place here—you can hear it, smell it—where people make lives, suffer pain, enjoy small pleasures, play baseball, die, make love, have kids, drink themselves drunk on spring nights and do their best to hold off the demons that seek to destroy us, our homes, our families, our town.

Here we live in the shadow of the steeple, where the holy rubber meets the road, all crookedly blessed in God's mercy, in the heart-stopping, pants-dropping, race-riot-creating, oddball-hating, soul-shaking, love-and-fear-making, heartbreaking town of Freehold, New Jersey.

Let the service begin.

TWO MY HOUSE

It's Thursday night, trash night. We are fully mobilized and ready to go. We have gathered in my grandfather's 1940s sedan waiting to be deployed to dig through every trash heap overflowing from the curbs of our town. First, we're heading to Brinckerhoff Avenue; that's where the money is and the trash is finest. We have come for your radios, any radios, no matter the condition. We will scavenge them from your junk pile, throw them into the trunk and bring them home to "the shed," my grandfather's six-by-six-foot unheated wooden cubicle in a tiny corner of our house. Here, winter and summer, magic occurs. Here in a "room" filled with electrical wire and filament tubes, I will sit studiously at his side. While he wires, solders and exchanges bad tubes for good, we wait together for the same moment: that instant when the whispering breath, the beautiful low static hum and warm sundown glow of electricity will come surging back into the dead skeletons of radios we have pulled from extinction.

Here at my grandfather's workbench, the resurrection is real. The vacuum silence will be drawn up and filled with the distant, crackling voices of Sunday preachers, blabbering pitchmen, Big Band music, early rock 'n' roll and serial dramas. It is the sound of the world outside straining to reach us, calling down into our little town and deeper, into our hermetically sealed universe here at 87 Randolph Street. Once returned to the living, all items will be sold for five dollars in the migrant camps that, come summer, will dot the farm fields on the edge of our borough. The "radio man" is coming. That's how my grandfather is known amongst the mostly Southern black migrant population that returns by bus every season to harvest the crops of rural Monmouth County. Down the dirt farm roads to the shacks in the rear where dust-

bowl thirties conditions live on, my mother drives my stroke-addled grandpa to do his business amongst “the blacks” in their “Mickey Mouse” camps. I went once and was frightened out of my wits, surrounded in the dusk by hard-worn black faces. Race relations, never great in Freehold, will explode ten years later into rioting and shootings, but for now, there is just a steady, uncomfortable quiet. I am simply the young protégé grandson of the “radio man,” here amongst his patrons where my family scrambles to make ends meet.

• • •

We were pretty near poor, though I never thought about it. We were clothed, fed and bedded. I had white and black friends worse off. My parents had jobs, my mother as a legal secretary and my father at Ford. Our house was old and soon to be noticeably decrepit. One kerosene stove in the living room was all we had to heat the whole place. Upstairs, where my family slept, you woke on winter mornings with your breath visible. One of my earliest childhood memories is the smell of kerosene and my grandfather standing there filling the spout in the rear of the stove. All of our cooking was done on a coal stove in the kitchen; as a child I'd shoot my water gun at its hot iron surface and watch the steam rise. We'd haul the ashes out the back door to the “ash heap.” Daily I'd return from playing in that pile of dust pale from gray coal ash. We had a small box refrigerator and one of the first televisions in town. In an earlier life, before I was born, my granddad had been the proprietor of Springsteen Brothers Electrical Shop. So when TV hit, it arrived at our house first. My mother told me neighbors from up and down the block would stop by to see the new miracle, to watch Milton Berle, Kate Smith and *Your Hit Parade*. To see wrestlers like Bruno Sammartino face off against Haystacks Calhoun. By the time I was six I knew every word to the Kate Smith anthem, “When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain.”

In this house, due to order of birth and circumstance, I was lord, king and the messiah all rolled into one. Because I was the first grandchild, my grandmother latched on to me to replace my dead aunt Virginia. Nothing was out of bounds. It was a terrible freedom for a young boy and I embraced it with everything I had. I stayed up until three a.m. and slept until three p.m. at five and six years old. I watched TV until