

There is much more, of course, such as the Tony Lama boots, the Calvin Klein jeans, bomber jacket, goose down vest, keys to BMW car, coffee bean grinder, Cuisinart, microwave oven, futon mattress, Eames chair, George Kovacs lamp, L. L. Bean catalog, and glassware and other doodads from Crate and Barrel. I didn't want to show them all because High-Rise Man doesn't want to appear ostentatious.

So that's the story of my evolution from Bungalow Man to High-Rise Man. Or my decline, if you prefer.

I will have regular scientific reports on my findings of various aspects of this culture. Is there a perfect pesto sauce? Does walking a useless little dog help High-Rise Man meet High-Rise Dollies who are also walking useless little dogs? Can a French 10-speed bike outdistance a Chicago high-speed mugger? Does potential class war exist between Coho salmon snaggers and High-Rise joggers?

Meanwhile, I must go. My cappuccino machine is hissing at me.

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March 7, 1982

### ***My Belushi Pals***

Like so many Chicagoans, last Thursday night I was watching a rerun of the Original "Saturday Night Live" show.

I was rewarded when John Belushi came on to do one of his outrageous skits.

As happened whenever I saw John perform, I felt a mix of emotions.

Amusement, of course. All he had to do was lift a brow and curl his lip and he could make me laugh.

I go a long way back with the Belushi family. John's late Uncle Pete was one of my closest friends and was godfather to my first child. John's father and I were also friends. I first set eyes on John when he was about five years old, running around his uncle's backyard while I devoured his Aunt Marion's wonderful Greek cooking. I don't remember that he was very funny then. But he and the other Belushi kids were sure noisy.

So when John became successful, I suppose I felt something like a distant uncle and was proud for him.

But as I watched him on my TV or in a movie theater, I always felt puzzled. Where had this incredible comic instinct come from?

Mike  
Royko

His parents were good people, but not visibly humorous. Yet they produced two sons, John and Jim, who have the rare gift of being able to make strangers laugh.

I remember when I first learned that John had become an entertainer. It had to be, oh, a dozen years ago and I was at an independent political rally at a big restaurant on the South Side. A young man came up to me and, in a shy way, said: "Uncle Mike?"

I guess I blinked for a moment because he said: "You don't remember me?"

I said: "I know you're one of the Belushi kids by your goofy face, but I'm not sure which one."

He laughed. "I'm John. Adam's son."

I asked him if he was there because he was interested in politics.

"I just joined Second City. We're going to be doing a few skits here tonight."

I was impressed. Second City was already a nationally known improvisational theater group. I wish I could say that after I saw him perform, I knew he would one day be a big star. But I didn't. I could see he had a flair, but I wouldn't have bet you money that by the time he was thirty, he'd have one of the most familiar faces in America. A lot of people are funny, but very few have a talent that might be called genius.

As I said, I always had a mix of feelings when I watched John. And last Thursday night, I also felt a twinge of sad nostalgia.

That's because he was playing Pete the Greek, the owner of the short-order diner. You know the one: "Chizbooga, chizbooga, cheeps, cheeps, cheeps."

Whenever I watched him do that character, it was like flipping back in time almost thirty years.

I'd be sitting in a short-order diner in Logan Square, waiting for my wife to finish work upstairs in a doctor's office. The diner was where Eddie's Barbeque now stands, just across the side street from where the old L terminal used to be.

John's Uncle Pete would be at the grill, slapping cheeseburgers on the grill, jiggling the fries. Marion would be serving the food and coffee and handling the cash register.

I don't remember if Pete said "chizbooga" and "cheeps" exactly the way John later did. His thick accent was Albanian, not Greek. But it was close.

And somewhere in another neighborhood, in another short-order joint, Adam Belushi was slapping cheeseburgers on another grill. Everybody in the family was chasing the American dream.

And they were doing it the way immigrants have always done it: whatever works—and never mind how many grease burns you get on your arms.

If it was a Friday, we'd probably wind up in Pete's third-floor flat or my attic flat, drinking Metaxa and talking about the things we might do some day. If I ever got off that weekly neighborhood newspaper and he and Adam could pyramid those short-order grills into the restaurant of his dreams.

We were all together the night a few years later that the dream restaurant opened. Adam, Pete, and me and our wives. The place had thick carpets and cloth wallpaper, oil paintings, a piano player in the bar, and the best prime rib I've ever had. Maybe you remember it—Fair Oaks, on Dempster, in Morton Grove. It's now a big Mexican restaurant.

We toasted their success. It was a long way from tending sheep in Albania, and they had earned it. It didn't stop there, either. Before long there were other businesses. Pete figured he might as well go on and become an American tycoon.

But life has a way of giving you the glad hand, then slamming you with a fist.

A few years ago, Pete, still in his forties, died. At the funeral, we talked about John and how he had gone to New York and was starting to make a name, and how proud everybody was.

And the last time I saw John, we talked about those times and my friend Pete. It might surprise those who saw him only on the TV or in movies, but he was still shy and often quiet. And he had not let his success and wealth turn him into a jerk. He was still a genuinely nice kid.

That was the night his movie *Continental Divide* opened in Chicago and there was a party after the show. A reporter for *Rolling Stone*, who covered the evening, later wrote that as the evening ended, John and I were hugging.

I guess we were. When you feel like a proud uncle, and see the kid up there on a movie screen, you ought to give him a hug.

This column seems to have rambled. I'm sorry, but I just heard about John's death a few hours ago, and I have difficulty writing when I feel the way I do right now.

He was only thirty-three. I learned a long time ago that life isn't always fair. But it shouldn't cheat that much.

March 16, 1982

## *Don't Write Off Belushi*

The moment it was determined that drugs caused John Belushi's death, they snatched up their pens and paper to express their self-righteousness.

"You have been caught with your pants down!" was the triumphant message from Mrs. Martha McMinn, of Portland, Oregon.

I assume Mrs. McMinn means that because I wrote a column expressing sadness at the sudden death of a friend, I should now be embarrassed because of the circumstances surrounding his death.

She went on to say: "Life was certainly not unfair to Belushi. He had fame, money, adulation, and he blew it on dope and a broad who was not his wife.

"He got what he deserved!

"Sincerely . . ."

And I'm sure Mrs. McMinn is sincere. At least I would sincerely hope that people would not be *insincere* when expressing what almost amounts to glee at someone else's death.

Mrs. Pauline Olson was not exactly bubbling with compassion, either. She said:

"Boy, I'll bet your face is red! You give us a song-and-dance about what an All-American kid your friend Belushi was. But now it turns out that he was just another show business dope user.

"Frankly, I never liked him much on TV. He was fat and crude, so I'm not surprised that he came to such a bad end.

"He was not deserving of our sympathy, and I think you owe your readers an apology for portraying him as a decent person when he was no such thing."

There were many others, and their letters are still coming in, but you get the idea.

Well, I hate to disappoint Mrs. Olson and Mrs. McMinn and all the others, but no, I'm not embarrassed and, no, I'm not going to apologize.

When I wrote about Belushi, he had been dead only a few hours and nobody knew what had caused his death. Later, I was surprised to learn that he had been using drugs. When I had seen him in Chicago last fall, he appeared to be leading a clean life. Soft drinks, a sensible diet, regular exercise, no outward evidence of drug use.

Had I known about his drug use, I wouldn't have been any less sad. If anything, I would have felt worse because of the wastefulness of his death.

Nor does the way he died mean that he was, as Mrs. Olson so harshly contends, not "a decent person."

The fact that he stuck needles in his arms could mean that he was capable of stupidity; that he might have been weak, self-indulgent, or guilty of whatever character flaws make otherwise intelligent people perform self-destructive acts. But that didn't make him a monster.

Belushi hurt no one but himself, and his family. But until his family condemns him for their pain, I think outsiders like Mrs. McMinn ought to reserve their condemnation.

Actually, I have more difficulty understanding the workings of the minds of people who are so quick to dance on somebody's grave. Obviously, no sensible person approves of drug use. But Belushi wasn't exactly selling the stuff to kids in schoolyards.

I wonder if they fire off notes like that whenever somebody they know dies.

If you think about it, the opportunities are always there. Drugs aren't the only form of self-indulgence that can lead to death.

For example, one could write a note like this:

"Dear Lucille:

"I was saddened to hear of the untimely death of your dear beloved husband, Rudy. Because I was out of town at the time, I could not attend the funeral.

"However, I must say that Rudy brought it on himself! And you didn't help, either.

"As your friend for many years, I could not help but notice that Rudy was always thirty or forty pounds overweight. Lugging around all that fat couldn't have done his heart any good. And you must share the blame for cooking him all those high-calorie meals.

"Dietitians keep warning that being overweight can shorten a person's life. But did Rudy stop shoving food in his mouth? Noooooo!

"So as much as I can sympathize with you in your time of sadness, you and Rudy got exactly what you deserved!

"Sincerely, your friend . . ."

Or one could always write a note like this:

"Dear Mary:

"I didn't want to bring this up at John's funeral because you were busy greeting mourners.

"But I have to say that I can't understand why you and everyone else were so surprised that John dropped dead so suddenly.

"After all, he did smoke two packs a day, and any idiot knows that the U.S. Surgeon General has warned that smoking is dangerous.

"If he had had the willpower that my William has, and had quit the filthy habit, he'd probably be alive today. And his teeth would have been much whiter. But, nooooo, he just kept on puffing away.

"So in your time of sorrow, I just want you to know that John got what he deserved!

"Sincerely, your friend . . ."

Or this one:

"Dear Lucille:

"Just a note to let you know that we are thinking about you in your time of sorrow.

"But as I was telling my dear Ed the other day, it was just a matter of time.

"Your George just wouldn't slow down, would he? Sure, all that drive and aggressiveness got you a big house, and two cars, and those fancy clothes, and expensive vacations. But it also got George hypertension, anxiety, and high blood pressure!

"So you and George got exactly what you deserved!

"Sincerely, your neighbor . . . (We're the ones in the much *smaller* house, with the *older* car, and the *cheaper* vacations. But at least my husband is still around!)"

So Mrs. McMinn and Mrs. Olson and all you other grave-dancers, feel free to use any of the above letters when the occasions arise.

Or have you already been doing it?

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April 11, 1982

## ***Survival Talk Stinks***

Suddenly there's all this serious talk about civil defense planning and how many people could survive a nuclear war.

Whenever that subject comes up, I recall a conversation I once had with Carl Sandburg, the great poet, when I was a young reporter.

It was about twenty-two years ago, when the Cold War was