The Diving Horse

by John B. Abbott, Jr.

Fall of 1959. That was the year Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba; Alaska and Hawaii joined the Union as our 49th and 50th states, respectively; and Guns n' Roses reigned as the top TV series. Charlton Heston collected an Academy Award for Ben-Hur, and Leon Uris's Exodus topped the reading lists. In Garwood, New Jersey, a child picked up his favorite Golden Books and stood outside of his parents' apartment building, waiting for the school bus. What a sight: a chubby boy in black high-top Keds, jeans, and a flannel shirt, patiently waiting and watching for the bus that, when it finally did rumble down Willow Avenue, passed him by. The driver didn't think to stop, which made perfect sense since her route schedule didn't include three-year-olds—not even three-year-old me.

"The bus didn't stop for me," I complained to my mother that day.

"Oh, really?" she calmly replied. Later she would say that the only surprise was the age at which I wanted to start going to school. But it shouldn't have surprised her really, because as the son of a pair of avid readers, I grew up in a house abundant with opportunities to read and write. Newspapers, magazines, television, and radio were always available.

When I finally reached school age and the bus did stop, high drama and adventure made up most of my extracurricular reading. I would read and reread Classics Illustrated comics, and authors like Daniel Defoe, Mark Twain, Arthur Conan Doyle, Washington Irving, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Frank W. Dixon. I also enjoyed Superman and Batman comic books and even went through a MAD magazine phase. Sometimes Mom had to chase me out of the house after school to play, because I would have rather just stayed in my room and read.

I wasn't much on writing until I was enrolled in a Catholic school, St. Bernard's. There, the nuns were stereotypically tough but thorough educators. In third grade, I labored long and hard with Sister Mary, and while it was her thoroughness that led to my discovering that I loved to write, it was a horse—the Diving Horse of Atlantic City—that sparked a lifetime passion for writing.

At the beginning of that school year, Sister Mary had assigned to us the ubiquitous essay about summer vacation. That summer, my family had taken a day trip to the original Steel Pier in Atlantic City to see the famous Diving Horse. How my parents learned of the horse, I don't know, but as a family that took all its vacations by automobile, no doubt they were alert for local-yet-unusual attractions. Atlantic City must have been appealing; in the 1960s, there were no casinos or nightlife per se—unless you count Frank Sinatra, Jr.—but the town was mostly known for its family-oriented amusements and the tradition of Bert Parks crowning his welcome to Miss America. But for us, Bert paled in comparison to the diving horse. So off we went in the white '64 Pontiac to climb aboard carnival rides and eat hamburgers.

Thinking back on that day, I remember the windburn I got on my forehead from the cool salty breeze off the Atlantic—a first for me. And to this day, I can't go to the Jersey Shore without bringing home a box of fresh saltwater taffy.

But above all, I remember anxiously getting bleacher seats to see the Diving Horse. As we took our seats, the horse, with a fellow named Arnette Webster (clad in a rubber wet suit) on its back, was about to jump from a platform roughly 30 feet high into a pool. I recall staring at the odd sight of a horse standing as calmly as you please on a platform above a pool just like the kind I swam in at my Aunt Anne and Uncle Leo's house. To a recorded drum roll and cymbal crash, Webster urged the horse forward, and the two fell through space to make the biggest splash I'd ever seen—even bigger than the cannonballs my uncle could make in his own pool! Wow! And then both horse and rider surfaced, though for the life of me, I can't recall how they got out of the pool.

So two months later, when Sister Mary gave us the essay assignment, it was easy...as easy as falling into a pool.

Looking at the Diving Horse essay some 40 years later, it's apparent how much I must have enjoyed writing about the experience. I put a lot of energy into trying to describe the windburn, the taffy, and the horse, which, to my eight-year-old eyes, must have been suitable for a Valkyrie to ride. But in that essay, I did something that I imagine no other child in the class did: I ended my piece with a rhetorical question. I wrote, "How would you like to go to Atlantic City?"

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Small as that detail was, Sister Mary must have noticed it. And she must have encouraged me to keep writing, because with that essay, I learned something about myself. I learned that I loved to write.

It was at that age, as my father has confirmed, that I started to write stories, not just read them. I soon took to writing as I had taken to reading. I wrote about monsters, superheroes, and what could pass for a fourth-grader's version of a mystery. Superman never had it so easy foiling the best-laid plans of Lex Luthor, and my detectives—not as articulate as Sherlock Holmes, but as savvy—somehow always managed to catch the bad guys and still remember to say “Thank you.”

It’s been said that writing is a process of discovery about oneself. I’ve been lucky—I can trace my writing through careers in journalism, radio, academia, and finally, mystery fiction.

Along the way, there have been setbacks, reinvention, reflection, growth, and maturation. I’ve managed to enjoy some modest success in each field and even have had the pleasure of an occasional check or royalty.

Even now, when many of my workdays at Rutgers University are done, Rex Stout, Mark Twain, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Superman are still often at the center of my recreational reading. And when I write a mystery, whatever thread each of my various detectives picks up and untangles, something inside reminds me of the chubby kid with the glasses urging the horse to “Jump! Jump!”

In terms of distance, it was about 30 feet. In terms of writing, it was a leap of a lifetime.

In dedication: For my father, John B. Abbott, Sr., who passed away on July 17, 2001, and who taught me how to love reading and baseball, and the value of lifelong learning.

John B. Abbott, Jr., was a participant in the first summer institute (2000) of the National Writing Project at Rutgers University, where he is a staff member of Rutgers University Computing Services, a co-adjunct in the writing program, and a doctoral student in English literacy. Abbott, who is also an active member of the Mystery Writers of America, is currently on hiatus from teaching and pre-dissertation studies.

- New Year’s Resolution #4:
  I will take risks.

- Note to self:
  Submit that article to The Quarterly