



# “Senior Year,” an essay by G.S. Payne

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They both would have been in their mid-fifties now, like me. But in my mind they're forever seventeen. Two best friends of mine. Two separate car crashes. John was killed in September, Mike less than a month later. It was a strange year, my senior year of high school. An eventful year, the most eventful year of my life. Looking back, maybe the most influential, too.

It started with me being in love for the first time, although I didn't recognize it at the time. I was never serious enough in those days to imagine I could be in love. Love was something for older, more mature people. Adults. Not that I didn't pretend to be mature, and my pretending became pretty good. I watched James Bond and Clint Eastwood movies and spent my time trying to emulate the coolness I saw, assuming that coolness equated maturity. An outward appearance of cool coupled with a legitimately quick wit would serve as my attempts to conceal my teenage insecurities. I was part Sean Connery and part Hawkeye Pierce. Maybe I even managed to pull the disguise off some of the time.

In any event, I wasn't ready to admit that I was in love and it would only be later, in fact, after Julie had broken up with me, months after the car accidents, that I realized I'd even been in love. That explained the heartache, the emptiness. But it was only years after that that I would understand what's behind the heartache of lost love, that I would understand that it always ends with you losing a little piece of yourself. Julie wasn't the first or only piece I lost that year, but sometimes lessons take years to internalize, even, maybe especially, when you're hammered with them repeatedly in a short period of time.

What it ultimately requires, this internalizing, is a level of self-awareness that I did not possess then. All I could sense of the emptiness of Julie's leaving was the loss of another mask for my insecurities—a source of validation to which I'd clung like a rock climber. And the loss was unacceptable. Who did she think she was to do this to me? I handled it badly. I don't remember all the things I said to her in all of my teenage angst, but I do remember being ugly about the matter.

On second thought, it wasn't necessarily the things I said, really, but rather the way I acted. I laughed it off. Pretended I didn't care. I was *cool*. It was my way of striking back, of trying to hurt her. Easy come, easy go. Plenty more fish in the sea. I cringe to think she might have even believed my fiction, that maybe I'd hit my target and wounded her in some way. The truth was anything but how I tried to present it. She'd never know the nights I spent looking out of my second-floor bedroom window onto the street below, hoping to see her car pull up to our suburban house, certain that it was just a matter of time before she'd realize her mistake and come back to me. I'd take her back, of course, but I wasn't going to make it easy for her. She'd have to pay. Naturally, she never came.

But she was with me for both of the deaths, helping to pull me through them. John was a great kid, an A student with a future brighter than maybe anybody else in the class. John and I became best friends in middle school, losing touch with each other just a bit as we made our way through high school, each of us hanging out with slightly different crowds. But we were both on the student council and in my junior year I was made homecoming coordinator. I appointed John as decorations chairman and it was the smartest thing I did. He ran with it, throwing himself into the job with a rare commitment, taking over most of the planning responsibilities, with my approval (I'd felt I was in over my head, anyway), yet never expecting any credit. He did it for the school and he did it for a friend.

It was a Friday afternoon and it seems to me that John was driving his sister home for the weekend from the nearby college she was attending. At a stop sign, he pulled out in front of an eighteen-wheeler. He was killed instantly. His sister needed years of physical therapy and was never the same, from what I understand. We all learned about it that evening. There was a home football game and I was walking in with some friends. Julie was in the band and we'd planned on meeting up later, probably at Alberto's or Pappy's or whatever little pizza joint happened to be the hangout at the time. John's little brother was in the band, too, and we saw him coming out of the gates escorted by two police officers as we were going in.

"Earl," I said, "what's going on?"

"My brother's been in some kind of accident."

"Is he okay?"

Earl looked scared. "I don't know. They won't tell me anything."

Then he was gone, into a police car, to where, we didn't know. But I remember we all just stood there and finally someone said, "That can't be good."

There was a pay phone outside the football field and we started calling hospitals. The band had apparently taken the field and I could hear them playing in the background, performing their pre-game program. It was a clear,

cool Friday evening and you could hear the hum of the crowd. Everything felt festive and fresh. The same scene was most certainly playing out all over America because Friday nights in autumn belong to high school football. And marching bands and cheerleaders and letterman jackets—and the innocence of youth. The juxtaposition of all of that, just inside the gates of the field, and us, just outside, calling hospitals and imagining the worst, shortly to have some of that innocence stripped away, stays with me still.

Eventually one of the hospitals told us that, yes, there was an admission earlier of a trauma victim who had the same last name as the person about whom we were inquiring. But the first name was that of John's sister. Where was John? That information was "unavailable."

By then, word was somehow getting around and the next thing I knew I was part of a convoy of cars on the way to the hospital. There must have been twenty of us. I can't for the life of me remember the scene at the hospital as we all poured out of those cars and ran into the emergency room. It must have looked like bedlam to anyone in the waiting area. Were John's parents there? I have no recollection. What I do remember is one of my friends, who'd arrived at the hospital first, coming out as the rest of us were going in and announcing somberly that the accident was fatal. John was dead. No, that can't be right, I remember someone saying.

But we would learn that it was right and the next thing I remember is all of us outside of the hospital, milling about in the parking lot. We sat on the pavement or leaned on cars or leaned on each other, casting shadows from the glow of the light posts. Nobody knew what to say. Some cried. Mike was there and suggested we all come back to his house. It was silently understood that we would all remain together for at least a little while that night. Nobody was going home. And I remember that moment in the hospital parking lot because there's never been a moment when I needed my friends more.

From Mike's house I called my parents and told my mother what happened and she said she thought it might be best if I came right home. I told her I'd be home late. Julie showed up eventually. We held each other and I asked her, *why?* and she just shook her head.

Mike's parents must have been out and Mike somehow had access to some beer and everybody started drinking but me. For some reason I felt I needed to process what had happened soberly.

"C'mon," Mike said. "Let's get drunk. Life's just a dream, anyway."

I'll never forget that he said that.

By the time I got home, my parents were in bed, but my father got up and came into my room and embraced me, holding me tighter than he ever had before. He didn't say a word. I thought he was comforting me. It wouldn't be until I'd one day have a son of my own that I fully understood what was behind that embrace.

On a sunny October Sunday morning a month later, my mother took a phone call from a buddy of mine while I was out with my father, picking up a couple of his friends at the airport who were in town for the day—his former secretary and her husband. After we pulled in, I noticed my mother taking my father aside as I made small talk with our guests in the driveway. Then my dad called me over. “More bad news, Jer,” he said.

Mike was my best friend. He had a wit quicker than mine and we spent a lot of time making each other laugh. Mike and I had orchestrated the famous library book checkout affair, talked about for years afterwards. We didn’t especially care for the librarian, a flinty, no-nonsense woman everyone referred to as “Sarge.” One of us, I don’t remember which, came up with the idea of spreading the word around that on one given day, everybody in the school would check out a book and then return it later that same day, thereby forcing Sarge to have to re-shelve close to two thousand books, by our reckoning. In an age before social media, we somehow managed to get the idea out to the entire school and on the appointed day, students lined up at the library, checking out everything they could get their hands on. The scene that sticks out in my mind was of a pair of freshmen, one leaving the library with an atlas that was as big as he was and the other with an unabridged dictionary. When the books all started being returned, it had to have been a librarian’s worst nightmare.

The library was closed for the next couple of days and though nobody could pin the idea on us, the faculty had its suspicions. Mike and I had become somewhat known as pranksters, although nothing we’d done before quite rose to the level of the checkout affair. The psychology teacher took us aside just to let us know, in case we cared, that the library prank had made the librarian cry and he hoped, in case we were interested, that the people behind the stunt would spend some time thinking about that. We nodded understandingly, of course.

We got into trouble together a couple of times, Mike and I, although it was always for small things like cutting class or sabotaging a particular cupboard in the art room, stacking it in a way so that when someone opened it, boxes of colored chalk would come tumbling out. We’d be sent to the vice-principal’s office and on the way Mike would always say, “You gotta laugh, Payne. You gotta laugh.” It was sort of his mantra.

The night of the accident, Mike was out with two other buddies of mine, sitting in the backseat of the car. No alcohol was involved, no drug impairment—just a momentary lapse by a seventeen-year-old driver who would have to live with it for the rest of his life. The car went off the edge of the road around a curve. The driver overcorrected and the car flipped. Mike was ejected through the rear windshield. In the ambulance, they said he kept trying to sit up, but at some point before arriving at the hospital, he died of massive internal injuries. The driver and other passenger were only slightly injured, treated at the hospital, and released.

I couldn’t help thinking that I would normally have been with those guys on a typical Saturday night, maybe sitting beside Mike in that backseat. But I’d been seeing Julie and Saturday night was date night. I don’t know; maybe Julie saved my life.

My parents ushered our guests into our home that Sunday morning while I took a walk down the hill behind our house and around the corner to sit on the bank of the small fishing pond that was part of nearby Toomey’s farm.

The pond was stocked with bluegill and as a kid I'd whiled away many a weekend afternoon catching them and then releasing them back into the water. They'd bite on just about anything and I'm sure I caught the same ones over and over. One day I hooked the one largemouth bass that made its home in the pond. He was probably a good three pounds and all the kids in the neighborhood around Toomey's talked about him in hushed, reverent tones. If you caught him, you were something special. Alas, I had barely started reeling him in when he snapped my line.

On that Sunday morning, nobody was around and I sat down on the bank and looked out over the ripples on the pond. The tall grass at the edge of the water was yellow in the sunlight. I looked up just in time to catch a flock of geese in a V heading south, soon disappearing over the trees, but it was quiet enough that I could still hear their distant honking. And then I started to cry, surprising myself in the process. I cried with a force I hadn't felt since I'd been a small child. For several minutes I could not stop. Finally I collected myself and walked back home. Julie called. She hadn't yet heard the news and I had to break it to her. "Do you want me to come over?" she asked. Yes.

We spent the afternoon together. We drove to a nearby park and walked along a trail through the woods. The leaves were just starting to turn. I don't remember what we talked about. I'm not certain we said anything at all.

Like John's, Mike's funeral was attended by pretty much the entire senior class. I was a pallbearer at both funerals and grimly joked that I was going to letter in pallbearing that year. *You gotta laugh.*

Weeks went by, then months. Julie and I kept seeing each other. After a movie or dinner on a Saturday night, we'd invariably drive to a secluded parking spot I knew of. Julie taught me about intimacy. I told her I'd been with girls before. Of course, I hadn't.

Eventually, we broke up. We were heading to different colleges. I'd been accepted to Penn State and she to West Chester. We both knew the relationship would not survive the separation, though she recognized it first and more consciously. She responded by withdrawing. The subsequent friction culminated in a blowup over something forgettable and the breakup became official. I carried on with my practiced insouciance, playing it cool, lying to everybody, including myself.

I spent the last few months of my senior year just wishing it were over. I was more than ready to put high school behind me. I ran out the clock restless and bored and getting in trouble for more minor infractions, like being late for class and skipping study hall. That fact is, I just didn't want to be there anymore. High school had become stultifying. The rest of my life was waiting for me and if I'd learned anything that year, I'd learned about the vagaries of life, the random nature and fragility of it. I knew now that there was little time to waste. A sense of urgency and gravitas replaced my childhood ingenuousness.

I have a distinct sense today that something was either lost or gained at that point yet I'm still not sure which. But in the almost forty years since that senior year, I do know that I've carried its effects with me, probably in

ways I don't even recognize. Things experienced in your teen years have a way of sticking with you, influencing you for good or for bad. The years may make the memories murky, but their effects are infused in your psyche. How much of who we are is really arrived at in any kind of measured, ordered way? How in control of our day-to-day preferences and decisions and behaviors are we, really? From where do we get our life lessons and how do we internalize them? From where do we gain our wisdom?

Where do our changes come from?

I thought of all of this not long ago, helping a friend sort through some of her own memories as she tried to piece together the influences that have shaped her. As we grow older, it seems to me we become less able, or perhaps less open, to being swayed by circumstance, at least in any significant, personality-shifting way. Of course we think we're in control of how we react and then respond to life's events, but the die is cast early. Influences bind themselves to us tightly in our youths and don't easily detach.

In adulthood, I've grappled often with the large questions of life, read books by philosophers, tried to intellectualize the process of living. I've tried to be objective, in other words, to look at things independent of experience. But life has a way of giving you models and standards and lessons, even when you're not looking for them. The earlier they are, the more affecting. Forty years ago, there was John and Mike and Julie, three seventeen-year-old kids who taught me more about life and love than anything I ever read in those philosophy books.

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Since earning his undergraduate degree from Penn State University, G.S. Payne has devoted his energies toward the study of his true passion: creative nonfiction. Now living on the Gulf Coast of Florida, Payne works predominantly as a ghostwriter, specializing in narrative nonfiction, memoir, and prescriptive business books. His clients have included captains of industry, athletes, and people whose lives nobody would believe had he not been there to document them. His own book, *Writing Memoir: The Practical Guide to Writing and Publishing the Story of Your Life*, is available on Amazon and wherever books are sold. Visit Payne at [www.YourConfidentialGhostwriter.com](http://www.YourConfidentialGhostwriter.com).