



Ten Again

Michael J. Bellito

TEN AGAIN

A Novel by
Michael J. Bellito



Eloquent Books

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*To my wonderful wife, Joani,
with heartfelt gratitude.
Thanks for sharing life with me.*

TEN AGAIN is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any real life individuals or situations is a figment of the reader's vivid imagination. So, if you see yourself in this work, perhaps you were once young. Have a nice day.

MJ Bellito

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TEN AGAIN

PART I
SUMMER

CHAPTER 1

“OF MONSTERS AND MARBLES”

The screen door slammed open. I exploded into the sun-tinted, green-as-grass back yard on the first morning of the first day of summer. Eternity—the true meaning of summer to a ten-year-old boy—stretching out to the distant horizon with the first day of school so far away it didn’t even exist. An endless series of sun-drenched, melt-in-your-mouth Popsicle days and starlit, lightning-bug nights. A giant jar of time to capture adventure with just-down-the-block friends and seal it up forever, only to peer into it when the ache of old age needs a lift.

My brother Tommy followed close behind. He knew no other way. Two years younger, he had spent every hour of every day of his life shadowing me. We shared a small bedroom in a ranch house on a corner lot in a northwest suburb of Chicago. One closet. Side-by-side matching dressers with mirrors. A desk. Bunk beds. Me on top, the sacred privilege of the first-born. We interacted together like siblings: we yelled, cursed, fought, destroyed communal property, watched too much TV, laughed, cried, and ultimately defended each other against all outsiders.

“Hey, Mike. What’re we gonna do today?”

“I dunno yet,” I answered haughtily. “Let’s get the stuff out of the garage, and I’ll hit you some grounders. Maybe Johnny’ll come over.”

Johnny was our best friend, another brother in spirit. He lived across the street and two houses up, toward the highway. He was Tommy’s age, had a crew cut, freckles, an infectious laugh, and an easy-going temperament. His house, however, was unique for the era. It had no parent at home during the day. Johnny’s dad, like all dads, worked. But his mom also worked outside the home. Head librarian at the local library. This was unheard of. Most moms had no car; many had no driver’s license. Their divine

calling was to stay at home, clean house, cook meals, and keep kids in line by any and all means necessary, including some that violated the Geneva Convention. This system worked well for the most part. Adult supervision gave us the greatest gift of all. We were the last generation who were allowed to be kids.

“Let’s go get Johnny,” I said after watching Tommy muff six ground balls in a row.

We scooted across the street and banged on the open screen door. Johnny’s face appeared. “Hi.”

“Hi. C’mon out.”

“Can’t. Patty’s not up yet.”

“What? Is lard ass gonna sleep all day?”

Patty was Johnny’s thirteen-year-old sister, who was ostensibly in charge of him during the day but was usually either on the phone or in the bathroom. Today of all days, the first day, the greatest day, she had chosen to stay in bed.

“She’ll be up soon. C’mon in.” Pushing open the door, Johnny grinned, his eyes glistening in anticipation. “I gotta show you something cool.”

Tommy and I glanced at each other. This had to be good. The owner of every new toy on the market, Johnny seldom disappointed. We followed him down the short hall and into the familiar bedroom. Shelves lined with model cars, his passion, greeted us as we entered. But there on his cluttered desk, surrounded by brushes and bottles of colored paint, sat a new model. It was unlike any we’d ever seen yet instantly recognizable.

“Holy shit!”

Painted green with numerous red scars, the Frankenstein Monster stepped menacingly forward from a metallic gray tombstone.

“Where d’ja get him?”

“At Walgreens. And guess what? He’s not the only one. They’ve got Dracula and the Wolf Man too.”

This was too much. Models of the Unholy Three. How many sleepless nights had they caused us? Occasionally, our parents would allow us to stay up past our bedtimes on Saturday nights to watch the venerable "Shock Theatre," a potpourri of horror guaranteed to scare us witless. The Mummy, the Creature, the Invisible Man, and other fiends would haunt our dreams and scar our psyches. But none as often or as relentlessly as Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Wolf Man—the murderers' row of monsters.

"What are you morons doing here?" The soulless voice came from the doorway. Turning to see Patty standing in her nightgown, hair in curlers and face caked with beauty cream, we quickly forgot Frankenstein.

"Hi, Sis," said Johnny with a smirk. "Sleep well?"

"Why don't you go outside and play?" she scowled. "And take your Nancy-boy playmates with you." Stalking off to the bathroom, she added over her shoulder, "And be home for lunch on time."

Once outside, we looked up and down the serene street. Rows of elm trees cast shadows across the well-manicured lawns. "Let's go round up the guys and have a game," I said.

We ambled down the street, crossed the intersection, and headed toward Jimmy's house.

Jimmy was the skinniest, fastest, and most athletic kid on the block. His natural gifts and cocky attitude combined to make him a dangerous, accident-waiting-for-a-place-to-happen kind of kid. His favorite challenge was to run out in front of slow-moving cars to see if they could stop in time. As terrified moms, blanched with fear, slammed on their brakes and jerked to a halt, Jimmy would laugh insanely and kick up his heels. Once he jumped off a ledge of bricks on the site of a house under construction, thrusting out his tongue in crazed defiance as he landed. Blood spurted from his mouth as his nearly severed tongue wagged back and forth. A panic-stricken

trip to the hospital with his hysterical mother resulted in a jagged row of stitches, which he proudly displayed to curious onlookers for years to come.

Jimmy's mom met us at the door.

"Morning, Mrs. O'Donnell. Can Jimmy come out and play?"

"Jimmy!" she screamed over her shoulder. She was famous in the neighborhood for that scream. Day or night, it pierced the solitude of our quiet street. Once when Jimmy and I were casually walking to school, we heard a shriek split the still morning air behind us. Whirling around, we saw Mrs. O'Donnell two blocks back, sporting pink robe and curlers, frantically waving something in her hand. "Jimmy! You forgot your pencils!"

"Asshole," he muttered and kept walking.

Another time, Tommy and I were waiting outside for our friends to come by before school when we saw Jimmy's older sister get on the high school bus. As the bus began to pull away, Mrs. O'Donnell threw herself in front of it and pounded on the door. "Stop! Stop!" Stepping on, she faced a sullen, shocked-into-silence mass of teens. "Kelley!" came the high-pitched wail-from-beyond-the-grave. "Shame on you! You forgot your lunch! It's your favorite, egg salad sandwich and Fritos!" We were told that Kelley cried all the way to school.

"Jimmy!" she yelled even louder. "Can't you hear me? The boys are here to play!"

Jimmy never walked anywhere. Before Mrs. O'Donnell knew he was there, he had shot past us onto the dew-covered front lawn, his arms waving as he sang aloud, "It's sum- sum- sum- sum- summertime!"

Laughing, we scrambled after him. Mrs. O'Donnell's last minute, frantic instructions followed us down the street, to be devoutly ignored. "Boys! Don't-play-rough, don't-climb-trees, don't-run-in-the-street, look-both-ways! Boys! Do you hear me?"

A blue jay, squawking in distress, burst from the upper branches of a nearby tree.

The next stop on the block was Eddie's house, where he and Greg were engaged in a duel-to-the-death match of marbles on a patch of dirt by the driveway.

"Hey," I said in greeting. "Let's get some more guys and play ball!"

"In a minute," came Eddie's terse reply. "I'm trying to win back my cat's-eye."

Whoa. This was serious business. We stared in silent suspense as Eddie leaned forward on his hands and knees, carefully calculating his shot. He took a deep breath and held it. Click.

"Yes," he exhaled, pumping a triumphant fist into the air. "It's mine again."

"Lucky shot," groused Greg.

Eddie grabbed the clear, green-streaked marble and thrust it back into its leather pouch. His pudgy arm reached up and wiped the glistening beads of sweat off his forehead. With a sigh of relief, he looked up at us as if seeing us for the first time. "So, what're you boys up to?"

Eddie was short and plump, making him the butt of all the fat jokes in the neighborhood. Bright-eyed and amiable, he never seemed to mind the teasing. His innate politeness came from having been raised in the South for the first eight years of his life. He always addressed adults, including his own parents, "sir" or "ma'am," a custom that baffled his newly found friends. The most likely explanation for his manners was his strict upbringing. I had once witnessed Eddie's father whipping him with a belt in broad daylight behind the garage as punishment for some transgression. No wonder he was always home on time for dinner.

Greg, on the other hand, had no father. A taciturn boy, he was being raised by his widowed mother after

his father, a newspaperman, had died of a sudden heart attack. Greg's mom was the only single parent on the block, divorce being uncommon in those days. Eager to please, Greg loved being included in our games; because he was a born athlete, we were glad to have him.

Our number now six, we could have played a variety of street games, but we had outgrown those the past summer. I forcefully rallied the troops. "Listen up. Eddie, you and Greg go across the street and get Denny. Jimmy, you cut through the back yard and get Bobby."

We all loved Denny. His dad had the coolest job on the block. A cop. And not an ordinary cop either. A state trooper. When he cruised down our street in his Illinois State Police car, heads always turned. If we were playing catch on someone's front lawn, we'd gesture with a circular motion at him. He'd smile and oblige by turning on the siren. Denny was a lot like his dad. Tall and sinewy with a dark complexion, always flashing a bright-white smile. Not arrogant, but sure of himself. Someone who was going to be somebody.

Bobby, like Eddie, had been brought up elsewhere, near Philadelphia. He had actually moved into the neighborhood three years earlier, but it took us awhile to get to know him because he lived on the next street over—a separate planet in those days.

"Make sure everybody brings their gloves 'cause we're gonna play hardball," I ordered. "We'll meet back here at ten o'clock sharp and head for the field. Bring your bikes."

Bikes. A magic word for us. Bikes meant freedom. Freedom to go anywhere—the ball field, the swimming pool, the movie theatre, the little store. The latter was found in every suburb in America during its heyday. Called mom-and-pop stores, they were family owned and operated. Run by immigrants from various ethnic tribes, they carried almost every item found in larger grocery stores. Canned soups and vegetables, cold and

hot cereals, pastas, soapsuds, and a multitude of household cleaning supplies. Ours, overseen by Mr. and Mrs. Garheimer, was called the little store because—well, because it wasn't big. We relished our trips there to buy candy (penny, two-penny, and nickel variety), ten-cent ice cream bars from the big glass freezer, and five-cent packs of baseball cards. However, the privilege of owning a bike carried with it the responsibility of running errands to the little store to pick up milk, bread, and other necessities from time to time.

My bike that summer was a brand new, red and silver 26-inch Schwinn Traveler, named after Confederate General Robert E. Lee's magnificent horse, or so I claimed. It had exactly one speed—as slow or as fast as I pedaled—foot brakes, and ugly metal baskets on each side of the rear wheel, a concession to my parents upon its purchase for those little store runs. To detract from the hideous baskets, I immediately decorated it with cool sports stickers (Cubs, Sox, Bears, Fighting Irish). These, along with the sleek power of the block's biggest bike, gave me a proud-as-a-parent attitude whenever I rode, condescending to the other kids to ride alongside them.

Our bikes, a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors, hurtled helter-skelter toward the ball field. The whooping, shrieking boys upon them carried favorite bats, balls, and gloves, the scuffed leather and wood "autographed" by Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle, and other stars of the day. We pedaled furiously, and I felt in my heart what I could not have known—that life would never again be such fast-paced, frenetic fun. As our tires screamed across the hot pavement, the summer sun beat down on our heads, holding us in its viselike grip.

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