

Chapter 1

An Unlikely Candidate

I believe every person is the direct result of the sum total of his or her life experiences. Where we have all been in our lives has a lot to do with where we are today and how we view the world.

I didn't grow up in an educated family; my parents didn't introduce me to Wall Street or investing at an early age; we didn't even have much money. In essence, I am probably the most unlikely person to someday be called "The Wall Street Whiz Kid."

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I'm from New York. To anyone who has ever met me or heard me on TV or radio, that's a no brainer. I *sound* New York ... specifically, Bronx.

I was born in Manhattan in 1956, and, when I turned seven, my family moved north to one of New York's more family-oriented boroughs. My sister, who was eight years older, left home the following year to marry her childhood boyfriend. The couple moved to Brooklyn which, although it sounds close, is a long train or bus ride away, so for the next ten years I saw her only once or twice a year.

As a result, I basically grew up an only child. While my mother, Esther, worked constantly—mostly at secretarial jobs—my father spent much of my childhood unemployed. When he did work, it was often as a chauffeur for some big- named singers like Simon and Garfunkel and a sportscaster named Chris Schenkel. He'd occasionally find odd jobs doing other things, but was *not* working more than he *was* working.

The problem was: Dad was a gambler. Not to the point of loan sharks knocking on the door, but whatever money Dad managed to earn he gambled away at cards, the track, or the casinos. Gamblers, I have learned, are generally lazy people. That's why the thought of hitting it big on a bet is such a high for them. It's a way of beating the system and avoiding work. That describes my dad.

I guess it wasn't completely his fault. Like many of us, he had a dysfunctional upbringing and issues with his own family. As a matter of fact, by the time I was born he and his family were barely speaking. That rough Italian upbringing gave Dad a really bad temper, which got him fired more than once. I remember one job he lost because he punched a boss. People were often fearful of his temper. I know we were.

I used to tell people that my father was a police captain or he owned a private car service instead of admitting that Dad was a chauffeur or out of work. The reality was that I was embarrassed by my dad—by what he did, or more appropriately, what he didn't do. I was ashamed he didn't work hard and ashamed of the long stints when he didn't work at all. I later figured out that were it not for Mom's steady, modest income, we probably would have had an even more meager lifestyle. Thankfully, our simple apartment was in a rent-controlled building, which likely saved us more than once from living on the streets. Though my dad always managed to have a car to get around, Mom took only public transportation to and from work each day. There were no luxuries, no vacations. We had just enough clothes and food. I suppose living on the edge of lack is okay

when your environment is a caring and nurturing one, but our lack extended to love. There was little money and less love. There was a lot of fear.

My father's name was Rudolph, but everyone called him Rudy. To the outside world, he was funny and generous. At home, the story was different. He verbally and physically abused me more times than I care to remember. I guess that was his way of taking out his frustrations, and he did it with books, chairs—whatever was handy and/or whatever he could throw. I remember we'd all wait until Dad woke up to see what kind of day it was going to be. If he was happy and smiling, we knew it would be a good day. If he got up and didn't talk, I'd run to my room to try to avoid the inevitable chaos and violence that could explode at any time.

My earliest memories of the physical abuse were around age eight or ten. I don't remember a whole lot, partly because it was such a crappy time and partly because it was a long time ago. But I do recall being hit by a toaster, wooden spoons, and other things. Sometimes it was just a punch to the face or a kick to the gut. Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen I ran away a few times, but there was no place to go. The longest I stayed away was seeking overnight refuge in the bowling alley. Eventually I had to go back home, and it was never pretty. I do recollect my mother sitting me down after

Dad's outbursts trying to somehow explain to me why he was like he was. Each time it ended with the fact that it wasn't my fault.

The last time he beat me I was twenty-one, and the argument was over me dating a thirty-five-year-old woman. Less than two years later, I'd leave for good.

In the last ten years of his life, he seemed to settle down physically and mentally. Maybe he mellowed. Maybe it was because he became estranged from some of his family members, so he became more focused on his own wife and kids. I don't know why, but he settled into a regular gig as a doorman—a position he seemed to enjoy. By this time, Mary and I were married, so I finally had real love in my life (the kind of love I never, ever had before), so over the years I came to forgive my dad for his decades of hurtful actions. It had been a long time since the violent days of my youth, and people who are raised in an abusive household are just happy when the hitting stops. I guess I never really trusted him again, just put up with him.

After Dad got the regular job as a doorman, he and Mom would travel to Atlantic City once a week, often stopping at my central New Jersey home to pick up my wife. On the way home from one such outing, he lingered in my living room. He'd had a good day at Trump's casino, saying that he beat "The Donald." (He liked the idea that if he won, it was coming right out of Donald Trump's pocket.) But that night he was uncharacteristically solemn, like he had something to share.

He sat me down in the living room and talked to me for perhaps the first time as a man and a father. As if seeking my forgiveness, he told me all the things he had done wrong. The abuse, the gambling, the lifestyle. He told me emphatically to never cheat on my wife, leading me to believe that he had succumbed to that evil. It was a sincere, heartfelt time we had ... as if he was sharing with me what little wisdom he had in the hope that I wouldn't go down the same path he'd traveled. The whole exchange took maybe twenty minutes— about eighteen minutes longer than we'd ever spoken before.

Then he left, and I went about what I was doing. A few minutes later, he came running back up the stairs like he'd forgotten something, but he said he returned just to give me a kiss, which he hadn't done in years ... or maybe never. Then, without a word, he ran back down the steps and he was gone.

The next morning, he had a massive heart attack and died.

It was that day that I had my first real Christian experience: forgiveness. It's what our faith is based on. I knew I had forgiven my dad because when he died I wasn't mad at him... I felt sorry for him. After everything that had transpired between us, the lack of blame and culpability I felt had to have come from God. (That's where all real forgiveness comes from.) It wasn't something I could ever have done on my own, nor would I even have wanted to. But I did.

I didn't know it at that moment, but this was the first of many times where I saw the hand of God on my life.

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As a boy, the one place Dad and I always found peace was at the racetrack. He was happy there. When I was seven or eight, he started taking me with him, and as a teenager, I got my first taste of gambling. From that point on, days were spent sneaking into Yonkers Raceway betting on horses, cards, bowling, and shooting pool for money at my home away from home, Fieldstone Bowling Alley.

There was never any real moral issue with gambling or hanging out in a pool hall since we were basically void of religion. My mother was a non-practicing Jew who was raised in an orphanage during the Depression, and my father a non-practicing Catholic. I was baptized as a baby, but my mother had thoughts of raising me Jewish. Dad, however, wouldn't have anything to do with it. Though I don't think he was a bigot, my father's immigrant Italian family was an anti-Semitic bunch and there was no way his kid was going to be a Jew. Remember, in 1947 when my parents got married, there weren't many "mixed" marriages like theirs.

So, I was left with zero religious training. Zilch. No church, no temple, no books, no nothing. No religion, period. We didn't believe there *wasn't* a God, we just didn't believe anything except what life had taught us. And life taught me a lot.

I did pretty well in school if you don't count being suspended three times in Junior High School 141. But, by the early seventies, racial tensions were high in the U.S., and likely nowhere higher than in New York City's public schools. When I was in the tenth grade at De Witt Clinton High School, I was robbed by a gang of African-American teens outside of school. It was nothing personal—I was just the wrong white guy in the wrong place at the wrong time. I resisted the attack, and fortunately a teacher saw the crime in progress and called the police. Later that night, two of the robbers were arrested. To retaliate for their buddies spending time at the local precinct, the next day a group of their friends attacked me in the hallway of school. The attack gave me a fierce prejudice that I wouldn't get over until many years later, and ultimately led to me not finishing the tenth grade. After a few months of summer school, I signed up to repeat the grade at a new school the following year.

A combination of boredom, an unfamiliar school, and other kids making fun of me caused me to quickly lose interest in schooling. At seventeen, I dropped out for good. With the exception of a few classes necessary for financial licensing, I have never returned to the halls of academia. I never got my high school equivalency diploma or GED, and have no college, trade school, or other formal education.

There have been times that I wish I had done things differently. I was never a great English student and I've always had to pay an editor or writer to correct my newsletters. That has cost me a small fortune. Some people, especially those who consider themselves in the "upper echelon," have been biased against me because I'm not a Wharton MBA with a cultured accent. Biff and Buffy generally don't rush to me with their business. But, the reality is that my streetwise ways have served me better than any piece of paper with an Ivy League name printed on it.

When I told my father I quit school he had only one piece of advice: “You better get a job.” So, I took a job at a Korvette’s department store for \$2.93 an hour. When I wasn’t flirting with the girls, I was selling hardware. Looking back, this is actually pretty ironic, since anybody who knows me knows that I have zero mechanical ability. Me, in the hardware department? Ha! That was 1973, and it was the first of many jobs that were taking me nowhere. But they kept me busy for a while until I found my next real passion: disco.

Depending on your age and where you are from, the thought of living for the discothèque either makes you laugh, gasp or cry. Nonetheless, I lived for Friday and Saturday nights and disco. Have you seen the movie *Saturday Night Fever*? No kidding, that was me. I wasn’t exactly John Travolta, but I wasn’t bad. The film and Travolta’s Tony Manero character very accurately depicted the way my friends and I lived as part of the disco subculture that evolved around music, clothing, and dancing. Working a variety of dead-end jobs during the days just so we could make it to the disco at night. The leather jackets, wide shirt collar up over the jacket ... we epitomized the typical white-disco-guy persona.

We visited 2001 Space Odyssey (where *Saturday Night Fever* was filmed), Studio 54 and the other big discos in New York City. The Golden Hour in the Bronx was my home away from home and I spent many a night in Westchester County’s Fudgies and The Milky Way. We valued our lives based on the amount of gold hanging around our necks and the cars we drove, and we judged the girls by the amount of makeup they wore and the volume of gum they could chew. Aah, to be young, naive, and without responsibility.

But the disco lifestyle was short lived. Though we had fun while it lasted, I soon found the bars and flings left me with a sense of emptiness. I guess the whole reason I got involved in that lifestyle was to try to make up for something lacking in my home life—searching for love and acceptance on the dance floor, in a bottle of booze and with countless women. It all ended in the spring of 1979 when I met my future wife, Mary Elizabeth Troy. A recent immigrant from Ireland who came for vacation and never left, Mary was a waitress at the Riverdale Diner in the Bronx. After meeting Mary, suddenly the partying and dancing and hedonistic lifestyle wasn’t important to me. It was literally like a bell went off in my head, and was unlike anything I had ever felt before. I guess when you live without love for so long and then somebody loves you, the feeling of love is somehow amplified. It was remarkable.

Mary was different from any other woman I had ever met. To me, she was high class. That meant her thoughts weren’t in the gutter like the other girls. She was extremely religious, a trait totally foreign to me, and she clearly came from a loving and nurturing family. In my eyes, she was gorgeous, and her heavy Irish brogue hooked me. When you added it all up, Mary had everything the other girls didn’t. Despite the fact that for our first date I showed up in a t-shirt and took her to Pizza and Brew (not exactly a high-class joint), just eight weeks later, we were engaged to be married.

Soon after, my future father-in-law, Sean Troy, one of the finest human beings I have ever had the privilege to meet, arrived in the States to check me out and, per Irish tradition, I had to ask permission for his daughter’s hand in marriage. What a concept, I thought. Getting your parents’ permission? Outrageous. After having been with women who would do just about anything with anybody, I couldn’t comprehend a woman who wouldn’t marry without her father’s blessing. So I knew I had to make the guy like me.

His whirlwind four-day trip came over the Thanksgiving holiday, flying in on Thursday and flying back out on Monday. He brought one of Mary’s sisters with him for company, and the four of us spent the days socializing. Mary had told me her dad had raced greyhounds, so one day I took him to the track. By the end of the night he ended up winning, which made for a happy mood. Before leaving for the airport after their four-day visit, Mary and her sister retired to the bedroom giving

me the high sign to make the “ask.”

Those were the toughest words to ever come out of my mouth, but I did it. Thankfully, he said yes, with his only request being that the wedding take place in Ireland. I said, “Sure, sure.” Whatever it takes to marry Mary, I thought. The catch, I later learned, was that to be married in the Church of Ireland one must be Catholic. Needless to say, I became Catholic—not because of any spiritual yearning, but simply to get married. I would have become a Buddhist to marry her, it didn’t matter to me. So, after eight or nine months of classes and a confession that took two hours (when you’re doing your first confession at twenty-three it’s a whole lot different than at eight), there I stood before the priest, surrounded by about five hundred eighth graders and three other adults, to receive my confirmation. Thus began my life as a Catholic.

Mary and I were married in a civil ceremony in New York in November, 1980, then in a church wedding in Ireland on April 20, 1981. (For five months we “lived in sin” in the eyes of the church because though legally married by a judge we had not been married in the church.) I returned home from Ireland with a new wife and a \$25,000 dowry from my father-in-law. I was twenty-three and Mary was twenty-five.

In retrospect, I think my abusive father and desire for a stable, happy home likely accelerated our courtship. I saw Mary as a way out. Marriage sure beat my mother and father’s house! So, our “happily ever after” began in an apartment in the Bronx, followed by a little duplex in suburban Andover, New Jersey, with Mary waitressing while I wound up in a job I really liked—and one that would drastically alter the course of my life—as a warehouse manager for Toshiba’s copier division.