

"I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now."

These days, I find myself not wanting to sum up parts of my life in the doggerel of '60s folk rock. Yet sitting in an ancient blue shoe box sits a packet of letters, cards, notes from years I tend to relegate, like the box itself, to some corner shelf of the closet of my mind.



Recently, I found that box, blew off some of the dust, and took a stroll down the years. In that small stack, I find many funny moments, random thoughts, even a few mysteries. My plan is to make two piles, keepers and shredders. It's not long before I notice I still have one pile -- the one that was destined for the shredder.

There I am, apparently a somewhat troubled 17-year-old in the middle of the school year in 1981, engaged in an erstwhile fight with the establishment, whatever that was at the time. I assume it was parents, school, life, etc. A little of everything. That would make sense, because back then, I knew everything.

There's a few pictures from a couple of high school dances. A couple of moments with girls who have probably thought even less about me over the years than I ever did about them. A few boisterous group shots of a lot of testosterone-laden guys mugging for the camera. In this one shot, there's a future cop, a couple of engineers, a golf pro, a financial planner, and yours truly. There's a guy who didn't quite make the grade but still plows onward, searching for that one break that will vault him out of his troubles and bring him the respect he's craved all his life. And, as always in every crowd, there's that guy who had so much on the ball, was so full of life, was pegged to be that guy with the klieg light future, yet he's no longer with us, the victim of both a botched surgery and his own demons.

And always, there's me, this dark, skinny, smart-mouthed kid. He's fairly happy, fairly confident of some future, yet somehow he's not quite able to find his footing. Not yet. And I wonder, occasionally, if that's something we all feel and ultimately grow out of or if that snapshot is but a microcosm of this life I have led.

Later come letters from college. More advice. A couple of attempts at staying in touch over the summer, and at least three references to inside jokes I cannot remember for the life of me.

"Everyone laughed about the Bloody Mary mix," writes one fraternity brother, referring to some gross joke I apparently was known for at the time. I have no idea what that means, but I'm not too far from doing a Google search, finding the guy, and asking him.

Later, there's a first love and a first heartbreak, and not too long after that, the usual angst and uncertainty looming over impending graduation, which in my view at the time, is a fate akin to death itself, as it is inexorable, inevitable, and touted by all as a gateway to a new life.

Then in the midst of all this, there's the mind-numbing, strength-sapping, soul-shattering experience of losing a parent at a fragile time of life. I read through some of the cards and letters, attempted words of comfort but true-hearted nonetheless, and I realize that these, too, were people I haven't thought of or spoken to in years, yet I owe them my very sanity.

I occasionally hear snippets as to how some of them are doing. There's that guy, wealthy and self-made, who mapped his life out like a battle campaign and will, in fact, retire when he's fifty, very wealthy, crying poor all the way to his beach house. There's that guy who went the opposite way, yet seems to have moved comfortably into middle class life with most of his hippie liberal ideals still intact.

And here I am, not where I thought I'd be, but not unhappy about it, either. I would guess all of us probably feel like this movie script hasn't played out like we thought it would, even the scion

to industrial millions.

Life is strange, unexpected, even cruel. But it's never boring. I'm okay with it; I wonder how some of the others are.

I hear tell of a lot of guys who hit my age and realize life is more than halfway over, so they get hairpieces and sports cars and Harleys and teenage girlfriends and take up bungee jumping. I had my mid-life crisis when I was 31, which may have been the only thing I've ever been early for in my entire life. It was great fun, but I soon found out style initially gets one farther than substance, but it can't keep pace. Substance is slower but it lasts far longer and it's worth far more. And the good news is substance redefines the race.

I considered those two piles, the one to keep and the one to toss, and found they were still one pile. So I threw away the old rubber band that held them together, found a new one, and put those years back in the box.

Some other time, maybe.

For better or for worse, that's a good portion of my life in that box. I'm not sure I want it to disappear until someone puts me in a box.

The day I find life boring will be the day I check out of the game. Right now, though, I can't wait to see what happens next.