JOHNNY AND SPEEDY

By Michael Ventura
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It's late 1971 or early '72, and Johnny's driving fast, the way he liked to, on a snowy stretch of the Massachusetts Turnpike. I'm riding shotgun in his Volkswagen van, engine mounted in the back and nothing in front, nothing between you and a wreck but the windshield and some metal not much thicker than tinfoil. Hit anything and your legs get crushed from the knees down. Crash at Johnny's speed and for driver and shotgun there's not much to do but die.

The van's full of teens going to or coming from rehearsing some play. We're singing, with Johnny's strong, true voice in the lead. A vehicle to the right skids in our way; Johnny swerves; the VW skids left; we're a bit off the road, and it doesn't look good.

That song froze in my throat. Only one voice still sang full out – Johnny's. Swifter than words, more a feeling than a thought, it hit me that if we wreck and die it'll be me dying scared while Johnny dies singing.

That was some lesson. The man was full of lessons like that.

His van found traction and road while Johnny cackled (he could cackle like no one else): "Speedy! Don't mumble. Sing it out!"

Speedy – that was me.

We met the summer I was 12, maybe 13, when I'd been tagged with that nickname. Through my teens I was "Speedy" or "Speed." I was 26 in that VW, when only Johnny and some teen-year friends called me that. Still do.

Or did. Johnny died a month ago, age 82. He was 31 or so when we met.

Johnny or John or just Ertha. John Ertha.

In a society more segregated than many can now imagine, he was the first African-American I knew up close. Far more important, he was the first man whom I wanted to emulate. My father and uncles had their stuff, but not one of them walked free. John Ertha did, scattering sparkling intellect like Forth of July fireworks. It was from Johnny I first heard Rousseau's "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." In Johnny's voice I heard Eugene V. Debs say, "While there is an impoverished class, I am of it; while there is a criminal element, I am in it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." To be maybe 16, a counselor at summer camp, and sit in a converted barn while Johnny Ertha read us *Animal Farm* – well, that was to feel a challenge to all the powers that be: Try as you may, you'll never tame me.

At those Unitarian summer camps, mornings after our breakfast, cleanup, and inspection, there was the "theme talk," followed by discussion in small groups. First time I heard Johnny give a talk, 12- or 13-year-old Speedy understood not a word – partly because Johnny's sentences tended to tumble over each other in no predictable fashion. But I got it. It was about freedom, about liberty, about standing your ground and being your own person. Kids like me got it not because he said it but because he embodied it; he was doing it, with style, right there before our astounded eyes.

Memory's hazy, but I believe my discussion group that day was led by a counselor named Barbara Federer, or a name very like it. When she asked Speedy what he thought the talk was about, he said something like, "That's the kind of man I want to be."

Johnny was compact and carried himself like a boxer. His energy was boundless. I never could judge his height because he was, for me, larger than life. He couldn't talk for 15 minutes without quoting poetry, breaking his train of thought to exclaim, "And Millay!" -- Edna St. Vincent Millay – "It's as in Millay: 'My heart, being hungry, feeds on food/The fat of heart despise!'" That kind of thing. Constantly.

He coined epigrams with stunning ease – some spoken once, some repeated every day. "You must let others be right, to console them for not being anything else." "Just as important as what we do or what we don't do is how we behave when we don't know what to do." Always punctuated by poetry, often Millay and his other favorite (whom I never could bear) Conrad Aiken. Or he'd lurch into a performance of Dylan Thomas' "Lament." And there was this – I remember the thought more than his exact words:

Don't confine others to your limitations.

He chided me with that plenty, which I didn't welcome. I like to think now, finally, I've absorbed the lesson.

Johnny Ertha was a Ping-Pong madman, playing that game, or any game, as though life itself was the bet. Ping-Pong or chess, he'd distract you with a barrage of "You can't beat me and nobody you know can beat me and even if you beat me you still can't beat me!"

Even if you beat me, you still can't beat me.

In my eyes, that was the signature and measure of the man.

And there was something dangerous about Johnny. Not threatening. Dangerous. His very presence seemed to say, "To be a free human being, you just might have to be as crazy as me."

Johnny was a Boston public-school teacher and civil rights activist. He and the intense, gorgeous, platinum-blond Darlene married when Jim Crow was in full force in a third of this nation. In many states their marriage was illegal. Even a kid could see that Johnny and Darlene matched each other in intelligence and in the courage their choices required. I will not insult them with idealization. These were never easy people. Johnny especially. But it was never less than an honor to cross their paths. To win their respect was to gain something of great value.

When he became director of Homestead Camp, I was head counselor. Johnny was the don, and Speedy was his capo. But he had the funny idea he was boss, while I had the notion that the boss was me. We went at it. I think he liked that I was taking him on, but not so much when I led a faction that came near to costing him the job. And neither of us fought pretty.

Summer's over. The campers have gone home. I'm sweeping out my cabin when Johnny comes in. I'd never seen anyone so angry. His arms hang at his sides, boxer-style, fists clenched. My feeling is, "He's gonna wipe the floor with me, but I'm getting in one good shot with this broom."

Johnny says softly, "I hate you."

Turns away. Stops himself. Faces me again. And this responsible, furious, beautiful man says, very carefully, "I love the man you're going to be."

He leaves. I burst into tears.

We didn't speak again for several years.

When our paths crossed once more there wasn't a twinge of resentment, anger, or regret in either of us. We were just glad to see other.

Two years ago, during one of our long out-of-touch periods, his daughter Cori found me on the Internet to tell me he was ailing. How grateful I am to Cori: My book about John Cassavetes had just been published. Johnny got to hold it in his hands and read the dedication: “For John Ertha -- who, when I was a boy, was the first in my experience to embody the passion, courage, mind, and rascality that could be: a man.”

I left the East shortly following our VW adventure and didn’t see Johnny again for 19 years – and never saw him after. But we kept up, in our way. We’d lose touch for a year or five or so, then one of us would reappear suddenly as a voice on the phone, as on that morning in the mid-Nineties when a call rang at sixish. I’d been asleep maybe an hour and a half. No one calls me that early unless there’s trouble. Or so I thought, groping for the phone.

“Speedy! Is that you?”

“It’s me, Johnny.”

“How can you tell?!”