The alarm went off at 6 a.m. on a cool Saturday morning in our home just outside of Newark, New Jersey. I was seventeen years old and still never really had much of a life since Dad had bought the local saloon and moved us from Pittsburgh six years earlier. He had been an executive for a large automotive company—I was never really sure what he did but he wore a suit, tie, and a look of perpetual boredom. His dream was to own his own business, a tavern. Dad was always one to enjoy a drink. He would share stories of how he and his pals would get into local bars at 16 for drinking, fighting, and shooting pool. It was great to hear all of his stories of debauchery and bravado, but his dream was robbing my dream. Heck, I had been pitching in at the family business for so long I wasn’t even sure I had a dream. I was still searching, but in the meantime I dragged myself up, slopped through a quick bowl of cereal and orange juice, slugged down a coffee, and hauled by butt to the Pit Stop Bar and Grill. It was my job to get in early, wipe down bottles, clean the bathrooms, pick up trash around the place, and get it sparkling for the local drunkards to return. They, in turn, would get the place all set for me to clean-up all over again after church the next morning. I had been doing this since 1957, when I was just 12. Dad had recently upped my allowance from $0.50 a week to a full $2 bucks.

I finished my Saturday routine and decided to drop by Henry’s Five and Dime for a late morning milk shake. There I found my old classmate, Jimmie Romano, sitting in the corner by himself. Jimmie and I had been friends all through junior high school but we had drifted apart the past year of high school. We were still cordial and would take the time to speak when we ran into each other. A few years earlier, Jimmie had really been into Dobie Gillis and would imitate Maynard G Krebs. He would have everyone rolling with laughter. Jimmie sort of resembled Maynard. He was gangly and hunched and had a large nose. Jimmie’s other features were more of his Italian heritage. He had olive skin with shifty dark eyes and coal black hair. He was the class cut up during junior high. He kept us all in stitches. But Jimmie started to become moodier and more removed as we moved into high school.

“Yo, Jimmie…how ya doin?”

“I’m cool man, just sippin’ some joe and takin’ in the day.”

“Whatcha, readin’ there Jimmie?”
“Howl, man.”

“How? How, what? What are you trying to learn to do, Jimmie?”

“Not how man. Howl, daddy-o. Like, the great poems of Alan Ginsburg.”

“Alan Ginsburg?”

“Yeah Joe, Alan Ginsburg. Just listen and learn.” He looked down at his book and began to read aloud. “A lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon, yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars’… Now that is some heavy stuff, Joe. Can you dig it?”

“Dig it? Jimmie I can’t even understand it.”

“Well you need to unshackle from the chains of suburbia, you need to immerse in the written enlightenment of On the Road. You need to branch out, Joe. Hey, we been friends a long time but I just can’t dig your square existence. Once school ends I am bound for wider pastures. Let me do you one favor before I go. Follow me to the Village next Friday night. Give me one shot to rescue you from this prison, man. Slaving for your old man, living no life but that of a servant. You’re too young Joe. You gotta live daddy-o, or you’re headed straight to dragsville, man.”

“Wow, Jimmie, you really have gotten that Maynard G. Krebs thing down, but can you shoot it to me straight? I barely understood where you were going. What Village? And Friday night? Man, I have to be in by midnight and got to be up at the crack of dawn on Saturday. Where’s the Village?”

“Oh man. Joe, come on. Like Grenwich Village. Damn, you need to open up, cat.”

Jimmies’ dad had died in the Korean War. Jimmie was raised by a single mom who did not have a tight grip on his comings and goings, like my dad and my family had on me. My dad was all about the business and it was a full on family project. Though, I had to admit, it was becoming a giant weight on my social life, of which I had little to none. My only release was playing the guitar. Dad had sprung for lessons and had gotten me a cheap acoustic when I was fourteen. It was my only escape. I had saved some money from my allowance and got a boost from mom. She always reminisced about drama club in high school and she supported the arts. With some allowance and mom’s pitch in, I had gotten an electric guitar the year prior. It was a cheap Kent electric Japanese guitar and tiny used Fender amp. A couple of guys on the block and
I put a small trio together and would take turns at each of our garages a few times a week, but the only show we had played was my buddy’s kid sister’s birthdays. I had been into Buddy Holly since I was a kid and saw him on the Ed Sullivan Show. I wore thick coke bottle glasses and my birthday was in September, just like Buddy. I was shattered when he went down in that plane in ’58, but in those suburban garages my little band worked hard to keep his music alive.

I had to admit that Jimmie did peek my interest, and it was about time I got out. I mean, I could go off to the Army and fight for my country at almost 18 years old. Why not explore some? Why not live some life? Why not do something while I was still young?

“Hey Pal, where you off to?” My dad asked in an interrogating tone, while I played it cool.

“The band and I are just going to grab a flick at the drive in, that okay?”

“Yeah, sure Joey, but you know the deal?”

“Sure Pop, I’ll be home at midnight.”

“You better. The place needs cleaning early, Joey. I am depending on you. Have a good time.”

I took off walking down our tree-lined street on a calm and serene Friday night. I got to the corner of 8th and Spruce and there, waiting in his all black and partially rusted 1952 Desoto, was Jimmie. I jumped in without a word and Jimmie sped off on the 15 miles to Greenwich Village. I had been to New York plenty of times, seen the Empire State Building, went on a class trip to the Statue of Liberty, but I don’t think I ever explored New York and never really heard of Greenwich Village. I was filled with feelings of freedom and excitement as I cracked the window and took in the Jazz sounds coming from Jimmy’s car radio.

“Wow man, I hope they let you in dressed like that. I mean, like, can you lose the letterman sweater?” No one at Café Wha? is going to give a shit about your varsity basketball letter, Joe.”

“Ah come on Jimmie, what was I supposed do, dress in all black like you? Only thing I got in black is that cheap suit my parents got me for the Junior Prom. And besides, I rode a lot of bench to get this letter. And café what?”

“Exactly man, you’ll see when we get there. Just, oh man, don’t talk about varsity letters and junior proms. You’ll embarrass the shit out of me. Just play cool daddy-o, sit back and take in the scene.”
We rolled down the tight streets of Greenwich Village, looking for a parking spot. The streets were alive with artists and musicians. Nobody here looked like they were from Newark. It felt so good to be free and out of the confines of the neighborhood. I felt like an explorer.

We found a parking spot and walked to the café. We went down steep stairs like we were going into the basement of the building. We walked into a dank and dark open room; tables were tightly and haphazardly set up around a small stage. The smell of espresso coffee and cigarettes attacked your nostrils as soon as you entered. We sat down at a corner table. Jimmie was right, I felt way out of place in my sweater and flat top hair style. Just about everyone was in dark clothes and sipping coffee. Chatter was everywhere. I heard political debates and contemplations on society. These were not the views I was used to hearing. My dad was still trying to shake off Kennedy’s win over Nixon. Dad was a heavy Republican and a heavy Ike man. This was all new, but there was something so cool about it.

Sitting to my left at the next table, I caught a glimpse of one intriguing young lady. She was petite, had dark eyelashes, a French bob hair-do, and a purple beret tilted on her head. She was the cutest thing I had ever seen. I took a sip of the pungent espresso coffee that Jimmie treated me to. Before I knew it, I was on my third espresso and I was getting pretty revved up on the caffeine. Either emboldened by the caffeine rush or her beauty, I had to speak to this girl. I leaned over and asked her name. She answered Charlene with a coyness in her voice that accelerated my pulse. She allowed me to buy her a coffee and asked about my sweater with a giggle. As I began to stammer out an explanation for the sweater, while trying to throw in some pride of the letter, a small spotlight shining on the stage interrupted us.

“Ladies and gentleman, please welcome to Café Wha? Mr. Dave Van Ronk.” A guy with long greasy hair combed and hanging to his right, with a scruffy face, took a seat on the stage and began to pluck at his acoustic guitar with his fingers, no pick. He had a rough voice. He belted into the microphone in a talk-sing style. He was singing about cocaine and it was a little uncomfortable. I had never heard anyone sing about drugs, but there was a slow bluesy feel to the guitar that was intoxicating. I was entranced by the music, the girl, and the entire vibe of the room.

“You like?” Jimmie asked.

“Pretty cool, Jimmie.”

“You like Van Ronk? Wait till you here the next guy, Bob Dylan.”
“Bob, who?”

“Bob Dylan, man. This is folk music and it is just what the doctor ordered. Sit back and take it in Joe. This is real, daddy-o, nothing artificial here, man. This is your baptism, cat.”

Dave Van Ronk finished his set and out came a young guy with fizzy hair and a hat on his head, like what you see old merchant marines wear. He wore jeans and black boots, with a flannel shirt and his sleeves rolled up. He strummed his guitar and leaned into his harmonica draped around his neck with a brace. It was a steady, chopping rhythm and he played cross harp. He pulled away from the harp and began to sing about hobos and questions of life.

I had never heard anything like this before—in one swoop of folk music I had found a purpose. I was determined to go home and take my lumps from my old man for getting in at 1 a.m. and go on a mission to become a folk singer. So energized by the caffeine and music, I laid awake in my bed and made it to the bar on time. I was determined to ditch the band and begin my excursion to become a folk singer. I was just months away from turning 18 and graduating high school. I was determined to endure what I could and took every opportunity to return to the Village with my rekindled friendship with Jimmie Romano. Jimmie took great pride in my awakening and his influence over me. He had moved to the Village and got a job waiting tables at a joint called the Gaslight. He was writing poetry during the day.

I read On the Road by Jack Kerouac and was inspired to write a song about Dean Moriarty and his friend Sal. When I wasn’t working the bar, I was practicing finger picking and listening to Woody Guthrie. I bought Bob Dylan’s album that came out that year and played it over and over. I grew out my flat top and ditched my sweater. I was transforming quickly. My parents were worried. My goal was to play a Hootenanny at the café. I’d heard that was how Dylan had made it, but I had a long way to go.

Once I turned 18 it was non-stop trips to the Village. I kept running into Charlene and we got to know each other. She was from Long Island and we would plan to meet many a night in the Village. She was a year older than I and she inspired me like a muse. I was pulled every which way, inside and out by her beauty. I would take a train and ferry to her home in Suffolk and play my guitar for her. One day, while picking one of Woody Guthrie’s songs, a smile beamed across her full lips and she walked over and kissed me deep; a French kiss that I would never forget.
“You are ready, Joe.” She said as she pulled back from our kiss, “You need to speak to Manny Roth, the owner of Café Wha?”

Flanked by my Pal Jimmie and Charlene, I carried my guitar case into the café and approached Manny Roth. Crammed in his small office behind the stage in the café, Manny looked up at all three of us. He put down his pen and gave us a warm smile as his eyes drifted down to my guitar case. “Well, what do we have here?” He asked. “A trio?”

“No, Mr Roth,” Charlene said. “This is Joe Welleski and he’s been a quick student of folk. We come to your club all the time and our Joe has a dream of playing here. Please help him make it come true.” Charlene was acting like my manager.

“Joe Welleski? Joe, you may want to think about shortening that name a bit. But let’s hear what you got first and we can talk about that.” I sat down on a little chair in front of his desk and began to play. I did three songs, opening with Leadbelly. I then strummed into the song that motivated my journey, the one I’d heard Bob Dylan play. I finished with Woody Guthrie.

Manny Roth sat back in his chair and stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. “Not bad, Joe. Do you do your own songwriting?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Roth, but I didn’t feel ready to play them yet.”

“You have to have confidence in your music Joe. Let me hear one?” I strummed out the song I had written called “Never Ending Highway,” the song inspired by the character Dean Moriarty from On the Road.

“Joe, I tell you what, we’re going to give you a shot on a Hootenanny Night. You can pass the hat for some money and we’ll see how you do. If it goes well, if the crowd digs you, we can talk about working you into the rotation. Sound fair?”

I rose from the chair with my hand extended and with great gratitude. I shook his hand, probably a little too long, but I was so excited. “Mr. Roth, thank you. You won’t be disappointed.”

We all ran up the steep steps of the café to the street where we hugged and celebrated. Charlene gave me a long kiss and we went off to find coffee at a street corner joint so we could sit and savor the moment.

The moment arrived quickly, and in a couple weeks I was backstage at the café waiting to hear my name called. I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans and opened an extra button on my black shirt, then rolled up my sleeves. I was getting three songs to play and I was ready. I took a
swig of water to moisten my dry throat. I sat on the little stage and the spotlight shown on me. I looked out and could only see silhouettes with the light in my eyes, except Charlene. I could see Charlene. She and Jimmie were right up front. I had invited my parents, who were still trying to digest my rapid conversion. As usual, they had to work the bar.

“Welcome for the first time to Café Wha? and anywhere else, Joe Wells.” I could hear faint finger snapping from some of the crowd. I steadied my hand on the strings and grabbed a G chord. This was it; I was bound for folk fame. I leaned into the microphone to sing, and—

“Grandpa, we’re here.”

“Joe, are you up in the study again with that guitar? Get down here and hug your grandkids. The kids are heading to the movies and we got them for the next several hours. Spend some time Joe, you have to be at the bar tonight to close up.”

“I’m coming Charlene, just let me close up my guitar and I’ll be right down. Why don’t you call Vito’s and order some pizza? Wait a minute, my cell phones right here. I’ll take care of it. All right you crazy little kids, I’ll be right down. Who wants to hear Grandpa play some guitar?”

“Play that hobo song Gramps, we love that one.”

“OK, you got it kiddo’s, hold on and I’ll be right there. Hey, Vito’s, how about delivering a large with everything to 801 Spruce? 20 minutes? No problem. Here’s my credit card number.”