

James Johnson

Dear Dad,

I used to copy everything you did. Shake hands the way you did. Look people in the eye the way you did. And talk to everyone the way you did. I couldn't wait to drive and maybe flick my ashes out the window vent just like you. (Later I learned better that was not something to imitate). And I remember how much you loved books.

I remember your tan Corvair. It took us everywhere. You drove it to Community Hospital to let me see Margaret for the first time. You let me know she would be my best friend.

Well, after Margaret came home, you and I didn't get to drive around as much, just the two of us. We had one great drive when I was in first grade. You told me we were going to get my library card. It was going to be just we two, back in the Corvair.

The day was cold and clear, late morning or early afternoon. It wasn't hot and my allergies weren't bothering me so it must have been after my 7th birthday, sometime in January. We drove up to the Montclair Public Library and walked through the big revolving doors in the glass and steel front wall. I remembered it was pretty new, with a wood staircase that floated to the second floor in the middle of: All. Those. Books.

When we walked to the front desk, you announced I was going to get a library card. You were certain I was responsible enough to handle it. Pretty certain.

Mrs. Harrell wasn't working that day. I remember a really fair woman with black hair that curled from a gentle face. She gave me a manila punch card that day.

You helped me pick out my first non-picture book: "The Travels of Marco Polo." It filled my nose with the smell of years when I opened the book. The pages were yellowed, but sturdy, and strong enough to take me far away.

I could barely tuck it under my arm. Its clear plastic jacket was as cool and smooth to my fingers as the colorful board books my mother had read to me. That was 1968.

A few weeks ago I sought and found an old copy of that first book and fanned my fingers over it. The stamps in front and back claimed its former home as the Audubon Free

Public Library and the "date due" registry showed it had been in circulation from March 1963 until October 1968. It was clearly the cousin of my first Marco Polo book from the Montclair Public Library. After nearly five decades, the brown and red ink drawings, the maps and the stories, belonged to me again. And I to them.

Do you remember the last book I gave you? It was for your last birthday. You were barely older than I am now. It was "In The Matter of Color." You had been talking about the author for months. When I got it and brought it home, you were raking leaves in the backyard. You were stunned...and pleased.

You've missed a lot, mostly your granddaughters. They're both big readers. And they've both been library volunteers in Montclair and elsewhere. You'd like that, I'm sure. And I still have my library card.

Thanks, Dad. And thank you, Montclair Public Library.

Jim

James Johnson, a lawyer, was born in Montclair and received his first Montclair Library card in 1968.