

## Otto's School Bag

*Max Neiman*

“Let’s go to LA and catch the Buddy Holly movie,” Sarah announced. She pressed her case for a movie trip to Los Angeles by reporting that the film had garnered excellent reviews. So we decided to take in the spring greenery that the previous winter’s plentiful rains provided in the valleys and drive from Riverside to Los Angeles to catch a matinee showing at the wide-screen Cinerama movie theater. We loved rock and roll music and the television commercials for *The Buddy Holly Story* evoked happy memories of our teen years dancing to Buddy Holly’s songs, his thumping “Peggy Sue” or his velvety “Everyday.”

We took our five-year old son David along, who loved to hop around listening to all sorts of music at home. He’d often frolic about the entire first floor of the house, waving his hands, with his hair flying and his head nodding to the pulsing beat charging out of our stereo system’s fancy speakers. We sang rock and roll songs in the car on road trips or during our forays to and from the beaches or mountains, or even while going to the supermarket or heading to David’s day care center or to his school. David was literally drenched in old-time rock and roll, which I almost always sang as I gave him a bath when he was an infant and toddler.

We climbed into Bruno, which is what we named our two-door, 1970 dark green Model 142 Volvo and drove down the Pomona Freeway, past the still soft, green canopy of vegetation and the pink and white flowering succulents sprinkled below Mount Baldy, along the foothills overlooking the cities and villages of the San Gabriel Valley. When we got to the white-domed Cinerama movie theater on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles,

the line for the next showing of the film was already starting to grow. Fortunately, we were early enough to score a good spot in the queue, as the line soon meandered for a block on Sunset Boulevard and then extended for many yards more around the corner on Vine Street. David was getting a little restless just standing there. So Sarah kept our place in line, and I took David for a walk up Sunset towards Cahuenga Boulevard.

We walked for a while and passed a phone booth. I noticed a really thick telephone book hanging and swaying slowly on the chain inside the cubicle. I watched it for a few moments, as it moved, metronome-like, as if just recently used. Slowly the phone-book reduced the arc of its movement, until it came to rest. I looked at it for a few beats more. David and I then continued past the phone booth and walked for a while further and then turned and started back, once again passing the phone booth. I stopped to stare at the phone booth again.

I don't know why I thought of the Sterns just then. Perhaps it was because of the contrast between the wide shimmering, pastel panorama of Los Angeles, which seemed so different from the narrow red-brick, row-housed streets in Philadelphia, where my mother and I and the Stern Family once lived together in the same building. I hadn't lost the sense of wonder in the vast expanses of Southern California and how different it was from the compact, densely populated neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Chicago, cities in which I'd lived before moving to California.

I recalled how one could lean out of the windows of the upper floors of the Strawberry Mansion, Philadelphia building I lived in, at 3210 Monument Street, and have a conversation with neighbors propped in their windows across the way. A favorite pastime among older residents and children sentenced to home confinement, whether due to

illness or bad behavior, would be to put pillows on the lower edge of the window to cushion one's elbows and just watch the street theater unfold below.

Kids played in the streets and organized the games they played, using the features of buildings – walls, porches, stairs, alleys, and pavements – to produce a variety of street sports and games. During weekdays, the “rush hour” for kids playing in the streets tended to be the two hours after school, when many awaited the arrival of working parents. On the weekends and in school-free summers it seemed as if a thick, living carpet of children topped the entire area near my home. Broadcasting throughout the neighborhood, was the music of the street – the thumping of balls against the facades of homes, the disputes among youngsters, as well as the calls of parents, in English or German, or Yiddish or Polish, summoning their kids home for lunch or dinner.

Before they moved to Los Angeles, the Sterns – Morris, Silvia, and, their son, Otto – lived on the second floor of our row house. My mother and I lived in the smallest unit in the same building on the top, third floor. Our landlord lived on the first floor. As David and I were again passing the Sunset Boulevard phone booth, it occurred to me to look and see if I could find Morris or Silvia Stern or Otto Stern, their son, in the phone book. I located “Morris and Silvia Stern” right away. I asked David to put his finger next to their names, pulled out a quarter and deposited it in the slot for coins and dialed the Sterns' phone number.

After a few rings, a woman answered with a “*Hallo*,” and I asked, “Is this Mrs. Silvia Stern?”

“Yes it is,” she answered.

“This is Max Neiman. My mother, Bertha Neiman, and I lived on the third floor above you, on Monument Street in Philadelphia,” I quickly responded.

A brief moment passed, followed by, “Oh no! What is this? Really? Where are you?” Silvia asked.

“I’m calling from a payphone, here in Los Angeles. My wife and son are with me to see a movie here, and . . .” Before I could explain further, Silvia Stern interrupted, “You have to come by to see us!”

“Yes, of course, we’d love to see all the Sterns, “ I responded, “But we’re at a movie theater, and we need to be back home afterwards, in Riverside, so maybe we can arrange a visit for when we next come to Los Angeles, which we do pretty often.”

“Wunderbar!” Silvia boomed, reminding me that Morris and Silvia were from Vienna, Austria, from well-off and educated families, or at least that was the impression they gave while living in Philadelphia. Morris was taciturn, short, and pudgy as I remembered, and Silvia was a big-boned, big-presence woman, taller than her husband. She often had a big smile and beautifully colored lips. Silvia had a deep, smoker’s voice, and I immediately recalled the never-ending cigarette she held or puffed on. She gushed one expression of surprise after another on the phone. I managed to assure her that we’d arrange to see them very soon and told her I had to get back for the movie.

When David and I reached Sarah back in the movie-line, I excitedly told her what happened. She was amused. Sarah was used to hearing my frequent tales of living in Philadelphia, and now we had an actual connection to someone from that time. I had made arrangements to meet the Sterns at their apartment when we visited Los Angeles again on a planned visit to the Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits with our son, David,

who loved visiting that place, with its skeletons, fossils, and depictions of the animals that once existed in the region.

Otto Stern was my childhood nemesis. His father, Morris, unlike Silvia, rarely spoke. Morris had a friendly smile more often than not, a quality accentuated by bemused eyes and his round, bald head. He often offered chocolate and candy to me and to Otto. He frequently left home after dinner to do more work at his furrier business and seemed mostly to be either working or resting. He was generous to my mother and me, and he and Silvia would often take my mother on shopping trips, after they purchased a Plymouth around 1956, not long before they suddenly packed and left Philadelphia for Los Angeles.

I also remembered that Silvia was very strict with Otto. The more I reached back to our time as neighbors in our Strawberry Mansion row-house, the more I recollected of Otto's suffering at the hands of his mom. If Otto made a single error on his homework, he got a nasty rebuke or even a slap from Silvia who made him start all over. No erasures were allowed anywhere on his homework. Not on his handwriting and writing exercises or his math problems. "*Keine Fehler!*" – No Mistakes!" I would hear Silvia command.

Yet Silvia could also be genuinely warm, friendly and charming. She was regularly engrossed in trying to "upgrade" my mother's fashion choices. My mother really didn't devote much time to pampering herself. As a result my mother became one of Silvia's improvement projects. Silvia seemed to take it personally when my mother was too tired or worried about work or my father, who was living in West Germany at the time, to think much about clothing and shoes or make-up.

Otto, on the other hand, was a consistent target of Silvia's vindictive and punitive impulses. He had to deal with his mom's ceaseless pressure and threats, her relentless insistence that he be the best, the first, the most admired by his teachers. Silvia constantly compared Otto to me, even though he was a better performing student and certainly better behaved than I was. If my mom arranged for music lessons for me, Silvia inflicted music lessons on Otto. If my mother had me take singing lessons, Silvia would ask my mom, "Bertha, who is Max taking singing lessons with, and how much does it cost?"

Anyway, whatever I did academically or culturally, Silvia often insisted on having Otto participate in it too. So perhaps Otto resented me for always being a kind of oppressive exemplar for his mother. In fact, I was a bit of the class-clown when it came to school, and I regularly got into trouble for being a smart aleck, for babbling too much while the teacher was holding forth, and for getting into brawls with class bullies or consorting with other juvenile miscreants.

I still don't know why, but I often believed Otto was at the root of the many Max Neiman capers that went awry. And a lot of them did go badly wrong, often for reasons having nothing to do with Otto. It was convenient, though, to have Otto be my go-to scapegoat and to pretend that he was the source of my reputation as a class disrupter and "bad boy."

I wanted it both ways, to bask in the reputation of being an adventurous, mischievous boy and yet blame someone else for my rap sheet. In other words, Otto and I were engaged in an extended childhood fracas, whose origin I unfairly blamed on Otto. But as they say, in war, what does fairness have to do with anything?

Otto and I did sometimes have quiet periods of truce. We were both latchkey kids, whose parents were often gone before we left for school and mostly absent when we got home. Otto and I did often have fun together, whether it was flipping baseball cards, playing Monopoly, or pick up sticks, or when we watched television. The Sterns had a television, and we didn't. Silvia left better after-school treats than my mom did, and Otto shared those with me when we watched the variety of late-afternoon kids' programming, like various cowboy serials, the Mickey Mouse Club, Crusader Rabbit, or Howdy Doody. But these intervals of peace didn't obviate the many episodes of childhood enmity that existed between Otto Stern and Max Neiman.

"So, Max Neiman, what is the punishment for using bad words during recess?" my third grade teacher asked while glowering at me. She knew that I knew the answer, and she waited for me to provide it, sitting at her desk, with me standing peevisly at its front. I thought I had seen Otto talking to her during recess, and so I assumed he was responsible for this you-are-busted-moment. I knew what the cost was of yelling "damn" or "shit" or calling someone an "asshole" during recess, and I replied to my teacher, "Yes. Clean-up duty, and homework including 100 lines of neatly written 'I will not curse or use bad language at school,' signed by a parent,"

In my head I already was ruminating about how to retaliate against Otto, even without any concrete evidence that he was the cause of my latest school-crime-conviction. I had no patience for that "beyond a reasonable doubt" stuff when it came to Otto. I was going to be late getting out of school and have less time to hang out on the street before my mother got home from work, and I was going to have to write that no-

bad-language-at-school crap. Then I was also going to have to figure out how to minimize my mother's ire and likely punishment for me. I was seriously pissed.

When I got home on that day I noticed that Otto's school bag was on one of the porch chairs at our building. I was seething. Otto was involved in a game of half-ball down the street. I looked at Otto's school bag and my revenge instantly became clear and compelling to me. I put my school bag down on a porch chair, and took Otto's bag and ran down an alley adjacent to our home. I ran two blocks in a northerly direction and finally stopped at the backyard of a house. I dropped Otto's school bag into a bush in the building's backyard and ran back to our block. Otto was still playing down the street, and I walked up to where he was playing, and coolly asked if I could join in, which, of course, I did. After a bit, parents started arriving, and Otto and I went back to our house.

I bounded up the stairs to our stoop with Otto right behind and walked over to get my school bag. Otto looked around, and, of course, his bag was not there. He asked me if I had seen it, and I coolly responded that I hadn't seen it when I put mine up there. Otto was instantly frantic and terrified. We both knew that his mother would blame him for losing his school bag and be ruthless in punishing Otto for his "carelessness." Otto started crying, and I suppressed any sympathy for him. I left him to his bawling and fear as he went in to deal with his mom, who had arrived a few minutes before. I waited on the porch, since my mother had not yet come home. I relished the shit-show and punishment that Otto was experiencing as he dealt with his mom yelling at him about his school bag. I enjoyed it. I reveled in Otto's second floor torment.

All of that came crashing back into my head, sitting in the large Stern apartment in Los Angeles, when, a few weeks after having seen the Buddy Holly biopic,



Sarah, David, and I visited them after our trek to the Page Museum. Silvia showed us around their expansive apartment, which was furnished and appointed in plush “old European style.” There were lots of pillows and cushions and soft, feather-filled down comforters in the three bedrooms. There were elaborate ceiling lights and crystal chandeliers, with deep, wide couches and thick, high-backed club chairs. On shelves as well as inside glossy, crafted glass and polished wood cabinets were collections of Rosenthal dishes and colored Czech crystal stemware. A number of clocks were scattered throughout the apartment, all of them quite beautiful. Apparently Morris Stern had become a collector of vintage clocks, such as art deco-themed electric mantle clocks and several German-made, torsion pendulum clocks, shield by domes of glass, each with gleaming, gold-plated cylinders connected to ornate spokes, moving in varying ways to the clock’s timing mechanism.

There were a few shelves, filled with a mix of English and German language books, and a couple of rather large coffee tables covered with periodicals that the Sterns subscribed to, as well as some magazines that related to Morris’s clock collecting and another two or three photo-essays about Israel’s various wars since 1948. If you didn’t notice the palm trees outside the apartment windows, you might have thought you were in the home of a well-off German family in Europe during the 1930s.

Otto’s mom brought out some wonderful coffee cakes, including one of my favorite, “Mohnkuchen”, Austrian poppy-seed cake, accompanied by excellent coffee, with whipped, heavy cream. I noticed that Otto wasn’t there, but didn’t say anything about it right then. We talked a bit about the old neighborhood and “those times” in

Philadelphia. Sarah and I enquired about their life in Los Angeles. It turned out, as Morris Stern explained, that he had a relative who had made his way to the West Coast, and had urged the Sterns to come out there from Philly. Los Angeles, like most of California, was back then in the midst of its post World War II boom, propelled by the Korean War and continuing Cold War tensions. Although he did operate a furrier business there for a time, Morris Stern soon became extensively involved in Los Angeles real estate investments, particularly in apartment and commercial buildings, and clearly he was very successful.

Sarah mentioned how much she had heard over the years from me about “growing up” in Strawberry Mansion. “So many stories, repeated so many times to our friends, during dinner and parties!” Sarah said with a bit of a sigh and a little bit of mocking exasperation.

“Yes, so many stories,” Silvia said wistfully. Her eyes started to tear, and her face reddened, as if she had stopped breathing. I asked, “Silvia” . . . I had been instructed to not call her Mrs. Stern . . . “how is Otto? What is he up to?”

“I told him you would be coming,” she replied, “But he said he had unavoidable other plans”

“That’s too bad,” I responded. “I had been hoping to talk to him and reminisce about our childhood and exchange tales about our battles.”

“You know, Max,” Silvia, continued, with her face still flushed, “I am very happy for you. You have a beautiful family, a beautiful Jewish wife and son. You are a professor at a university, and I have to say that it is a surprise, because when you were growing up with my Otto I was sure you would become a murderer!”

Silvia's declaration that she thought I would grow up to become a killer was, to say the least, a real shock; even as I knew that I'd often been a problematic youngster. Her comment rocked me. It was as if I was instantly trying to reconcile two clashing visions that I had of myself. It was very uncomfortable.

"You asked me about Otto," Silvia pressed on, as Morris sat in a chair across the room, supporting his tilted head with his left arm and the palm of its hand, as a tired look came over his face. He tried to interject, "Silvia, please don't bother our guests with this stuff."

"Otto has had a very hard time since he graduated high school," Silvia continued, as if Morris wasn't even in the room. "Otto dropped from college. He was in the military during the Vietnam War and picked up some rotten habits. He was involved with drugs and shiksas of every color. His papa tried to help him. Even bought him a business, but Morris's health is suffering, and he needs to pay more attention to himself."

Silvia's eyes and neck reddened as she went on. "Otto has had a lot of problems, and I don't know what to do with him, or what would happen to him if Morris wasn't there to help him every time he had a problem or got into trouble."

I touched Silvia's arm. "I'm so sorry that Otto has had so much difficulty, Silvia. I would love to talk to him, and get together with him. I'll give him a call soon, and see what happens."

"I don't know what to do with Otto, Silvia said . . . now quietly. "We only see him once in a while, and he doesn't even come by for the holidays much." Silvia suddenly appeared to be tired, and found it difficult to say much more of anything. Morris kept

looking intently to the outside of the apartment, shaking his head a few times and mouthing a few words I couldn't hear.

Sarah had a mildly alarmed look on her face, while our son, David seemed, thankfully, distracted looking through some of the photos in the magazines and books covering the coffee tables. Perhaps there was much more that needed to be said, much more to be confessed, but the apartment was suddenly filled with weariness and gathering sadness. It was time to leave.

We left the Sterns' apartment, after a bit more, mostly awkward, talking. Silvia gave me Otto's phone number, and I made sure to let the Sterns know how grateful my mother was for the times Morris and Silvia helped my mother get around Philadelphia. But I was disquieted by Silvia's memories of how ruthless I was as a kid. It was clearly almost the only way she remembered me. On the way home that day, I didn't participate much in the conversation that Sarah and David had about how good the cakes and cookies at the Sterns were. I didn't break out in the standard raucous medley of rock and roll tunes that I often bellowed in the car during our day trips. David asked me several questions about Otto, and I ignored him, and he stopped asking after Sarah thankfully distracted him with some unrelated discussion about where we might go on our next trip to the mountains, or beaches, or cities of Southern California.

It took a few days, but one afternoon, while taking a break from work in my home office, I took out the phone number for Otto that Silvia had given me in Los Angeles, and dialed it. I heard a surprisingly deep and raspy man's voice at the other end answering with a "Hello?" I responded, "Hi, Otto. This is Max Neiman. My family visited your mom and dad this past weekend. I'm sure they told you about it. I told them I would con-

tact you, and so here I am! We had a great time with your parents, and I was hoping you and I could catch up. It's been a long time!"

A few moments of silence passed, and I continued, "You remember me, don't you, Otto?"

"Oh yes, Max. I remember you," Otto replied. He continued after a few seconds, "My mother told me about your Los Angeles visit. She couldn't stop mentioning that you turned out to be a professor at the University of California, and how you have a wonderful Jewish wife and beautiful son." A few more moments passed in silence, and he continued, "I congratulate you."

Of course, it didn't sound like a compliment, and I was going to add something about Otto's mom being too kind regarding my accomplishments and turn the conversation to him.

I cheerily tried moving the conversation along, "Otto, I'm hoping that we might get together in person and have a talk. I've told my family so many stories about our growing up in Strawberry Mansion, and we'd all love to meet you."

Some more seconds beat away, and I anxiously asked, "Otto? Are you still there?"

"Yes, Max, I'm still here. I'm still waiting to hear from you."

"Waiting to hear from me?" I was perplexed. "Otto, I'm right here. Am I saying something wrong?"

There was breathing at the other end. I could feel Otto at his end of the line and then suddenly he said to me, "Max, it's not what you're saying. It's what you haven't . . . oh hell . . ." and then I heard a click. It seemed like a boom at the moment,

soon followed by a dial tone, which I kept listening to with the phone resting on the side of my head. The dial tone ended with some more urgent noises from the phone company, with a message telling me “please hang up.” I did, and called Otto back. No answer.

I felt as if I’d been slapped. I thought about how I treated Otto when we lived in Philadelphia. I felt as though I’d been caught in some mischief. Was I about to be handed a bill for some long-ago transgression? I thought about my juvenile larcenies and how Otto was, at least some of the time, unfairly blamed by me for the punishment I earned for my youthful offenses.

But remorse was soon overcome by a tide of acerbic resentment rumbling through my stomach. My jaw tightened and my teeth clenched. My right hand formed into a fist, as a menacing anger and an uncomfortable tension stiffened my body. There was Otto again, spoiling my plans, ruining my day, taking the opportunity to land a zinger. I thought about Otto’s school bag, which so long ago rested in the bush branches after I heaved it there. I recollected again the sound of Otto wailing as his mom spanked and scolded him. My irritation and anger with Otto simmered. I felt a smile forming on my face. I sat there for minutes, again relishing what befell Otto on the day I hid his school bag. I heard a quiet, calm voice inside me . . . “He deserved what he got.” I felt my head nod and then slowly nod again. Otto’s mom might have been on to something. Maybe . . . maybe . . . maybe Silvia was right. Maybe . . . I could have been a killer.

Max Neiman  
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