

INTRODUCTION to *BAD HAIRCUT: STORIES OF THE SEVENTIES*

By Tom Perrotta

In 1988, ABC aired the first episode of *The Wonder Years*, a sitcom set in the late 1960s. The show was a wholesome, unapologetically nostalgic evocation of suburban American boyhood during what the narrator describes as “a golden age for kids.” It lasted for five seasons, following its adolescent protagonist into high school and the 1970s.

I hated it.

I’d grown up in the era the show depicted, and the idea of a golden age just didn’t ring true to me. *The Wonder Years* made the Seventies feel suspiciously like the Fifties, *Happy Days* with longer hair and goofier clothing. Everything that made those years distinctive and weird seemed to have been toned down or erased. Where were the drugs and sex? The racism and homophobia? The violence and cruelty? What about the general air of paranoia and moral confusion, the loss of faith in adult authority that was even shared by most of the adults I knew? That feeling that we’d missed the party, but got stuck with the hangover anyway?

In retrospect, I’ll admit that I was probably taking *The Wonder Years* way too seriously, demanding a historical reckoning that a network sitcom couldn’t possibly provide. But I had a good reason for doing so, or at least a selfish one: I had just begun writing some semi-autobiographical coming-of-age short stories of my own, and I couldn’t help feeling like the show had stolen some of my thunder,

colonized some territory to which I'd already staked a psychic claim. Despising that lovable whitebread sitcom was my way of defending my turf and clarifying my sense of purpose. Whenever anyone asked what I was working on, I would describe the stories and then add, "They're about everything *The Wonder Years* leaves out."

The stories I was writing back then eventually became this book: *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies*. All of them feature the same narrator, a boy named Buddy who's eight years old in the first story and eighteen in the last. Each story is a snapshot of a moment in his life, an incident or relationship that lingers in his memory. Buddy has no last name. I tried to give him different ones, but none of them took. Eventually, I surrendered and decided that he was just Buddy, a kid defined by the friends he makes and loses in the course of the book.

For most of its pre-publication life, this book was called *You Start to Live*, which is also the title of one of the stories. I borrowed it from a low budget TV commercial for a driving school, which ends with a woman waving out a car window and telling the world, "You start to live when you learn to drive!" I was reading a lot of Raymond Carver at the time—his influence on my early prose style is hard to miss—and I thought *You Start to Live* had a pleasingly Carveresque lilt, an ordinary phrase full of mysterious resonances.

Unfortunately, my publisher disagreed. This was a dilemma for me, because as much as I liked my title, I liked having a publisher even more. I'd finished the book in 1991 and then spent two years collecting rejections, first from the big New York houses, and then from university and small presses. Finally,

with the help of my friend, Alexandra Shelley, I landed at Bridge Works, a start-up small press run by Barbara and Warren Phillips. Barbara was a writer and handled the editorial side of things. Warren, a retired CEO, ran the business side like a business. He informed me that *You Start to Live* was a bland and forgettable title, and insisted I come up with a new one.

I complained, but not too much, since I knew it wouldn't do any good. My wife and I scoured the manuscript, making a list of possible new titles. At some point someone—there's a minor dispute about which of us gets the credit—noticed the following sentence: "It happened to be Valentine's Day, a stupid holiday, and a miserable one, if you're alone and have a bad haircut." We chuckled and added *Bad Haircut* to the list.

"That's funny," I said. "But Bridge Works will never go for it."

I was wrong, of course. Not only did they go for it, they went one step further, adding the subtitle, *Stories of the Seventies*. Once again, I complained on literary grounds—short story collections didn't usually have subtitles—and once again Warren insisted on having it his way.

Now, eighteen years later, I don't mind admitting that he was right: the title change was the best thing that could have happened to the book. Not only is *Bad Haircut* a lot more memorable than *You Start to Live*; the subtitle turned out to be a stroke of marketing genius as well. When the book finally came out in 1994, a full-fledged Seventies revival was just getting underway. Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*—one of my all-time favorite films, and the one that comes closest to capturing the Seventies as I remember them—had come out

a year before, and Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* had followed closely after. *Bad Haircut* didn't achieve the same level of cultural visibility as either of those landmark works, but it got a surprising amount of attention for a debut story collection from a small press. Guided by the subtitle, a number of reviewers addressed the question of whether coming-of-age is a timeless, universal experience, or whether there really was something different about growing up in the Seventies, which one of them called "that blighted decade." The book was picked up for paperback by a big New York house, and has remained in print ever since, which is a lot more than I could have reasonably hoped for in 1994.

One of the things I worried about when writing these stories was how they would be received in my hometown of Garwood, New Jersey. Garwood is small, tight-knit community—my mother still lives there—and I wondered if some people would object to my treatment of our shared past. On the whole, my worries turned out to be misplaced. As far as I can tell, most of the people I grew up with have enjoyed the book, and gotten a kick out of seeing that particular time and place represented in a work of fiction. A number of readers—you know who you are—claim to have spotted versions of themselves or other local characters in some of the stories, and some of them have even been right.

About ten years ago, though, a weird thing happened, at a difficult time in my life. My parents had been in a terrible car accident in North Carolina. My father died in the crash, and my mother was severely injured. Along with my brother and sister, I returned to Garwood for my father's funeral. I don't remember a lot about the wake, though I do remember being deeply moved by all

the people who showed up to pay their respects, my father's friends and neighbors and co-workers, his colleagues from the volunteer Fire Department, people who just knew him from around town. He'd lived in Garwood his entire life, and I could feel the comforting weight of all that history, all those personal connections.

Near the end of the viewing hours, I was approached by a woman I knew, the mother of one of my childhood friends. She looked distraught, and I hugged her and thanked her for coming. But instead of talking about my father, she gave me a searching, unfriendly look.

"I read your book," she told me.

My book? I stared at her in mute amazement.

"Bad Haircut," she explained. "I didn't like it."

She waited for me to respond, but I remained speechless.

"All that profanity," she continued. "The boys in our town didn't talk like that."

I didn't argue with her. I was too tired and too stunned to engage in a literary discussion in a funeral home, just a few feet away from my father's open coffin. If we'd been anywhere else, I would've told her that she was wrong, and that the boys in our town really did talk like that, because that was real life, whether she liked it or not, and not the fucking wonder years.

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