

## WANT TO GO FOR A RIDE?

### Want To Go For A Ride?

By Casey Gauntt

I'm reminded these days of the movie *Contact* and the scene with John Hurt, an eccentric, reclusive billionaire dying from cancer and floating inside the Mir space station. He believes zero gravity will slow down the growth of the cancer cells. He's on a video conference call with Jodie Foster and, after revealing to her that he has secretly financed the construction of a back up space-time travel machine (the other one Jodie was selected to go in having been destroyed by the maniacal preacher played by Jake Busey) asks her **"So....., do you want to go for a ride?"**



## Pinging The Universe



[Classmates.com](http://Classmates.com). Everybody has heard of this website—right?— the one that connects high school classmates from the past. Over the years I would get a random email from the website asking me if I wanted to find a classmate at my alma mater, Lake Park High School, in Roselle, Illinois from which I graduated in 1968. “How do they know where I am?” I’d wonder, and along with other ‘please join’ messages from Facebook and LinkedIn, I’d delete them. “No thanks.” I’d left Lake Park in my past many, many years ago. I had not kept in touch with anyone from there since 1970, and didn’t see any reason to do so. Well, there was one guy, but that was over twenty years ago.

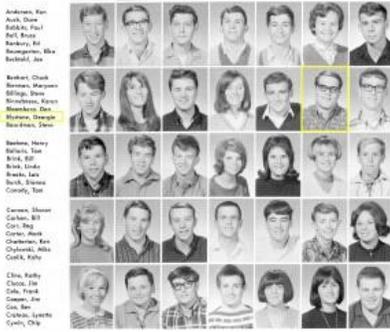
I got another annoying email from *Classmates* in August of 2009. My initial reaction was to delete that one, too, but I hesitated. It had been almost a year since I got [The Letter](#) from my father, and I’d been thinking about that one guy, George Blystone. He grew up in nearby Roselle and we met over basketball at dueling junior highs. He was a star athlete and the funniest guy in school.

Back then there were the “hard guys”—aka “greasers”— the boys who wore their hair slicked back into a ducktail at the nape of their neck, below the waist leather jackets, tight black pants, ankle high pointed toe black leather boots with extended heels and Banlon shirts buttoned tight at the neck. Rodney Hendrickson and Gary Olson [Their story: [McKenzie’s Field—Ole Ole Olson Free](#)] were hard guys. Summer loafers-no socks, madras shirts, golf team and good grades swept me into the “rah rahs” crew—the west coast equivalent of “surfers.” Blystone was a cross breed.



Rodney Hendrickson & Gary Olson  
*McKenzie's Field- Ole Ole Olson Free*

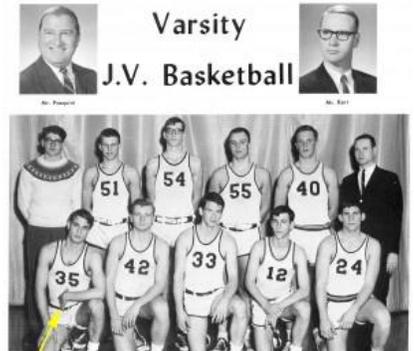
George lost his father at an early age, several years before me and—I don’t know—I always felt there was a unique bond between us. So, I opened the friendly message from *Classmates* and was led to the message center. There were no messages for me, but I was prompted by the site to leave a message for a classmate. I typed something like “George Blystone, where are you? Casey Gauntt” and hit ‘send.’ Big mistake. I hope not for him.



George "Georgie" Blystone - Class Picture



Lake Park High School - Roselle, Illinois - 1968



Row 1: George Blystone, Larry Johnson, Bruce Elliot, Tom Hahn, Tom Laska, Row 2: Dave Mueller, Bob Johnson, Steve Neundorfer, Bob Anderson, Jim Neundorfer, Clark Hill

Over the next several days I was bombarded with messages from *Classmates* inviting me to join as a member, enticing me with messages from classmates who wanted to contact me, if only I would sign-up. I slowly got sucked in. I'd check the website from time to time to see if there was a message from Blystone—anyone. Nothing. I took the bait of the "free" 7-day trial membership. I figured, wrongly as it turned out, I had to join to actually receive any messages. I checked-in every day. Nothing. I made a note on my calendar and, *Classmates* having brought no fruit to me, I cancelled before my credit card was nicked for a roll-over one-year membership. Damn. What a waste of time. I gave up.

But *Classmates* did not give up on me! They patiently continued to send me messages "Casey-Two more classmates have signed your guestbook—see who signed." So, in February of 2010 I gave it one more shot and, lo and behold, there were two messages for me: one posted in October, 2009 from a girl who's name didn't ring any bells and which I didn't bother reading and—there it was!—a message dated January 19, 2010 from George Blystone who wrote: "Hey, where's the 100 dollars I loaned you for that hooker 25 years ago?" Definitely Blystone.

But it was 22 years ago—no hooker, no hooker— that was the last time I'd seen or heard from him. George and a buddy had come to San Diego in January of 1988 for Super Bowl XXII to see the Washington Redskins trounce the Denver Broncos 42-10. He was living and working in advertising somewhere on the East Coast. We had dinner at the hotel where he was staying on Mission Bay. Hilary and our kids Brittany, then 8, and Jimmy 4, were with us. There was a fireworks show that the kids enjoyed, Jimmy ended up with a Redskins hat, and George and his pal went off to find the parties.



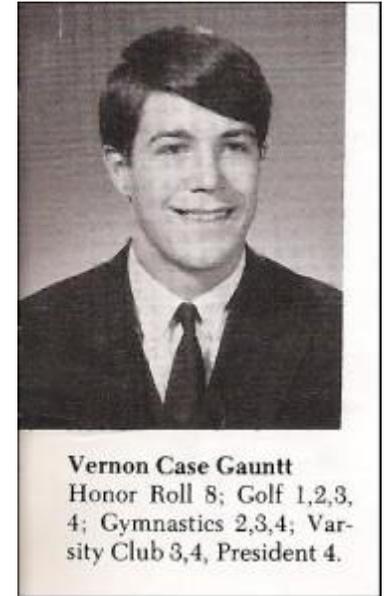
Super Bowl XXII - 1988

I immediately fired off a reply to Blystone, something to the effect "I invested the \$100 in a start-up with this strange name *Google*. Where are you? Send me your email address—here's mine;" and signed up for a one-year Gold Membership with *Classmates.com*—why not, they came through for me. My message rattled around unanswered somewhere in cyberspace. Buoyed by this slimmest of contact with George, I uncharacteristically reached out and reconnected over the next three months with a few of my very closest childhood friends from Itasca and Lake Park High School. They were surprised, shocked more likely, to hear from me—but also pleased I think. Not having heard back from Blystone, I sent an email to my renewed old friends and asked them if they had any better way to contact him besides *Classmates*. Linda replied "I don't, but Camille might. I'll ask her." Another Roselle girl.

## Contact

His ears must have been burning, for that same day, a Monday April 12, I received an email at my office from George. It was vintage Blystone, as if the subject line wasn't my first clue: "Can you have sex after 60 without chemicals?"

"Since I'm not a member of *Classmates*, I just today saw [my message to him of February 10] that you acknowledged that you took my money that I gave you for the sex change operation and put it to good use. I hope that you are in good health and that mentally remaining a man was not too difficult for you. Here are my phone numbers, email is attached, so get back to me and let me know [censored] and how all the Gauntt family are doing. I am going to Chicago on Wednesday to close on the house [where he grew up] in Roselle and [censored] with [one of my high school girlfriends and her sister]. [censored] George"



I LOL (laughed out loud for my contemporaries), and exclaimed "**Thank you *Classmates.com!***" I truly had struck Gold—as in my membership. George used his business address so I Googled his company's website, a marketing firm in Stamford, Connecticut. I clicked on "Our People" and bingo—there was a picture of Blystone—or rather the head of an old, balding man—no hair piece or plugs, thank God—with a Cheshire cat grin above the name "George Blystone." I presumed that was him. I'm kidding—but not about the hair or the grin. I would have recognized him anywhere. I pondered a reply.

I dismissed the phone call option. Sometimes it is unavoidable, as was the case with Emily Sue Buckberry. But I wasn't going to put George in the awkward position of delivering a few ice-breaker cracks before the inevitable "So Casey, tell me, what's up with your kids?" Later that same afternoon I sent him an email and attached the story of [The Letter](#):

**From: Casey Gauntt**

Date: Mon, April 12, 2010 at 2:02 PM

Subject: Re: George -good (?) to hear from you.

To: George Blystone

"George -good (?) to hear from you. I hope the FBI isn't continuing to monitor your emails. I'm so glad I signed up for the Gold Membership in *Classmates* so I could get stuff like this. I checked out your website... pulled up your picture... Jesus Christ, George—what happened to you? I'm going to call you, but I want you to read the attachment first. You will understand why. WARNING—do not read this at work and maybe have a scotch first. Let me know when you've read it, gotten your breath back (sorry about that), and then we'll get on the phone. Hilary says Hi. -Casey"



Casey was both expectant and anxious to hear from George...

I didn't hear a thing from Blystone on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. I began to have second thoughts about sending him the story cold like that, and figured he didn't know what to do or say. So, I called George on his cell phone Friday afternoon on April 16. When he answered I said something like "You either forgot how to read or you need some help with the big words, so I thought I better give you a call."

"Casey? Oh man. I need to talk to you, but I'm just finishing up a meeting, so can I call you back in a few minutes?" And he did. George said he had just finished a business meeting in Chicago with, it just so happened, Jerry Huffington, another classmate of ours from Lake Park. George said he went into his office in Stamford on Wednesday morning to pick up some things before flying to Chicago. He saw my email message, ignored the disclaimer, opened the attachment and began reading.



Casey, in his San Diego Law Office, makes "Contact" with George after 22 years...



George Blystone - 2000

"As I got into your story I was embarrassed by those idiotic emails I sent you. I knew the part about your dad's suicide and how hard that was for you. I was there with you that Christmas [1970] right after it happened—remember?" I had forgotten that. "And then I read about your son, Jimmy, and what happened to him. Casey, I am so sorry, I don't even know what to say –it's the unthinkable, the unimaginable. When I got to the part about the lady from West Virginia who kept the letter your dad wrote you and then calls you 40 years later, the few hairs I have left stood up on the back of my neck—and that the letter arrived on your son's birthday!—I started crying my eyes out. I completely lost it. I'm really shaken up by all this. It's like my beliefs are turned upside down—not religion but— you know—like what happens next? It is so clear to me that your dad and Jimmy came through to you and were both telling you ' We're here, we're together, we love you and we're giving this to you.' By the time I stopped crying and got myself under control it was getting late and I had to hustle to get to the airport. When I boarded the plane my eyes were all red and I was still a mess."

We talked for another twenty minutes about family, his three grown kids, our daughter Brittany and our work. We cut through everything quickly as only old friends can do and we both exclaimed, more than once, "why haven't we stayed in touch all these years!?" We promised each other that we would talk again in a couple of weeks.

And I thought, well isn't that nice—George and I finally made our connection and spoke after all these years—but this story was not over.

## **The Ride**

In the early evening on the following Tuesday, April 20, the phone rang at our house in Solana Beach. I answered. The voice on the line sounded nervous—agitated.

"Mr. Gauntt? Hi, this is Dennis. Something really weird just happened."

Jimmy and Dennis met at USC and became very good friends. Dennis attended USC's prestigious film school and Jimmy double majored in English and Spanish and spent the bulk of his time writing plays and screenplays. Dennis grew up in Chicago and Jimmy enjoyed a long weekend there with Dennis and his family in 2006. Dennis went into the film business in Los Angeles after graduation and he and Jimmy stayed close and pitched each other with their avalanche of ideas for movies and plays. Dennis had come to Solana Beach a few times with Jimmy to have dinner with Hilary and me. We hadn't seen or heard from Dennis for more than a year. Dennis continued:



Jimmy Gauntt in Hollywood while attending USC - 2008



Who would've suspected Dennis would ever get into Show Biz

"I got a call from my mother this afternoon from Chicago. She said that over the weekend she heard from a friend of hers an amazing story as told by a 'George from Connecticut' about a high school classmate 'Casey' whose son 'Jimmy' was struck and killed by an automobile, and some lady from West Virginia found a letter and 40 years later calls 'Casey' and tells him she has a letter from his father and she sends it to him on his son's birthday!?"

"Oh my God," I interjected, as Dennis frantically plunged forward.

"My mom is crying as she's telling me all this and she asks me: 'Jimmy— isn't that your friend—the one who was killed – who came to visit us in Chicago?' And I told her, 'Yes, yes, that has to be him! His father is Casey.'

"Mr. Gauntt what's going on here? What's this story about a letter? It sounds so amazing. I'm pretty freaked out right now. Is this real?"

I think at this point I may have started to laugh. Hilary had been watching me during the call and I put my hand over the mouthpiece and said to her "You aren't going to believe this." I was also a little dazed and confused myself about what just happened. Dennis had blurted out so fast the conversation he'd had with his mother that I made him re-tell it to me, "this time more slowly." I then tried to piece it together for him and me. I told Dennis a little more about the story of The Letter and the timing involved with that.

"But, Dennis, here's the thing that blows my mind. 'George from Connecticut' is a guy I went to high school with in the Chicago area and I haven't seen or heard from in over 20 years—that is, until a week ago last Monday."

I told Dennis about how we had reconnected through *Classmates.com*, and that I'd sent George story of The Letter last Monday and spoke to him about it on Friday. I was still confused.

"Dennis, who told your mother about Jimmy and The Letter?"

"Some friend of hers—that's all she said."

Dennis and I spent a couple more minutes catching up with what was going on in his life and ours and I promised to send him the story of The Letter, which I did later that evening.

A couple of days later I emailed George: "When you were in Chicago last week, did you tell The Letter story to someone? It's perfectly fine, but I've got another story that may blow your socks off." George called me right back and filled in a few of the details he neglected to mention during our call the previous Friday.

"I didn't tell you this because I couldn't believe it myself at the time. When you called me on my cell I was in Chicago having a glass of wine with Jerry and was actually in the middle of telling him about you and the story of [The Letter](#). He was the first and only person I've told your story to. As I'm talking about your son 'Jimmy, who went to USC, was living in Los Angeles and was struck and killed by an automobile during the summer of 2008,' Jerry's mouth dropped open and he said 'George! I already know about this. It has to be the same "Jimmy." I heard about his death soon after it happened from a friend of mine who said her son, who lives in Los Angeles, was good friends with Jimmy. In fact Jimmy had come to Chicago for a visit a few years ago. She said her son was devastated by the death of his friend. His name is Dennis. This is unbelievable!"

George said he then told Jerry about Emily Sue Buckberry and the story of The Letter. After their meeting, George flew back to Connecticut.

George continued... "The next day, Saturday, Jerry called me at home and said he had just got off the phone with Dennis' mother. He told her about his meeting with me, that we were classmates with Casey, Casey is Jimmy's dad, and the story about the lady from West Virginia who sent Casey a 40 year-old letter from his father that arrived on Jimmy's first birthday after his death. She's convinced Jimmy Gauntt was her son's friend."

I then told George about the call I got from Dennis on Tuesday.

"How is this f\_\_\_\_\_ing possible?" George asked. "I read your story and learn of Jimmy's death on Wednesday. I then go to Chicago—I haven't even talked to you about it—and Jerry, our classmate, and the first person I've spoken to about reconnecting with you, Jimmy's death and the story of the letter, knows Dennis' mother and already knew of Jimmy's death; but Dennis hadn't heard the story about The Letter—he hears about it from his Mom, who hears it from Jerry immediately after he hears it from me?! What are the odds of that?! I'll tell you what I think—incalculable! There's something going on here that is much bigger than you and me, my friend!"

We were both silent for a moment.

"George, I have no idea what's going on and I can't begin to explain it, but I think Hilary summed it up pretty well: 'Dennis was supposed to get the story of The Letter.' Maybe it's just that simple."

We again promised to stay in touch before another twenty two years went by and, before we clicked off, I managed to throw in "Oh, and to answer your question,' no chemicals necessary.'"

But as we are beginning to learn, it's never that 'simple' and this story was far from over.

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Stay tuned for the next episode, [The Bermuda Triangle](#).

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**Postscript.** Although I started writing this story in May of 2010, I didn't send it to Dennis until December. The title and opening reference to the film [Contact](#) have always been part of this story. In fact, immediately after my "Mr. Gauntt, something weird just happened" call from Dennis, I jotted down some notes while the facts were fresh including the lines about the movie that appear in the opening to the story. Dennis read the story for the first time upon his arrival at his home in Chicago, halfway into his move from Los Angeles to New York City. I too thought it 'interesting' that he would read this in Chicago, but as Dennis wrote in the email he sent me immediately after reading the story:

***"What's crazier is that I watched the film "[Contact](#)" two times in a row the night before heading off to Chicago. It's one of my favorite films."***

*Of course it is.*