

LOOKING BACKWARD

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by

James R. Kincaid

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Note: Some of these stories have been previously published, some not. It's too much bother to separate them out, much less give credits. I've been around long enough to know that nobody cares about such things, not unless you're breaking some law. That might make it interesting. But I doubt it.

FOREWORD

The title of this collection echoes that used by Edward Bellamy in his famous utopian protest novel, carrying the subtitle *2000—1888*, saving me the trouble of telling you when it was published. Bellamy's novel was, at one time, the third largest selling work of fiction ever in the U. S. I won't tell you the other two, as it's more fun to guess.

You're thinking *The Bible* as one, but you really ought to look it up. I recommend "Wikipedia."

Bellamy's work gave hope to millions, spawned several utopian communities, (where people dedicated their lives to the vision encased in the novel), inspired over 150 Bellamy Clubs, and a general Marxist politics called (misleadingly) "nationalism." How about that!

I first read *Looking Backward* in a "Masterpieces of American Literature Class" as an undergraduate (would have been summa cum laude but for a hoked-up cheating scandal) at Case Institute of Technology. I have reread it every year since, sometimes twice. I am sure you can say the same thing.

This *Looking Backward* (mine) is even better and will have an impact both broader and more startling. You can contact me for information on how to start a Kincaid Club (reasonably priced T-shirts).

These stories all deal with time and our response to it (whatever that means). Some of the times are external,

some are internal, some are neither. The arrangement of the tales speaks for itself. I, at least, will not insult you by speaking for it.

I should have mentioned that, in addition to T-shirts, you are also able to purchase (while they last) pennants, banners, and instructions on how to conduct Kincaid Club Meetings (recruiting, sustaining members, the best drinks and snacks to serve).

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STILL CLINGING TO YOUR SHIRT

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Theodore Roethke “My Papa’s Waltz”

“Yours daddy drinks sometimes, I know, but he’s a happy drinker.” His mother said that when he was about six. Often. He remembered her saying that, remembered very clearly. She’d say that after pulling him out from beneath his bed, his hiding spot that concealed very little, certainly not him. He’d burrow there twice on these nights, first when his daddy canon-balled through the front door, waking neighbors, dogs, and cries inside his head. The second time was afterwards, seemed like hours afterwards, when Daddy was through with him.

“Your daddy drinks sometimes, that’s true, and I can’t pretend it’s not, not to you. Lord knows, I’ve tried to talk reason to him; but he is what he is. We have to take the rough with the smooth, Tommy, accept people for what they are, make the best of it and realize that nobody’s perfect. Your daddy’s not perfect, but neither’s me nor you. He’s a good man, at bottom, and he loves us more than anything. Remember that.”

She'd say that, pretty much verbatim, when he was thirteen, after pulling him out from beneath the bed. The bed-underneath offered sanctuary as defective as it had when he was six—and throughout the years following—but it was better than nothing, he told himself, knowing that it wasn't at all, that it was, precisely, nothing.

He didn't argue with his mother any more, talked to her even less than he listened. He'd tried in the intervening years a few times.

"He's not a happy drunk, Mom, he's a mean sonofabitch."

That'd earned him a slap from Mother. He realized it was not such a great idea to double the number of big people coming down on him, so he had tried a softer approach, one he figured was brilliant.

"Mom, we're not doing Dad any favors by pretending he's fine. He's not fine, and he needs help. I think AA is a start. Maybe force him to go there. It'd just be for his own good. We'd be showing how much we love him."

Surely she'd fall for that.

Nope: "AA! You think you're father's a . . . ? I'm ashamed of you, Tommy. Your very own father! How could you? Who told you such a thing? Was it those Patterson people?"

The Pattersons, next-door-neighbors and thus threatening to his mother's illusions, hadn't said anything. They took pains to be attentive to Tommy, over-paying for his mediocre lawn-mowing, offering him Cokes and sandwiches in the summer. Once they took him to the theater to see "Tom Sawyer," his first live play, and they would have done a lot more had his mother not stopped it. His dad didn't object to the Pattersons, but, then, he probably didn't know they existed.

Anyhow, the AA suggestion didn't work, not at first. Tommy decided to give it a second try.

"Mom, Dad is violent—now, wait a minute—but it's not his fault. Blaming Dad for the way he is, is like blaming a person with tuberculosis for coughing." (He'd read that, and it seemed to him a very shrewd tactic to repeat it.) "Part of his sickness is that he can't recognize that he's sick. Not his fault. He just can't. Now, wait a minute, Mom. I'm not saying anything against Dad. I love him and he's my father, like you say, and your husband and all. But it's because we love him, we have to—wait a minute and I'll think of the word—intercept."

The word he wanted was "intercede," but it really didn't matter. "I know those Pattersons have been poisoning your mind again. You're going to be saying your father, your own father, is nothing but a drunk. Oh, Tommy, this hurts me so bad. You don't know how you hurt me."

"Mom! This is about Dad. I want to help him. You want to help him. That's cause we love him so."

"There is nothing wrong with him, and we are not sending him to AA. What a disgraceful thing to suggest! We are not sending him to AA."

Tommy lost it then, began to cry—and yell: "How about to a mental institution?"

She stood there, mouth flapping but saying nothing.

"How about to prison?"

"Oh my God, Tommy. Are you crazy?"

"No, but he is. You're right, he's not a drunk. That'd be unfair to drunks. He's a psychopath, a mean bastard psychopath!"

So he cooled down and decided to try it himself, after some warm-up, disguised so as to appeal to his dad's non-drinking interests, ease into the real subject with artful chumminess.

“Hey, Dad!”

“Whatdayouwant?”

“How bout them Steelers!”

“They fucking lost. You know that? How bout them? They’ve fucking awful, bunch of pansies.”

“We’ll get ‘em next week.”

“The season ended, idiot. Last game. No playoffs. No nuthin.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that, Dad. I know how much you love them.”

Hostile stare.

“Anyhow, Dad, I wanted to talk with you about something. That OK?”

“No. I already told you about beating your meat and you’re not old enough to go after the real thing. Don’t bother me.”

You’re thinking he should have left right there. He was thinking he should leave right there. But he didn’t.

“Don’t be mad now, Dad. OK?”

“What?”

“What I want to talk to you about now. Don’t be mad. Try. “

“Whatdya mean, be mad. Who you accusing?”

“I mean, it’s pretty personal and all—not about beating my meat but personal about you. That OK?”

“Personal about me? You crazy? No.”

“Oh. Here it is, Dad. Alcoholism isn’t a bad thing, not at all. It’s an illness, not anybody’s fault. Look at your hand shake there. Right now. Anyhow, alcoholism can be treated.”

He was staring at his son, silent. Tommy couldn’t decipher the look on his face. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen it, shouldn’t have puzzled him. Maybe it didn’t. Maybe it was just that he was now on a roll.

“Yeah, it can be treated. Easy. You know that, Dad. It

can be treated. You yourself can be treated. I'm the one to help."

More silent stares.

"AA. That's what I mean. There's meetings right around the block, every Tuesday and. . . ."

The silence ended in a big way.

Years later a shrink told him he was acting out in typical Oedipal fashion, actually finding pleasure in battling his father for his mother's affections, really just taunting his dad, whose alcoholism gave the boy what he wanted in the way of ammunition. Shrink said to him he identified with his father, emulated him, envied him his authority, his regal power and authority.

And that sort of thing cost him thousands over the course of two years.

He visited his father regularly in the hospital, wondering why he did so but never failing to make a visit a week, actually more often than that.

"Oh, it's you."

"Hi, Dad. How you feeling?"

"I'm not dead just yet. That what you mean?"

"How's the breathing. Easier?"

"Shit no."

"Is there anything you need?"

Blank stares.

At night he had recurrent and vivid dreams of his father, actually not his father so much as the bed that had sheltered him when he was young. His father was little more than a voice, a song, no matter how beautiful. It was the underneath of the bed that came back to him so sharply, in rich and wonderful detail.

Night after night, it seemed, he revisited that very

spot, looking up at the slats, the mattress bottom, the strange and ragged sides of the rails that let in just enough light. He could look up and see, see all he ever wanted to. And hear, of course, the reliable father, coming up once again to look for him, so he wouldn't be alone. Daddy would, this night too, look for him.

Look for him and find him, of course. Daddy was never late and Tommy was never lost.

It was one thing he could count on. That meant everything back then. And now.

T. H. HUXLEY TEACHES SUNDAY SCHOOL

“Mr. Huxley, our Board has met and wishes most cordially to invite you to test the waters of our religion by wading right in, as it were.”

“As it were what, Mr. Patterson-Smythe?”

“My apologies: our Board hopes you will oblige us by engaging directly with the spirit and not just the letter of Christian practice, practice and, I might add, belief.”

“I’m a plain man. Can you tell me more clearly what your Board wishes me to do?”

“Wishes you to do? Oh, Mr. Huxley, we wouldn’t presume to direct your steps. As for wishing you to do something in our line, well yes. But no more than you’ve a mind to, Mr. Huxley. We wouldn’t think of it, not for a minute.”

“I am afraid I must take my leave, Mr. Patterson-Smythe.”

“And I can convey to my Board your favorable response, may I?”

“To what? God, man, put your Christian tongue round words I can understand. What do you want me to do? I swear that if you don’t tell me straight out, I will drive your nose right through the back of your God-fearing head.”

“Teach a class in our Sabbath-School program, Mr. Huxley, just teach a class for our youth. That’s all we had in mind.”

“That’s all you had in mind? The question is, do you have what we might call ‘a mind’?”

“You are a celebrated wit, Mr. Huxley. Turn it loose on our youth, sir; turn it loose.”

“If I turn it loose, you will have no youth left in

your Sabbath-Schools, Mr.—ah. . . .”

“Patterson-Smythe, not that it matters.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Very good, Mr. Huxley, very good. Our view is this: if you encounter our youth and their firm grounding in Biblical knowledge and Christian wisdom, not only will they remain unshaken but will win you, yes you, into our very fold, the fold of Christ. A bold venture, certainly, one some might call foolhardy, tempting failure and worse. But we shine with the confidence of Our Redeemer.”

“I’m sure you do. I thought there was to be a debate. That’s what was mentioned, a debate with a representative of your Board or a minister.”

“Yes, there was talk of that.”

“Talk of it? That’s what I agreed to, a debate. Not teaching a class. Teach a class? That’s like asking a member of the Animal Cruelty League along on a hunt.”

“Good one, Mr. Huxley!”

“I’m surprised you have lasted all these years on earth without some friend of man garroting you.”

“Oh my, Mr. Huxley, this promises to be a—.”

“Look, Mr. Patterson-Smythe, I responded to your Board in the first place only because they touched me in a tender spot. No, don’t say anything until I explain. They said that I was engaged only with the rich and powerful in my public work, that I acted as if Christianity in this country were confined to the wealthy, the Church of England, and as if it’s only representatives were the privileged, such as Bishop Wilberforce. They suggested that I engage with representatives of Nonconformity, who, after all, are both more numerous and more in touch with the spirit and teachings of the primitive Church than are High Church leaders. Your Board also suggested, very politely, that I was shooting

at easy targets and that I might find much more worthy intellectual opponents among the populace, certainly more robust and deft thinkers than Soapy Sam. I admit that I was stung by this suggestion and forced to grant its justice, which is why I agreed to debate.”

“I see.”

“To debate.”

“Yes sir.”

“So?”

“Well, we were hoping you’d adjust to this new condition, just as Mr. Darwin says superior organisms do.”

“Mr. Darwin didn’t have in mind walking headlong into traps set by religious fanatics.”

“Good one, Mr. Huxley!”

“So, what you propose is a kind of debate with your younger members?”

“Actually, a class you would teach, an open class with you as teacher.”

“You know what you’re letting yourself in for?”

“Ah, Mr. Huxley, do you?”

“So, this is the class, is it?”

“It is, Mr. Huxley. I plan to introduce you and then you may do as you like with the text we’ve set.”

“Let’s dispense with the Introductions.”

“I see. Everyone on equal footing.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. They’ve been victimized by your superstition and I’ve escaped. It’s the free wolf talking to the captive wolves in the zoo.”

“Just as you say.”

“What’s this about a text?”

“Just our routine practice, a Biblical text we use as the basis for our teaching.”

“Your way of poisoning the well. OK. I accept. What’s the text?”

“The parable of the vineyard, as set down in three of the gospels, in Matthew 21: 33—46, Mark 12:1—12; Luke 20:9—19.”

“Why not in John too?”

“I suppose God knew that three times was sufficient.”

“Figured even the dullest of the faithful would absorb it after that many times, right? Or maybe John didn’t think Jesus actually said it? Or maybe whoever cobbled together what is called ‘John’ didn’t have access to this particular folk-tale?”

“The writers of the Gospels simply record the Word, as given to them by God.”

“Of course. So, it’s not John’s fault but the Almighty’s. He forgot to mention it to John or maybe got bored with the same story, reached the limits of divine patience?”

“Good one, Mr. Huxley.”

“So, you want me to teach the parable of the vineyard?”

“Exactly. That parable found in Matthew 21: 33—46, as well as. . . .”

“Of course. And that other parable of the vineyard in Matthew 20:1—16. It’s OK to teach that too?”

“Well, that’s not. . . .”

“It’s another parable of the vineyard, Jesus having a pedagogical fix on vineyards. It’s also called ‘the parable of the vineyard,’ if I’m not mistaken. Am I mistaken?”

“No, you are not, Mr. Huxley. I am warmed that you know the Bible so well.”

“Hard to escape it in this country. I hope to help change that. At any rate, I will keep to my bargain, like the overseer in the parable of which I speak.”

“Well, we had in mind the other parable.”

“That because the one I favor only appears in Matthew? You figure maybe Matthew made it up, slipped it in as an improvement?”

“Good one, Mr. Huxley.”

“I take it that I am free to teach Matthew 20:1—19 then.”

“Well, the Sunday scholars are not prepared to. . . .”

“You mean you haven’t told them what to think. So, you take your vineyard and I’ll take mine. Agreed?”

“Never let it be said that we stood between you and any passage of Christian authority you might choose to teach.”

“Class, this is Mr. Huxley, the famous agnos—.”

“I thought we agreed that there’d be no introductions. Class, I am an agnostic, not Satan. I have no quarrel with those who wish to believe anything at all, in a risen God or flying frogs. I object only to the pressures certain of these believers put on others, particularly on young people, to bypass their own rational faculties and hold to a set of stories for no better reason than that certain threats and authorities are marshaled behind them. I am a friend of reason; it’s a simple as that. I will fight as vigorously as I am able against authoritarianism and affable bullies.”

“Thank you, Mr. Huxley. Now class. . . .”

“I have not finished. I will finish shortly, but I need to explain my position and not have it explained for me by one hostile to or incapable of understanding it. My young friends and I shall get along famously. If you choose to stay, please do not interrupt.”

“Good one, Mr. Huxley.”

“Thank you. Let me put it simply: I think it is

wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce reasons which support that certainty. I do not think there are propositions which men ought to believe without reasons, nor do I think approbation ought to attach to the profession of disbelief in inadequately supported propositions. One of your own number has spoken with glowing self-approval of his “faith,” defining that faith as the God-given power of believing things which are incredible. For me, no matter what God or Gods are bestowing such powers, faith, in that sense, is an abomination. I just wanted to make myself clear. Now to our teaching. Are there any questions before we begin?”

“Mr. Huxley, sir, are you attempting to win us all to your atheism?”

“Young man, I am not an atheist. I demand only the right to ask for rational support for propositions. I am quite uninterested in propagating any certainty at all, including the certainty that there is no God. I am not interested in forcing any position on you, though I would like to lay before you the attractions of the open, exploring mind.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Our text for today, young friends, is Matthew 20: 1—16. I am tempted to summarize the story or ask one of you to do it, but perhaps such paraphrasing would be open to objection, so let’s have one of you read it out for us. Who will do it? Yes, you there in row three:”

“For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, who went out early in the morning to hire labourers into the vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. And said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and

whatsoever is right I will give unto you. And they went that way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour, he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the Goodman of the house. Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

“Thank you very much. You read uncommonly well. I will not say you have talents in speaking better practiced on more worthy texts, not wanting to subject this Bible verse or any other to easy ridicule. So, class, what does it mean?”

Silence.

“Come now. Let’s look at this interesting tale, attributed to Jesus, a personage said to be part and parcel of your God. It is known as a parable, a fable with a point. Perhaps we should examine the details, hoping

that the point will thereby become manifest.”

Silence.

“The laborers begin at different times throughout the day, are rounded up as needed and are set to work, some, we are led to understand, though perhaps from a biased source, as it is the aggrieved laborers speaking, through the burden and heat of the day. Others work only an hour. Am I more or less right thus far? We do have evidence before us, so correct me if I am wrong.”

“No corrections? Then let us proceed to what may be the core of the parable: the reported fact that every worker receives the same wage, one penny, which my researches tell me is roughly equivalent to a modern sixpence. Their wages, in other words, are equal, though the length of their employment is very different, one group to the other. Am I right?”

Silence.

“Don’t agree out of the mistaken notion that I possess authority. I have none, less than none, in Biblical interpretation. More importantly, authority should have no place in determining truth. So, on to the next troubling detail. Workers complain, not all the workers, but those whose labor had been day-long. Right? They seem to feel that wages should be proportional to hours worked or something on that order, right?”

“Right, sir,” said one student, who immediately retreated behind his Bible.

“Thank you, friend. Now we come to the fascinating response of the householder, a response which seems to have several parts. First, he tells the complaining laborers that he has satisfied the terms of the contract. “What cause have you for complaint?” he asks. This seems to be what one might call a top-heavy economic theory, or a top-down theory, correct? It is no worker’s right to know what wages other workers are

receiving or to lodge complaints on the ground of comparative wages. That's what he's saying, no?"

"If you please, sir. I don't think the parable is about economic theory. With respect, sir."

"No respect needed. Error does not deserve respect. Fire away."

"I believe, sir, that the point of the parable is yet to come."

"Well, then, let us see what is yet to come. The husbandman goes on to say that he has the legal right to do what he wants with his own, that is, what he takes to be the absolute prerogative of capital. But you will be telling me that this is reducing a divine moral fable to worldly economic terms, and I will yield without causing you the trouble of raising the point. So, finally, we hear, "The last shall be first and the first last; for many are called, but few chosen." I will agree with you that this statement doesn't seem as if it is an item in an economic theorem. But what is it, then?"

Silence.

"Come, now, what is the capitalist or husbandman saying?"

"If you please, sir, we don't know that it IS the husbandman speaking. It isn't clear, is it, the identity of the speaker, I mean?"

"That's a fine point, young man. Who else might be speaking?"

"Jesus."

"My, my. I see. That could be. Yes, I see. It could be. That does change things, as if he's standing back, Jesus is, having told what looks like a story of labor and capital and then comments on it. That's very shrewd, young man. And what, in that case, is Jesus saying?"

"That all shall be saved, all shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

“My, my. Really?”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter what you do. Grace isn’t earned, sir. It’s a free gift.”

“Really? So, this is a parable telling us it doesn’t matter what we do?”

“Yes.”

“My goodness. I must say I haven’t met a Christian who seemed to hold to those views.”

“Possibly, with respect, you haven’t met any Christians, sir.”

“If not, I am glad I met you, at any rate. What is your name, if I may ask?”

“Peter, sir.”

“Hello, Peter. And what does that mean about many being called and few chosen, Peter?”

“Ah, there perhaps others should comment, sir.”

“OK, others?”

Silence.

“Would you say it seems to counteract the hearty hospitality of what you said earlier? If all are welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, no matter what, what does it mean to say few are chosen?”

Silence.

“Peter, help us out here. I know you don’t want to put yourself forward, but I am eager to hear what you have to say. After what you taught me about this parable, I am ready to sit at your feet. So, tell me, what does this mean about many called but few chosen?”

“I haven’t any idea. I choose to ignore that sentence myself, Mr. Huxley, knowing that some things are beyond my ken.”

“That’s very candid, Peter. So you ransack the Bible to take what fits what you want to believe or profess.”

“Yes, Mr. Huxley. If I could make that sentence fit,

I would, but it almost seems awful to me, that few should be chosen, so I assume I do not understand.”

“So you work with what you understand, what fits, what you feel accords with your notion of divine goodness?”

“Just so, as do you with Darwin and Darwin with nature. We all work inside what you would call hypotheses.”

“Lying about things that don’t fit, Peter?”

“Not seeing them in the first place.”

“Peter, I take my hat off to you. I won’t join your Bible Club, not right now, but I’d like to talk with you about natural selection.”

“Thank you, Mr. Huxley. The last shall be first after all.”

DULCE ET DECORUM

The Battle of the Hurtgen Forest consumed most of the month of November 1944 and, most observers and historians agree, accomplished nothing. Of the 120,000 boys who fought there, 33,000 were killed, wounded, or driven insane. One GI returned with a cache of ears sliced from dead Germans and another with a souvenir bag of teeth. Through the long winter, feral dogs in the forest would feed on corpses seared by white phosphorus. A veteran sergeant who had been through North Africa, Sicily, and Normandy wrote home quoting *Lear*: “The worst is not/ So long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’”

Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light*

Dear Mom:

I keep thinking of that kid . . . lying off the path as if he were asleep. I see him lying on his back, arms overhead, with eyes and mouth open, as if asking, ‘Why?’ If you could see us kids killed at eighteen, nineteen, twenty, fighting in a country that means nothing to us. . . . Kids that have never had a crack at life. Some have never worked and earned money and felt proud.

Quoted in Paul Fussell, *The Boy’s Crusade*

Thought he saw something move, there to the left. His instinct was to sprawl, but he'd learned (a little late) there was no point in that. You could run, duck, hunker, or even stand. Made no difference.

He'd been here before, this forest, maybe this very slope, facing this very hedgerow. But where were all the bodies, flying upwards, exploding and splattering? Under foot, too, making walking more like skating on lumpy ice. He wasn't sure why he had returned or if he had intended to do so. He wasn't sure if he were lost or deserting.

He did remember he was carrying a note from his friend, his best friend. They spent time when they weren't being shot at from twenty yards away writing, not exactly to one another but not exactly not. Ignoring whatever was on his left—if it wanted to kill him, it would—he opened the paper, smeared with something, probably blood and intestinal slime:

The living are complicated but the dead have been stripped of all meaning. We see them coifed in crab-shaped helmets, dressed in gray uniforms, mouths agape, gray teeth, gray hands, worn boots, no identities, indistinguishable one from the other, dead meat, nothing to grieve. We are stupefied by the death we'd breathed, and stumble toward combat clutched by the fear that we, too, could be made simple.

His friend's name is Leo—*was* Leo?

“Hände hoch oder ich schieße!”

So, that was what was on his left, a German. He looked over, saw nothing, didn't bother to raise his hands, but did wonder why the asshole was being aggressive to one of his own.

“**Heil Hitler!**” he yelled in the general direction of the voice.

What came back was a giggle. Son of a bitch.

He tried again: “**Respektieren mein Führer!**”

More giggles. Now somehow closer

What the hell: “**Ich werde Ihnen zeigen , dumm—er—dumkopf!**”

“No, ‘**dumm**’ works just fine,” said the voice, closer but still disembodied. “And what exactly should I watch out for, stupid as I admittedly am?”

“I might just spin around real fast and shoot you.”

“Really? **Das ist mir Wurst.**”

“What? That is your sausage?”

“Didn’t train you too well, did they? What I said was, ‘What do I care?’ Shoot me if you want to.”

Now he saw him. He stepped around from a tree not fifteen feet away, right next to him, really, a G.I., too.

Great.

No, it wasn’t. Couldn’t be worse. But, then, this guy seemed to know he’d just been trained, like a seal, only seals were better at it. He needed to say something, so he did: “OK. I’ll shoot you, you lousy Ami. If that’s what you are. In the finger? Toe? You got trench foot anyhow. I’d suggest a toe. Only my view, of course. Your choice entirely.”

“So’s your old man.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Really? We were taught to say that in an emergency.”

Finally, he saw what his enemy, his companion had seen much earlier.

“Well, ain’t that something! Mind if we continue in English? And if you want to shoot **me**, that’s OK, too. Just want to be fair.”

“Brotherly.”

“I guess. So, now I look at you, your uniform’s kinda funny, though your English is terrific. What’s your story?”

“Same as yours. *Your* English is good, too, pretty good. And I am sorry about the uniform. Don’t be disgruntled, but it came from a POW.”

“Disgruntled’ is not the term you want, **dumm**. Maybe ‘outraged.’ I take it back about your English.”

They had somehow found themselves sitting on convenient logs opposite one another, the American in the authentic German infantryman’s uniform and the German in the don’t-look-too-close American combat outfit.

“You asked about my story,” said the German. “First, do you think it’s safe here?”

“Never has been,” said the American. “You here before?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry,” they both seemed to say at once, nonsensically but with no reluctance.

“What’s your name? Mine’s Omar. No relation.”

“Heinrich. No relation.”

“So, Heinrich, how is it you’re spending Christmas Day in this fucking Belgian forest way over here beyond your fucking Siegfried Line?”

“Good question, Omar, and why are you. . . ? OK, I’ll go first, though it’s not The Siegfried Line for us. It’s only you Americans who love Wagner.”

“What’s it for you.”

“The West Wall. Some wall, right?”

“It sure has been. Murderous.”

“The walls of Troy. Anyhow, I’m here, Omar Bradley buddy, you ardent Bums fan, am I right?”

“What? Oh, the Dodgers. No. Shit, Heinrich, tell your story and stop showing off. I don’t want to hear about Betty Grable, either, or hear you sing the Pepsi commercial.”

“Hits the spot! Twelve full ounces, that’s a lot! Nickle, nickel, nickel, nickel, nickel, nickel, nickel.”

“Impressive. Now, your story?”

“Yes, well—do you know where we are? I mean, close to something—a city, a country?”

“Malmedy, I think. Belgium, I think.”

“Ah, no. We must at all costs avoid that city. And since you’re going to ask: about a week ago, a bunch of the First SS Panzer Division, the Kampfgruppe Peiper, murdered a whole line of your soldiers, defenseless POWs. Seemed like around 40—50.”

“You saw it?”

“Yes.”

“Participated?”

“You won’t believe me if I say no, but I was just loitering about, I think you say, hoping for some direction on how to get West, behind your lines. Our jeep had been wrecked, actually just stopped working, and. . . .”

“And, Heinrich?”

“It was more than I could take, if you can believe it. I just took off, headed back into these woods, headed south, I imagine.”

“I see.”

“If you desire to shoot me. . . .”

“Let’s stop talking about shooting one another, Heinrich. I’ve seen enough of that, trying to make sense of who is killing whom, you know.”

“I do. So that’s how you use ‘whom’?”

Omar laughed and both stood, not for any reason they could have stated. For the first time, they looked at

one another closely, realized how much each resembled boys they knew or had known, boys that only last week, yesterday, had been part of their lives.

“Since you aren’t going to tell me your story, Heinrich, I’ll tell you mine.”

“**Ja, sag’s mir doch. Entschuldigung!**”

“You just said, “Yes, my doch is sagging. Very sorry.”

“No, no—go to it, talk away, tell me.”

“Easy. After several weeks in the forest, this forest, I was asked if I’d like a special assignment, being one of those identified as fluent in German.”

“They were on the target there!”

“Fuck you, Heinrich. Anyhow, after a lengthy six weeks of training, make that five, I was parachuted behind your lines with a couple dozen others and told to meet up with partisans, who would direct us.”

“That’s the sum total of it?”

“In a way. The weather was, so they said, ‘marginal but acceptable,’ so they went ahead with the drop. They said the pilots were very knowledgeable about this area and that the ‘overcast’ would make the drop much safer for us.”

“And they were oh so right?”

“They are never right, seems to me. And they don’t care. We must have been dropped all over Belgium and Germany, maybe into Poland and Hungary, Russia. I finally almost met up with three others, saw them across a field a second before your sewing machines started humming and got all three.”

“Yeah.”

“So, I’ve been wandering ever since.”

“Searching for what?”

“What can I say without just flapping my gums, Heinrich? I don’t have any idea what I’m looking for.”

Maybe Americans, who will kill me; or Germans, who will kill me when they see what I am, which will take them about as long as it took you, who are none too bright; or maybe Belgians, who will kill me either way. Or maybe I'm just looking to get in another breath, maybe two. I don't really care."

"Yeah."

"You?"

"Most different. Only not different in the slightest. I am part of Operation Greif, which you know about."

"Yeah. You are going to kill Eisenhower."

"Exactly. Only what we are doing is taking road signs and turning them backwards, cutting some phone lines, which may be those of our own forces, planting some mines to tear up innocent farmers. But then, who isn't innocent?"

"Operation Greif. The Most Dangerous Man in Europe. Otto Something."

"Skorzeny, the man who kept Hungary in the war on the German side, the man who rescued Mussolini, the man who Hitler entrusted with getting our troops to Aachen and then, for all I know, to Dunkirk again, to London, and to Chicago."

"So, you are key to Operation Grief?"

"Oh, yes sir, Minnie Mouse, I am the key. Ha! I did get to know Skorzeny a little. Very puzzling man and very very insane. But not as much as The Fuhrer. Skorzeny told me that of the 250 men he got only ten could pass as English speakers, me being among them. Everything was wrong: our weapons, our uniforms, our talk."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, Omar? You might be more brotherly. Anyhow, our training was in how to chew gum and smoke cigarettes only part way and then put them out, in

leaning against walls and slouching. Slouching was the hardest.”

“I don’t know, Heinrich, I’d say you slouch with the very best.”

“Thank you, **mein freund**. We watched Yankee movies and were told to imitate the speech and learn the slang. That was very helpful for those who thought David Niven or Cary Grant were good teachers. Then we were given all this money, counterfeit, of course, and far too much: nine hundred American and a thousand Brit, and told to vamoose.”

“The training sounds fun.”

“My good friend, a **knabe** even younger than me, Wilhelm—we called him ‘Willy’—was executed for writing a letter home they said spilled the beans too much. No, it was not fun.”

“They sent you out with training like that, no real way to survive?”

“They sent you out, too.”

“Yeah.”

“Otto did tell us. . . .”

“Otto?”

“Skorzeny.”

“You were close, on a first-name basis?”

“Maybe, if you can get close to a snake, a mad snake. He did give us one very excellent tip: keep clammed up and, in a pinch, start unbuttoning your pants and run away, pretending you have diarrhea. No need to pretend for most of us.”

They were both silent, neither feeling any impulse to ask more, know more. Had either killed the other’s countrymen, betrayed them, added a few more to the millions of dead? By now. . . .

In a few minutes, they looked at one another and, for some unaccountable reason, broke out laughing. A

dangerous thing to do, were they interested in safety. They were not.

“Well, Heinrich, if that’s your real name, let’s toddle off into the forest together and see what we can find.”

“Trees and more trees, I hope.”

“That’s certain. And maybe some mines and chicken wire.”

“And soldiers.”

“Doesn’t matter which side.”

“Yeah. We’re either the enemy or we’re traitors.”

“At least we don’t have to choose.”

“The pressure’s off. We’re in the same boat.”

“Right. With no fucking paddle.”

“Going nowhere.”

“Getting in each other’s way.”

“Together to the end, bungling and **gestumper**.”

“To the end.”

CHARLES DODGSON AT THE PEARLY GATES

“So, let’s see here, Dodhill. Male. Right, you’re male? No need to answer. It’s not a quiz. Not yet. I’ll let you know when the exam starts. No, I won’t. I’ll just slip it in on you, under your white robe there. We have a sense of humor up here, Dodhill. Doesn’t seem like you’d fit in. So, let’s cut this short, shall we? Damnation for you! Just kidding. Laugh, will you, Dodhill. You some kind of nitwit? A Puritan? We got too many of those up here as it is. Americans, mostly. OK, Dodhill, I’d like to keep chatting with you. You’re a very entertaining fellow. But I haven’t got all day—only of course I do. This is the land of endless days, Dodhill. That strike you as an attractive feature? Between you and me, I think it’s overrated, can get a little—well, you know, a bit like heavenly bliss, which maybe isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, only don’t say I told you. You’ll see for yourself, or more likely you won’t. Depends on how you do on the exam, which is now 80% over. Doesn’t look good for you. Better put on a closing spurt. So, Dodhill, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“For one thing, your—er—holiness, I am not Mr. Dodhill, begging your pardon.”

“The hell you’re not. I have your card right here in front of me. Dodhill, plain as day. Doesn’t take a Saint to decipher that. You suppose we make mistakes?”

“Oh, no sir.”

“In the half of eternity that I’ve been here, I’ve never seen such chutzpah.”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir.”

“You know what ‘chutzpah’ means, Dodhill?”

“No, I don’t. I’m sorry.

“This looks bad. I haven’t seen a chart like this since Lucrezia Borgia.”

“Oh I trust not, sir.”

“Can’t you tell I’m joking, Dodhill?”

“Oh, of course, sir. That’s a good one.”

“Somebody authorize you to take that tone with me, worm?”

“Oh, no sir.”

“You have any idea who I am?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re aware that a little check mark here, a little tic in this box, this one right here, and you’re sent straight to a burning lake the size of—well, it’s one hell of a lake.”

“Oh please.”

“You get it, Dodhill? One HELL of a lake.”

“I’m sure it is, your holiness.”

“Are you witless, Dodhill? And stop calling me ‘your holiness,’ like I was nothing more than the pope.”

“Yes your saintliness.”

“That’s better.”

“Sir, may I ask a question?”

“Holy Hell, Dodhill, you think it’s safe to try my patience? You think I can’t do what I want?”

“Oh, no, no I don’t. I’m sure you can do anything you want.”

“You bet your ass. You think they don’t trust me?”

“I’m sure they do.”

“You think they send somebody around to check on me, Dodhill?”

“No sir.”

“You’re starting to irritate me, you know that?”

“Oh, please.”

“Stop crying, Dodhill. That’s irritating too. What’s

your question?”

“Pardon?”

“You stupid, Dodhill? I don’t like stupid people, try to keep them out. It’s not official policy, but there’s such a thing as tone.”

“Oh, yes sir.”

“You said you had a question. What was it?”

“Oh, yes sir. Remember when I called you ‘your holiness’ and you led me to believe that it was not simply the wrong form of address but somehow insulting to you?”

“I remember everything, Dodhill. What’s your question? You’re taking a big chance jerking me around, kid.”

“I was wondering if the Church of England is the one true church after all.”

“The Church of England the one true. . . . Dodhill, you are hilarious. I don’t see that you did stand-up, not on your card here. You were a banker, did some charity work: married, faithful, two dull children. What’s special about you, Dodhill? Make your case. Nothing here on your card convinces me. Your eternal soul hangs in the balance. You got 90 seconds. Starting. now.”

“St. Peter! That’s who you are. Am I right?”

“You got 72 seconds left, Dodhill.”

“I tell you I am not Dodhill! I will not be damned for another man’s life. My name is Dodgson, not Dodhill. St. Peter or not, you are wrong.”

“Straight to hell, that’s where you’re going, you contemptible shit! Right over there, the one with the long line.”

“That’s unfair.”

“It’s heavenly justice, Dodhill.”

“It’s no kind of justice.”

“Don’t question what you can’t understand. He

works in mysterious ways, the committee does.”

“This place is run by a committee?”

“Changes every six months.”

“Elections?”

“Yeah.”

“You on the committee sometimes?”

“No! Not for over 30 million years our time, give or take.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean, you’re St. Peter! How could you not be on the committee any time you want, head the committee? I mean you’re the person everyone knows is in Heaven.”

“You got something there, Dodhill! I’m Mr. Heaven, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would. Certainly.”

“Damned right. But tell them that!”

“How can they do that to you?”

“You know who’s on the committee now?”

“Who?”

“You’ll never guess.”

“The Duke of Wellington?”

“Bad enough that pole-up-the-ass made it in! But no. Go on, guess.”

“John Keats?”

“Good guy. He won’t do it. How do you like that? Says he’s not the committee sort. Means it too. I can’t say that I understand that.”

“Goethe?”

“Who? No, give up before you irritate me. You give up?”

“I do.”

“Good. It’s Pocahontas. An Indian. What you bigots call a Red Indian. Woman. They said they needed someone on the committee with a more intense spiritual

life!”

“Never heard of her.”

“Of course not, Dodhill. Nobody has. They hadn’t had a single Red Indian on the committee in, I don’t know, three or four eternities. You know what a double eternity is, Dodhill?”

“No, should I?”

“Not unless you want in. You find this funny?”

“Yes sir.”

“Sure you do. Now, back to Indians. OK with you if we return to that subject?”

“Yes sir.”

“Thanks. I think the committee bosses felt guilty. Started to notice under-represented inhabitants. Nonsense.”

“Your time will come again, St. Peter.”

“It better hurry up. I ain’t got forever. Oh, yes I do. You’re not laughing. That was a good one.”

“Put yourself in my place, St. Peter. I don’t think you’d be too relaxed.”

“Put myself in your. . . . You are blindingly disrespectful, Dodhill. But OK, I’ll pretend I am a banker and. . . .”

“Listen, man! I am no banker. Look at your bloody cards! You dropped one or mis-shuffled. I am Dodgson.”

“You’re damned is what you are. Straight south there, first chute on your right.”

“Just look at your cards. There, there at your feet.”

“Huh? Oh yeah. You knock this out of my hand, spawn of Satan?”

“No, St. Peter. I promise.”

“You promise? We all know that the children of darkness take pride in their lies. They hate the light, and I am all light. Light, light, light, light! You notice that?”

“Well, you seem very well turned out.”

“Thank you. I try. I get precious little credit for it up here.”

“How unfair.”

“Unfair. You want fair, buddy; you come to the wrong shop. Satan, to give him his due, runs a fairer operation.”

“That’s not what we’re lead to believe on earth.”

“Yeah, well you got a lot to learn, buddy.”

“I hope I get a chance to learn.”

“Huh? Oh yeah. Your card. Hell, Dodhill, I just damned you. I guess I could change it, though that’s a real pain in the ass. They don’t want us wavering, you see, so they make it tough to erase. But screw it, Dodhill, you ain’t so bad. I’ll let you in if you vote for me—just kidding.”

“You can go ahead and damn Dodhill, for all I care. I’d bet a guinea I’m the card at your feet there.”

“Really? No, that one’s—let me see—a guy named Dodgson. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. What a ridiculous name. Be glad you’re who you are, Dodhill.”

“I’m Dodgson. Truly I am. Ridiculous name and all, though I think it’s needlessly insulting to ridicule a man’s name.”

“Don’t be huffy. Lot of pressure in this job. You think I don’t make mistakes?”

“Oh no. That wouldn’t be possible.”

“God damned right it wouldn’t. You think you could do any better?”

“Oh no.”

“I’m only human, Dodgson.”

“Of course.”

“Gotcha, Dodgson. Only human. That’s good. Let’s look at your card now. Get a fresh start. I’m a fair man, Dodgson. I’ll try to forget the bad impression you’ve made thus far. But you got two strikes against you,

Dodgson. You know baseball, right?”

“No.”

“Oh yeah, wrong century. You can’t expect me to keep track of everything, Dodgson. Eternity is very confusing. It’s not just one day after the next after the next in a line, you know. It’s everything kind of all there at the same time. It’s not a string of consecutive days; it’s simultaneous presence, more or less. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but that’s the way it was explained to me. You got a better explanation, Dodgson?”

“No.”

“Well then, don’t be critical. Let’s see what we have here on your card.”

“I can explain.”

“You can explain what, Dodgson? I haven’t charged you with anything. My advice is keep your goddamned mouth shut. Maybe what you’re worried about didn’t even make it onto the card. It’s only a 3x5 card.”

“Oh.”

“On the other hand, if you have something to confess, it’ll go better for you if you are up front with it, know what I mean?”

“I suppose so.”

“Know what I mean, Dodgson, know what I mean?, say-na-more, say-na-more! Know what I mean? Know what I mean?”

“I said I did.”

“Shit, Dodgson, don’t tell me you don’t know Monty Python.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“So, tell me your favorite Monty Python episode.”

“I’m afraid I . . .”

“I thought so. Want to know mine?”

“No.”

“What?”

“I’m dreadfully sorry. Of course I do.”

“What’s the point? You have any idea how tedious this job is, Dodgson? Hour after hour, on and on, I try to carry on conversations with people whose knees are knocking. Weeping people, blithering and howling people. Hardly a good conversation once every billion years. It’s not uncommon for people to vomit, Dodgson, right here at the god damned pearly gates. You imagine I have an easy job, Dodgson?”

“Oh no.”

“You think this is a piece of cake, Dodgson?”

“Oh no.”

“You think this is Heaven? Huh? Is it? Huh?”

“Well, I assume. . . .”

“So you think I’m being tormented, Dodgson, do you, punished?”

“What?”

“I mean, do you think this is really heaven?”

“I am sure it is, sir. I mean you wouldn’t be here otherwise, would you?”

“Why are you putting it that way, Dodgson? You meaning to plant some seeds of doubt in my head? I already have plenty of seeds of doubt in my head, Dodgson.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh God, Dodgson. Am I just fooling myself, do you think? Am I being punished, punished for all eternity, interviewing you fucking bores one after another until the cows come home. Only—you know what, Dodgson?”

“What?”

“They never will.”

“What?”

“The cows.”

“Oh.”

“Is this hell, Dodgson, and am I in it?”

“Oh, no, you’re St. Peter, remember; and if anyone belongs in heaven, it’s you.”

“There was that denial stuff. That’s a hurdle. You know, those Roman soldiers just come up, not even a “How you doing?” just straight out: ‘Aren’t you with that guy over there?’ ‘Me? Him? Who’s he?’ That’s what I said. Given the circumstances, it seemed, I don’t know, the better part of valor. Still, I think it may have been some kind of test. And hell, I mean, I didn’t just evade the question. Why didn’t I just evade the question, Dodgson?”

“You had to have been there.”

“That’s true. Thanks, Dodgson. You’re right. Those Romans: crucify now and ask questions later. You’re not so bad, Dodgson. You’d be surprised how little understanding I get up here on that particular experience. Bunch of self-righteous assholes, you ask me.”

“Not Our Lord Himself, surely?”

“Oh, Him? Who’s to know? You don’t see him one on to the next. Doesn’t spend time down here, that’s for sure.”

“Isn’t he everywhere?”

“What? Where’d you get such an idea, Dodgson? What in hell could that mean?”

“Like time, all at one time, all in one place.”

“Oh yeah. I never thought of that. You got something on the ball, Dodgson.”

“Thank you, Saint Peter.”

“Hope you’re not a smart ass.”

“Oh no.”

“It’s one thing to be understanding and sympathetic, Dodgson, another to be a suck-up. Are you a suck-up?”

“Oh no.”

“Too bad. I haven’t had a good suck-up around since John Calvin. Know him?”

“Dead before my time.”

“Heard of him?”

“Of course. He’s very famous.”

“As famous as me?”

“Not even close. You are Peter and on this rock our Lord built his church.”

“You making fun of me, Dodgson?”

“Oh no!”

“Then cut it with those rock puns.”

“I am deeply sorry.”

“Let’s see your card, Dodgson. Stop distracting me. I haven’t got all day.”

“Certainly. What happened to John Calvin?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, big mistake there. But enough of that. Your card: Writer of mathematical treatises, symbolic logic texts, complaints to local merchants about the food. What a wasted life!”

“I did no harm.”

“You think that’s sufficient, Dodgson? Clods of dirt do no harm, may do a lot of good in their way. Can you make the same claim as a fertilizer?”

“Oh please. Please, you’re saintliness.”

“Please what? You catch that witty comment? Can you make the same claim as a Chinese guy shitting in a rice field, Dodgson?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps not.”

“Don’t be a moron. Please try to respond appropriately.”

“I don’t know what’s appropriate. I’m so nervous. And you’re so witty.”

“No I’m not. Don’t be a suck-up.”

“Certainly not.”

“Unless you’re good at it. Let’s see. Writer of celebrated children’s literature. Sorry they left that on. It sounds cutesy. I hate cutesy.”

“My books are not cute, if you please, sir. They are fanciful.”

“Yeah, yeah. One other thing here on the card: Photographer. Nude subjects. That’s hot, huh, Dodgson. Get em nude; and snap, snap, snap? What else is on this card? Things are improving.”

“Well, sir. . . .”

“Subjects pre-pubescent little girls. What the hell’s that, Dodgson? Took pictures of naked kids?”

“With full permission of their parents, St. Peter. I regard those photographs as art, as an expression. . . .”

“Sure you do. You bring any with you?”

“No sir, I. . . .”

“Oh yeah, how could you? Too bad. If I let you in, you think you could describe those subjects to me, those little girls?”

“They were angels of the imagination, dream-children whose. . . .”

“I’m not the police, Dodgson. Drop the artsy talk. Could you describe them fully, maybe draw them roughly, you know? Could you?”

“I could.”

“You’re in, Dodgson. Wherever it is we are, you’re there.”

“In heaven, of course.”

“Oh sure, Dodgson. That’s what they told me. What else we have to go on? We either trust one another or we’re no better than—you know, Satan and his legions. Here’s the entrance pamphlets. Covers housing, food services, laundry, banking, clubs you might want to join.”

“That’s good.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Glad you think so.”

I BLAME MOTHER

Mother was not a comely person.

True, by the time I could register a view of her she was not in her first youth. But a few photographs of Mother as a young flapper survive and these tell the same sad story. I was going to these photos and show you, but thought better of it. After all, Mother's physical being, her body, is not the point, has little to do with ways in which she wrapped herself round and strangled my developing sexuality, how she burrowed deep and formed the roots of all my sexual misfortunes.

Not that Mother didn't have her good points—in the same way every human mixes good and bad. Not like she was Norman Bates's mama. Still, I now see that my problems in life, all that sexual ignorance, awkwardness, uncertainty, embarrassment, humiliation, failure—can be pinned right on Mother's ample bosom.

I understand that the coupling of Mother and sex might cause discomfort among some, but, then, you didn't know mother

To start with Mother's positive attributes, that is, to give the appearance of being fair and balanced: everyone who knew her regarded Mother very highly. "A fine Christian woman!" "A woman of courage!" "You ought to feel very lucky to have such a Mother!" Mother was a pillar of the local church, a dedicated schoolteacher, a friend to the poor and needy, volunteering at ever so many agencies, centers, hospitals. She went to Burundi at age seventy-two to help out on a mission station, teaching children and doing all manner of good. Yes she did.

I was myself, upon attaining my majority, a most

attentive and dutiful son too. Just to give me the credit I deserve. In the early days after my father's death, I visited Mother constantly and helped her with homework—she was going back to school to get her degree in order to support herself. I did a few household chores too, I think. I don't want to distort that part of it. Not like I was handy or did much. Mostly I sat and listened to Mother's stories, the same stock of maybe 135 stories sparked by random associations and repeated without significant variation—without any variation at all—whenever she heard a proper noun. Mother, in this regard, was like certain parrots or, say, sprinkler systems activated by definite signals.

I'll give you an example: in those days the Pirates had a shortstop named Clem Koshorek, of whom I was an admirer. But I dared not mention Clem Koshorek before Mother lest: "Did I ever tell you about your cousin Martha's friend Clem—what was his last name?—worked at Wheeling Steel, had that lazy eye and they were keeping company years and years never married and some people don't and Martha was such a good soul, didn't do much out of the house what with her spinal curvature but made those Christmas ornaments you remember her house was full of them poor dear and. . . ." It did no good to tell Mother that you had heard the story hundreds of times, nay, that very morning—that you had no idea who cousin Martha might be. Better luck stopping a freight train with a folding chair.

I also taught Mother to drive, I did indeed. My Father had done all the driving and now she had to learn. I taught, perhaps not skillfully but patiently—well, not patiently, but I did accompany her on perilous drives on the back roads (they were all back roads) around Cameron, West Virginia, where she spent summers

taking care of her own mother. Now, my grandma was a wonderful person, through and through, which just shows you that sometimes apples not only do fall far from the tree but land in orchards several counties over.

Anyhow, it was around Cameron that I guided my Mother, including, one morning, straight through my grandma's barn door. I have tried since then honestly to assess whether, deep in my subconscious, I was attempting to do Mother in, whether I might have said, "Hit the gas!" instead of, "Brake now!"

Please excuse this background. I am just as anxious as you are to get to Mother and sex, my real topic and the one you paid to hear about.

First, though, I need to expose what I have recently concluded about Mother's view of me. My view of Mother is one thing, but what counts is her view of me. For some time, I thought Mother was unaware of my presence, was preternaturally self-absorbed, a little like Sarah Palin without the blazing intelligence. But now it occurs to me that it was **me** who so bored Mother that she was driven to blather in order to fill in the time and keep from running one of her volunteer badges up my nose. Maybe it wasn't boredom I inspired in Mother but annoyance. Mother could hardly stand to be around me, unlucky for her as she also thought it was her duty to be in my company almost constantly. So, simple as pie: Mother was determined to love me, but she didn't like me, not a bit, found me grating, insufferable. I can now see that she tried to smother this, but how could she? The problem was what I was. And what I was, was, more or less, an asshole.

I've changed since then.

As I say, Mother tried to restrain herself, just couldn't. I will give but one example, one being all I can stand. I remember talking to Mother about a girl at

school, a smart girl, so naturally I was jealous. In any case, I said, “She’s sort of stuck up, you know.” And not having the good sense to leave it at that (remember I was a jerk): “And what’s she got to be stuck-up about I’d like to know. She’s so ugly. Yes she is. So ugly. Ugly as a . . .” Mother stared at me for a second, unable to let that pass, then: “Well, what makes you think you’re such a prize?”

Mother may have felt she was striking a blow for all women, trying to calm my nasty ego, teaching me that appearances are unimportant, or any of a million other things—but what she was really saying was, “What a first-class, award-winning shit you are” and also—here it comes—“how sexually undesirable.”

Anyhow, as I was saying, I wasn’t possessed of all this insight when I first found myself sputtering in the deep waters of puberty. Mother it was who told me that wet dreams—she called them “it”—were nothing to be ashamed of—so long as I tried to conquer “it” and didn’t allow “it” very often.

But Mother’s sexual presence in my life, although looming, was not centered in direct sexual instruction. Mother also equipped herself with more general, positively universal, opinions on all body parts, not just those of reproduction. She often found reason to remark that she couldn’t fathom why anyone wanted to glimpse a **naked** body, except, she’d add, getting a dreamy look in her eye, with babies. Babies are different. To this day I cannot stand to look at an unclothed infant or to hear the word “naked” without feeling an upsurge of something like nausea.

Mother also was very open about the ways in which she and my father labored long and hard to bring forth my brother and me, specifically me. Between us had been a lapse of four years. Mother seemed to feel a

passionate need to explain that gap to everyone in range, including, I swear, visiting friends of mine: “You know,” she’d say without provocation, “we tried and tried to get pregnant. We worked so very hard, tried and tried.” Imagine hearing that and striving ardently to block any horrorshow images of this heavy labor from entering your head. It doesn’t work—didn’t for me. Even now when someone speaks of repeated efforts, I see Mother, naked, sweaty, striving earnestly. Father doesn’t enter my mind at all. There’s no room for him.

Burdened with such notions and, worse, gnarled and diseased images of nudity, arousal, sexual doings, I entered high school, where things were about to come to fruition.

But not for me, as you guessed. I found my greatest sexual excitement in the backseats of cars and in the hallways of our school. If I leave it at that, you’ll imagine I was normal. But that’d be too much fantasy even for me. Lustful excursions in backseats were undertaken with five or six other boys, riding around in the streets of East Liverpool, singing “Roll Me Over in the Clover.” That, as I remember it, was both daring and, in its way, arousing. Maybe not arousing, but it gave us (gave me) the feeling of accomplishment, of putting myself out there and finding something like sex. Not much like sex, you’ll be thinking, but more like sex than, say, going to church with Mother.

I referred to school hallways, which also sounds almost illegally racy: up against the lockers, inside storage closets. But what it really amounted to was some advanced but sadly limited groping of remarkably pretty girls. Sandra Mahoney—one of the 75 Sandras in my class—would come up to me and, grinding her chest into my back, even guiding my hands to her breasts, say, “Oh, you’re going to give me cancer.” Brenda Lawrence

would glide her perky buttocks into my waiting hands. Marci Babcock blew in my ear, Sandra Miller licked it, Mary Lou Wylie stuck her moist finger in there. Oh glory. All this quite out in the open as classes changed.

The thing was that when the milling crowds faded away, so did the erotic activity. For me anyhow. It was only when things could be contained, when the young women—girls, we called them and they called themselves—were secure, empowered—only then that such play was common.

All through high school, I had plenty of sexual experience: singing of sex with boys, fiddling in the hallways. And so did every other boy, I think. I knew of about four boys and just as many girls in my class of three hundred that had what anyone now would call sex.

So I was by no means alone, which made me feel better, only no it didn't. It made me feel that Mother was winning, that she had ordered a world replete with yearning and no fulfillment.

All that changed when I went to college, but not much. I won't pursue this as there's nothing much to pursue. Sex took pretty much the same forms, only changing location: now boys sang slightly more raunchy songs in fraternity houses. And now I actually went into back seats of cars with girls and almost groveled once or twice, inconclusively and, from my point of view, pathetically.

You know, what strikes me most now about all this was how kind all these 1950s females were, how generous. They weren't teasing us, rather signaling that they were willing to share a form of power that they knew, deep down, was theirs for only a brief time. Before long they would have real sex, that is, settle down into some replica of a dreary Father Knows Best without any real future and no more sexual excitement.

But we're talking about me here and how Mother crippled my own sexual authority, which otherwise, as you can plainly sense, would have been massive. Having come this far, though, I find I cannot keep the fires of resentment burning so brightly against Mother. True, I was absurdly slow in matters sexual and it's equally true that that was all Mother's fault. But what the hell.

To yield completely and say that Mother was indeed the saint other people saw, to throw in the sponge, would be facile and sentimental. But to conclude the opposite, that I was altogether right is plain wrong. I suppose my feelings are all befuddled. And will stay that way. So be it. All I know for sure is that I wish Mother and her voice had never been silenced.

HAIRCUT

(Thanks, Ring Lardner)

You're only as good as your last haircut **Fran Lebowitz**

It made no difference, none at all, not to me. These places were pretty much all the same if you thought about it, which most people don't. Wasn't like I was getting myself all dolled up to be on the cover of *Look Magazine*. Dad had made the same remark about every time he figured I was going for a haircut, even though I never said I was getting a haircut, just so I wouldn't have to hear him repeat that about how I'd never be on the cover of *Look Magazine*. I mean, I knew I wouldn't, but why'd he have to keep saying that, as if I needed reminding? I sure didn't ask him to go along and say it to the barbers and everybody else. Went by myself from the time I was three years old, seemed like.

"What you getting all dolled up for, kid? Think they're going to put you on the cover of *Look Magazine*?"

None of the barbers mentioned *Look Magazine*, so far as I can remember. And I would remember that, of course. Most of the shops I knew of, probably most shops across America, had *Look Magazine* there on little stands for people who like to read while they wait. That includes me, and I don't mind reading magazines. I make it a practice. No more *Look*, of course, not these days; but there's *People*. I read that.

Of course I check out the covers. Not like I'm checking to see if my mug somehow got there. I don't fool myself about that. *Look* had better covers, mostly.

My favorite was Marilyn Monroe. I'm not alone in voting for her, you can bet the farm on that. Speaking of voting, though, I wonder how many times they had that asshole (excuse me) Kennedy on the cover? Way too often for me. Way more often than was fair. I'm not sure they had Richard Nixon on even once. Maybe once, if that.

I look a bit like Richard Nixon. I know that from personal observation.

Barbers are a very chatty bunch. I think it's part of barber college: you have to take a course in talking someone's leg off. Not that I mind. It can be relaxing. It can also be so irritating you'd like to wrestle the razor out of his hand and give everybody a break by removing his voice box.

Sometimes I feel like talking. Sometimes I don't. That seems to me normal. Barbers, though, are by nature abnormal. They only operate in one gear, full blab.

In that way, they're like my dad.

Even after his accident, my dad kept his mouth running as long as there was anything to run. Wasn't like he was hurt all that bad, not at first, in my opinion, but he sure milked the chance to order me and Lily around while he could. Lily was my sister, still is. My mom, in case you're wondering, had the good sense to get lost not all that many years after I was born. Here today, gone tomorrow, like they say. Not like I blamed her. You'd have done the same, if you'd had the bad luck to get yourself hitched to my dad.

My turn in the chair.

"Before you ask, just to save you the trouble, leave the top alone, close on the sides. Use your razor, the sharpest you got, on the edges. And, as a prize for doing all that, I'll entertain you with some very amusing stories. Absolutely true ones, too."

“It all started with my dad, like most things do, probably with you too, your dad, I mean. I’m not prying. It’s my dad we’re talking about. A very funny character, you’ll think, when you hear the stories I have to tell you. You’ll laugh your can off. Be so funny I’ll have to watch out you don’t cut off one of my ears, laughing and waving your arms around, like you do. I don’t mean you especially, just anyone. And there’s no need to tell me you never cut anybody in your seventy years of barbering. Maybe not fatally. Not too often. I’m not asking. It’ll be our secret. I’m no dumbbell, no matter what you might suppose. I can figure out there’s no other reason anybody’d go into barbering, what with having to listen to fellas like me drone on and on. There’s gotta be a reward somewhere, just stands to reason.”

“So back to my dad and his way of making everybody laugh. You know how it is with some people, just naturally funny. That wasn’t what it was with my dad. He had to work at it. I suppose that should add to his credit balance, right? I mean he was about the least funny guy in the world, I’d say. Maybe Joe Stalin was less funny, but who knows? He might have been a regular cut-up at home, life of the party. At home was where my dad wasn’t funny unless, as I say, he arranged funny things to happen, almost like he was writing a movie and then making it play out right there. You know how it is.”

“My dad had this real big Adam’s apple. You probably seen a few. My dad’s, it was hard not to stare at, though you tried not to, of course. But it was like a whole orchard had been stuffed into that neck. You being a barber, you’d probably be tempted to do a little surgery, even things up, make him more normal—as if you or anybody else could do that—make him normal.

That'd be a miracle beyond even Jesus. I should know."

"My dad worked for this hotel in our town. Not doing comedy. He was a hotel employee. Ask him or just give him an opening and he'd say he was 'a hotel associate,' 'in hotel management,' 'behind the scenes planning,' or once. I swear, 'Hotel Vice-President.' He kept us away from that hotel, so I never saw him doing his top-level important work. Mom wouldn't talk about it. When I was little I thought Dad was a footman, then, later, a janitor, until Lily told me he was a waiter, found it out from one of her friends who went there to eat."

"Which brings us back to Lily my sister and my very funny dad. Once, I remember it was January, not long after the holiday season, which was no holiday for me and Lily, I can tell you. Not that I'm complaining. Some kids had it worse. Hell, some didn't even make it through the holiday season at all."

"My dad wasn't what you'd call handsome. He was what you'd call ugly, butt-ugly, as the foul-mouthed kids around now say. I know lots of people think kids today are going to hell in a hand-basket. Not me. They lip off to adults, are disrespectful? Good for them. You oughta find a way to help them get even, get some revenge, and you're the guy to do it. Think about it."

"So Lily and this January day. It was when my mom was still around and before she left us, not that I blame her, but that's another story and none of your business. Lily, see, told us she had this date. Big mistake to let on, but I guess she didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. Our mom had made her this real nice dress. Wasn't like our dad was going to loosen the purse strings to buy a dress even halfway that nice, so here Lily appears on this January Saturday night, see, in a beautiful dress. She looked wonderful, and I guess she figured there was nothing for it but to let on she had a

date, which would explain the dress and why she had it on.”

“Lily was pretty, not just in that dress but all the time. Lily it was taught me to dance. She was very good to me, much more than I deserved. But the point I’m making here is she was very pretty. My mother was pretty, which explains Lily. My dad was ugly, like I said. I’ll leave it to you to guess who I take after.”

“So Lily is there waiting for her date. I think Lily must have been sixteen then, which would leave me at eleven, thereabouts. Anyhow, my dad figures he’ll fill in the time with a real funny joke, like I told you he was good at. Not just good but one-of-a-kind, if I do say so. So he goes to Lily, ‘Before you put your coat on, honey—’ he called her ‘honey’, which was unusual, but none of us paid attention to that—‘Before you put your coat on, come here and let me see that there dress up-close.’ So Lily goes and stands in front of him, and he then makes her turn around with her back to him, like he wants to examine the material or something. He takes some time looking at the material, or that’s what we thought, as we couldn’t see, you know, what with Lily standing between my mom and me, and my dad examining the material.”

“That goes on for a bit, then he stands up—he’d been sitting in this chair he always sat in, a brown big disgusting chair—and he puts Lily’s coat on for her, grabs it out of her hands and puts it on her from the back, laughing real hard like it was funny to put on a coat.”

“Anyhow, Lily’s date comes. His name was Arthur, not Art or Artie but Arthur, which tells you a lot. I never liked him much, thought he wasn’t good enough for Lily, not even close. I mentioned that once or twice to Lily, but she told me I was too young to understand. I

wasn't too sure what she meant by that. Anyhow, I was right about Arthur, as events to come bore out."

"But here he is, Arthur, who says hi to my mom, who is very nice and polite, and to my dad, who tells Arthur some jokes and, I'm not making this up, says to him, 'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.' I hate that, just hate it. My dad made it even worse. He said, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do; but, you know, kid, I don't think that excludes a damned thing." I was eleven, eleven or twelve, and was made real uncomfortable. I could tell my mother was embarrassed. And Lily, she turned beet red, like they say."

"That's not the funny part, though. My dad didn't build his reputation on that sort of thing."

"About an hour or so later, the door opens and Lily comes busting in, way too early for the date to be over. I happened to be there in the front hall at the time. I don't know why, as there wasn't anything to do there by the front door, but that's where I was. Lily comes busting in, and I at first think she's forgotten something. But then I see she's crying real hard, sort of the way it is when you think you'll never stop, which men know about, too, not just women. Those who say men don't know about that from first-hand experience are goddamned liars, that's what I say. There's nothing to be ashamed of in crying and it can be a lot better than the alternative. I'll go so far as to say it always is."

"Before I know it my mom and dad are there too, in this little crampy space. My mom moves in to hug Lily and is asking what's wrong. My dad, he's laughing, howling like a banshee. Well, I'll spare you the next few minutes, which were spent sorting things out and making them clear. What it was, Lily's dress had a message written on the back, and that message, written in black ink, was 'Please Pat Me Here.'"

“You got it figured out who wrote that there and when. I won’t insult your intelligence by explaining what there’s no need to be explaining. Besides, I know better than to insult a barber, for obvious reasons. Just wanted to give an example of my dad’s humor, which was, he once said, and I quote how he put it exactly: ‘I may not be rich or on the cover of “Look” Magazine—yet!— (You get it? “Yet”!)—‘but I can say this, that I have a good time and try to make good times for everyone around me, without any exceptions or regard to race, creed, or hair color.’”

“It wasn’t too long after that my mom left. Just left. She wrote long letters to Lily and to me, but I don’t think there’s too much funny in all that so I’ll skip to one last instance of my dad’s fun, just to convince you.”

“Littler closer on the side there.”

“Well, I’d been wanting a baseball glove, not a new one, just a glove of any kind. I loved playing and my friends were pretty nice about me not having one, letting me use theirs when they were up to bat, that sort of thing. They were nice about it. All the same, you know how it is with kids. You don’t want to be the only one without a baseball glove. Which I was. I don’t think it’s shallow to want something which in those days was pretty basic, a baseball glove. You may disagree with me if you like, but that’s how I felt. My dad said several times he’d get me one and meant to do it before then, only it had slipped his mind. That was one of his favorite phrases, ‘It just slipped my mind.’ That’s not part of him being funny; I don’t mean that. I guess I kind of zoomed past the point I was making like I was sled riding. I often do that. I should say I did have a sled, thanks to my Mom. It wasn’t like I didn’t have anything at all. But what I had didn’t include a baseball glove. That’d slipped my dad’s mind.”

“This one day, a day or two after my mom had left for good, only we didn’t know that then, as her letters hadn’t arrived and as our dad had told us she was just visiting her sister, who was also our Aunt, Aunt Martha, who was very nice to Lily and me and sent us scarves every Christmas and cookies with our names on them. Of course that’s not where my mom was at all. We never did find out where she was, never. Not to this day. Wanted to contact her so many times, so many. Couldn’t even tell her about what happened to Dad.”

“Don’t take any off the top. I told you.”

“So my dad calls me into his bedroom. I say it’s his because my mom never set foot in it again. And here’s what he said. I should tell you that I was plenty nervous, even scared, as Dads didn’t call boys into bedrooms in those days except for one reason, which was not good news for the boys or their hides, if you know what I mean. I know I’m supposed to say that I didn’t have it any worse in getting beat by my dad than other kids. You expect me to say that, don’t say you don’t. I think I did, though, had it worse. I know I did, whether you believe me or not.”

“So my dad has me there, not saying anything at all, just kind of staring at me, glaring. I’m trying to be brave, as that’s what he always says he wants and expects, for me to be brave. So I’m trying so hard. Finally, though, I can’t help it and start crying. I think it comes out even louder since I’ve been working so hard holding it back, like you do.”

“My dad doesn’t let out a peep, lets me cry a while. I can’t tell what expression’s on his face, at first, but then I see he’s smiling. Then he starts laughing, like there’s a big joke going on. Then he pulls out an envelope. I know what it is! The ball-glove. That’s like my dad, to make a joke out of it. Only I see right away

how wrong I am. It's not his kind of joke and it's not like he could get a ball-glove in an envelope. I was stupid not to see that right off."

"Here's what it was, his joke. There was a sheet of paper in the envelope, folded over. The first section said, in plain black letters—probably used the same pen he'd used for the joke on Lily—"You mom has"—and then you turned it over and it said in big letters 'VAMOOSSED.'"

"Wasn't like he didn't explain, in his own way. What he said was that he didn't want me 'wallowing in self-pity.' I remember that because I was so confused, not knowing for sure what 'self-pity' was and not knowing about 'wallowing,' apart from pigs. He said we all had to move on, get on with our lives. He told me that several times, 'Move on. Get on with your life.' But I was eleven, maybe twelve at the most, and I had nowhere I could see to get on to. I mean, where could I go?"

"But my dad had worked on that envelope, which illustrates what I was trying to show you."

"I see you're about done, so I won't have time to tell you about Dad's accident. I'll just say it kind of took the fun right out of him, you know what I mean, and you might. You can't ever be sure about anything, can you, even whether you might not be the next cover of People Magazine, which I now think I might be, seeing what a fine job you did."

"What do you mean, 'On the house?' You think I'm lookin for charity? My dad taught me always to pay my way. He taught me lots of things."

AND GONE FOREVER

**And so we beat on, boats against the current.
F. Scott Fitzgerald**

Something important happened when I was thirteen. Either that, or I discovered a secret was there all along, waiting. Or I made a decision that took on the power of whatever is fundamental. I did something, felt something. I can't seem to get close to what that was, not by any direct route.

One way of sidling up to it is by way of shame, reactionary as that sounds.

"Aren't you ashamed?" my mother asked me.

"No, mama, I'm not."

"Well, I am."

"Why?"

"Can you imagine what you've done to your father and me?"

"Why are you ashamed? Stick to that."

"Jesus said. . . ."

"He didn't say a word about it. Anyhow, who cares? What causes *your* shame?"

"I don't know."

I don't think she did.

That gives me the idea that shame is the key and the mystery. I don't mean we should feel shame about being gay but that, in some cave within, we allow it a dark, flickering life. Good luck tracking it, luring it out. Mother feels that shame is obvious, is basic to what we are—a trivial view. Our shame, the shame we gay people (I) deal with is nothing like that, is really—that's what I'm trying to find out: being shoved out onto the shame

stage, determinedly unashamed, being not that well suited for the shame part in the play, being so very gay, not being gay enough.

And there's the predictable objection some good people regard as a clincher: not all people, gay or not-so-gay, feel the same thing or in the same degree or for the same reason. We're all so different. Only we're not so very, and I want to escape the trap of wild individualism: all that does is keep us from thinking.

So what is it with us and the unthinkable?

My first times of having that word "gay" in my head are not the first times I felt ashamed, for sure, but I can hardly think of having sex at thirteen without re-experiencing what later slid down into shame, rooted, I imagine, in all that sex we had or all that we were not able to have. Was it that we made love or couldn't really find enough love to make? I also don't know at what point shame came to occupy my life or my memory. But I think it keeps me from understanding how and when I came to know that I was homosexual, that I was damned well going to be, that I might as well be, that I had no choice, that I had plenty of choice and had chosen. My guess is that all gays want to talk about "when I first knew" and can't come up with much. We're driven to discover what we can't: when we start digging back to that first awareness, we can't get there, reach a level of granite too thick to get our memories through. We drill and drill, dredge up nothing.

I think I can find out something if I return to Winston and me, and face down that thirteen-year-old's shame. Did I create it? Was I expecting it? Could I have avoided it? Can I avoid it now?

I was twelve-going-on-thirteen the summer I fell in love. Winston was a little older, but I don't think the age difference had anything to do with it. I admired Winston

but I didn't look up to him or regard him as the big brother I never had. This was not some infatuation.

The hardest thing for me right now is to think of myself as a serious thing, a person, at thirteen. I'm so poisoned with clichés about youth, one of which would let me dodge the whole question by saying Winston and I were "just kids," that we weren't really having sex, just experimenting. Not true.

Winston. Funny name, I know. He had no nickname, never had as long as I knew him, which was until he turned fifteen and his parents sent him off to an excellent prep school, a boarding school. It broke my heart. Winston's too. I know it did from letters he wrote that fall. I sent back in letters of my own all the love I could pack into words, unashamed and excessive, were excess imaginable. I returned, though, only what I received from him. I can't pretend I had more to give than he, in letters written on special Oscar Wilde stationery we had bought together in quantity the week before he left, dividing it and pretending the paper would keep us together, stand in for hands and mouths across all that vacant space. When he came home at Christmas, he wouldn't see me, wouldn't talk on the phone, answer my e-mails, the one note I sent on plain paper and slipped under his parents' door. I tried dozens of times over a four-day period right before Christmas. The last time was on Christmas Day. I told myself I stopped because I was hurt, but even then I knew it was closer to fear. He wasn't seeing me because I couldn't bring myself to see him; had he been the one calling and writing, I would have done the same. Even in our cowardice, we played the same game, set the same rules, holding on even as we were torn apart. We hold on in the same way still.

Winston's family was very rich. When we first

started hanging together, I was flattered that a kid from his part of town would pay attention to a kid from mine. That was an immediate and strong feeling; sounds superficial but it isn't and it didn't go away. It wasn't just that he was rich but that he could reach and do astounding things, things he gave to me, made part of my life. His parents didn't condescend to me, seemed to find me interesting. I didn't inquire too closely, not wanting to spoil anything. Kind as they were, I tried to avoid them, certainly one-on-ones: they might discover I wasn't a fit companion for their son, only child. I guess the first layer of shame is simple enough. My parents were corny and not what you would call rich, being what you'd call poor—but not interestingly so. For one thing, they weren't stoic but grumbling. For another, it wasn't like they had fascinating diseases, were supporting relatives, or had taken vows of poverty. They had no objections to making money, just didn't have the wherewithal to do it. I felt a predictable mix of shame and guilt over my parents, probably much like what is felt by the millions of young kids in that position, so this is no big clue to my own special dilemma. But it's a start. Maybe, feeling myself unworthy by virtue of my parents, I projected that embarrassment onto the sexual experience my friend and I were lucky enough to find, imagining that I was tainting Winston, smearing my class disgrace all over his rich clean worthiness.

Anyhow, Winston and I might never have gotten to the down-and-dirty had our passion not been, as they now say, triangulated. Winston had a neighbor who was, like everyone in the country club environs, rich, a late-40ish guy straight out of Hugh Hefner's corny 1950s fantasies I discovered myself later in college: old magazines my aggressively straight roommate kept around. This neighbor seems to have modeled himself

dutifully on Playboy standards, all brandy snifters and red velvet smoking jackets, minus the Playgirl bunnies. I see now how trite and regressive Harry's idea of "the bachelor" was, but it bowled us over back then. Harry—call me "Hal"—somehow made his way past the safety detectors of Winston's parents and spent large hunks of time with us, using arts pederasts everywhere would pay big money to obtain.

Hal managed to make himself distant and mysterious, extravagantly indifferent to us. He didn't try to insert himself into our pursuits, never asked questions or lowered himself to our music or video games. We regarded him as a combination of an exotic island prince and an elegant Parisian sophisticate. We never asked, Winston and I, why we were around him so much, for about a year early on in our friendship and before we had found what most people would call sex. The first summer I started being almost full-time with Winston also inaugurated our adventures with Hal. Hal had a swimming pool, as did everyone within a dozen blocks of the country club, including Winston, whose set-up was actually more kid-equipped than Hal's. Still, Hal's was our pool of choice that summer. Hal didn't swim with us, but he oversaw us faithfully. He would sit in a lawn chair, a beat-up plastic-laced thing, sipping his fancy drinks and reading. (That he favored crappy furniture added to his charm, made him seem more worldly and alluring than Winston's parents, who made sure everything was new.) I wonder what Hal read through all those hours we cavorted before him, though I had no such curiosity then, my thoughts being divided between Winston in his speedos (I wore baggy boxer-style trunks) and Hal's abusive wit. Rather than wooing us, at least in any conventional way, Hal used a combination of silence, sneers, and fumbled names.

“My God, you have the gut of a truck driver, Samuel.”

“If your derriere were any bigger, William, you’d need two of those girly outfits.” (We loved that word, which sounded so odd—dare-ee-yair—and gave us an excuse for talking about one another’s butts when we were alone and mimicking Hal.)

Hal’s success at capturing us depended heavily on this insouciance, that and our eagerness to be captured. It never occurred to us that he wouldn’t be spending nearly every waking minute with us were he indifferent; we believed in his remoteness and thus, as we performed, also created the perfect audience for his act, one of whose features was pretending he didn’t get our names straight. Winston was, variously, William, Wickham, and Walker. My real name wasn’t Samuel, or Spaniel, or Stanfeld, as Hal variously called me, but Simpson, a label that caused much personal grief and must have represented a sad wave toward the stylish made by parents who couldn’t locate even bad style.

Hal’s ability to ignore us, all the while clinging, worked and gave our older overseer room to exercise a mildly suggestive line of sneering, especially by way of talk about butts and bellies, the very topics Winston and I focused on, and for the same reasons as Hal. Seldom did he get within yards of direct verbal indecency; once he told Winston his “jewels” were “all too evident” through his suit, but he seemed to notice the subsequent discomfiture and never ventured into that territory again.

Hal didn’t oversee our clothes changing; we did that at Winston’s house (in quarters separated even from one another). Our other main Hal-house activity was pocket billiards, a game that allowed Hal hours of progressive petting. I can still remember his first advance, standing behind me as I leaned over to make a

shot, his hands with mine on the cue, pressing up against me under the guise of instruction, his hips driving lightly into my butt. For several weeks after that, Hal restricted himself to the straight on pressing game; then he advanced, slowly, to shove-‘n-rub, and finally to reaching around and massaging our bellies under our shirts. It was some time before his hand drifted southward, finding our small dicks through our trousers. By winter, he had begun pawing us under our pants (over underwear); and he ushered in the springtime by touching our all-togethers, protected from his diving hands by nothing at all. Apart from more openly masturbating himself against us as he rubbed, he went no further. It got so Winston and I would initiate the groping sessions, bending over enticingly, even wiggling our tails, luring Hal to us like displaying animals in rut. There, at the side of the table, were the only times he touched us, though he might have done so easily enough on other occasions: we also watched television and played video games at his house. Perhaps the pool table gave him all he wanted, all he dared. Winston and I may have had our limits. We would not have known unless Hal tested them, which he never did.

Winston and I went several months without mentioning to one another—anybody else was out of the question—what was happening at Hal’s. As Hal was going at me, I carefully kept my eyes away from Winston, who spent long minutes pretending to line up shots. I did the same bluffing for him. One day, close to Christmas, while lounging at the table, studying Hal’s cheap window decorations across the room, I accidentally (unlikely, but I think it was) looked over at my friends, at Hal arched over Winston’s back, humping away and rubbing vigorously the crotch-front of his jeans. Hal’s face was screwed up in what looked like

terrible pain as he ground away, molding with his one hand Winston's cloth-covered dick and pulling on it not very gently. He moaned a subdued little moan, Hal did, eyes tightly shut; but Winston was looking at me and, catching me watching, made a googly-eyed face and pretended to answer Hal's moan. It was all I could do to stifle my giggles.

Winston's mockery opened up whole new worlds for us both. Not that it was sublime humor, you'll be thinking, but in ways that count that's just what it was. Even while I was sucking in my belly, clenching my jaw, and otherwise courting suffocation in order not to guffaw, part of me was on top of Winston and inside him, not only in lust but in relief and gratitude. My friend had taken an enormous risk for me, and I never forgot that. He had been willing to initiate our homosexual life, something I doubt I would ever have done. If great humor, humor passing into art, is mostly generosity and risk-taking, then Winston's rubber-faced act was positively Shakespearean.

It gave us—gave me—a way to joke our way into contact. All along, I had loved less what Hal was doing to me than thinking of what he was doing to Winston. More than anything, I wanted to be Hal loving Winston. Even when Hal was going at me, I imagined myself as Hal, not that I wanted exactly to handle myself in some complex autoerotic dream. What I thought about was Hal's freedom to do what he wanted, touch anywhere he liked. Touch Winston.

The shame I felt prior to this moment had nothing to do with imagining what we were doing was improper. I was ashamed, but it was all connected to Winston. Would Winston think less of me for allowing Hal to do all this? For enjoying it? Would Winston know that all the time I was thinking of him, not of Hal? Winston

seemed somehow so much more in control than I, possessed of a key to understanding that I had never been given. Hal was doing something TO me; Winston was getting something FROM Hal. Winston would recognize that difference, despise me.

After that Christmas-time episode, the shame stayed, right at the heart, but it repositioned itself. It was still dominant in my affection for my beautiful friend, but it was now more like a field we were walking through than a cloud darkening over our world. Hal became less important. Winston and I still weren't touching one another, but we were talking about Hal, playing Hal-inspired games that were suggestive but more like charades than doctor. We played Hal's lover, Hal whorehouse, married life with Hal. It was the talk that inflamed me. I can remember hours of this play, hours so fine I don't know if any sex we later had, or I have ever had, came close to matching it.

"You say that to all the girls, Hal."

"Are you thinking of marriage, Hal, or are you just using me?"

It was Winston who pushed things more boldly, gave us permission to go beyond verbal play. He began with lines directed at my lust for him, sensing what was no longer just a joke to either of us.

"Stop it, Hal. I'm not that kind of girl."

"Do you love me, Hal, or are you just after my body?"

"Oh, please. Not until our honeymoon, you know."

Finally, he used one of my own openings to glide us into new lands.

"I want to go out to eat, Hal. I'm tired of cooking."

"You're tired of cooking, Simmy?"

"I am, Hal darling."

"Well, then, Simone, let's just nibble and lick at

one another.”

It was a daring thing to say and I think our wooing would have stalled, had Winston not engineered it so that our game could escalate. Pretending to be Hal, I could get away with a lot, a lot of words, but never anything like what was coming so openly from my friend. What was he doing? What could we be doing?

I know my face was flushed; but Winston, never predictable, reacted to my shame with a laugh. I was standing facing him, puffing my chest and fingering my shirt (robe) in a parody of Hal. Winston was slinking sideways in front of me, running his hand up and down my cheek, a perfect tease. Then he spun around, pulled his pants down to below his knees, and bent over. He may have been inviting me to raise my Hal role to the next level, to fondle his white-clothed butt. He stayed there for what seemed a full minute, looking back over his shoulder, smiling and winking. But I just looked, held back by uncertainty, perhaps, but surely by something deeper. Somehow, I couldn't think Winston was playing right along with me, moving us to new territory; I must have thought he was testing me. Whatever I did, I was sure to flunk. Part of me recognized that Winston was a better and kinder game-player than I, that he was waiting for me to catch up, that there were no wrong moves for me to make—but I was so scared.

So nothing happened. Winston pulled up his shorts and we went on with our verbal mimickery. For months afterwards, really for years, I called up that image of bent-over Winston, making himself vulnerable. Sometimes it came upon me unbeckoned, but it was never unwelcome. It isn't now.

It was the first time I had ever seen that much of Winston, apart from when he emerged in speedos.

Though we had had sleep-overs aplenty and swam together, our dressing and undressing, as I say, had been separate, our prudishness not so very different from that of other kids our age but working its way toward unraveling without us recognizing it. I would have displayed anything to Winston, were I not worried that he might judge me for doing so, discover something about me I needed to hide. And it wasn't that this one moment changed things right away. It was some time before we were doing to one another what Hal had done to us, though once we started, clothes didn't last long.

Hal disappeared before too long, pretty suddenly, though I have no idea what happened exactly. I don't remember at first anybody putting a word to what Hal was, for sure Winston and I wouldn't. We didn't face prohibitions, just silence, which made me feel even guiltier, since the quality of that silence made me sense it must have been my fault. Next thing we knew, Hal was moving out of town, to Seattle. I can't imagine how I knew that, maybe from a comment Winston's father let fall, the one in which he also called Hal "that pervert" and Winston's mother stared daggers at him. So I had forced Hal out of town, run him off. That's really what Winston's father had in mind when he spit out that ugly word.

Of course a part of me recognized what name Hal would be forced to answer to and was aware Winston's father didn't mean me, but such certainty just didn't take. I knew what I knew. There was a genuine through-and-through pervert in town and he wasn't named Winston or Hal, whatever either of them did—or was induced to do.

Winston and I were seeing one another just as often, but the Hal games stopped along with Hal, which left us with no reason I could figure out to talk about sex

or maybe engineer things so I could turn around and find myself facing Winston's half-clothed body. I am pretty sure nothing ever would have happened had it depended on me. But one day, Winston suggested dress-up. Out of the blue. His mother had set out some old clothes in a basket for the maid to take to Goodwill (his mother being too classy to offer them to the maid, though I came within an embarrassing inch of asking Winston why not, the maid being so poor). Winston found the clothes, had me help him carry the basket to his room, and started right in:

“Simmy, how do I hook this, whatever it is? Can I practice on you? Just lift up your skirt a little. A little more.”

I did and he started fiddling with some kind of hook. To break the tension of the unbearable pleasure I felt from having Winston handle me, however discreetly, under this oversized dress, I broke away a little and reached back toward the basket.

“Is there a bra in this pile?”

“God—what’s IS all this?”

What it was, was a lot of funny women’s understuff.

“These are women’s undies. My mom’s undies, for God’s sake. Arrrggghh!”

He made a face as comic as the one he’d managed when Hal was molesting him. I think I flashed back to that moment and felt oddly empowered. Anyhow, for some reason I took a chance: “You’d look even better in them, Win.”

“OK. But we’d both be better without em.”

“You’re right.” What was he talking about?

“Just follow my lead.”

Turning to face me, Winston slowly, very slowly, unbuttoned and removed his shirt, then his jeans, and

then his underpants. I couldn't believe it was happening, but it was right there, perfect. I not only felt no shame, but, for the first time in my life, experienced something like complete confidence. Winston wanted what I wanted and I knew it; even more, I knew I didn't have to hide from him—my mind or my body. That's why I could go so slow with my own undressing, matching him, following his lead.

I nuzzled my nose into the top of his legs, moving my mouth toward his hard penis, maybe an inch from my face. My hands had moved up the back of his thighs and onto his butt, very slowly, stroking and then molding his cheeks with no gentleness at all.

No plans were involved, though I remember thinking later, while Winston was doing something especially great to me, that I would do just the same thing to him when he was done. And I did, now and then thinking of brand new moves and using them too. We employed the furniture, the floor, and banged against the walls. Before we knew it, we had spent over two hours with one another's bodies.

We had progressed so quickly from taking clothes on and off to taking them off and not on, to pretending to play the "Hal game," to pretending to be hubby and wife, to pretending to be baby-making, to not pretending at all. Within a half-hour, there in Winston's room, we were licking and sucking one another, grabbing and prodding and holding. Every time one of us would make a move to get dressed, the other would throw him down into the oversized scratchy chair, take the clothes back off, and start all over again. I thought it would never end, and for the only time in my life I had no doubt about that. The prolonged rutting was made possible, in one gross sense, by our inability really to reach orgasm, but there was nothing gross or incapable about our grinding

and wrestling. We proceeded like experienced lovers, our techniques helped along greatly by our time with Hal, our ability to infer what he was after, even what fantasies were running through his mind. They must have been running through ours, too, and now we put those overused ghost images into action. It's not that we were delicate. After so many, many months holding back, we ripped at the lovely body we had yearned for as if we were lions on a zebra. The next day as we undressed one another we laughed over the scars and scrapes and bruises we had, emblems of our too-long-delayed coming together.

I guess we went too far, tried for too much those first days of lovemaking. But it wasn't like we were calculating. Still, as we marveled at the body so long hidden, tried our best to hold onto and taste every part, we both spoke our affection. Maybe it just bubbled out of us, but our speaking, like our love, didn't happen against our will. We chose it.

"I love you, Simpson."

"I love you, Winston. I always have."

We didn't say a lot more than that. Like so many new lovers, before and after, we were bedazzled. We were wondering if we weren't the first boys—humans—to discover that we could fuck, really fuck. Beyond that, we were wondering if we were the first to discover love, absolute love.

Only later, as we found ourselves unable to hold true to what we had for one afternoon, what we had lived inside so completely, did the shame creep toward us. That afternoon we went so far beyond shame that we invited it in by our very confidence, our inability to imagine anything remotely like shame. It was as if we had set ourselves up for a recoil, had recklessly overwound the very spring that was energizing us.

In the midst of all this confident unconsciousness, what were we choosing? Can you make choices when you are floating on a joy so great your imagination doesn't extend outside it? I think so. I think we knew what we were doing and willed it into being, not just that afternoon but in the exhilarating months which followed.

Where's the choice, then? Perhaps in the fact that we deliberately kept driving ourselves so far beyond our capacity to sustain our love, kept over-extending not so much our bodies—those were inexhaustible—as our imaginations, our capacity to invent. Our first dress-up game had turned into precocious sex, oddly expressed in terms that would have suited two veteran queens meeting at a bar. Except we were involved just as much in the kid game, the dress-up, as we were in the sex. Our sense of being alone, in a strange, complete world of our own making, depended on moving so fast we didn't rest to see much or reflect. We were like inventors working perfectly inside a comic delirium, meshed together and unaware of anything beyond our art.

We chose to operate that way and a part of us soon recognized the risk, that we couldn't allow ourselves to be bored. We could only move and love inside play. We were kids, we were in love, we were fucking: none of these truths was sacrificed to the others. We chose the impossible balance, chose to love uncontrollably, to do everything we could imagine to do to one another's bodies, and to be kids with attitudes and activities that were exactly like those of other kids, only fuller, more complete.

We played as honestly as we could:

“I love you so much, Winston.”

“No you don't—you love the St. Louis Cardinals.”

“Oh yeah. Well, next to the Cards, I love you.”

“Yeah, and boarding and scuba and surfing.”

“Those are your things, Winston! You get us mixed up”

"I do that a lot. Well, next to those rich-kid things only I know, I love you."

I remember that talk, one of many, but this one seemed to go further.

"You want me to drop surfing and boarding and scuba, Simpson?"

"Then you'd love me more?"

"God, Simpson. . . ."

"I know, Winston. How much further, how much better? I really don't know."

"I don't know either."

I think we did know. And we were scared.

We tried so hard, both of us, locating one activity after another, new games. We both joined scouts and found ways to fuck at Jamborees. We fucked behind the risers at choir rehearsal, behind the outdoor bathrooms at summer camp. We fucked before and after soccer practice, at debate tournaments, at various stops on our joint paper route, before and after Methodist Youth Fellowship, at the beach and in the mountains. We played fuck video games, fuck board games, fuck basketball, fuck karaoke.

Most often, we played Brokeback Bingo. We had watched “Brokeback Mountain” in Winston’s basement, finding the movie so hot that we took the chance of caressing one another right there, risking a parental invasion and discovery, as we slowly fondled, exposed, dallied with one another through the last two-thirds of the sad film, carefully delaying our climaxing and removing more and more clothes as we went. When the movie was done, we were naked, inside one another in alternate sequences. As the closing credits rolled, we allowed our now—possible orgasms to come and to

generate in the next hour our most complex coalition of sport and sex, game and galloping eros. We quickly made up a board game that used terms from the movie (images, phrases, proper names copied from the credits at the end of the film). We then constructed eighty cards, the standard B—I—N—G—O. And we played furiously, the winner of each game-series being able to dictate exactly what brokeback cowboy activity he desired, using any available costumes and supporting materials. We got so we could imitate perfectly, so we thought, the rough sex of Ledger and Gyllenhaal, adding many touches of our own and creating new possibilities the movie had forgotten to depict.

The game was simple enough, but we held onto it longer than any other activity of the hundreds we had invented. Maybe the awkwardness of the game, the way it strained at the limits of our fancy, should have told us something. Maybe it was that very extremity that loaded it with such meaning, some signal that what we had couldn't last, unless we kept pushing and creating longer and harder than we were able, ever able, to do. Our love existed in the house of impossibility; we knew we could hardly live at any other address and that we were doomed to be evicted.

We neither of us mentioned that we were playing inside a tragedy. In our version of the time on Brokeback Mountain, we two cowboys were true to one another and neither of us was abandoned, left with only the smell of the other's shirt.

At some point after this raunchy game, this grand and disastrous game, was instituted, I became aware of an unrelenting inner pressure, a need to do something better and different—find some original game or activity, some new expression of our longing. For a short time, we became terribly used to one another and the

habitual threatened to overtake all that exciting, nourishing wonder. That brief relaxation turned out to be more than we could bear. We knew that at the time, sensed that comfort was the wolf at the door. But I couldn't think of anything to do about it, any way to get back again into our fruitful and uncertain world. Nor, I guess, I know, could Winston.

And I think that's where we both allowed a different, wholly unerotic shame to emerge full-blown around and inside us. The need for imaginative fertility became more than we could satisfy. How could we not keep it going? It seemed and seems so simple: just invent, call up more material, more love. It wasn't that someone was telling us we couldn't. No external forces interfered; we simply had to draw on our own resources, the deep well of our love. But we didn't. And our failure was more shameful than cocksucking on the school lawn before classmates, teachers, and parents could ever have been. It seemed as if we were not being alert to the other, more exactly, that I was not being alert to Winston, wasn't honoring his love, wasn't honoring him. It began to gnaw at me that if I loved Winston enough I wouldn't have such trouble keeping the fun going, finding ways to integrate anew our lives as kids and our sex. There had been no trouble before this. But now there was.

And I became ashamed, filled with that which is with me still, at first sporadically and then deeply. I loved Winston, and it wasn't enough. I was overwhelmed by my unfaithfulness, driven by fear that my only love would find out I didn't love him sufficiently. I could not have loved him more. I could not love him more now. But it was not and is not enough.

Put that way—and it is the way to put it—my shame came not from being gay but from wondering if I

was stopping being gay, wasn't sufficiently gay, wasn't gay at all. The doubt was poisonous. I allowed myself to face it, drink it in: if I were gay, I'd find ways of loving Winston as I had at the start. If I were gay, I'd be worthy of him. If I were as gay as Winston, decently and thoroughly gay, I would never have to recognize faithlessness or betrayal.

How could I be with Winston as it was? I loved him more than anything, more than breath and couldn't stand to lose him. But how could I not lose him? Once caught in the brambles of this way of thinking, I could never get out. I looked everywhere, but could never find the tools that would free me.

I've tried since to adopt an attitude toward that time that would allow me to live with it, not be paralyzed by what it offered to us and then withdrew. I've tried bemusement, easy distance, sophistication: it was a funny childish interlude, common enough, naïve and unreal just one of those things. But I can't hold onto that. Whatever it was, it wasn't funny; and it threatens, every time I think of it, like right now, to blot out all else, to be the only reality. It wasn't just one of those things but the only thing I've ever known worth a life.

ALFIE, BABY

“Hey there, whoa!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That’s a better pace. Whew. You go by ‘Al’? That your handle?”

“You must excuse me.”

“For what? What’d you do?”

“I have no wish to be rude.”

“Well, that’s dandy. Not like I’d notice anyhow. So, look, Al. . . . Can we slow down a bit more?”

“I do not know you, sir.”

“Thomas P. McClusky. Now you do, and happy you will come to be that you made the acquaintance of Thomas P. McClusky.”

“I’m afraid I have no time to speak today. Perhaps you could talk to my wife. Back there. Farringford.”

“Your wife? She handle your business? Anyhow, I’ve found it best not to involve third parties. Complicates things. Makes it problematic when it comes to exit strategies, I’ve found. Not that I’m sure your wife isn’t a doozie—in all ways, business too. I’ve seen ladies who are top notch at business, you know. But I find it best, as I say, to go straight to the main man, keep it mano a mano.”

“I must be off.”

“Hold your horses. Give me thirty seconds. I can feel it in my bones that you’ll be happy you did. I can tell just by looking at you, even with that Dracula coat and shawl thing on.”

“Dracula?”

“Ah, before your time—or after—but pay that no never mind. Here’s my question to you: are you

interested in making money?”

“That’s impertinent, sir!”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’”

“My servants will eject you, sir, by force.”

“Yeah, sure. But back to money. You got a swell layout here, but I know you could use a little extra—or a lot extra, if you take my meaning—just to spruce things up a bit, get some doo-dads for the little woman. Am I right or am I right? ”

“No.”

“What about some well-earned rest? I admit it doesn’t look like you’re doing all that much, putting in the hours wandering about this god-forsaken island. But I know appearances can be misleading and that you are hoping for a nice cushy retirement, some gin rummy with Mrs. T and naps in the afternoon.”

“No.”

“Oh, wasn’t it you who wrote, ‘Let’s harken what the inner spirit sings, ‘There is no joy but calm!’ Why should I toil, who am the roof and crown of things. Oh rest ye, brother mariners”—and so forth. So, rest ye, Al Tennyson!”

“You got the meter wrong—and everything else. In any case, the speakers are cowardly, lotus-eating mariners.”

“Drugged-up, huh? You got anything like that around? Guess not. But don’t tell me you don’t, down deep in your singing inner spirit, long for the good life and for the money it’d take to land it for you. Right?”

“I have no interest in lucre or the sloth you say it would buy.”

“You think that, but was it you that also wrote, ‘It little profits that an idle king’? Huh?”

“Yes, I wrote that. “By this still hearth, among these barren crags.”

“Right. Good stuff. I know a song-writer might be able to do something with that. But back to “little profits.” That’s the key, by damn, little profits, very little. You want real money, Alf, I know you do. Get yourself off these barren crags, for one thing.”

“You mystify me, and I must now leave. Please remove your hand.”

“Just a friendly gesture, buddy—trying to keep you from making the mistake of your life. But I can see you aren’t fully persuaded yet, leaning but not quite there. So OK, here it is. You’re poet laureate, am I right? Can’t be too many of those around, and I’m told you have a pretty good following as it is, even before I work my potent magic—in The United States of America, I mean.”

“Are you sane?”

“Sane as a hat-stand, certified, Laureate o’ mine. So, let me lay it out for you. A speaking tour, but that’s just the beginning.”

...

“No answer, PL? OK, I’ll walk along with you but not so fast. Where’s the fire, huh?”

...

“OK, Al. The idea is to hit the ground running, minute you’re off the boat. That’s the name of the game.”

“What game?”

“Now you got it, Al. You’re thinking out of the box. I knew it the minute I saw you, ‘There’s an unorthodox business opportunity ready to bloom,’ I said.”

“How did you get here?”

“You mean. . . ? How did I get here on The White Island?”

“It’s the Isle of Wight.”

“Sure it is. Or did you mean, ‘How did I come to be

here at all?’ I’m wondering, Al, whether your question is directed at the physical or the metaphysical?”

“Pardon me?”

“Glad to. Did you mean something airy-fairy or nuts and bolts? Were you wondering how we came to be at all, or how I, Thomas P. McClusky, got made by my Mommy and Pop, one mid-October evening, counting backwards by 9, you know.”

“No! Indecency is anathema to me.”

“That’s just one more way we’re joined at the hip. Anathema to me too, to the max.”

“Right, Al. I take it your silence indicates that we’re on the same page, ready to put our heads together and hatch this plan that’ll get you right off the charts guaranteed. No more nickel and dime stuff, depending on book sales—poetry too. Penny ante. Through with that, right? With my help, you can jockey for a top position in real markets. As you say in another of your poems, ‘Every door is barr’d with gold, and opens but to golden keys.’ That hits the nail right on the noggin.

“I did not mean to endorse greed and acquisitiveness, man, just the opposite.”

“And I agree, Al, with you all the way, step-by-step, though we’re taking them at a pretty hefty pace and I wonder if we couldn’t maybe. . . .”

“You are free to go any time.”

“Wouldn’t think of abandoning you, nossiree. One thing they say about Thomas P. McClusky: he’ll stick to you like glue, loyal as a dog or parrot or your wife, the ravishing Mrs. T. You know what they say about friends and loyalty. You know that one? Friends are like bum cheeks—shit comes between them but they stick together.”

“Sir, I. . . .”

“You laughing there, Al? Knew I could get through

to you, establish some real rapport. Didn't think it'd be over shit, but you never know. Keep your options open, right?"

"OK, Laureate, you mull that over. Meanwhile, let me run this up the flagpole, Al, see if you or your people salute. The speaking tour is the set-up, only the set-up. First the East, the proven territories—Catskill resorts, Wheeling, Akron, Gatlinburg. Then swing West to Saint Looie, Dodge City, Tombstone, Leadville—the real money towns.

"How's it sound so far? You think we're leveraging our synergies?"

"I have a walking stick, sir. One more minute of this and I'll not answer for how I may be driven to use it on your person."

"You'd hit me? Well, it wouldn't be the first time, I'll tell you that much. I can only say I meant you no offense at all, you or your missus or anybody else. I'm an honest man with a very sick wife and little girl, out to do what I can in this world to bring harmless pleasure to some and no pain at all to the rest. But why don't you go ahead and beat me. I mean, why not?"

"Oh, sir, I did not seriously intend assault. It's just that you are so importunate and have me so confused. Please do not weep. I will listen calmly to your schemes, I do assure you."

"Now we're cookin' with gas. As I say, Al, the tour's only the hook. What really counts are—you ready for this?—endorsements! Huh? Yeah? Endorsements!"

"What?"

"You know, The Laureate's Luncheon Meats, Tennyson's Toothpaste, Alf's Alcohol Rub—that sort of thing. Sky's the limit."

"Oh my."

"But here's where my experience comes into play,

my experience and, I will not hesitate to add, my originality. Thomas P. McCluskey isn't called the wealthiest man East of Dubuque for nothing."

"Are you?"

"Yes indeed. Am I what?"

"The wealthiest man east of Dubuque."

"I'll not lie to you, not too often, har har, but no, I am not. What I said is true, though: I am CALLED that."

"And it doesn't take a soothsayer to imagine who does the calling, right Thomas P. McCluskey?"

"You got me, sharpie. We're going to hit it off right down the line. Say, you got a fine speaking voice, if a little rumbly. Do you sing?"

"No."

"Play guitar?"

"No."

"Do impressions?"

"Never."

"Well, I'm not apple-polisher, Alf, and I can see I got my work cut out for me, but I'm not one to give up."

"Learn that art."

"Learn what art?"

"The art of giving up."

"I can see you're one tough cookie, either that or playing hard to get. I'll tell you what, I see the little woman approaching across the fields there. I take it that's Mrs. T, right, as I'd be the last to imagine anything unfitting, something on the side for the Laureate, ya know, nudge—nudge. I'll lay out the whole scheme for her."

"You come within twenty meters of her and I'll throw you off the nearest crag."

"Oh please, my friend, I meant nothing by it."

"And that sniveling act won't work again."

"That silence you? Are you mute, temporarily at

least? Tell me, then, just how much money do you suppose this might bring? Give me two separate figures, one for the readings and the other for readings plus endorsements plus impersonations. I do a fine Prince Albert. But I draw the fucking line at guitars.”

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

I have a theory that movies operate on the level of dreams, where you dream yourself.
Meryl Streep

My big brother wasn't feeling good. That's what he said, though I didn't really figure he was sick. He was never sick. Also, you see, he had helped me haul ashes this morning. I love putting it that way, though it's really me helping him, mostly watching while he shovels out the dirty stuff from under the furnaces, puts it in bins, hauls it out to the curb. They pick it up there. Sometimes he lets me shovel a little and he doesn't yell when I spill some. He never yells at me.

He knows great jokes. Here's one: "Why did the chicken cross the road, roll in the mud, get up, and cross again?" You know the answer? "Because he was a dirty double-crosser." "Why are chicks such good talkers?" "Because talk is cheep." Get it? Cheap—cheep?

Anyhow, my brother's feeling bad. That's why I'm going to the State Theater alone. I've never done that before, but I'm not scared.

You see, every Saturday we do the same thing, me and my brother. We haul the ashes of six neighbors, sometimes seven. We make about 60 cents, total, sometimes 70 cents. That way we can pay to get in (20 cents total) and buy a box of Jujufruits each (10 cents total) and have some left over for our piggybanks. I have almost two dollars in my piggybank now. That's what my brother told me. I'm not sure, as my piggybank doesn't let me look and I can't count too good, being six years old, just barely six, but a lot better than being five.

My mom said OK. Of course my dad did. He always said OK. They said OK because I could walk straight down St. Clair Avenue and never have to cross the street. A long way but very safe. Some alleys are there but no streets, like I said and told them that, so they'd let me go, me and my 20 cents (an extra 5 cents in case I needed more Jujufruits, which I wouldn't if I didn't chew them).

The other reason they let me go was that the movie that was on was "Bambi," which I'd seen a few times but wanted to see again. It wasn't a western or anything. They'd probably not let me go alone to anything but "Bambi."

The movie started at noon or a little later. I wasn't sure, so I faked it. "It starts at noon," I said. Actually it started at one o'clock, I found out when I got there, but that was OK as I easily killed the time by standing around on the street in front of the State Theater. They let me in a little early. I got a real good seat in the balcony. Other kids liked to sit in the balcony so they could throw popcorn over the railing and see if they could get away with it.

I would have done that, but I didn't like popcorn. That's not true, really. I did like it, but it didn't last as long as Jujufruits.

Soon as the newsreels and the 3 great comedies (Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and The Three Stooges) and the coming attractions had ended, I realized I had been wrong about "Bambi" being what they were showing. What it was they were showing was "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man." Not exactly "Bambi."

I'd seen "Wolf Man" movies with my brother but never "Frankenstein." I'd seen comic books about Frankenstein, so I sort of knew what I was in for. Kind of.

You've probably seen the movie, so I won't tell you about it. What I do need to say is that it scared me, just a little bit. No, it scared me a whole lot. I don't know how to tell you this, but it kind of froze me into my seat. It really did. I started feeling better when it was over and they started right in showing the comedies again. This time, too, I paid attention to the newsreel, the war stuff, which was most of the news, though they also showed bathing beauties, for some reason. I paid attention to the war news so I could tell my brother, who was real interested and knew everything about it. This time I'd tell him that allied troops had invaded the Solomon Islands. I had no idea what that meant, really, but he would.

Like I say, that part was OK and I kind of forgot what was up ahead, like a moron. I kind of thought about leaving, but when "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man" started up again, I couldn't take my eyes off the screen or move a muscle, not even to go down and get another box of Jujufruits.

Well, I just sat there through the whole thing, start to finish, again. After the second time through, I knew I had to leave then. I mean, I couldn't stay there all night. They closed the State Theater down later in the night, I think. Anyhow, I knew I'd better get home, even if I was in big trouble.

I knew I was in big trouble.

When I got out of The State Theater, I thought there was something wrong with my eyes, it was so dark. Nothing was wrong with my eyes. It just was dark, very dark.

So I had to walk up the hill in the dark. The first little bit wasn't too bad, since it was still lighted by stores, but pretty soon it was just houses and these dark alleys. I decided I could get by the alleys OK if I kept

my eyes straight ahead and never looked into the alley. But that was awful, since that way I couldn't see what was coming at me, which was Wolfman, for sure.

Wolfman is much scarier than Frankenstein, since he moves real fast. Frankenstein is very slow, though you wouldn't want him trapping you someplace, like in your bedroom, I thought, which almost made me pee myself but wasn't as bad as Wolfman jumping out at me from the alleys.

So I didn't have any plan, really. The only thing that got me home, finally, was that moving wasn't as bad as standing still. A few times I ran but that scared me more, for some reason. I knew somebody was chasing me.

Once I looked over and saw the Wolfman, plain as day. He was just watching me from the alley, growling, I think. I just kept walking.

I guess I figured I was dead anyhow, so no reason to run.

I made it home, of course, and there was my brother, who looked none too good. He really was sick.

Right behind him was my mom, who looked pretty mad, and my dad, who was smiling, for some reason. Anyhow, my brother was in front and he started yelling at me: "You little dummy! You moron! You Nazi Jap idiot! I told you they had Frankenstein movies on. I told you. You remember, right?"

I was about to start saying how he hadn't said anything like that, when he winked at me, real stupid, but so I wouldn't miss. He kept winking and calling me a dummy and saying I knew all about what was on at the State Theater. Finally, I caught on.

By the time he was finished, my mom had stopped looking so mad, just gave me a big hug. So did my dad. Then we had supper.

We had pot roast, which I hated. But I pretended I liked it. I figured I'd better pretend. I didn't want to make my brother start yelling and winking again.

PICKETT'S CHARGE

This war is not about slavery.

Robert E. Lee

I fought against the people of the North because I believed they were seeking to wrest from the South its dearest rights. But I never cherished toward them bitter or vindictive feelings, and I have never seen the day when I did not pray for them.

Robert E. Lee

Honoring Lee shows how little progress we have made toward regarding all people as equal. We might as well erect monuments to Klan leaders, to Benedict Arnold, to Axis Sally.

Anon

“So, class—Madison and Christopher, come over here!—from this hill you can see how the afternoon’s battle took shape and—Michael, tell Joshua to take his headphones off and listen to—What?—Well, then just take them off for him—how the afternoon’s battle took place and how touch and go it was—Yes, Hannah, I know I promised a bathroom break and there’s no need for that childish pantomime—for both sides, really, and how much depended on messages being delivered or not and—well, you could hear me fine if you’d come a little closer—where was I?”

“You were going to talk about Pickett’s charge.”

“Thank you, Andrew, though I think that charge has been overstressed, blown way out of proportion in

importance. Just my opinion.”

Silence.

“Well, class, you saw the laser show recreation of the battle, what do you think?”

“I thought it was a great show, Ms. McMillan. Nice colors—blue and grey and all.”

“It was a fine show, Lauren, but as for Pickett’s charge?”

“I liked that part a lot.”

“OK. Good. So—Taylor and Ryan, would you join the group, please?—as for Pickett’s charge?”

“That’s why the North won the war, right, Ms. M?”

“Well, what do the rest of you think? Was that one charge so very consequential?”

Silence.

“What do you think, Alexis?”

“I think—“

“Yes?”

“I guess.”

“Well, lots of things happened that day and in battles before and after, so that—yes, Sarah?”

“I can’t understand why they have that monument over there.”

“To Pickett? Is there one?”

“No, to Robert E. Lee.”

“Well, we were onto the battle and Pickett, but OK?—will you all please gather closer and shut the hell up!—sorry—but Sarah just asked about the Lee monument, why it’s here. Here on that spot, you mean?”

“Here anywhere.”

“Oh, you mean. . . . What do you mean?”

“I read about it, all the whitewashing of Lee, people thinking he was opposed to slavery, when that’s just a load of pigshit.”

“A load of. . . . Can you explain, Sarah?”

“Lee owned slaves, mostly from his wife, who inherited them with orders in her dad’s will to free them, only Lee didn’t. He even sold some, broke up families.”

“What do the rest of you think of that?”

Silence. Finally, “What a dick!”

“I see. Thank you, Tyler. Yes, Sarah. There’s more?”

“A lot more. He took an oath to defend and protect the United States and then raised his hand against his country, showed himself a coward, an opportunist, and a cowardly liar.”

“Well, Sarah, you have to remember the times. . . .”

“Like I said, he broke his oath. Almost half of the military officers in Virginia remained loyal, but Lee turned his back on his word and then tried to overturn the government he was sworn to uphold.”

“But Sarah. . . .”

“I want to know, Ms. M., why he wasn’t tried and hanged, traitor that he clearly was. I read this historian. . . .”

“Sarah, you think he should have been executed?”

“I’m just asking. The U. S. executed 140 deserters in World War 2 and they were just trying to save their asses. This is direct treason. It’s like having a statue of Heinrich Himmler at Auschwitz.”

“I see. What do you think, class? Tyler?”

“Sentimental nonsense. Sarah’s right. Having a monument to this miserable guy here, especially here, is disgusting.”

“Why especially here, Tyler?”

“Like they were saying in the show—“The High Water Mark of the Confederacy.” Those rocks right here, right here, right where we are: that’s as far as these inhuman people got, as slavery got. The high water mark, the emblem of the beautiful lost cause.”

“And you think? Yes, Sarah?”

“It’s the point where bigotry and hatred almost won.”

“So, the monument to Lee. . . ?”

“Kept all the lies alive, made these shameless traitors into emblems of gallantry and—I don’t know—made them official, stamped them with approval.”

“Well, back to Pickett and the charge. You see, he came right up from over there

and the carnage was horrible. Lee knew that he had this one last chance on the third day of the battle, and. . . . Yes, Dylan?”

“I think you’re doing what Sarah and Tyler were saying.”

“Really, Dylan? How’s that?”

“I mean, who cares about the battle? All this about Pickett. It seems to me just what Sarah and Tyler were saying, you know.”

“Which was?”

“Sentimental horseshit.”

“The details of the battle are. . . ?”

“Remember that Faulkner novel you had us read? I brought it with me. It’s all about this poison we kept alive by things like not hanging Robert E. Lee. Can I read this part, which is what I mean, the part is—will show what I mean?”

“OK. Go ahead and read it, Dylan.”

“OK: “For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s still not yet two o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the

hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think This time. Maybe this time....”

“Thank you, Dylan. That’s beautiful.”

“You think so, Ms. M? I think it’s disgusting. Makes me want to puke.”

REMEMBERING JOHN MILTON

“OK, great joke. Now let me go.”

“Sure we will. Count on it.”

He was fighting not to over-react, not to get angry, not to get scared. The vital thing was to figure out where he was, who these guys were, what they were after.

“Is there something you want?”

“There’s something we want, we’ll take it.”

Stop asking questions, begging, hoping you can pry something out of them. Keep quiet and think. Think what?

“You know I got lots of money. Just saying.”

Silence. That was worse.

Keep your goddamned mouth shut! There’s a chance they might get antagonized. Unless it’s a joke, which of course it is. Concentrate on that. Who are these guys? How many. Seems like two distinctly different voices have answered him, maybe just one. Maybe three.

Count to one hundred backwards, breath deep, put your feet flat on the floor. Think of happy things. You’re pitching for the Atlanta Braves. You’re fucking the head cheerleader. You’re accepting the nomination of the Republican Party for President of these United States.

Trouble is, the darkness kept pressing in, making it impossible even to fantasize. He couldn’t tell if his eyes were open or closed. How could that be? He tried to force his eyelids up and down. How could he not be able to do that, tell if it was happening?

My jesus chirst they’ve cut off my eyelids. I was passed out a while. Could have done anything they wanted to me. But I’d feel pain if they’d cut off my eyelids. And I didn’t feel pain, felt very good. Never

more alive. But maybe that's the adrenaline. Doesn't rule out cutting them off.

That couldn't be, not reasonably, but how else could he explain the darkness.

Once he'd been in a special room for physics classes at college where they did experiments requiring precise measurements of light. They said it was very nearly perfectly dark in there, absolute pitch black.

Once he'd been at Mammoth Cave National Park—or maybe it's a state park. He was there with his mother, trying to give her a break after his Dad's death. They'd gone really deep into the cave, the tour group had, and the tour guides turned off all the lights. First they told everyone to hang onto the person next to him, since it was startling, what was about to happen. Then they turned off the lights and told you to put your hand in front of your face and try to see that hand, holding it as close as you wanted. That was pretty scary, even grabbing onto Mother all the while. They said it gave new meaning to not being able to see your hand in front of you face. They said that was perfect blackness.

Wonder if they both were. Neither time seemed as dark as it was now.

His hands were tied behind him, hard and tight. He had worried most about them at first. It hurt a lot, both locally, at his wrists, and in his shoulders and neck. They'd drawn his arms back too far. Every time the car or whatever he was in—must be a car—hit a little jolt, it felt as if his shoulders might dislocate. He could feel the bone straining in the socket, or that's what it seemed. He thought hard about the structure of the shoulder, the ball and socket arrangement; then he realized it was the hip he had pictured all this time. The shoulder was probably somewhat different.

Now he could only recall the pain in his shoulder if

he thought about it. It was the blindfold that was far worse.

He tried to listen for background noises. That was a good thing to do. Later they'd be sure to ask him if he heard distinctive sounds that would help them piece together where he was so they could come rescue him. A factory letting out, a gunnery range, cows, big trucks, bells. All he could hear was his own breathing. He tried to quiet that down and did. Funny how much control you have over that process and how noisy it usually is. A whole roomful of people must make a real racket just letting air in and out. We're used to it, don't even pay attention to it, just ambient noise.

He couldn't hear anything but what must be the car engine, and that was just a steady hum. He knew they all were in some kind of vehicle, though, as it now and then swayed a little. Not much. Remarkable suspension system, which suggested a very expensive car or even a limo. Now you're getting somewhere! A limo. He tried pushing back on his spine and sore shoulders, using his feet to exert a little pressure toward the rear. Not much, as he didn't want his captors to figure out what he was doing. His feet were bound together at the ankles, also painfully, at least painfully when he tried to use them to leverage himself against the seat.

But he did so, stealthily, and found only a soft, probably contoured pressure resisting his push. Very comfortable, doubtless a luxury car or a limo. The evidence was piling up for a limo. Now he was getting somewhere. Just trust to your thinking. Stay calm.

So, Item #1—a luxury limo. That meant the people snatching him were men of wealth. Was he all that sure they were men? This was no time for hasty assumptions. He could get a long ways if he stayed cool and thought clearly, he knew that. So, were they men? The one or

two speaking—possibly three—were certainly men or possibly women disguising their voices. He had read that you can get quite sophisticated voice-altering equipment, so it could be that these were, wholly or in part, women, with such devices attached.

Did it matter anyhow? Was he wasting his time, his valuable time very likely, pursuing an irrelevant point? He thought about it. Was he wasting his time figuring out if they were men or women? Not at all! For instance, if it seemed wise at some point to attempt an escape, the best way to do that would be to attack the scrotum, with knee or foot or club or fist. Assuming they were men. He knew that from karate classes. He hadn't taken such classes, but they were everywhere in movies and television; and besides, it made sense. But if they were women, what then?

Maybe it just didn't matter: women were sensitive there too, surely, and would double over in pain just like men and give him the time he needed to get away. Not that he had ever so struck a woman. He had never, ever hit a woman, not ever; nobody could say that against him.

And why worry about wasting valuable time anyhow. Imagining that his time was limited: that was a way to panic. It wasn't a pleasant thought, but what if he was in this for the long haul? Days and days, even months. How long had they held onto Patty Hearst anyhow? That was different, but you read all the time things like "Bank of America Heir Kidnapping Enters Third Month."

Of course he wasn't an heir to anything he knew of, but that probably didn't matter in terms of the logic of time and the need to narrow the field of possibilities. He liked the way that sounded: narrowing the field of possibilities.

If only it weren't so dark. But it was, so there was no point in dwelling on it. It was so dark, though, it seemed like it smelled dark. But anyhow.

What else could he establish, within a reasonable range? Maybe he had hit the limit of what he could deduce from the immediate physical circumstances, so how about—motive?

Crucial to any crime, and this certainly was a crime, is motive. That's what all the crime dramas say, or maybe it's the courtroom dramas: weapon, opportunity, and motive. The weapon here is the car, sort of, and the chloroform. The opportunity was provided by me taking my evening walk, which I did every single night, regular as clockwork, at ten. That's certainly a bad habit, that sort of regularity. Look where it landed me! Have to introduce more of the haphazard into my routines. Here's a question for you: if it's haphazard, can it be a routine?

But what about motive?

He couldn't think of any, none at all. But then the triple-whammy of weapon, opportunity, motive only applied if it were a crime. All along, he'd let himself think it WAS a crime, purposefully dealing with the darkest possibilities in order to prepare himself for the most demanding situation.

Just then the car swerved or something and he leaned slightly to the left, righted himself immediately but thought he may have made contact with something or someone. Couldn't be sure, but why not be polite? Nothing to lose.

"Sorry," he said, in a conciliatory, good-natured voice.

No answer.

Jesus Christ. There are people here with him, aren't there? Don't be stupid; of course there are: how else

would this expensive limo be shifting back and forth?
You think nobody's driving?

So, with no real weapon and no motive, there was only opportunity making this whole adventure seem like a crime. Opportunity alone did not a crime make. That's nonsense. But opportunity by itself could sure lead to a prank!

That kind of thinking could be dangerous, if it amounted to no more than wishful thinking, but he had, after all, entertained fully and in detail the most horrifying possibility. He wasn't evading. And it wasn't like he was shifting to the harmless. It was certainly true that pranks themselves so often go wrong. You read about it all the time. High spirits lead to injury and even worse. Especially if alcohol is involved. Had he smelled alcohol? He could only remember being grabbed and finding it hard to breathe. And there was a smell involved—kind of the smell of sort of like rubbing alcohol, only sweet, unpleasant sweet. They might know what that was. That could be important. He tried to remember more, but that had all happened so fast.

If these guys were drunk, he'd be able to smell it inside this luxury limo. Could he? That was the idea: keep compensating for this wretched darkness by testing his other senses, not just his hearing. Couldn't smell anything much, though, a faint smell of maybe polish, a new car smell? But there was more, an acrid under-odor he realized soon was likely his own sweaty smell, his b.o. No alcohol, though. That was a very positive signal, unless, of course, his pranksters were sitting up in front, behind a glass partition, as in the really posh limos. True, they had spoken to him a while back, but maybe they had caused the partition to be closed, once they had fooled with him a little, figured it'd jerk him around more if they were silent. That'd explain a lot.

How long ago had they spoken? Damn! That was sure to be the most important clue involved and he'd forgotten to note it. How long they were in the limo would indicate how far they'd driven, within a reasonable range. An hour was it? Two? A half hour? More than that, though when you're sitting in deep and complete blackness, like down a well, who can tell about time passing? Prisoners in solitary are said to hate worst of all the inability to tell how long they've been there, disorients them completely. And they at least are not in utter darkness; even in medieval dungeons, the darkness couldn't have been even close to this.

So, back to motive. He had been connected with some mock kidnappings when he was in college, deeply involved in his fraternity and their hazings and counter-hazings. His pledge class had several times, twice at least, captured actives and driven them way out, once out clear over to the Pennsylvania turnpike, and released them with no money and, in the second case, no pants either. Of course, nothing like that was going on here but maybe he could learn from it. Why had he and his frat pledges chosen kidnapping as the best prank, the best way to get back at their tormentors? In his day, before hazings and hell weeks had been cleaned up, the torments had been quite real, from being forced to drink raw egg and soy sauce cocktails to being beaten on the ass with thick paddles. The hell week antics had been pretty brutal: one prank involved somehow forcing the exhausted pledges to pee on one another. How was that? By squirting warm water down their legs so they thought others were peeing on them, since, oh yeah, they were blindfolded at the time.

Kidnapping answered to all that brutality somehow, paid it back, though he couldn't quite think how. For one thing, it reversed the odds: usually there were about 45

actives and 15 pledges, a 3—1 advantage, something like that; the kidnapping let them reverse the ratio and make it even more in their favor: five or six pledges kidnapping a senior and putting him at their mercy. Their mercy! Ha!

But they all found their way back easily enough, these actives, laughing and showing a lot of tolerance for what was no more than an inconvenience to them. Even the guy without pants had gotten a ride with a trucker, then an understanding motorist, and was back within an hour or two of his captors. He'd be tolerant and good-natured too about all this, never admitting that he had suffered some real pain and was, hell let's face it, scared almost out of his wits there for a short time.

But the idea of motive still hung there in the air as the big question mark. Why would a group of his friends do this? He'd eliminated the idea of crime, but even a prank had behind it some plan. Somebody had to say, "Let's do this"; and somebody else would say, "Why?"

That was the rock-bottom truth. Reduced to this fundamental level of analysis, motive was still the key.

The problem was that he didn't have any friends. Of course that wasn't true. He had lots of friends, including some he'd been close to ever since those fraternity days. And before that even, friends from high-school and from childhood. And from work and church and his club and the gym.

Which of them would do this?

He couldn't think of a group, a collection of them, getting together to plot such a thing, and plotting it would surely take. It wouldn't just happen. This was way too elaborate a scheme, with the drugging and the long limo ride—probably renting a limo even. None of his friends would own them, none of them being funeral directors.

His failure to attract the friendship of morticians struck him as very funny: what a hole in his social life! How could he have lived so long and not befriended the best friends of the dead? It seemed so funny he couldn't help it: he let out with a short snort that turned into a chuckle that turned into an all-out and long-term laughing spell, not a laughing fit. He wasn't out of control, just heartily amused.

"Sorry," he said, when he regained control of himself.

Nobody responded. Again.

Forcing himself to be serious, he returned to the motive issue and to the darkness. If it were not a group of undertakers and other poker buddies, gym buddies, work buddies, lifetime-friend buddies, golfing buddies, who could it be? It couldn't be those sorts of buddies, after all. Couldn't be. Couldn't be a prank. Nobody cared that much about him. Nobody would play a trick on him, even a minor one. Nobody ever had. And the reason was obvious: you had to think about somebody in order to want to trick them. You might think warm thoughts or hateful thoughts, but the person-about-to-be-tricked had to be connected to some sort of thinking, something going on inside you. For him, there was no such person, much less a group.

He gasped as this realization hit him. It wasn't anything short of a crime going on here, couldn't be. No trick was involved. No trick must mean a serious crime. OK, that's what it is. Face it now and get yourself prepared!

So, who could hate him? Or, put it another way, who would profit from this kidnapping? What had he done to deserve such a thing as this? The brutality of it all, not even talking to him. And the darkness, the unbearable darkness.

It wasn't time to protect myself. Now if ever I had to face the worst moments, the most shameful things I could dredge up from a lifetime with no more than its small share of humiliations and mean and nasty acts. After all, what had I done? But that was avoiding the kind of hard thinking I had to do. No time to start evading or apologizing.

Maybe I HAD done more than my share of vile stuff. Besides, what in the world made the difference now? Wasn't like a contest I could win or lose on points, was it? How in God's name could I get out of this? Out of this and back to the light? I'd give anything at all for light right now. Forget anything else—just the light.

For no reason, he thought back to college again and the classes he liked least, the classes in dead literature and his most comically ghastly moments in the halls of learning, struggling with John Milton. The science fiction class he had wanted to take was closed, and some further mix-up landed him in a nightmare of a class on seventeenth-century literature, minus Shakespeare. The minus Shakespeare part was OK by him, though even that high-brow tedium would have been better than what was left when he was subtracted. So little was left that about half the class was given over to John Milton, just to have something to read, some filler. There were several very pretty girls in the class, but they were there by choice—imagine?—and had no use for him at all, once his pretense of interest in the material collapsed.

“Dark, dark, dark amidst the blaze of noon!”

Those lines from Milton's unbearably long poem on Samson had stuck with him and now emerged. And then there was his sonnet on Milton's blindness, called “On My Blindness” or something like that. Thank God he couldn't remember that. But “dark, dark, dark amidst the blaze of noon!” came at him now, evaded his

defenses, and made him more terrified than he had ever been in his life, terrified way beyond the relief of tears or shouts. “Dark, dark, dark amidst the blaze of noon.” Samson at least had his blindness, which much have been a kind of consolation. Better than being robbed of light without any cause.

Who would want to do this to me and why? Not my two ex-wives or the one soon to join their ranks would care that much. They really wouldn’t. The first two didn’t even hate me, humiliating as that is to admit. They grew indifferent to me, as did my present wife. I had affairs to save face, and all three were decent enough to pretend that they cared. Have me kidnapped? What for?

Business associates? Again, the lousy truth is nobody would bother, no reason to. Same with everyone else I ever have known, same with me.

I had sort of run out of thinking and was heading back toward fear and a greater darkness when the car braked. Not roughly. Nothing about the ride had been ungentle, except the silence, I guess, which somehow seemed harsh.

I didn’t even know the car had stopped until I heard the door open and felt hands on me, easing me out and into the air. I promised myself that I would cooperate and, no matter what, remain silent. The talking I had tried had seemed to antagonize them, and maybe I could buy back what I had lost by being quiet, making their lives easy. Maybe they were just doing their jobs—like all of us.

Not a sound, not even a grunt. I could hear only some gentle scuffing and light breathing. They didn’t tug at me, even, just indicated what they wanted by gentle pressure. I tried to look under the blindfold, even thought about trying to brush my head against the car door or something to move it a little, gain some access to

light. Above all, that's what I had to have. But somehow I was out of the car and walking along before I had a chance to do any of that, get that blindfold off or readjusted. Hands were touching me but with what seemed like kindness.

Then a new hand touched, less kind. It stopped my progress from front and back, edged me to the right a little, my right, then with one hand on my chest, hit me behind both knees so that I sunk to the ground. Immediately, I was thrust forward, my chest resting on something solid, not uncomfortable but a little frightening. Here I was on the ground, kneeling over something: a stool, a block of some kind, a smooth rock?

All this time, not a word. The longest interval passed. Finally, my resolve notwithstanding, I had to say something:

“Can you at least tell me why you're doing this?”

Not a sound.

“You don't have to betray anybody. Just tell me why.”

I might as well be back in the car for all the good my questions were doing me.

“Is it night-time?”

Nothing. I thought I heard more foot scuffling. Could have been my imagination.

A long time passed, very long. So far as I could tell, I was thinking of nothing at all. What I suppose it was, was that I was shifting from one thing to another, sort of the way you do when you are going to sleep, now and then waking up a little to wonder whether what you'd just been thinking was actual, deciding it wasn't, and then going on to some other preposterous set of images and stories.

For some reason, I started to relax. After all, had they been planning something violent, surely they'd

have been violent, right? Just stands to reason. Doesn't take a genius to figure that one out.

Just then, without hearing a thing, I suddenly felt hot breath on my neck. Maybe a hand brushing it too but hard to tell. I think just the breath.

What the hell. No need to be unfriendly, so "Hi" I said or started to.

When I heard a hard swish in the air, felt pain in my neck like a lightning strike, and saw, at last, pure brilliance ripping into and through not only my eyes but all that was left of me.

DICK AND NATE

If I can succeed, my greatest reward and my greatest hope will be that I have done something for the tens of thousands of other boys, or the countless unfortunates who must tread the same road in blind childhood that these poor boys have trod, that I have done something to help human understanding, to temper justice with mercy, to overcome hate with love.

Clarence Darrow

“You like this stuff, this course?”

“Part of it.”

“What part’s that?”

“The accused. If we only had the accused, the guilty, without the judge and jury and attorneys and newspapers and. . . .”

“Stop. I got it. Your heart goes out to Joan of Arc, John Scopes, Sacco and Vanzetti, Lt. Calley. I’m surprised. You’re such a cynic, such a foe of sentimentality.”

“My heart stays put, and I give not one shit about St. Joan or Scopes. The anarchists, sure, and, even more, Lt. Calley.”

“Calley? You think he was set up, took the fall for the military establishment?”

“I don’t care. He lined people up and shot them.”

“Women and children, old people.”

“Especially them. You pretend you care?”

“Of course. So Calley is your favorite in this lineup of the guilty.”

“Of course not. He’s run of the mill. My

compatriots are Leopold and Loeb, Nate and Dick. Wish they were around, wish they could be here, tell us more.”

“Why they did it?”

“Exactly not that. We know that. Tell us what was in their heads, how they made decisions, managed to elevate themselves so triumphantly.”

“I’m starting to see, Jude. You want to probe their strange way of thinking, the way two brains can become one, just like Dick and Perry. You remember Dick and Perry from last year, *In Cold Blood*?”

“Dick and Perry are commonplace thugs with commonplace motives. Nothing common about Leopold and Loeb. That’s the key. They did what they did not to prove anything but to affirm what they knew from the start.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t pretend not to know. That’s beneath you.”

“You mean, what we were talking about.”

“What we were talking about, yes, Titus. What we are learning to recognize in ourselves, learning to be.”

“I made up a poem about that, one suitable for use in any court that dares haul us in:

I cannot stand before your bench

Because I am an *Urbemensch*

And far above the Human stench!

“OK, Titus. But you know what I really mean. Leopold and Loeb not only understood something fundamental but allowed themselves to grow into that very thing.”

“They figured they were exempt from common laws, surpassed common understanding.”

“Partly. They really understood Nietzsche. It’s not a question of exemption but of triumph, a triumph over pity and compassion and the illusion that ‘thy neighbor’ deserves anything but contempt. Nietzsche said, ‘I love the great despisers.’”

“I remember. That’s heady stuff. ‘I am the herald of the lightning, and the lightning is the SUPERMAN.’”

“What is the greatest experience you can have? It is the hour of the great contempt.”

“The stupidity of the good is unfathomable.”

“Pity breedeth bad air for all pure souls.”

“And they believed all that, Leopold and Loeb?”

“No, no, no. Not a question of belief or conviction, Titus.”

“It’s what they were.”

“Yes, Titus. It’s what WE are.”

“OK.”

“I’ll tell you what. Drop by this evening, about eleven. OK?”

“OK. Why?”

“Why? Consult Nietzsche.”

There he was, Titus, precisely at eleven. He wasn’t sure whether promptness and attention to detail was an Ubermensch trait. Seemed too much like obedience, maybe. But who knew?

“Glad to see you, Titus. What do you want?”

“You told me to be here at eleven, remember?”

“And you obeyed.”

“Well, I’m here. I don’t know if I’d call it. . .”

“Call it what it is. Anyhow, sit and drink what I’m drinking, and think about the trial and the act, the beautiful act, Titus.”

Titus couldn’t think of anything to say, and Jude helped not at all.

Finally, Titus spoke. “OK. What I’m thinking about is Bobby Franks.”

“And?”

“What qualified him to be their target. That’s what

I'm thinking.”

“Could not be less relevant. They had no target, remember? The idea was—you tell me.”

“Is this a quiz, Jude, an exam?”

“Not exactly. So, what were they after? And don't answer, 'Bobby Franks.'”

“The perfect crime?”

“That a question?”

“No, they wanted to commit the perfect crime, only Leopold dropped his glasses at the crime scene and everything came unraveled.”

“First of all, the idea that these two were after something as banal as 'the perfect crime' pulls us down into an explanatory gutter out of which we will never climb. Secondly, things came unraveled because they didn't quite realize their destiny, their true beings.”

“I thought it was the glasses.”

“So did the State's Attorney. Remember?”

“Yeah. That bozo said the hand of the Lord had reached into Leopold's pocket and dislodged them there glasses, glunk—glunk.”

“Right, Titus, and what was this same bozo able to concoct as a motive?”

“They did it for money. I know, ridiculous.”

“What is ridiculous is the very idea of motive, as I keep saying.”

“Yeah. I think I see.”

“I think you don't. What did Darrow say was the motive?”

“He sort of dodged that, made forays into the subject and then beat quick retreats.”

“And those forays were, Titus?”

“Their peculiar inner nature, their upbringing, the general lost condition of youth, their homosexuality, their susceptibility to 'old Nietzsche.'”

“Which was his best argument, Titus?”

“I’m starting to see—none of them, right?”

“I don’t think you’re starting to see. What did the judge say? Why didn’t he kill them?”

“That’s interesting and a little bizarre. He rejected all the testimony from shrinks and all of Darrow’s arguments.”

“Except?”

“Their youth. No mitigating circumstances whatsoever, he said, but he didn’t think the state should execute young people.”

“Which led the prosecution into one of its riskiest and most interesting arguments, that the government had no trouble murdering young boys by the thousands in war, witness all those now pushing up poppies in Flanders Field.”

“Right, Jude. That judge was a moron. Darrow even said so, said he could have saved a lot of time and expense had he known, when all he needed to do was present their birth certificates.”

“OK, Titus. So where are we?”

“They did what they did because of what they were?”

“That what you think?”

“They rose into their true essence, Jude, became the Ubermensch that was there inside them all the time.”

“Let’s go for a ride, Titus.”

“Recreate what they did, Jude?”

“Not quite.”

“Why not? We can find us a crime to commit, somebody on the street? No motive, you know. Clean and pure. No pity, no virtue, the absolute world of. . . .”

“Don’t say it.”

They did get into a car, Jude’s. He drove for several minutes in silence, not, however, toward populated areas

but toward the woods east of town.

“Get out, Titus.”

“OK. What do we do now?”

“First, you know why Nate and Dick ended up where they did, becoming conventional: one a target for a homophobic loon and the other, even worse, doing some kind of fucking charity work? Do you know why?”

“The glasses. Just a dumb accident.”

“No.”

“Why, then?”

“Remember Nietzsche. The lightning. What is the signal thing about a lightning strike?”

“It’s bright, ferocious, dangerous, un pitying. And . . .”

“That’ll do. Lightning bolts are single, huh, Titus? They don’t operate cooperatively, are just themselves, know only their pure singularity, despise and mock the idea of union.”

“Oh, so Leopold and Loeb. . . .”

“Nate and Dick.”

“OK, so Nate and Dick, Jude, failed because they tried to merge two into one, came unraveled because they violated the very core of their nature.”

“The nature they had never quite found, right, Titus?”

“Right.”

“I have found mine, Titus. Alone and absolute.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“And my glasses are in my bureau.”

ÜBER ALLES

**He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.
Adolf Hitler**

“It wasn’t all that remarkable, just youngsters from our village getting together, boys and girls, for what you might call romps in the woods, overnights and sometimes longer in summers. Like youth everywhere, having fun—boys and girls, just enjoying themselves. The camping was for boys only, naturally.”

I hadn’t been paying attention to the Mercedes-Benz dealer, which was rude, seeing as how this was his house, dining table, booze, shrimps, and beef. I wasn’t sure what “it” he was discussing or, for that matter, how my wife and I had ended up here, half-listening to a monologue. My wife’s job, an assistant professor at old U of Michigan, meant that much of our time, my time for sure, was occupied going to dinner parties. For all I knew, there may have been rewarding things to do in Ann Arbor, available to those not obliged to bore away their late youth. In this particular case, we had been invited by a friend in the Classics Department, who said we’d find this evening with a businessman amusing, a break from the usual all-academic monotony. It seemed to me as tedious as the usual, forcing us to attend, if irregularly, to this very old German fellow maundering on about his early days.

The reason I had missed the first part of his memoir was only partly due to ennui. I was using most of my attention to stare at part of the woman across the table from me, not lasciviously, exactly, but intently, I guess. I was staring, truth is, at her breast, the one visible to me as she plunged forward periodically, getting to her food.

I wondered at the time why was I ogling this routine woman and her routine breast, even if it was flopping so obtrusively in my line of vision—when I leaned a very little bit leftward. I decided my attention was attracted in the same way a child or cat might be mesmerized by the only moving thing in a static landscape.

When I find myself drifting, I have this bad habit of lunging into the conversation, even or especially if I have to guess at the topics afloat. I do this to cover my inattention. It never works but I never learn.

“Sounds fun, these romps in the woods. Did I get it right, that there were girls frolicking there too?”

“Not always, and not for camping, as I say, though girls were an active part of the larger organization. Girls I knew and, frankly, had my eye on, were of course in the Landjahr Lager.”

“Of course. So your overnight frolics were with boys only. I used to go to Y-Camp myself, you know, YMCA camp. Boys only”

Nobody picked up that ball. The Teutonic host smiled cordially.

“Probably a lot like your experience.”

More silence.

“It strikes me now how much time we spent naked there, swimming and so forth. I suspect boys keep their clothes on now, what with, Jerry Sandusky and all.”

My wife kicked me sharply in the shim, so I hastily covered my slip: “Quite natural for its time. I think enforced covering is more objectionable than naked boys—for things like camping. Don’t you agree?” I smiled winningly at our host.

Host let me off the hook. “Yes, yes. Like you, we were very innocent, though we all remained clothed. Not that your experience was wrong. It’s just that we did little swimming, more rough things, such as hiking

through brambles and dense woods. Imagine doing what we called a Wandern in der Wald naked. Oh my.”

I knew enough finally to keep quiet, tried to shrink back into my seat, pretending to know exactly what such a Wandern would be.

Our host kept on, kindly covering for me: “I was local editor of our ‘Will und Macht,’ but that marked the beginning and end of my literary life, so I cannot pretend to the learning that surrounds me here tonight.”

“Excuse me for asking,” said a woman I think was in Anthropology, “but was your organization overtly political? I guess I mean, did you have to hear lectures, that sort of thing? I hope I’m not being rude.”

“Of course not. I can see why you’d ask. After all, there have been many years of propaganda here in the United States, painting a harsh picture of young people like me. We were kids, like all kids, who, I can assure you, did not seek out lectures. We did nothing that youngsters anywhere do not do, nothing unnatural or”—he paused briefly, his voice rising only a hair—“impure.”

May have been my imagination, but people seemed embarrassed. Nobody made a sound, anyhow, which sort of forced our host to continue.

“I do not know about the Y-Camp, which was doubtless a wonderful experience for American youth. I do know a little, though, about the Boy Scouts of America, an organization I admire very much and feel a kinship with.”

More silence. Mr. Mercedes continued, in a mild voice:

“We were just like the Boy Scouts, yes we were. I think there are many similarities between your group and the Hitlerjugend.”

I detected discomfort. For some reason, I thought I

should be the one to relieve it, despite not understanding the cause. Shames me to admit it, but I was thinking the ease-destroying problem was the veiled suggestion of homosexuality among the romping boys. You're wondering how I could have been so dense. So am I.

"I didn't," I said in a calming voice, "mean to suggest anything wrong about the woodland activities. I am sure they were completely innocent, like the Boy Scouts on their campouts and hikes and"— why didn't I shut up?—"Jamborees."

He looked at me blankly, with just a hint of anger, only a touch, as if he'd like to run one of his Mercedes over me back and forth several times.

Another guest, this one a high-ranking guy from my wife's department, was next to make things worse: "I don't know how it was with the German Boy Scouts."

"We had no Boy Scouts," interposed our Host, still polite, if cold.

"Oh," he went blundering on, "but I was about to say that my experience in scouting, Being Prepared and all, taught me everything I needed to know and more about sex. We'd get out there in the woods, inside tents, and—well, you know."

Something had to be done, but I knew it couldn't be done by me. I was hoping Marie would step in, and she did.

"I was wondering," said she, in a matter-of-fact tone, "whether the movies you watched as a boy, in your village there, were sometimes the ones we were seeing, though I know European films are now, and certainly were then, vastly superior to Hollywood trash."

Everyone stared open-mouthed, but her gambit worked and we somehow made it through another ninety minutes, out the door, and into the car.

"Nice job, Lou," she said, as soon as the door was

shut—her door, mine still open.

“Yeah, I really don’t care if that idiot Kraut spent his youth fiddling with other German willies. I don’t know how we got onto that.”

She stared at me with what even I could see was contempt.

“Playing with willies? Those kids were informing on parents and teachers, identifying Jews, forming the core of the new Reich.”

Finally, I got it. “Ah shit.”

“Yeah, ah shit.”

“The Hitler Youth?”

“The Hitlerjugend, of course. He was talking about it for an hour. Where were you?” She looked at me suspiciously.

“I was bored, I guess. The Hitler Youth? Just like the Boy Scouts?”

“An apt comparison, would you say?”

“Ridiculous. Boy Scouts weren’t gassing Jews.”

“Being an old Boy Scout, self-identified, you’d know.”

“Wonder why Adolf there said that about the Boy Scouts?”

“Well, do you suppose he’s a fascist prick who’s covering his ass, rewriting his past, normalizing his monstrosity?”

“Sure, but it’s still odd he would talk about it as if it were nothing much. He must know Americans might regard the Hitler Fucking Youth as slightly different from the Brownies.”

“Like I say, he’s. . . .”

“Yeah—excuse me for interrupting—but he really didn’t seem like a fool, not altogether, not apart from that. How about if we bracketed off all that psychological stuff, and, just for funsies, assume he has

something.”

“Has something? He’s recognized the Heil Hitler in the Boy Scout salute?”

“Stay with me. What I mean is, what if he isn’t a pathological, Jew-hating unreconstructed Nazi, but a guy who grew up inside an organization that appeared to him part innocuous, part fun, and part irritating. It was just something that was there, something Otto and Rudolph and Max all did, just that—what they did. Not at all unlike the Boy Scouts.”

“But—”

“I know, what they did seems horrid, WAS horrid, but we weren’t there. And we don’t know dick, really, about the Hitler Youth, at least I don’t.”

“Well, you can fix that. When you aren’t engaged in your many money-making and helping-around-the-house activities you can be studying past issues of ‘Will und Macht.’”

“I can also talk to What’s-His-Name at Mercedes R Us.”

“Yeah, he likes you.”

“I can apologize, you know, win him over.”

“Or the other way round.”

I decided a phone call would be a mistake, so I headed on over to the dealership, which seemed to me low-key. Not surprising, as this asshole just knew how to lure the unsuspecting into his Third-Reich trap. Yeah, and I had to drop that. If I wanted to know about Bill (his name, I discovered), I had to stop pretending I already knew. I didn’t know a thing. I wanted to know. Keep to that.

The opening didn’t go well. First, Bill was—I could see it in his face—so angry at seeing me it was all he could do not to have one of his underlings pitch me into

the middle of Jackson Road. Only reason he didn't, I figured, was a suspicion that I might have stopped by to get me one of his specially equipped Mercedes.

I'll not spare you—nor me—the humiliating groveling I went through to get him to hear me: “Bill, I realize I know nothing at all about your childhood, what it was like. I'm sorry I made judgments out of total ignorance, absolute ignorance, and simply want to know. We Americans really are fed predigested knowledge. I promise I only want to open myself up to what you went through, what it was. It's so easy to judge and so hard to understand. I'm not saying I am capable of understanding, but I can do better—and I can stop being such an idiot.”

More or less, that was it. Bill didn't soften—he wasn't the softening sort—but he heard me out and, finally, said he would talk with me, very briefly, but didn't have time right now. I had an inspiration:

“Let me buy you lunch, Bill. No, dinner.”

He seemed startled, then agreed.

As I turned to leave, he touched my shoulder: “You know, this is not easy for me.”

I said I knew it wasn't, then changed it to “I imagine it can't be.”

He touched me again: “My name is Wilhelm.”

There didn't seem to be a German restaurant in Ann Arbor, none I knew of. Besides, even if there had been, going there would be pretty blunt: why not just entertain him at home, with some swastika festoons and pictures of Auschwitz? So, I settled on one of our town's many theme restaurants, this one down-home country, with bales of hay stuck around and wait—people in coveralls and flannel shirts. Nothing could have been less appropriate—I hoped.

Our waitress told us her name was “Marie,” that the specials included “Homespun Hash” and “Down-on-the-Farm Flounder” (I swear) and that she’d be happy to bring us drinks while we made our difficult decisions. I wondered whether some kind of Old Country beer would be just the thing, but, of course, deferred to Wilhelm, who ordered iced tea. So did I, though I hated it.

He began immediately: “The comment about your Boy Scouts: that got your attention, right?”

“To tell the truth, so did the way you spoke of The Hitler Youth.”

“Which you know all about.”

“Not a thing. That’s what I meant to say. I know nothing, nothing at all. And that’s wrong.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Well, it’s partly idle curiosity. But what drives me really is a suspicion that most of what we know, I know, is protected ignorance. That’s especially true, I believe, in those areas where the most emotion collects, if you know what I mean.”

How could he?

He stared at me. I couldn’t tell if he followed or if he gave a shit.

“I’ll admit I figured the Youth consisted of a bunch of blond-haired fanatics, brainwashed by a totalitarian state.”

“And you yourself were not brainwashed into thinking that? Eight million kids all fanatics?”

“Eight million?”

“All the young boys in Germany. All. And they were brainwashed, unlike any other kids in the whole world.”

“No, you’re right. I can’t speak for others, but I have nothing but received ideas. I keep saying that. Apart from Leni Riefenstahl movies and my dad’s

stories, I know zilch.”

“Your dad’s stories?”

“He was in the Battle of the Bulge, as it’s called here. I guess you know that.”

“Germans had a different name for it.”

“Oh.”

This was getting nowhere. So I plunged, “I really didn’t find out anything useful from my dad. He spent a night hiding in a cellar, he said, peeking through a small basement window at the feet of German soldiers in the street outside.”

“A town taken and retaken?”

“Yeah.”

“How long was he in the cellar?”

“You know, Wilhelm, I don’t know: surely not long, maybe overnight.”

“Did you ask?”

“No. Wasn’t like it wasn’t a fascinating story for a boy, like a horror movie, but he only told the story once.”

Wilhelm stared at me.

“He didn’t talk much—ever—about the war. He was in bad shape when he came home. My Mom said he once knocked over a card-table and dived under it, scattering cards and guests, when some kid, maybe me, popped a paper bag.”

“Shell shock.”

“I guess. Yes, you’re right. Odd I never thought of that term. My Mother called it ‘nerves,’ said, ‘Your father is just a little jumpy.’”

“It must have been hard.”

“Yeah.”

“Very hard on Americans.”

“I deserve that. Sorry.”

“Well, as you’ll get around to saying, you weren’t

the ones invading Poland.”

“I won’t be the one to say that. You weren’t the one invading Poland, either, Wilhelm. You didn’t make the decision, mobilize troops. You were inside something else. That’s what I want to ask about.”

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“Call me Bill. Sorry for my tone. OK, here we go. I was born in a small village close to the French border, 1932. You can figure out a lot just from that date.”

“I guess I could if I knew anything about what it was like in Germany then, but I don’t.”

“Well, I’m sure you know Germany was almost ruined by the Treaty of Versailles and had a Great Depression that was much worse than anyone else’s for a time and started a decade earlier.”

“Not exactly. . . . I mean, I didn’t really know.”

“Well, they did—we did. Listen to me, now: when Hitler came to power in 1933 there were over six million unemployed and that tells you very little about privation and the lives of those barely managing not to starve.”

I started to say something, but he was locked in now.

“My best friend’s mother became a whore to feed her family.”

He paused but I knew he didn’t want a response.

“By 1938 there were only 2000 unemployed, a tiny number. Can you wonder that some admired Hitler? You might have done so? At least you would have been swept along. I’m not saying my own admiration was based on employment statistics, but they help explain the situation I grew up in. You can surely see that.”

He wasn’t looking for an answer.

“My parents didn’t admire Hitler personally, nor did many others. But—listen to me now—it seemed to them, I think—remember how young I was—just

politics. They were trying to lead their daily lives. That is, until my father was called up.”

“What was that like—for him or for you?”

“You weren’t able to talk to your father and I don’t want to talk about mine. That OK?”

I said it was.

“I do know that my family did not want war, hated the invasion of Poland you mentioned—as did most of our village. “

He paused to take a drink.

“OK, the Jugend. By the time I was old enough, the Movement had become compulsory, not that any of that would have mattered to me—or to any other boy. I joined in 1943, when I was eleven. The compulsory business was just an organizational formality, useful for bookkeeping and administering supplies. Before 1939 and the decree, virtually all German kids belonged, over seven million, I have read.”

He looked at me hard. “That’s what you want to know about, satisfy your curiosity. OK, it was glorious, the finest time of my life, those two years, up until the Communists came from one side and the Amis from the other. But before then, it was like the Boy Scouts, only better. I don’t expect you to believe me, but it really was a wonderful experience, not simply ‘fun’ but meaningful.”

“I’ve been trying to think,” he went on, now in a much softer tone, “why it was so fine. I know it seems monstrous to you, a lot of hysterical kids, goose-stepping and saluting. You suppose it’s some defect in the German character, some permanent moral affliction, a genetic monstrosity.”

Before I could protest, he went on.

“Think of this: it was open, free, and democratic. Imagine that. We were all the same, treated alike. How

strange that was. You probably know that, except for us in the Jugend, Germany was still a country of traditional classes and class power, almost feudal. We got outside such things. Beyond that, we could do what all kids love to do: hike, camp, play games. The marching was tiresome, but the war games and the sports more than made up for that. Such joy in being young and unleashed, that was part of it. Sure, there were lectures, but very few, probably less indoctrination than in the Boy Scouts.”

I didn’t protest, wondering if he might be right.

“The biggest thing was getting away from parents. I didn’t care about serving the Fatherland. I was eleven! But to be free! It was a complete and wonderful world of young people. Our teachers mocked religion, and you can bet we carried all that home with us. We regarded not only our parents but old party-members with contempt: fat, sputtering fools we thought—and we were right. You follow me?”

“This is all new to me,” I said. If he heard, or cared, he didn’t show it.

“But what you want to know about is the Jugend and Jews, I know. I wish I could understand it better myself. I’ve thought about it so often over the years and still don’t. . . There was a big sign at our school that read, ‘Jews are traitors and our sadness.’ That sort of thing was everywhere, certainly by the time I was in the Jugend. There was little talk about Jews, really, but this attitude was there, as ground-work, the idea that Jews were inferior and very dangerous. It was explained to us that Hitler was a genius in these matters and had studied the eugenic and racial sciences, making it clear to him that even inferior races could produce remarkable specimens. That’s what we had to watch out for, the mutations. I know it’s all nonsense, but we were little

and didn't have any real interest in this boring topic."

"Boring?"

"I'm trying to be honest. How interested would you have been at eleven-years-old in genetic science?"

"I see."

"I doubt it. And yes, we heard about the camps. You could say that we heard about the camps and that we approved. But approval was never an issue. It was just there. Not as if we were presented with a dilemma and asked to solve it."

"Weren't you. . . ?"

"Oh, I see. How could we, even kids, approve of extermination? Tolerate it. Why didn't we rise up? Don't bother to say anything. You see—though you won't believe this—we thought the camps were farms. All of us just accepted that. We knew that Jews were deported, but we had no idea what was going on. Auschwitz—we knew the name—was a farm. We were told and believed, a farm. Jews were sent there to keep them from polluting the rest of us and from sabotage. We never knew about the gas or the rifles, the little children. We did not know. We thought they were farms. Had we known. . . . We didn't."

"I believe you."

He looked right through me.

There was a long pause.

"I know you want to hear about kids reporting parents, becoming little Gestapo agents. That did happen once in our village. It was before I was in the Jugend and nobody talked about it. I don't disagree that the threat was there, and I don't disagree that the power it gave us was delicious. Would I have turned in my parents? No. My father early on often mocked Hitler, imitated his shrieking and even put finger on his upper lip—his moustache. Lots of adults did that sort of thing. We

didn't care. We didn't worship Hitler. We were part of the Reich, the Volk, not instruments of a tyrant. You see? Can you see that?"

"I think so."

"It wasn't just fun and games for us, you're right about that. It was much more than the Boy Scouts. We felt we were at the heart of a new history, not just a new country, a new way of thinking about what it was to be alive, to be human. Parents weren't the enemy. They were irrelevant."

"True, from your point of view," he went on, "the great power we had was to be sure nobody talked of losing the war, of surrender. I knew that at the time, that I was the enforcer of patriotism. We were part of the New World that extended backwards too. We were reclaiming our heritage, the power of the Volk. We were the new Germany, the new collective, the new human form."

After a second he added, "Read Nietzsche. We went beyond the illusion of the individual into the grand world of the All, the One."

He was silent a long time. I thought he was done and made leaving noises.

"Bill, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. I . . ."

"When I was at school, our teacher often said to our class that we were so stupid, not half would graduate."

I didn't see what I could say to this. He didn't seem to want me to chuckle in recognition of how alike schoolteachers are the world over.

"He said that often."

I kept my mouth shut.

"I remember him saying it, as if it were this morning. And you know what, he was right, except that his calculations were too generous."

“Really,” I said.

“Almost three-quarters of the boys were dead before they were eighteen, some young girls too. Kids of 8 and 9 were slaughtered.”

“Oh my God.”

“Did your father ever mention Aachen?”

He had. Some instinct told me to deny it, but I didn’t.

“He was in that battle? So was I. American troops against a group of children nine to fourteen-years-old, boys and girls, along with a few old men, very old. “

I didn’t see what I could say.

“I survived,” he finally said, looking me straight in the face. “So did your father.”

“Yes.”

“My father did not, nor did my sister.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said, again softly, “Now, what do you understand?”

I'LL BE SEEING YOU

I'll find you in the morning sun—

His first response was embarrassment. Wasn't as if he'd been thrust on stage, knowing none of his lines, or asked to lead the audience in the Canadian National Anthem, ("Oh, Canada"—then a blank). One time he had kissed his mother good night and accidentally (of course it was) inserted his tongue—Ah, Jesus! Then there was the time he had nervously taken the urinal next to his boss, choosing it from a long line of empties, just to show how unembarrassed he was, couldn't think of anything to say, was struck with how unfriendly silence might be, started a joke he thought he remembered, unluckily turning as he spoke. Ice-skating last November he'd got going too fast, wasn't able to brake, and had sent three little girls. . . .

Enough!

It was only a mass mailer, not so massive, his graduating class numbering 177, not insignificant if you thought about it, which he hadn't for many years, twenty-five years. 177 was a good number, if what you wanted was variety, the chance to disappear or to shine without much competition, most of all, if you wanted to know each and every classmate—at least by name.

He felt sure he could link names and faces unerringly. It would help if he had yearbooks. He didn't because his ex-wife had forced him to throw them out. He hadn't protested then, not foreseeing that he would need them now, badly, nor that he would soon be shut of his self-consumed, bossy mate. Why hadn't he stood up for his yearbooks? Madeleine had said yearbooks represented an unhealthy attachment to the past.

“Immaturity’s one thing,” she brayed, “but you set records for arrested development. Try to inch toward ten years ago.”

“OK, dear. So we’ll live in the present, every moment full and wondrous.”

“No, we live in the future. We anticipate, plan, invest, look on down the road.”

She wasn’t inconsistent. Didn’t matter to her that such prudence violated his very nature. He wasn’t aware of it for some time, that at his core he was not a futures kind of guy, but it all came out when he caught her with the insurance man.

He walked in on them, struck immediately not by the bodies before him but by the abstract conjunction of ideas and tenses: “So this is what you meant by giving your all to the future?” He wanted to say something more, both lacerating and funny, some play on insurance jargon: term, life, annuity, contingencies, door-to-door.

Finally, a little slower than he had hoped: “I guess you just designated your beneficiary, bitch woman. I hope you’re happy.” The final sentence seemed to him weak, even at the time, and he cut it from his subsequent reruns.

But none of that mattered now. He had gone on to a life he could regard with pride and, soon, report on with considerable effect at the reunion to friends from long ago, now together again. It would be as if the clock had stood still, maybe not the clock of the body but the clock of the heart. He wondered if he should be proud of that formula, perhaps repeat it from the podium, when he returned to the lovely Ohio River town in just over three weeks.

Good thing there was a little time, just to sharpen mental images, connect all those memorable events from the old days with names, clothes, bodies. He had no

doubt they'd come to him.

They didn't come to him, not in a useful way. What arrived when he called up memories were shifting and blurry images, drawn, he came to see, from all over: movies, television sit-coms, stories others had told, wishful thinking, and desperation. He decided, the event now only three days away, to give up on complete recall and see if he couldn't at least be sure of what he was sure of, so to speak, nail down a few facts, as a base on which to build.

Names. Stop trying for so much and settle for a list of names, even if faces don't right away attach themselves. Those will soon be there, like post-it notes. So, he got out a good rollerball pen and a yellow pad, thin-lined.

Three hours of thinking, doodling, talking to himself produced: Harry McDonald, Sue Wilson (or Williams), Joanie Bailey, Bill Zambrowski, Nancy Collins, Mary Ellen Campbell, Larry Ellis, Connie Foster, and Harry McDonald (a different Harry McDonald), and Debbie Harris. There were other names on the list, of course, but honesty had compelled him to add "?????" to all. Terribly depressing. Ten names, faces matched securely (sort of) with six.

Build the evening from such a foundation? Assuming he could locate one or two of these old friends—had they been friends?—maybe he would, with tact, sharp listening, and lots of silence, do fine. It'd all come back. "You six are my rock, and from this rock I will ascend." As he thought on it, cast his libido backwards, he recalled heart-stoppingly beautiful girls, now no doubt ravishing women. Well, he was unattached, had been for a dozen years. Who was to say some connection might not now be made, given how much they'd have in common, he and, let's say, Mary

Ellen.

Just then: “What if they’re dead?” He’d be up shit creek. A moment later he realized he was worrying himself over nothing: how likely was it all six had snuffed it before age forty-three? One or two at most, given actuarial tables. Struck him he ought to call his faithless whore of an ex-wife, up-close as she was to the insurance game. Only—get this!—she had been dumped by Mr. Nationwide even before she got him to legalize things. YES!!

Such reflections stayed with him the next two days and on his trip, motoring across from Indiana and, without a hitch, into the Best Western he remembered so well. Only it turned out he could not have remembered it, as it had been built nine years after his departure. Just showed that his receptivity was sharp and functioning, too well, perhaps, but better than not at all. He pictured himself activating his memory-alert machine, another boffo line he might use when called upon to address his much-missed classmates.

He saw suddenly an uncomfortable truth: all his friends would remember him much better than he, they. Minus yearbooks, there seemed no way out of that blind alley. Just go with it. Take your cue from their eagerness and build on their rich store of memories, tales of laughter and longing.

The motel room was a little shabby, damp and dreary. But then, he wouldn’t be spending much time there, not unless he and Mary Ellen. . . . But he wasn’t the person to congratulate himself on sexual exploits before they occurred. Of course, the number of such exploits could be counted on the fingers of one hand, with several digits left over. That was a good line too, though it wasn’t clear he could use it in his speech. Besides, he hadn’t come all this way to make fun of

himself. A little of that was winning, he had discovered, but he also knew from experience he didn't know when to stop. After a while, others reacted to self-abasement, first, with discomfort, and, then, with irritation. "Spare us your false modesty!" a lout at a party, a friend of Maddy (who was herself humorless and possessed of no false or any other kind of modesty) had said. Still made him squirm.

Shower, change, into the car, setting off down old familiar byways to The Elks Club ballroom for the first event: "Greet and Reignite! Snacks for Sale and Cash Bar. \$15 Donation." He was a good mile down the road before realizing he was, maybe not lost but certainly disoriented. They had put in a new road, a kind of freeway even, and he had difficulty finding the best way off it for his destination, especially as he couldn't remember ever having been at the Elks Club. Good thing he'd allowed plenty of time.

As luck would have it, there were signs on telephone poles: "Class of '91 Reunion Next Left." Couldn't miss it. He did, but snaked his way back to a parking lot not all that distant, to the door, and into the ballroom entrance.

A reception table.

"Hi!"

"Hi!"

"Welcome!"

"Thanks! Been looking forward to seeing you all."

"Yes."

Silence.

"I'm Bill, you remember."

"Sure. The nametags are in that box. Alphabetical."

"OK."

"Just pick yours out."

"Right. You all been doing fine over the years?"

There were three people there at the table, two females and one male, none of whom he recognized. All were silent, maybe confused as to which of them he was addressing.

Just to end the freezing silence: “Well, you’ve probably been blazing comets compared to me. All I can claim is a divorce, been fired twice, and rent a dump in Peckerville, Indiana.”

They all smiled. One of the females laughed. “You always were a great kidder, Bill.”

“Thanks,” he said, then realized she was being polite, that he hadn’t been any kind of a kidder, and that it was time to pin on his tag and get into the ballroom.

He had expected to be early, had worried about that. Needn’t have: the place was awash with bodies, way more than 177. Spouses! Shit! How was he to differentiate, avoid greeting warmly somebody’s mate? It’d be a male, as he knew better than to approach women, remembering that his high-school adventures with girls had been few and not always successful, even when played out in memory’s editing room. Had any been successful? Had there been any adventures?

So, key on males. Casually glancing at his list: look for Harry McDonald, Bill Zambrowski, Larry Ellis, and the other Harry McDonald. He edged around the outside of the room (more a meeting hall than a ballroom), avoiding the approaches of old buddies, which was easy, as there weren’t any, pretending he was looking for the bar, though he wouldn’t be needing that, having spent almost all his spare money getting here.

No sign of either Harry. Larry, he found, existed in his mind only as wobbly pictures of a young, skinny boy, none of which order were present here.

Finally, there he was. Unmistakable. Bill Zambrowski.

“Hi, Bill.”

“Pardon?”

“Bill Zambrowski. It’s me.”

“No, You Bill. Me Fred. Your name-card. I didn’t put mine on. My bad.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“That’s OK. Zambrowski is in Italy, I think. Runs a vineyard or something.”

“You in the wine trade, Fred?”

“No, no I’m not.”

Silence.

“OK then, Fred, good to see you.”

“Right. Go to it, then. Cheerio.”

Had Fred been a classmate? Was he Australian?

A mistake but a start. An hour later nothing better or much different had happened. He had tried everything. Not everything, but everything walking around could do. He had joined circles, approached individuals, waited for others to join him. And finally he faced it: nobody remembered him because nobody had noticed him first time around. He had passed through high school as a vapor, nothing.

And he had come back, spent money he didn’t have, to confirm that. Something beneath insignificant—then and now.

At least he could leave. Not as if anyone would care.

Just outside the Elks, half-way down the eighteen steps he had counted on his way up, a woman entering not only stopped but touched his arm: “Billy Connors. That you?”

He spun around, stared at her chest, where her nametag should have been but wasn’t: “Yeah. Hi!”

She smiled—so pretty, self-assured, way beyond him—now as back then.

“You were on your way out. Sorry. I am so happy to see you, though.”

“Me, too.” A stupid response, but she was so pretty, knew him, remembered him. How?

“You don’t remember me. That’s OK. I won’t keep you, just wanted to thank you for being so kind to me in school, so very kind, day after day. You talked to me when nobody else would, when I thought I was absolutely empty and invisible, no point in hanging around—not to be dramatic. But, Billy, you helped me so—saved me.”

“I thought I was nothing too. I didn’t know that until an hour ago, or I just blocked it. I wish I hadn’t come here.”

She smiled and he realized how bad that sounded.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry, ahh. . . .”

“Mary, Mary O’Toole.”

“Mary. I am so glad to see you, really I am. I think I wasn’t allowing myself to have any good thoughts, somehow was settling in on erasing those years and me with them, you know.”

“I do.”

“Do you live around here, Mary?”

“No, just home for a furlough.”

“Military?”

“No, I work in Africa, Billy. Physician. You?”

“I’m just a teacher, Mary. High-school social studies, coach soccer.”

“Billy, you want to get something to eat, drink, think about something other than this reunion?”

He didn’t say anything, so she leaned into him, blew warmly in his ear, and whispered, “Please.”

“Absolutely, Mary. Did you do that back then, with my ear?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“What’s the use of accurate memories, Billy? Let’s go do it all again, even if it is for the first time.”

SADIE HAWKINS DAY

“So, Chrissy, you’re on the social committee, right? Am I right or am I right?”

“You’re an asshole, is what you are.” Of course I didn’t say that, him being a teacher, thus an asshole automatically but in his case larger-than-your-average. What I said was, “Yes, Mr. Dinwiddy, I am indeed. Yes I am. On the social committee and proud of it. You’re spot on, as always. I don’t know how you do it.”

Of course he caught no sarcasm, proceeded right along his narrow gauge track.

“You probably don’t know about Sadie Hawkins dances, Sadie Hawkins Day, Lil’ Abner, Al Capp—all that.”

“Uh huh.”

“You know about all that, Chelsea?”

“Chrissy, Mr. D.”

“Oh of course. I am so sorry, Chrissy. Inexcusable. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Please don’t.”

At least he’d forgotten about the Sadie Hawkins shit. Only turns out he hadn’t.

Two days later, on the P. A. system: “Christine Martin, Christine Martin—report to the principal’s office—what did you say?—correction: Christine Martin, Christine Martin—report to Mr. Dinwiddy’s office—what?—right away.”

Try to imagine something more embarrassing.

Of course I had to go, hear what Dimwit had to say.

“Yo, Chrissy. Got it right this time, didn’t I! Fool me once. . . . You know that one, Chelsea?”

I’m not making this up.

“Umm,” says I.

“So, as to you, the Social Committee, and our Sadie Hawkins Dance plans.”

Our plans?

“Umm.”

“You are just the person to take charge, get it on the calendar—in November, of course—and spread the word. Decorations will be easy: hillbilly theme, you know, lots of straw, barn stuff, that sort of thing. Probably without the cows, unless you decide otherwise. It’s really up to you and the subcommittee you’ll collect together. Really the whole thing’s up to you, my clever Chrissy.”

I wanted out of there so bad I just nodded and beat it to class, American History, taught by a drooling boob but a lot better than Dimwit. I figured I was trapped with this idea, trapped without knowing why and what or exactly when the trap would squeeze even tighter, apart from the fuzzy reference to November. I did know the “Who,” of course, though that helped not at all. I wasn’t going to consult with him.

I asked a couple of friends and drew blanks, so I Googled. Jesus Christ! From an old comic strip called “Li’l Abner,” if you can believe it, introduced, Sadie was, in 1937, before they had cars or telephones, I think. Anyhow, the dance shit started about 1939 and went strong, it says, until the early 70s, first in colleges and then in high schools. Dinwiddy must date from the 70s or something, thinks the idea is just what we need, we modern youth of today, to smooth social interaction, lessen bullying, limit drug use, and promote wide-range pregnancies.

Who knows what he thinks?

I forgot to say that Sadie Hawkins Day, the dance part, is notable, unique, in having girls ask boys. That’s the big step forward, Dinwiddy supposes. Maybe it was

in 1937, but who gives a shit about that now?

Anyhow, “girls” asking “boys”? God damn! First off, there’s the “asking” part, as if anybody did that now, as if we sent courier pigeons to one another. Texting, anybody? “Want to hang out?” “See ya later?” “What’s up?” And what about the GLBT faction? Dimwit probably doesn’t know they exist.

I decided to stall, not so much “decided” as “dithered,” feeling paralyzed. Two days later I got this note in my mailbox—imagine “notes” and “mailboxes”—telling me about an article in Psychology Today (how impressive!) saying that in 2011, ninety-three percent of college women preferred to be asked out and that eighty-three percent of men preferred to do the asking. Like that told me anything, since, as I say, “asking” is so outdated. Might as well poll college kids as to who gets to drive the buggy. I did see what Dimwit was after: a daring pro-feminist move, by Jesus, a way to unshackle women and set them loose to exercise THEIR preferences, express the needs of THEIR loins.

The very next day, another note, this one on a study published in some pathetic rag aimed at penile dysfunction sufferers, Men’s Health. This “study” found that forty-one percent of college kids thought that if a woman asked a guy and then the guy kissed her, he was giving her a “pity date.” On the other hand, a big majority said that if the man initiated the date and then the woman kissed him, it was true equality. Dimwit had written on the bottom of the note, in his prissy printing (couldn’t he do cursive?) “We absolutely must do something about this—and we will!”

Do something about what? Get the kissing going? Girls first! In class, in cars, in diners and bars, in the woods and in bedrooms. Then nobody’ll pity them? This is underneath pathetic. But the scary part was the doing

something about whatever it was—yes we WILL!

I was equal parts humiliated and confused, so I did the worst thing imaginable, asked my mom.

“You’ll do no such thing! That’d be fatal, honey. Trust me.”

“Fatal? Hell, Mom, it won’t kill me.”

“Metaphorically, dear. You’ll be breathing but wish you weren’t.”

“It’s a dance!”

“How innocent you are, Chrissy. Imagine asking a boy. YOU asking? It’d leak out. The boy you ask will leak it. It’ll simply. . . . Let me call around and see about friends with sons. Someone’s bound to be free and happy to ask you. Let Mother call in some favors.”

“Mom, stop humiliating both of us. I’m on this committee, the social committee, you remember. Well, Mr. Dinwiddy, who is a fool but in charge, made me responsible for this dance.”

“Even worse, dear. You go to meetings, put up the decorations, ask a boy yourself. Oh my, Chrissy. It’s not that you won’t snag one, but it’ll be seen as a “pity date,” which is what we used to call them. Nobody’ll ever forget you were reduced to that level, not the rest of your life. I’m just trying to protect you.”

“But it’s the rules of the whole damned thing, Mom.”

“Huh?”

“It’s called Sadie Hawkins Day Dance, from the 1930s, some comic strip called ‘Lil’ Abner.’ Dinwiddy’s forcing us, forcing me, to revive it. You know about Sadie Hawkins?”

“Oh yeah. My mother did, told me all about it, way more than I wanted to hear: all about how she had asked this Howard guy, who was the one she had had her eye on—that’s the way she put it—all through her youth.

Turned out he was hooked, so she had to settle for Morton, your grandpa, who was, she said, only a distant second. My dad she was talking about. Can you imagine? Guess you can, as you know your grandma, and what a pisshead she is. But yeah, I see. Your teacher's forcing you to bring it back. Holy shit. What about gay kids? What about. . . ?”

“What about me? I'm stuck with this.”

“Here's the thing, Chrissy. Don't go for a hot guy. Just don't. Not that you would, but he'd maybe feel forced to go and everybody'd know you trapped him and he went because he had no choice. It'd be as bad as the 'pity date' I thought you were angling for. Much the same thing, really.”

“God, Mom.”

“Thing is to shoot just below your level, assuming there is one. Just kidding. Then everybody'll think you're a nice kid, which isn't a good tag to wear around but better than 'pathetic loser.’”

“I'm sorry I asked you.”

“I know, your cousin Billy.”

“Billy's in the eighth grade.”

“Oh yeah. Well, let me scout around, like I say.”

You see what I mean. Big mistake to ask Mom, who left me where I started.

Not quite, though, as she did accidentally make me think of how dumb it'd be to ask somebody I really wanted to be with, tip my hand and all. So, since we were in this new 'asking' territory, I figured I'd be a sweetie and go for someone everybody liked in a way, not much of a way, regarded positively, but not very, felt sorry for, but not to the degree you were supposed to dish out to the two kids in wheelchairs, the one with a walker, the Aspergers boy, and the two out-and-out genuine retards.

Travis it was—perfect. Well, a million miles from perfect but strategically brilliant.

Travis didn't seem to be connected to anything—not Twitter, not Facebook, not the toilet walls, so I either had to find him at school or go to his house, ring his doorbell. And then, by Jesus, there he was in the hallway, third period.

“Hi, Travis.”

“Oh, hi.”

And he kept walking—fast. Shit.

But he couldn't escape me forever, so I started inventing stories—“You know Travis? Yeah, Travis Cole. He in class with you? When? What room? I need to see him about a petition.” That was lame. A petition? But it's what occurred to me.

Anyhow, it worked. Fifth period. Backed him up against a locker, I did, and went into full friendly mode, which was an effort but necessary.

“Now, don't try to escape this time, Travis.”

“OK.”

What a sparkler this guy was, enough to make me hesitate, consider what a whole evening with him might be, consider my back-up plan. But I had no back-up plan, so I took the plunge.

“Travis, you know about the Sadie Hawkins dance?”

“I saw the signs.”

“Well, you know it's when Sadie asks Abner to the dance—and he has no choice but to go.”

“I see.”

“So I'm asking you.”

“Asking what?”

“Jesus, Travis, asking you to the dance. Two weeks from next Saturday.”

“That's Saturday the fourteenth of November.”

“Yes.”

Silence.

“So will you go with me?”

“I guess.”

Maybe I could break my leg, contract a fatal disease between now and then. How would I make it through five hours, even fifteen minutes with this guy?

But there he was when I went to pick him up, jeans and a flannel shirt, which was OK given the theme and given what I had on, which I don't want to think about. My mom did all the talking on the way to the gym, and for once I didn't mind. Most of the talking was aimed at Travis, who surprised me by being open and funny. I wish.

Here's a sample:

“So, Travis,” Mom chirped, “are you fond of dancing?”

“Well, Mrs. Mitchell, I've never really done it.”

That was welcome news.

“Well, I'll bet you're going to catch on fast. You seem so lithe and athletic. You active in sports, that kind of thing?”

“No, not at all. I'm sorry.”

This made it hard even on a babbler like Mom, who paused before shooting again: “You know, athletics are a waste of time, anyhow, set kids up to imagine the whole world is just a matter of scoring a touchdown or—putting the thing in the goal.”

Believe it or not, I welcomed this humiliating babble, which proceeded right to the door of the gym.

“Have fun, Lil Abner and Daisy, and watch out for pitchforks and wild hogs.”

What ran through my head right then, walking in adjacent to but about four feet removed from Travis, was that Mom had her good points, a thought I could hold

onto for no more than sixteen seconds before, oh damn, Travis spoke:

“Why did you invite me, Chrissy?”

I took a second to answer, not wanting to start off the night being pissed. But I sure was pissed. “Look, Travis, that’s for you to figure out. It’s not a question girls are allowed to ask, right? So figure it out on your own.”

I didn’t know how he’d react but didn’t have long to wait. He seemed to get taller, I don’t know, bloom or something, get better looking, lighter. Was quiet for a little bit and then said, “That’s true, Chrissy, what you said. I think I was trying to gain control, make you say you felt sorry for me so I could feel sorry for me.”

“Well, don’t—either one.”

“I guess I’ll have to find a new role.”

“How about a boy trying to have a good time and not anxious to analyze the shit out of everything.”

“I’m not familiar with that part.”

“Well, then improvise.”

“OK. How about for you?”

“Whatdya mean?”

“What part do you play?”

“Mysterious babe. Inscrutable wonder.”

“Uh huh.”

“You think I’m not up for that?”

“Let’s dance.”

“I thought you didn’t dance.”

“No, but you do. You lead.”

“I will in all things. So, Travis, let me be rude in return: why did you accept?”

“Well, I had to think a lot about it, deeply in demand as I am, you know. Of course you do. I had to consider whether you could make it onto my list of acceptables. You understand.”

“And?”

“Well, it wasn’t an easy decision, naturally.”

“Answer the question, loser asshole.”

“I accepted because I think you’re the prettiest and sexiest girl in school.”

I looked close to see if he was kidding.

“Yeah, sure.”

“You’re right. That wasn’t the reason.”

“I’m not the prettiest and sexiest girl in school?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“And all along I thought I was and that was why you couldn’t resist me, you lying prick. So what was the real reason, huh?”

“You want to know the real reason?”

“Yeah. Lay it on me—the same way your foot’s laying on mine, Fred Astaire. What was the real reason you reluctantly went out with me, accepted my invite?”

“I accepted because I’ve been in love with you since the sixth grade.”

“Oh.”

WALK AROUND THE BLOCK

“Dad, you really need to get out—you know, mix with people. You spend every minute in the house. Not healthy. Not good.”

“OK.”

“You say OK, but you sit here reading, hour after hour. At least go to a bar, get drunk.”

“OK.”

“Get drunk. Pick up a girl—a woman.”

He was stung but didn't show it, he hoped. Ever since Connie had died, he'd been saying to himself how she wouldn't want him moping around, making his fat ass fatter. But the idea of picking up a woman seemed criminal. He couldn't have explained that exactly, but it was so.

“OK.”

After Julie had left, though, he'd gone back to his book. At least he wasn't watching television. That was a step up. He wasn't sagging into the state where dishes piled up and the cats shit on last month's dirty laundry. He was very neat, always had been. Connie had teased him about it, told him he was making her lazier. But she wasn't lazy. What she was, was kind, and he didn't want to think of kindness or happiness, not now. There wasn't room in the world or in his heart for either: they had been gathered up and mailed away.

But a part of him, the part he knew had been patiently built up by Connie, felt keenly that he was wrong, was actually being unfaithful. Even his book, a fine one on the terrible lives of miners, couldn't keep him from hearing his wife's voice sounding right through that of his daughter's: “Stop it! Just fucking stop it!”

Hell, here it was Friday night. Good night to hit the town.

He looked at a calendar. Must be Saturday. Even better! Clean up, dress up, and get out that door!

He did just that, then wilted. With his hand on the doorknob, sagged back, unable to do it. Not a chance.

As he was turning around, defeated, it suddenly struck him. One step at a time, like AA. He knew about that. If you can't climb Mt. Everest yet, climb the stairs. OK.

A walk around the block. Not much of a start but. . . Don't think of what it will lead to. Just do it. Sufficient unto the day is the terror thereof. The unfaithfulness.

So he just by God turned around and, before you could say "Why?" was out the door and into the nice cool air.

It was a long block; he remembered that, though he hadn't been around it since—for some time. Of course he drove to the grocery and the laundry and—he drove to the grocery and the laundry—but never all around the block, recently that is. This would be an adventure.

He forced himself to walk slowly, tried to put himself in the moment and not, in anticipation, fold himself back into his recliner sixteen minutes from now.

It really was a little cool out but not nearly as cool as he had anticipated, maybe not cool at all. How could he tell, what with his jacket AND sweater? He took off his jacket, folded it over his arm, and set about forcing himself to notice his surroundings.

He couldn't do it, could manage only a kind of an internal argument he hoped was not reaching to point of actual speech, alarming the neighbors. "Slow down! Notice the lawns. Smell something, idiot!"

Just then, just as he turned the second corner and

was almost half-way on a mission whose point he had now lost, looking up at the unfamiliar stars and wondering if he should count them, he bumped into a woman, turned out to be a woman.

“Ah, shit! I’m sorry.”

It was she who said that. He mumbled and started to proceed, but she seized his arm, not gently.

“Ralph! Ralph, right? You been ignoring me all evening, your own sweet Maisie. Now I got ya and you ain’t getting away. I’m done with my smoke and I got ya and you are coming back inside for a little drink, just a smallie, with your own one, your Maisie. Ron has first-rate punch, you know. I’m sure you do. Sneaks up on ya, Ralph. I mean that in a good way.”

“Back inside? You have to excuse me. I’m just out on a walk—not a guest at the party. Is it a party, right?”

“You bet your sweet heart, Ralph. And you are the centerpiece, the one with the champagne flowing right down his chest to his—. So, give an arm to your Maisie and conduct me back into the heart of things, like the true gentleman you are.”

“I really can’t. I wasn’t invited.”

“Sure you were. And don’t play jokes on me, honey. I know you of old. Remember that song? ‘I know you of old, boy; I know you of old. You jack a’ diamonds, you jack of diamonds. You rob my pocket; you robba my pocket.’”

He did remember it, an old chain gang song. Somehow, standing there in the clutches of this drunk—and she did seem drunk, though not as drunk as she was trying to be, that song flooded him—“I know you of old, boy. Where are you hiding?” It brought tears to his eyes. Ridiculous.

All the same, he let himself be dragged up the walk and into the crowded front room, Maisie hauling him

straight across the room—"Sorry!" "Oops!" "Excuse me, please!"—and to the punchbowl.

Maybe a half-hour later he realized he had lost contact with Maisie—probably not for long—and had gradually started to float from conversational group to group, saying little (saying nothing) but, without recognizing it, losing the sense of being somehow a spy or an invader.

He had been floating mostly among women's groups, somehow, not feeling safe exactly but less exposed and strange. He did recognize what he was doing but had no idea why.

But then Maisie loomed up in his peripheral vision, headed his way, and he executed a quick turn to the left, into an all-male ensemble discussing football, or so it seemed.

"Helluva pass. Yes, it was. What did you think?"

Silence. Then he realized everyone was looking at him.

"I'm sorry. You were asking me. Sorry. I didn't see the game. I am so very sorry."

What was he doing? One thing he was doing was embarrassing the hell out of the whole group.

Finally: "That's OK. We're all just faded jocks, remembering past glories that never happened and being all pathetic here imaging ourselves back on the gridiron we wish we had been on before."

Everyone tried to laugh.

"I do apologize. I wasn't invited here. Maisie sort of—well, she suggested. . . .

I've been drinking your punch."

Silence.

"I'll just leave. I promise I won't do this again, nothing like it."

A hand grabbed him, not Maisie's.

“Hey, aren’t you. . . ? I knew. . . .”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can.”

“Oh. You think?”

“I do.”

SUNDAY'S CHILD

**Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child works hard for a living,
Saturday's child is loving and giving,
But the child who is born on the Sabbath day
Is bonnie and blithe and good and gay.**

My friends, my gay friends, have widely differing origin stories, stories about how they “knew” and when. Ramon talks (endlessly) about undressing for gym next to Michael in high school; Teddy waited until college when his roommate made it all crystal clear to him; Tri (that’s his name) tells of his seventh-grade play and finding ways to hug and fondle cast members, puberty and groping skills arriving for him at the same moment, twenty minutes into the first rehearsal for “Robin Hood and His Merry Men.”

Me, I knew I was gay before I knew what “gay” meant, was attracted to boys before I was able to make distinctions between boys and girls. I guess that doesn’t make sense. What I mean is that there was no origin apart from my origin. Got it?

One great advantage of being gay at age 3 or 4 is that it’s easy as hell to induce other boys to cooperate—girls, too, in another sphere. What I mean is you can play house and paper dolls with the girls without getting beat up. Even better, you can play dress-up games with boys that involve lots of handling. Actually, with boys, you don’t even need very elaborate games, no games at all.

“Hey, let’s take off all our clothes!” works nine times out of ten.

Of course, that golden time cannot last. At a point along about five years old, someone’s parents will notice and protest, at first only mildly, but soon with considerable vigor. They might not go so far as to beat you up, but they’ll tell your parents, who will. From then on. . . .

The hardest times for me were along about fifth and sixth grade, when I was just reaching double figures in age and my dick was able to twitch a little involuntarily, coming to life slowly and irregularly but stirring, you bet, just like the blossoms of spring, *tra la*. These times were so very often tough, but they could also be rewarding. Rewarding? That’s not the word I want. Not like anybody gave out prizes, not to me. I guess what I mean is that there was more to it than just getting beat on.

I know it’s trite to start a story with, “I can remember it as if it were yesterday!” and you don’t care about the fresh memory anyhow, just wanting me to hurry along to the sex part. And it’s not the freshness of the memory that matters to me anyhow but its loneliness. It’s all by itself there in my store, on the top shelf, uncrowded and beautiful.

It started at recess, when Ralph (not his real name, since the real Ralph might possibly read this and come after me with attitudes altogether different from those guiding him when we were 12)—when Ralph, I was saying, hung around me a little bit, not friendly. He called me, “shitass,” actually, his only words being, “Hey, shitass!” Later, he knocked on our front door and grumped some more at me. One of Ralph’s many attractions was his grumpiness, his ability to come at you while seeming to retreat, to pull you in while knocking

you to the ground.

This particular autumn day we spent down by the river, the clogged-up-with-offal Ohio River, throwing dried-up horseweeds at one another, playing spear-chuckers, and climbing trees. I think I was tempted to offer Ralph a boost or just do it, shove his butt (gently) up to the next branch. But I was too scared even to allow that temptation to become formulated into words or images.

“Hey, dickhead, you climbing up or what?”

He jumped down, wrestled me to the ground, knelt atop me and pretended to spit on my face. All of this while frowning contemptuously.

I managed to spin him around and found myself on top, a position I was so little used to I had no idea what I might do, what was now required. What I was thinking was that I hadn't managed that, couldn't have managed that. Ralph had spun me, pretended that I had done it, pretended to be the submissive one. Anyhow, there he was under me, frowning, of course, but making no move to unsettle us.

I don't need to tell you I wasn't tempted to pretend-spit on him. What I did, though I still can hardly believe this, is dive down with my head and nuzzle his cheek with my own, not daring quite to extend my tongue for some ear-action, but spending what seemed like an hour there, rubbing softly, as happy and heated as I'd ever been. It was probably only ten seconds, I suppose, and, even if it were longer, it was me who broke it off, pretending I was biting off his ear, a lame cover but good enough. I've thought a lot since about those seconds, returned to them often over the years. I guess I wish I had stayed with him, on him, longer, but even in my most goony reveries I know it's best I didn't.

I had risked a lot, but he had risked more. It wasn't

fear that made me cut short our cuddling, but respect for Ralph. That sounds idiotic or self-indulgent, or both, I suppose. But it's so.

After a while, the sun warming us some (not a lot) we made our way to the river's edge. I wanted to suggest swimming, as I knew Ralph had once done that, flaunting parental regulations and good sense, skinny-dipped close to shore but for a long time. He'd told me that, igniting in me all sorts of raging images, of course. He could have been lying, bragging, only that wasn't like Ralph. Anyhow, I contented myself with cowardice, promising myself that I'd get him into joint skinny-dipping sometime in the future, knowing that time would never come—and not just because the season was getting late.

But we did take off our shirts, found some soft dirt, and basked there on the bank, letting what warmth there was come to us. I don't know how it happened, which one of us arranged it (if either did), but after a while we somehow were touching. It was just our arms and shoulders, lightly grazing, moving ever so slightly with our breathing, breathing that became deeper and deeper as we leaned together.

I have no idea how long we were there, none. Long enough for the sun to become much warmer, the sun or Ralph and me. Maybe we didn't need the sun.

At some point I realized that our hands were clasped. They just were. On our backs, eyes closed, we had managed this much daring intimacy. It wasn't that Ralph had done it or I had done it. We had done it, and we held onto one another there in the waning sunlight, pledging to honor a feeling we couldn't speak and couldn't sustain.

There's was no need to put a name to what we had found, risen toward. I don't want to name it now. It's not

words I fumble toward but Ralph's hand. It's almost as if I can reach back through so many years, keep trying, fumbling, feeling—stretch out a little more—and there it'll be.

RETRICK YOUR BEAMS

It is so that a man is stricken down when some terrible trouble comes upon him. But it is given to him to retrick his beams.

Anthony Trollope, *The Duke's Children*

Ever since Lily passed, I've been swinging back and forth. I guess that's a bad way to put it, since it makes me think of "swingers," which Lily used to joke was what we were. Lily never stopped being funny and upbeat, never stopped until she had to, I guess. But I've been trying to move on, since that's what everybody says I should do, "everybody" being all my friends, two of them, who were really Lily's friends and almost as kind as she was which is why they are still concerned about me.

I swing back and forth between trying to do what my friends tell me Lily would want and just staying at home, what they call, "living in the past." Living in the past is bad, they say, not any kind of life at all and just what Lily was worried about for me. I guess they're right, but I keep doing that, hanging out in the past, as if it were really the only place I could find any life at all.

I can see that it probably isn't a good strategy. My friends are right, right that I should work at it, find a good strategy. I don't want to find a strategy, though. I want to find Lily.

But I do as I'm told. I don't know how many hours I have spent following their directions on how to proceed, to "get on with things." I try not to ask or think

too hard about what “things” they have in mind. Not that it’s much of a mystery: they want me to “hook up” with somebody, a new somebody.

As I say, I expect they are right. I guess I really don’t have much of an opinion on the subject. That being so, I’ll try to do as I’m told. They mean well and I have no reason to imagine they don’t know better than I do. So, I’ll put myself “out there,” just as they say, become a “player” again. No point in saying I was never a “player.” They know that, so I’ll just pretend.

I told them I had never been good in bars. I figured I’d beat them to the punch on that one. Lily and I had met in line at an outdoor hot-dog stand, but I don’t imagine that scenario is repeatable, so I didn’t suggest it, didn’t suggest anything.

They told me to check out Internet possibilities, which I knew enough to realize meant all these hook-up, on-line dating sites. I spent hours, days reading about the sites, how to perform on them, common mistakes men make. That last, the common mistakes, sort of paralyzed me, as they all insisted a good way to drive away women was to say trite and predictable things, such as “How are you?”

I mean, how are you going to have a conversation without saying trite and predictable things? That’s what my conversations are, and I sure didn’t know how I’d suddenly become witty and scintillating just because I was now “Steady and Searching,” the moniker Julia and Monique devised for me. It seemed to me pretty awful, tell the truth, but I didn’t want to hurt their feelings. I did suggest I could be “Ted” (my real name is “Bill”) but they didn’t even bother to tell me how dumb that idea was. I could read it in their faces.

Anyhow, I spent so much time reading about which sites, what to say, how to proceed past conversation to

meeting and then to serious engagements that I never did actually bring myself to get much beyond registering. I didn't really have what you'd call a conversation, not really. I put it that way because it sounds better than saying I was way too scared to go on-line at all.

I knew I had to do something before Julia and Monique signed me up for some kind of club for Pathetics or enrolled me for therapy, so I decided to go on a singles trip, you know, a group tour chock full of men and women (in equal numbers) seeking to connect. I know that sounds harder than on-line anonymous chat, but I figured I could find friendly sorts or simply go off by myself and admire the temples or the wildlife. I always liked birds.

That's how I got here in Costa Rica, which is sure beautiful and full of animals and jungles and the kindest people. Only thing is I somehow misread the webpage of the tour company. Don't get me wrong: I'm not blaming them. It's a great tour and the woman running it, the guide, sure knows her stuff. Then food is terrific and so are the activities: I even found myself canoeing and (get this!) zip-lining through the trees. The places we're staying are top-notch.

I see I'm so embarrassed about my mistake I am bumbling on about what nobody could care about. You don't. I don't myself: I sound like one of those reviews people write of trips they've enjoyed, when what I should be getting to is my mistake, really stupid.

Here it is. This is a family tour, not a singles tour. Something like the opposite of a tour for needy singles. It doesn't matter how I mismanaged this. I did. I suppose it's possible the mistake is no mistake but a twisted subconscious action, putting me where I always wanted to be: in territory that is settled, happy, and welcoming—with Lily.

The people here are sure that, settled and welcoming, also thoughtful. There's this one family especially, the Lunts (not the famous acting family but just four people from Minneapolis). They've kind of adopted me, you might say. Maybe they feel sorry for me—I'd hate that—but it seems different from that. Not like that at all.

I was taking a walk this morning—we're at a game preserve of some sort—and are encouraged to just make ourselves at home, roam anywhere. I guess the game they're protecting is not dangerous. There are these monkeys, you know, along with some anteaters, coati (whatever they are), ocelots, and bats. Yesterday we helped the ranger put a sloth back into a tree. They had been tending it at the infirmary here and figured it was ready to return. I mention that because Carrie Lunt, the little girl who must be maybe ten or so, was the one who put the little animal back in the branches, did it so gently and capably, like she'd been doing it for years.

I was thinking about this on my walk when I noticed something beside me, looked over and there was Carrie, the very same.

She didn't say anything at first, just took my hand and walked along beside me, going nowhere in particular.

"You miss Lily, don't you?" she said in a minute or two, just like that.

"Yes, Carrie. So much."

"I know."

I believe she did.

"You know what, Mr. Bill?"

She was always doing that, I'd noticed, not saying something right out but letting you know she was going to say something, if it was OK by you.

"I do, Carrie. I do. So, there's no need to say it."

She looked at me like I meant it, then laughed.

“I would have loved Lily,” she said.

“She would have loved you,” I said.

“But that’s not what’s going to happen, Mr. Bill. That’s not going to happen.”

“No?”

“It would have happened. But it won’t. You know?”

“Yes.”

“So, Mr. Bill, why don’t you come and live with us? We have room.”

“Ah, Carrie, I snore. It’d drive you to stuffing straws up my nose.”

“Nah.”

“You’re a dear, Carrie. But, like you say, that won’t happen.”

And of course it won’t. But you know what? I am starting to think that, stupid mistake that this trip was, it wasn’t a mistake at all.

AND THE WINNER IS

Talent is commonly developed at the expense of character.

Emerson

Talent is perhaps nothing other than successfully sublimated rage.

Adorno

It seems to me a sort of clever stupidity only to have one sort of talent—almost like a carrier pigeon.

George Eliot

Must have been a cut-rate genie, giving him but the one wish. Things weren't what they used to be. Still, one was what he had and what he'd deal with. Besides, he'd only wanted the one to start with. He hadn't let on about that, of course.

"So, what'll it be, Tom?"

"Tim."

"You sure? My slip here says 'Tom.' Never knew it to be wrong. I guess you'd know. So, what'll it be?"

"Go back, in time, you know."

"Wow, that's original. Go back and do what, discover America, discover penicillin, discover genuine happiness?"

"Nothing like that."

"Be somebody, then? Napoleon, Jesus, Al Capone?"

“No, just me.”

“That’s a first.”

“I’m proud to be me, that’s what it is.”

“Not my job to question, but I’d think again. At least make yourself better looking, taller? Lose those outsized ears?”

“Don’t change a hair for me, not if you care for me.”

“I care passionately. That’s my job. OK, it’s you. Where, when, and what? Hurry along; I’ve got three others to get to today.”

“East Liverpool, Ohio; May 29, 1953; win the big high school talent show, singing a duet with Judith McCracken, and having the emcee make a complete fool of himself while we’re at it.”

“That sounds like two wishes—winning and vengeance on John, the poor bastard.”

“Oh. You know his name?”

“I know everything. But that’s still two wishes. You only get one.”

“I’m conflicted.”

“And I’m running out of time. OK, we’ll pretend the wishes are so closely connected they count as one. Right: you win and John drops dead of envy.”

“Not dead. Just minor embarrassment.”

“You sure? I can do dead real good, had lots of practice.”

“Leave it to me to devise his humiliations.”

“Leave it to you? Jesus on a zebra! But time’s flying and I gotta. . . . Look, it really is your choice, but can’t you elevate your sights a little, find something more important, more resonant, less fucking silly?”

“Mother said never to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Good for Mother. What’s that cliché have to do

with all this?”

“If you don’t see it, I can’t explain.”

“I wonder if I got the wrong guy. I been working too hard, need a break.”

“You do look tired. Your eyes are sagging. Are those eyes?”

“Shut up. One last thing, then: what’s your talent? Oh yeah, you said: singing. What song?”

“You’ll Never Walk Alone.”

“Really? No Verdi, Wagner, Puccini? Oh yeah, high school talent contest. But that song’s in copyright in 1953.”

“That beyond your powers? Some genie!”

“Don’t be abusive! OK, I’ll do it and wish I’d never seen your short, ugly self, Big Ears!”

“Better than little pointy. . . . Thank you, Mr. Genie.”

“It’s what I do. So, back you go, ready to wow em there in the auditorium, you and Jenny.”

“Judith.”

“Whatever. One last time: I could give John a heart attack, let him flop on the stage, no dignity and, pretty soon, no breath. Just a suggestion.”

“Brilliant. No.”

Before he could get to Judith—the song, rehearsing, performing—he had to deal with John. You remember John, the emcee-to-be.

John is a senior. Judith and our hero, Tim, are sophomores or something, in case you were wondering. John is the sort of people-pleasing fool for whom the 1953 term “dipshit” was invented. Such kids—numbering about one per class—often are thespians, announcers on the P.A. system, hall monitors, wearers of

bow ties to dances, releasers of bad jokes, active in the wrong way in the wrong clubs, proposers of dreadful ideas like a stiff honors system to halt the rising tide of cheating. They have depthless reservoirs of confidence and are so dull, so adamantine stupid, as never to register the responses of others. Nobody, not even lesser dipshits, likes them. No matter, these lulus imagine they are both popular and influential. The unshakable power of such baseless assumptions will carry them far in life. Not to be depressing.

Even our hero, though admittedly short on people skills, knew how to handle this sort: listen to him, give him a perch from which to crow, flatter him. In return, one gets to register undisguised sneers: Dipshit Kings are incapable of detecting them. Just don't yell, punch, or turn away as they are talking. Sounds easy, but it's dreadfully difficult. Try it.

Armed with confidence granted through the genie's pointless generosity, our boy is capable of doing anything for a good cause and is about peeing himself to advance this particular cause, his own self-aggrandizement. He wants not just to sing but to captivate, to emit such sounds as will reverberate in each of his classmates' hearts and send winging back to him enough admiration to last a lifetime. Wait! That's not quite right: not admiration, but love. And not a lifetime, but an eternity.

Maybe he needs more than a single song to accomplish that. Maybe a song plus an encore. Oops—he can't remember for sure but figures school-bus schedules would make encores iffy. But if it's the emcee's idea, if Oliver Out-Of-It is doing it for the good of the school and Virtue writ large, well then. . . .

“Hi John. You don't know me; my name's Tim Mills. I'm only a sophomore, but I'd consider it a great

favor if you'd let me talk to you a minute, ask a couple of questions."

"Definitely, Mills. And I do know you, by the way, as it happens, and am happy to talk to you. How can I help you, Mills?"

His resolve not to assault this ass-face is frazzling. Nobody says "Definitely"; nobody calls people by last names; nobody says stuff like "as it happens"; nobody acts as if they're manning an information desk at a goddamned library.

"You sure you have time, John?" He nods, with the graciousness of Queen Victoria. "Thanks a lot, John, I do appreciate it. I haven't been in a talent show before and know you've been in many and are running this one. I'm glad you are. We all are. Who else is qualified?"

Tim stops, worried that he's drowning both of them in molasses. No need: John swells visibly, nods some more.

"I wondered what it'd be like, John. Of course I've heard talent shows before, Horace Heidt. Here's what I'm asking—sorry to take so much of your time—those shows all are very mechanical, very predictable in their structure."

John (notice no nickname ever came his way) is trying to look bland, but he's puzzled. One has to remember that this guy has a crawdad-level I. Q.

"They are all alike. Each act gets the same amount of time, one after another, running like a model train, chugga-chugga-chugga. No imagination, no flair! If an act stinks, it goes once and that's it; if an act is spectacular, it goes once and that's it. Boring, boring, boring."

John is smirking still, but he seems to be quivering a little around the lips, maybe thinking Tim, only a sophomore, is mocking him. So our hero strikes fast.

“But John—I know I’m bungling this, but I’m nervous. I’ve known who you are forever, but I never thought I’d work up nerve to talk to you. I know what you’ve done for this school and how original you are. I know you’d never be satisfied running a boring talent show, when it could be the best ever. So I imagined you’d be doing encores, time permitting, for the good acts, but I really wanted to know what you had planned for the lighting, whether you’d use those carbon-arc lights from the back. Reason I ask is, it’ll change how Judith and I dress. I know all this is second nature to you, and I hope you’ll forgive me asking, taking up your time.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mills. I’m glad to put my knowledge in your disposal. I have built up a lot of knowledge here and naturally I can understand—what I mean is, I’d like to know how you younger students, be you ever so resolute, can be expected to know what I know, you see, having not had the same ways of getting to that—ah—knowledge, unless there. . . .”

His confidence doesn’t seem shaken, but this demented groundhog has waddled too far from his hole, is dazzled by the brilliant sunshine of a sentence begun without an end in sight, and is now rolling down the hill, ass over tin cups.

“I see! I hadn’t ever thought of that, John, but of course. Unless you tell us, teach us, we’ll never know. We might try to trace your steps, but we’d have no chance.”

“Right. Mills, I like you, so I’ll tell you. Of course my duty is not simply to run this talent show but to plan it, not simply to plan it but to—what did you say?—create it, and create it as something new and not like any other—ah—talent show like they always have, boring—boring—boring. How did you put it? Chugga-chugga-

chugga. Not bad. I like that, Mills. Yes! Chugga-chugga-chugga indeed!”

Tim tries hard to look as if he wished he had a pad and pencil handy.

“Yes, Mills, I intend to have fewer acts, of course, as you say, and choose myself on the spot which acts should go twice—or three times.” The last is true inspiration. “And”—his eyes now glint—“which acts shouldn’t go at all, time permitting, as you say. I can trust my instincts here, instincts and. . . .”

“Experience?”

“Right. Instincts and experience. Right as rain, Mills.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, though I guess you already did, ha ha har! As for lights, Mills, this place is primitive, primitive! Those of us in theatre certainly expect more, demand more! And we get—well, see for yourself.” As these two are now standing in the hallway of the central building and not the gym/auditorium/theater, there isn’t anything to see for oneself, which is OK, since John’s interested only in sounds, not meanings.

After even more lavish ass smooching on Tim’s part, tip-giving on John’s, slack-jawed attentiveness on Tim’s, and condescension on John’s, Tim manages to escape. It would have been appropriate to the occasion for our hero to have backed away, bowing like Osric as he scuttles. But even he has limits.

(You’ll notice here a shift in pronouns, point of view, whatever. It’s an artful shift, though you knew all along that “he” was “I.”)

Wednesday, Assembly Day, finds Judith and me

dressed to the nines, throats sprayed. (This encore we mentioned earlier—you remember?—is another song from the same play, called “You’ll Never Walk Alone.”) However, Dr. Clendenning, the orchestra director, has sprung on us a new version of the climax to the main number:

Longin’ to tell you [slow way down, soften] but afraid and shy,

I’d let my [very slow] gol—den chan—ces [slower still] pass me by

[speed up to the snail’s crawl] Soon you’d leave me,

Off you would go in the mist of day,
[slowest yet] Nev—er, nev—er to know [hold note forever]

How I loved you [long pause]

If [pause] I [pause] loved you.

Since the section is repeated, given in *Carousel* both to Julie Jordan and Billy Bigelow, we aren’t a quick act. To make matters worse on the timing front, Dr. Clendenning calls us out of class second period to load on us yet another way to prolong things:

“Got this idea, kids.”

Judith and I bob our heads,

“The Never-Walking encore is great but don’t rush into it. That’ll be at the end, after all the other acts. I’m talking about the main number here. You’re going to get applause like thunder. After a minute of it, I key the orchestra at measure eighty-four there—see?”

We see.

“I’ll cut right into the applause with the orchestra, forte. Then you both start in at ‘Longin to tell you’—alternating phrases until ‘Never, never to know,’ where you both sing, a duet, louder than hell, dramatic, ear-splitting sweet. Tim, you go high and Judith, you pick up

the harmony, and then whisper the last phrase, ‘if I loved you,’ in unison, and dead soft, I mean below soft, slow too, of course.”

“OK.”

“You better go back to cutting up frogs. I’m not supposed to interrupt your work.”

On our return—“Judith, what do you think of this?”

“I think it’s a little show-offy, even without the encore. And this’ll make two encores. One here and one later.”

“I agree. Should we say we don’t want to do it?”

“Huh? I want to do it.”

“OK. A little show-offy is good. But this’ll extend our time, a lot.”

“You think we shouldn’t just take over the talent show entirely, Tim? John would approve, of course, if you convinced him it was his idea.”

“You’re right about John, evil one, but do you think we really should occupy about half the whole program?”

“I do. That’ll be good.”

It is good. Sure enough, we finish the duet, embrace, bow-holding hands. The cheering comes crashing down like an explosion: on and on. Judith and I stand there, smiling like goofs, forgetting (at least I am) that we’ll be doing the last part over again. After a minute that seems like ten, here comes the orchestra behind us. Luckily, the lead-in isn’t short, which gives us time to regroup and the audience a chance to sense that something is happening:

“Longin’ to tell you—”

Immediate hush.

Finish, further atomic blasts, retreat.

“Judith, that’s enough—even for a dream, even for the genie’s capacity. Don’t you think?”

“If you do, Tim.”

“Good. That’s it, then. We’ll watch other acts. Return then to where we were.”

“Return? Do you think so?”

Then, just at that moment, faithful to his imbecility, John grabs the mike, shouts down the shouting and gives forth the news, we had, true, planted but hoped he’d forget:

“How about an encore? A different song. What you just had wasn’t what I’d call a real encore, as it was the same song, part of it. So. . . . Yes! We haven’t done encores in the past, but I’ve never been in charge in the past, and I say encores are the thing—so we’ll do that thing and have an encore.”

You lackwit! Busses leave on schedule, other acts are waiting, we’ve taken too much time as it is. Even fantasies can’t be this selfish.

I look at Judith, who’s thinking the same thing, nudges me; so I go out, grab the mike, and say, “Thanks, John, but there are other acts we want to hear and not much time, so thanks to all you friends from Judith and from me. We’ll howl at you another time—and that’s a threat!”

John looks none too pleased, seems disposed to force an encore. But when the audience laughs, he adopts my words as his, accepts the good will, and proceeds. Drawing back into the side hall, Judith and I are slow beating a retreat, still lost in our mutual rapture. It does occur to me that John might possess further, more crapulent ideas, and that Judith and I should duck out of his sweaty-palmed reach. But it’s high emotion, romantic and dangerous, and it holds us in its spell, right here in this huge cementy hallway leading nowhere in particular.

Judith is so pretty now, bright and alive, but she seems ready to leave, loitering only out of kindness, the

unintended consequence of which is that we're sitting ducks for John, who plows straight at us after introducing in his inimitable way the next act, dance stylings by Debby Ann Naylor, who (I recalled) seizes every opportunity to don spangles and tap her way into our hearts. But she never makes it past the vestibule, the left ventricle, sad sad Debby Ann. Debby Ann is loyal to her dream, and it repays her with mockery she tries hard to ignore.

"Hello there, kids! I like the way we turned your encore into the next act. Classy, class—eeeeee!"

"Liked your introduction, John."

"Yes! Yes, you did. I mean, you and I know these things, Tim. Excellent singing, Janice."

"Judith."

"Oh yeah, that's what I meant to say. Easy mistake there, but. . . ." John ran out of steam, tried to fire up again: "Liked your act there, Juiced-Up Judith. Good lungs you got, and I'm not being foul-minded either, ha ha."

Judith and I edge back, keeping our eyes on John, just in case he decides to come at us.

"I want you—don't go away."

"Well, we have to. . . ."

"Wait. Don't think of going. I have an idea or two up my sleeve, once this oddball girl gets through with her dance. I guess you could call it a dance, ha ha."

I look at my watch. Hallelujah! "I'll bet those are some ideas. But John, there's only about a minute until the bell. Looks to me like Debbie Ann is going to tap right into the night."

"Like fun she is!" said John, who begins a rapid twirl that will launch him back into emceeing action. But he slips, does John, halfway round, his shoulders and upper body having moved too fast for his fat butt and

heavy feet. The result is an undignified sprawl, accompanied by a yip that turns into low-pitched but loud baying.

“Oh my God! I’m hurt. I broke something. Help me!”

Judith and I somehow keep from laughing, but neither of us squats to help. John makes a few scrambles, trying to get upright with such haste that he once again fails to get his lower body beneath his upper and takes another sliding spill. By this point he’s sniveling, not softly.

“Are you hurt, John?” This, naturally, from Judith. I’m hoping that John has fractured at least one leg, his skull, all ten fingers, and his ass bone. I hope he has lost the use of his eyes and nostrils and sustained internal injuries, mortal.

Just as a weeping John makes it to his feet, pants torn right down the ass-crack, and starts plunging toward the auditorium, the bell rings. Debby Ann, ever the pro, transitions into two fast trip-and-grab moves, bows, and exits with dignity, as the one-thousand-odd kids empty out faster than the calendars flicking by in old movies, years moving before you can count or even see them, the auditorium steadily darkening.

“Judith?”

“John?”