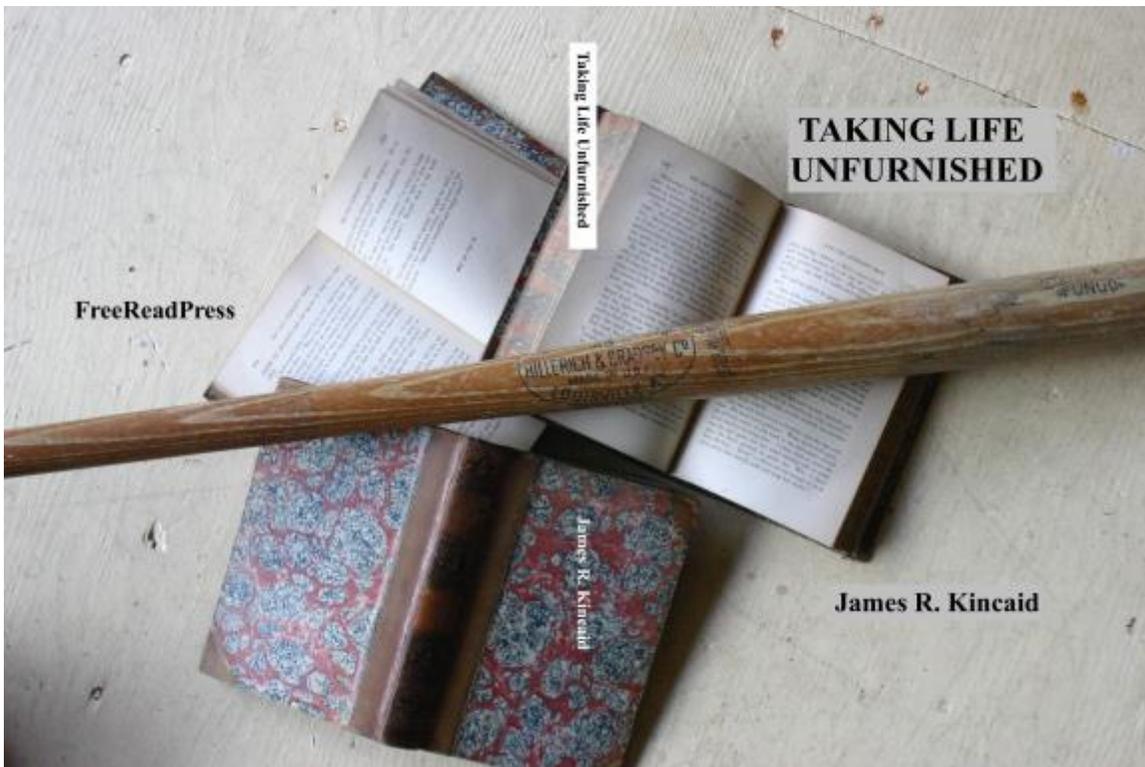


TAKING LIFE UNFURNISHED

JAMES R. KINCAID



[T]hen he heard the loud clock in the hall still gravely inquiring “how, is, my, lit, tle, friend? how, is, my, lit, tle, friend?” as it had done before.

He sat, with folded hands, upon his pedestal, silently listening. But he might have answered “weary, weary! very lonely, very sad!” And there, with an aching void in his young heart, and all outside so cold, and bare, and strange, Paul sat as if he had taken life unfurnished, and the upholsterers were never coming.

Dombey and Son

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe so many debts to so many people—scholars and friends (sometimes both in one) from all over the world and from decades past. Even were you interested in this topic, you couldn't expect me to remember them all, and you would see that launching into a list (well-meaning) I would be sure to omit some and offend others one way or another. I will only mention two who have done nothing whatever: N. John Hall, Gerhard Joseph. Just remembered two more: Rob Polhemus and Gerald Bruns. Yeah, and Joseph Dane. Nothing, despite repeated requests. I hope you haven't found that some friends are hardly worth winning in the first place. I hope you've somehow been lucky in that regard.

PREFACE

Dickens's Paul Dombey is unlike that author's most famous expiring child, Little Nell Trent, in that Paul would just as soon stay alive, isn't anxiously accommodating himself, minute by minute, to a melodramatic narrative. He just never had a chance to find a survival story, is lost and alone, trying to find a spot in a world that has forgotten to set aside for him a room.

IF ONLY

“I guess I am a fantasy.”

Marilyn Monroe

“Whatdya say, team? Is this meeting going great, or what?”

He waited, not too long, for something he should have known better than to expect. Actually, he didn't know what to expect, though he was hoping for more than silence. Silence was what he got.

“Would you say it was going poorly?”

“Would you say it was going as expected, or are you surprised by something? Yes, Arthur?”

“I'd say it was going just as I sure as hell hoped it wouldn't.”

“Good! Do you all agree? No takers? Arthur says the meeting is going as he hoped it wouldn't. How many feel that way? A show of hands? No? Arthur, would you care to elaborate, tell us why you hoped the meeting wouldn't go somewhere and where you hoped it would go? Is that a 'yes'? Oh, it's a 'no.’”

He decided he'd outwait them. Somebody would eventually say something or the hour would end, an hour which had, he saw, forty-three long minutes left in it.

He tried to look attentive, smiling a warm smile. He wanted to project what he really felt: comfortable, alert, non-judgmental. Only what he really felt was angry, uncertain, a man rolling on fast toward panic. These patients were the worst he had ever encountered, worse even than the cousin he had tried to help with his paranoia, ended up making it worse: he had come in thinking the cops were after him, hiding in his bushes, tapping his phone; and he exited treatment with a list of spies and persecutors and agents of terror greatly expanded, including his own kids (ages nine and eleven), his mother, and the very cousin trying to treat him.

After six minutes, a little less, he decided he couldn't take any more.

“Here's an icebreaker, gang. Let's all reveal a fantasy we have, talk about it, you know, just throw it out there for the group. Doesn't have to be anything shameful, of course, just something you use to prop yourself up, kind of the silver lining you look for. OK?”

“You going first, Miles?”

Holy shit! “I'm willing to do that, but you don't think me starting might poison the well a little, set us off on the wrong foot?”

Lillian it was said, “No.”

“OK.”

He somehow couldn't think of anything right then and there. After all, the idea was to let it roll, open the doors to the subconscious and see what pops out. That's what he wanted for his group, spilling the dreadful beans, no censoring or tailoring for an audience, just. . . .

"You going to tell us, Miles?"

"I sure am, Andy. First, let me say a word about fantasies, how important they are to all of us. You mustn't be ashamed or think you're the only one who enjoys fantasies or depends on them, even. Albert Einstein, it was, said, and I quote, 'Fantasy is more important to me than positive knowledge.' So, we should feel easy about discussing ours."

Silence.

"You sure you want me inaugurating this?"

Silence.

"If you insist. Unaccustomed as I am. . . ."

Nobody laughed.

"Here it is, then, I'd like to have a ray gun that I could use on anybody I wanted."

"Jesus Christ, Miles. You fantasize about killing sprees, zapping your enemies?"

"Well, well, Julie. No, not killing."

"What, then?"

Good question. How'd he let himself get trapped into leading off, and how had that homicidal fantasy ever leaked out? He had to invent something fast, but he could do that. He hadn't spent all those years studying psychiatry without learning how to disguise thing, embellish, lie.

"My ray gun, I call it 'Enabler,' does not harm. In fact, it grants wishes, like the genie in the bottle, only just one wish per zap."

"How do you know what the zapped guy wants?"

"Guy or woman, Arthur. You see, that's just it—I don't. What flowers comes from the other person, not from me. They often don't know their wish themselves, but there it is, making them very happy—very happy indeed."

He was ready, more than ready, to move on to the next patient, the next fantasy, but the group was prepared only for more of his. Wanted to keep it going, more precisely, to grill him.

"What if their fantasy is to murder you, to abduct your kids, to burn down this office, to march you naked down the street, to paint your balls with Superheat?"

"Oh, I forgot to say that my ray gun uncovers only happy fantasies, just happy and harmless ones."

"Sounds asinine to me, like some Disney cartoon from the old days, before they realized kids wanted sex and violence."

"Right as rain, Barb, absolutely! Still, do remember we try hard to be non-judgmental here, to understand and support one another and not be quick to censor or

criticize. Not that I am at all upset or offended, you know. That'd be even worse—me judging you.”

Of course he was upset and offended, very, and was judging Barb to be the mean-spirited, viperous bitch she was.

He managed not so say so.

“Barb, would you tell us yours? Just go ahead, as we are all friends here.”

Like hell we were, but Barb let fly anyhow.

“I think of being with Jesus.”

“Tell us more.”

“I don't even really believe that stuff, but I do think of it. I think I'll be there with Jesus, and. . . .”

“And?”

“My little sister, too. My mother and daddy. And we'd all be well and I'd not be sick and nobody would be dead.”

Barb started to cry, which might have made everyone uncomfortable but somehow didn't.

“I'll go next, but I do want to tell Barb I think that's not a fantasy, that it will happen and that you'll all be together and very happy. Anyhow, mine is that I want to be cuckolded. That's pretty much it.”

“That's your fantasy, Andy?”

“It is. I don't exactly picture it or anything, but what's in my fantasy is kind of after it happens and I'm telling Sharon, my wife, that it's OK, that I understand and forgive her and that we're. . . .”

“Yes, Andy.”

“We're even now, or at least I'm not such a son of a bitch.”

“Lillian. Yes?”

“I got mine, kind of, from James Thurber. I never got to play sports, you see, and it's not that I think I would have been good or anything. I just love the idea and I think about it all the time, put myself to sleep with it.”

“I think we all do that, Lillian.”

“Thanks, Miles. So, mine is that I'm pitching in the World Series, against the Yankees, and I pitch all the games and strike out every one of them and my teammates put me on their shoulders and carry me off the field. It just seems so real. I know it's silly but it seems so important. And don't tell me it's not silly. I know what it is. It's not silly; it's me.”

“I'll go next.”

“Do, Julie.”

“I know we're not supposed to apologize, so, OK: I live in a world of talking animals and they all like me and are my friends. Nobody makes fun of anybody else. Everybody is pretty. Nobody wants to hurt.”

They all waited for Julie to say more or for someone to say something. Nobody did, so everyone looked at Arthur, who had, in a way, started the whole thing by his complaint.

“Arthur?” Several people seemed to say that at once.

“OK. What the hell. This famous political commentator, Glenn Beck, you know him?”

Everyone nodded.

“Well, he said his fantasy was to strangle Michael Moore---you know him?”

Everyone nodded.

“His fantasy was to strangle Michael Moore with his bare hands. He said it was comedy, his statement. Maybe it was.”

Nobody spoke for a while. Finally, Miles thought he should, though he had no idea what to say: “So, Arthur, is that your fantasy? I mean, can you relate to what Glenn Beck said.”

“No. I like Michael Moore, admire him. I wish I knew him. I wish he was my friend.”

“Oh, so do you have a fantasy you’d like to tell us about?”

“I just did.”

“You did?”

“My fantasy is that I have a friend.”

There was still almost a half hour to go, but Miles knew what to do now and then, if not often, so he moved the whole session, the whole group, down to the closest: McSweeney’s Bar and Grill.

McSweeney’s was dingy and none too clean, a bar without a grill, even; but that was OK. That very evening, against all odds, it gave form to, magically fulfilled, the fantasy of one of the group. More than one.

CONFESSIONS FROM THE CONFESSIONAL

“Confession is good for the soul only in the sense that a tweed coat is good for dandruff. It is a palliative—rather than a remedy.”

Peter De Vries

“The confession of evil works is the beginning of good works.”

Saint Augustine

You know what galls me sore? It’s that every moron, including non-Catholic morons, atheists even, supposes he knows what goes on in the sacrament of confession, knows how it works and why it is sanctified and what rules obtain and why we do it in the first place. You ask the average asshole on the street how confession works and the last thing you’ll get back is, “You know, I really don’t know, NOT BEING A PRIEST.”

What you will get back is a lot of completely inaccurate horseshit, uttered in a solemn and knowing tone. What you’ll be told is such things as:

- confession is meant to promote the forgiveness of sins, expiation
- confession allows the priest to give you advice
- confession allows the priest to assign penance
- confession forces the priest to assign categories to offenses: venal and mortal and those not worth mentioning
- confession is conducted in secrecy and the information obtained thereby is confidential

Not true, any of it.

Pope Pius XXIIIrd told me directly (well, as directly as is likely) that confession has no fixed status in church practice and is to be used at the discretion of individual priests, so long as nobody got the idea that by confessing he was off the fucking hook and somehow protected from the publicity which ought to attach itself to heinous acts and the shame which God fully intended to follow from that publicity. But what’s the word of the Pope himself compared to the loud opinions of a layman, who has spent not ten thoughtful minutes in his disgusting, sin-soaked life?

I expect to be told that I shouldn’t use the male pronoun exclusively. I am sure I’ll be told that. I’ll be told that by the same cretins who know all about confession, just as they know all about linguistic sensitivity. You know what I’d say to these laymen if I had special dispensation? I’d say that they might just give my robe a little lift, shove

aside my cassock, pucker up, and kiss my rosy priestly bum! I use male pronouns exclusively because it's males I am talking about. You won't find women guilty of these same offenses, pretending to know things they don't and lecturing you on them.

I agree with those who think women should be allowed in the priesthood. So does Pius, just waiting for the right time to kick that baby into the lineup of agenda items and ram it through the convocation, right past all those fat-assed eastern European cardinals. I suggested a trade-off, give them a little and snatch a little back, when they aren't looking. I mean, they aren't too vigilant, unless it's their food or sexual habits you're threatening. They aren't too smart either, but that goes without saying, huh?

Women would do a great deal to enliven things and bring the church into the twenty-first century, as I mentioned to Pius. "Into the fifteenth-century century," he quipped. That Pius is a real cut-up sometimes. I happen to know he has an eye for the ladies, which all true disciples of Christ must have, I say, as an essential part of their aesthetic equipment. This is what most people don't understand about the relationships which grow up often between us and boys. It's a question of understanding and appreciating beauty, that's all. But trying to explain that sort of thing to your average layman is like trying to tell a cop that the boys are in their underwear because they feel more comfortable that way, can express themselves more freely, and find their unencumbered way to Christ. I choose that example because it has arisen in some retreats I have attended, where several priests have themselves discussed openly and frankly the misunderstandings they have run into. Fr. John McClellan and Fr. Dominic Robestelli found the police so resolutely obtuse that the Bishop was forced to transfer them out of their parish duties and right into coaching basketball, conducting after-school classes in good grooming and proper dating practices, and doing miscellaneous counseling at Our Lady of the Springs Elementary.

Here's the raw and absolute truth about the confessional world. I speak here of the confessional work of those priests not trapped in the clutches of the Eastern European crowd, whose practices have so little truly Roman (or Christian) foundation that I'd call them downright Protestant, were that not a little unfair to Protestants, some of whom have a pretty good line on sin, arrived at accidentally, of course, and not through centuries of rigorous thought and immersion, but pretty good all the same.

Confession is intended to sort through the lousy and fun things we have done, sorting out the lousy from the fun, finding ways to promote the latter and publicize the former. I've explained all this earlier. With the Lord's help and the sanction of my good buddy Pius XXIIIrd, this little piece is offered as my own humble contribution to a greater understanding of Our Holy Catholic Church and its sacraments.

---Mary Alice Martin is guilty of allowing Robert Miston to play with her breasts out in back of the Von's store on Bixby Street. Mary Alice Martin was advised to tell her husband and try not to let it happen again.

---Robert Miston is guilty of fondling the breasts of Mary Alice Martin and also of Jessica Martin at several different locales and, naturally, at different times. Yes, Jessica Martin is Mary Alice's daughter. Robert Martin was advised to stop playing with fire.

---Billy Tenwood confesses each week to masturbating up to twenty-five times per day. He was told that God did not disapprove of such practices. That truth didn't take hold, and he returned again and reported the same tired activity. He was told not to waste the time of priests, holy men with real confessions to hear. That didn't work any better. He was reassigned to the counsel of Fr. Dominic Robestelli.

---Roberta Anderson, Louise Underwood, and Maxine Norton came in as a group and confessed to adultery. Confession is not customarily a group activity, but this was a special case, made special by their assertion that the object of their misdeeds was the same, in fact, the author of this very theological tract you are reading. They were told, jokingly, not to compare notes and dismissed good-naturedly.

---Simon Thurston confessed to having doubts about the exact makeup of the Holy Trinity, something like that. Who could be bothered to listen to that? He was advised to get a fucking life.

---Paula Johnson confessed to having murderous thoughts and impulses. She was urged to identify the object of her homicidal desires. At first she refused, but when told God would send her to hell unless she identified the potential victim, she caved in and said it was her very own mother, no less. She was told that her impulses were disgusting and certainly not forgivable. I think she has left the church. Bill over at First Church of Christ told me she had become a Methodist. Good riddance.

---The entire eleventh grade at St. Aloysius confessed to cheating on the SAT exams. They were admonished for violating the Honor Code, which forbids good Catholics from ratting on one another.

---Gladys Doyle confessed to draining her swimming pool and neglecting to tell the neighbor children, who consequently were, variously, injured or killed when diving onto the concrete twelve feet beneath. When asked directly whether she had intended these consequences, she said she really didn't know. She was then asked whether she could tell the difference between a priest and a psychoanalyst. Could she tell the difference between a sin and a wholly involuntary release of unconscious and disgusting impulses? Huh? Could she? Could she tell the difference between her ass and her elbow? Huh? Could she? Would she stop crying or did she want to face a few thousand years in purgatory?

When she stopped blubbing, she was told to assume it was an accident and try not to do it again.

---Michael O'Brien confessed to setting his sister's dolly, her bed, and her foot on fire. No action taken.

---Little Missy O'Brien confessed to telling on her brother, Michael. She was whipped on the spot and given thirty hail Mary's.

---Fr. John Simon McConaghy----yes, priests confess to other priests----said he had lustful thoughts for the following: the organist, the choir director, the large lady who kneels carelessly in the front row at early mass, the altar boy named Timmy, the postman, and his confessor. He was told, "Hell, we're all human."

LAST RESORT

**Rescue the perishing;
Care for the dying;
Snatch them in pity
From sin and the grave**

Dear Readers: You imagine you know what's coming, having spent years with Abby and Amy and Ann. An honorable tradition, or at least hoary. However, if I give you what you expect, I will have failed. I do not intend to fail.

In sixth grade I decided to play football, not because I nursed an admiration for the sport, but because our team had a tradition: boys only. Not after I was done.

You think upsetting peewee football hardly matches up with rocking the big-time world of syndicated columnists, but that shows how little you've considered it. People care, really care, about kids and football; they don't, really don't, care, about newspapers or their columns. That's true even of people who run them. Newspapers are going the way of the Dodo anyhow, but for the couple of years they're still here, I intend to set off bombs. I am not modest, and you shouldn't be either.

Modesty is not a trait worth having. Take note.

I find most people tedious: little white people, little white lives, little white problems. You are yourself a vapid, dead center honkie, of course, or you wouldn't be reading. And I recognize, no one more clearly, that trying to reach the poor, the rich, black, yellow, or red in my readership is pissing into the wind.

So, overstuffed puffs, I guarantee I will wake you up. Woe to those of you at ease in Zion.

I deal only with desperate people, those who have lost their way, and I take up blinding problems, grinding and horrible problems, problems that leave no room for any other consideration. If you are thinking of writing, don't think of it any more unless you have a dilemma you think might break your life and you with it. Don't consider lying, as I will track down and verify every letter I answer, every problem I take up.

There's a reason they call me "Last Resort."

Dear Last Resort,

I don't know where to turn. My daughter and her boy friend have evicted me, just thrown me right out. Several months ago, I signed over power of attorney to Jo Ellen, who said she needed it so she could take care of me properly and not face problems with

the taxman. I also transferred the title of my house to her. She said it was only a formality. My bank account and small savings. She said it would be hers eventually, and this way she could avoid inheritance tax and there would be much more for me as well. My house is very small and worth very little, but it is paid for and all I have.

Last week I received a registered letter telling me I had thirty days to vacate, no more than that, as the house had been sold. I asked Jo Ellen about it, and she said she and Benjamin had decided I needed full-time care and that the house had become too much for me. To make a long story short, they refuse to talk with me about this and they won't tell me where I am to go in thirty days.

Jo Ellen would never do such a thing, were she not under the control of this Benjamin, who I see now is evil and has poisoned my daughter against me. Jo Ellen won't listen to me when I try to discuss this, though, and now won't even return my calls.

What should I do? Please help me.

Sincerely—Homeless at 83

Dear Homeless,

You need to call the police right away, explain what has happened, and press charges against your daughter. Insist on this to the police and, when you talk with them, promise them clearly you will certainly not back down, be talked out of pressing charges. (That's vital, as they are otherwise reluctant to work very diligently on family issues that so often collapse into the mush of forgiveness.) Stop blaming the boyfriend, who could do none of this on his own. It is your daughter. Your daughter.

Get it through your head and accept it.

She doesn't love you, just wants your money and wants it now. The fact that she has made no arrangements shows that she cares nothing whatever for you. You must treat her as a dangerous enemy, which is exactly what she is. Do not let sentimentality get in your way.

There's only one place for your dear little Jo Ellen, that once-adorable tap-dancing honey for whom you sacrificed everything—and that is behind bars.

The police may tell you there is nothing they can do, since you have apparently signed over control of your life to those who probably wish you dead and certainly wish you would vanish. Don't trust the police on this point—or any other—but you may well have dug yourself a deep hole. If the papers are properly drawn-up, you may be left with no easy recourse.

If that is the case, try AARP legal department all the same, assuming you belong to AARP. If not, join. It costs \$12 (for the first year) and surely you have that much left. (If not, tell me.)

Also, start calling rest homes in your area. Do NOT tell them you are destitute. Let them think you can pay full fare. Once you get the paperwork going, they probably won't be able to eliminate you because you can only pay them the Medicare allowance.

That's it. Remember: when life gives you lemons, squirt 'em in someone's eyes.
Sincerely—Last Resort

Dear Last Resort,

I want you to know that I think you and your column are both stinking piles of %\$#@!*(&. You are a moron and the column you write does big-time harm, assuming there are people out there stupid enough to take it to heart. I hope you are a cynic, making money by bilking people willing to draw wisdom from a journalism student, with a GPA of 2.8, pumped up by good grades in phys ed. To imagine you as sincere is too dark altogether, as Marlow says in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," which you ought to read some time. I'm sure you won't publish this paragraph, so now we get to the part you can use in your column.

I am writing to you because my wife says she will leave me unless I do. She means everything to me. If she leaves, I will have no reason to live. I realize you hear that from probably 60% of those seeking your advice. I differ in that I know my own psyche and have genuine insight into my own character and this situation.

My wife insists that I tell the whole story. Here it is: I had an affair with a graduate student, a student in my lab, working on a grant project funded by the National Science Foundation. (It is an important project, supported by a prestigious grant, a point added in the interests of hiding nothing.) I do not wish in any way to excuse my actions, as they are inexcusable. I mean that from the bottom of my heart and do not want to tell the story in any way that will diminish my responsibility. At the same time, I owe it to myself to tell an accurate story. It is a complicated story, not a melodrama by any means. Though I am at fault, I am no villain.

Even the woman involved, the lab assistant grad student, would agree with me that she was far from being the victim of my seductive wiles. She was not lured into a sordid affair with me, nor was she the subject of a deliberate plan. In fact—and I am just being candid here—it was she who pursued me. Of course I should have resisted; I admit that freely. No excuses. Still, I will say that there was not a day went by in a period of several weeks that she did not make it clear that what she most wanted was me, bluntly, *sex with me*. She did a lot more than just "make it clear" in some indirect way, a way that might have been misinterpreted by a male less principled. (I have an unblemished record as far as my treatment of women in the workplace is concerned.) She spoke of the two of us, our bodies, and what we might do with them in a way impossible to misinterpret, touched me inappropriately, actually made me the subject of what a lesser man would call sexual harassment.

But I should have resisted. I did resist for several weeks, as I say; but that makes no difference. I finally succumbed. That was wrong. I think my wife knows it was not the real me doing this. I was under great pressure at work: the grant project was not going well (thanks in no small part to the girl at the center of all this), my usually robust health was sagging. I make no excuses. I did it and I am not proud of what I did. I can say this with complete and absolute sincerity: I am sorry. Absolutely, it won't happen again. No matter the pressures or the temptations or even more outright harassment, I will be as faithful as the geyser.

Sincerely—Repentant Husband

Dear Repentant.

Repentant is what you are not. There are many other things you are not: sincere, decent, intelligent, insightful, deserving of your wife. I say the last without knowing her, realizing it's just possible she was not forced into marrying you, only deluded. She was in love, right? More women are hurt by that sappy mythology than by all the guns the vile NRA manages †on wheedle into the hands of the pathological. The patriarchy does a slick job of selling “love” and its endorsement of the licensed prostitution called marriage, prettying up rape and making thugs like you unmerited beneficiaries of large-hearted women.

I received another letter that will serve as a response to Repentant. I print nothing but legitimate letters, as you know. I mention it again, as the massive coincidence involved might otherwise seem incredible. I should add that I cannot say with certainty that the writer of the following letter is the same “girl” referred to by Repentant. It hardly matters.

Sincerely—Last Resort

Dear Last Resort,

I know you must receive so many letters opening with a declaration of being “desperate,” hoping thereby you will answer them in print. Well, I am certainly “desperate” too, hoping you will NOT print this but assist me anyhow.

I was the victim of the most brutal form of sexual harassment over the past five months and more. A terrible story, made no less terrible by being banal: thousands of women have similar tales to tell. My variation is also a common one: a university graduate student attached to a professor who held over me not simply my livelihood (I was his lab assistant and needed the small stipend and the large tuition waiver) but my career: he could find ways to terminate my graduate studies altogether.

I am writing you not to seek advice on this matter, though I am sure you could provide excellent advice. I am writing because I know you will be hearing from my

assailant. I have come to know his wife, who told me she was enacting this vengeance on him, forcing him to write to you and tell all. The professor in question would feel his dignity compromised by having even anonymous publicity. That's part of it. Another part is that he is so egotistical as to imagine that everyone will at once read through the disguise, as if he were the only second-rate biology prof with a minor grant and no conscience.

His wife tipped me off on her revenge plan, so I could take steps to protect myself. I was unable to talk her out of doing this, so set is she on making her particular worm writhe. While I do not blame her for that, I wish she weren't putting me at risk, too.

I am asking you, then, not to publish his letter, tempting as it might be. I have not seen that letter, but I can imagine the sorts of things he would say.

If you feel you cannot resist airing his nonsense, at least add the following, from an anonymous but 100% trustworthy source: first, his wife is dumping him anyhow; second, I have seen bigger dicks on Chihuahuas.

Sincerely—Screwed Over

Dear Last Resort,

I think it was really quite wrong of you to publish the letter from "Screwed Over" when she wrote specifically asking you not to do so. By publishing her letter and also the one from her seducer, you have added greatly to her pain. Of course, she was wrong to have sexual relations with a married man, no matter how much authority he held over her. There are police and campus authorities there to handle just such offenses as purported sexual harassment, and she should have made use of them before committing a despicable sin. But we should judge not less we too be judged. That's the voice of God.

I think you are no better than those paperazzi [sic] who feed on garbage and the public's thirst for garbage. Whatever happened to Christian Charity?

Sincerely—Mercy for Sinners

Dear Mercy,

It's Christians like you who allow premarital sex to flourish. I hope you know that. By extending what you call "mercy" to fornicators, you may as well just provide them with alcohol, soft music, a bed, and condoms. You should talk right away to your priest, rabbi, minister, or cult leader and ask for forgiveness and light. But it's probably too late. And it's "lest," not "less," birdbrain. I used to think that the lowest level of

literacy was occupied by those shackled to clichés; I now see there is a crawl-space below, where slither those who can't even get the clichés straight.

Sincerely—Last Resort

P.S. I have learned never to underestimate the stupidity of my readership, so I have to say straight out that I am being sarcastic here—in some areas.

Dear Last Resort,

Can you help me? I am in love with my sister. I can't tell for sure if she is “in love” with me. I think she is: I really am pretty sure she is, so maybe I shouldn't have said that I couldn't tell. What I guess I mean is that I don't know what we should do.

We are both fifteen, not twins but separated in a freakish way, by eleven months and twenty-eight days, Mom and Dad being unable to hold themselves back, I guess, and Mom not nursing my sister, who is the older of our almost-twinning pair. Not that any of that matters.

I realize that what I am asking shouldn't even be a question. It is deeply wrong to be in love, so very much in love, when you are brother and sister. There's a word for what we long for and it's as ugly as any word there is. I have read a good deal about it, learning that it is nearly a universal taboo.

I realize that we are young and cannot gauge very well what lies ahead and what deep problems we are causing for ourselves, problems we can't quite see now but will come to cloud our lives or destroy them.

But I have no life I can imagine apart from Katherine, or she from me. I shouldn't speak for her, but I know I can. (I will show her this letter and send it only if she agrees.) We have known about our love for three years, and have spoken about it openly in the last months. That means the sentences I wrote at the beginning were dishonest: my sister and I have no secrets from one another and are equally tangled inside this trap.

You are wondering if what I am asking about is having sex. I don't think that's it exactly. What we both want to find is some way to have a life together, a full life. Otherwise, neither of us wants any life.

Our parents are good to us and we love them, but they would not understand what it is we want, what it is we are, and would try very hard to separate us if they knew.

Can you help us?

--Yours sincerely--Thomas Abbott, Katherine Abbot

Dear Thomas and Katherine,

I make it a practice never to edit letters, but I have changed your names, since otherwise your parents might spot this and, as you predict, move to separate you. I am convinced that such a separation would indeed be fatal.

It's vital that you both be very careful for a few years. Spend every minute that you can together, since our lives are so short and such a bond as you have forged is so rare. Have sex, too, all kinds of sex, at least all those kinds you both find enticing. When you, Thomas, are 18, and Katherine only a few days short of 19, run away together, change your names, and enroll in a college in a different state. Contact me then, and I will help. (I enclose an address and e-mail in a separate letter.)

I think you know that what you have together has so much power that ugly words cannot touch it. Count yourselves very lucky. You don't need cautions—apart from being careful never again to let loose your real goddamned names—only good cheer, good luck, good loving.

Sincerely—Last Resort

Dear Last Resort,

Now I know you are a fraud, though a pretty good comic fraud. Inventing that incest letter was pretty bold of you, pretty gross, too. Did it occur to you that you might be lifting the lid of the proverbial Pandora's Box, as thousands of horny brothers and sisters now feel it's perfectly okay to bounce into one another's beds—and will?

More power to them, I say, were it possible to escape the guilt that is going to land like a sledge-hammer and crash whatever joy they might have otherwise known. Taboos don't just hang there like friendly warning signs; they are enforced with terrible penalties.

I speak from experience, having loved my older brother with a love that came to consume our world, constitute the only reality. I am married now and no more unhappy than most people, but I struggle every day against my ghastly secret, which is that I can never love any man as I loved and love my dear brother.

Sincerely—Sadder and No Wiser

Dear Sadder,

Leave your husband and persuade your brother to leave the wife he doubtless has. Live together always. Incest is nothing but a word; and in your case it spells glory.

Sincerely—Last Resort

Dear Last Resort,

I have a problem. YOU. You feed off the unhappy and the weak. You make fun of decent people, people whose problems are real. I wouldn't be surprised if people went and committed suicide as a result of your heartless quest for money at their expense.

Imagine some poor and unsophisticated person whose only crime is never having had the chance for an education. Or, OK, people who are rather unintelligent. Is that their fault? Imagine them sitting down in great anguish, embarrassed to write to you but having nowhere else to turn. They spend hours trying to find words that would explain their problem, hoping for some direction from you, anything that will lessen the heartache. What do they get?

You either ignore them or publish their letter in order to humiliate them.

I know it is possible you invent these letters, but I feel sure you are telling the truth when you say you do not, when you say nobody could invent such things, when you say you have no need to invent, “in a land where stupidity and self-pity flourish.”

How do you sleep at night?

Sincerely--Appalled

Dear Appalled,

Feel better? Feel good? Feel warmed? All aglow?

The only product more plentiful in this country than the stupidity and self-pity you mention is self-righteousness.

Now that you've had your little self-indulgent moment, your cleansing enema, I bet you feel justified in going on about your own filthy little practices, right? You write to me to build up some capital in your own mind, some psychic assurances of rectitude. Now, it's back to the slime, right, Appalled?

My guess is it's porn, right? Illegal porn? Cheerleader porn? Young cuties, young underage cuties?

Only a guess, but I'm never wrong.

Sincerely—Last Resort

Dear Last Resort,

I know you won't publish this, but a private answer would be appreciated. Me and my friends here at the Wal-Mart have a bet that you are a man (three of us on that point), or a team (three others), or actually Abigail Van Buren having a good time of it after all those years with the hysteric women (two bets here). We promise not to reveal what you say, but we'll cut you in on the prize if you tell us true.

Sincerely—Fun-Lovers

Dear Fun-Lovers,

Abigail Van Buren is dead, God rest her soul, and shame, shame on you and your Wal-Mart mates.

I am actually your Daddy, the Daddy of all of you-un. Yo Mamas be skanky hos and yo Daddy is shamed to have sired such a bunch of slack-jawed morons.

Sincerely—Last Resort

Dear Last Resort,

I am no idiot and realize you feed off poor fools lobbing pitches you can knock out of the park. But you also seem smart and not too attached to common decency.

Therefore, there's a chance you can help me. For sure, nobody here will.

I have cancer, not advanced stages but bad enough. I am at an assisted living facility and have very little freedom of movement, though a little money.

Simple problem: the only thing that will help my pain is marijuana, which really is effective and also illegal in this state. I can find no one who will help me, though I am sure my grandchildren would, had I unmediated access to them. Can you?

I promise if you help me that I will not pray for you.

Sincerely—Cancer Cindy

Dear Cindy,

Yes.

Sincerely—Last Resort

EDDIE

You been to school, you say you are a lawyer, you walked out of a magazine. I've been a drifter and a low-life loser, you can learn a lot from me.

Billy Joe Shaver

Eddie tended to drift into whatever jobs were available, jobs that would pay the rent. Problem was his channels for drifting were drying up. Actually, that wasn't the only problem. There was another, at least one. Eddie has recently gotten himself engaged, recently being last night, probably. Probably gotten engaged---last night for sure.

Eddie decided he needed to focus on one thing at a time, so, being now at work, he decided he'd settle into a steady position, a job that met his abilities and promised advancement, if only he applied to it his proven abilities and didn't allow himself to get distracted by one thing and another. That was his problem, distractibility. He had first-rate personal attributes, experience, and off-the-charts potential. He just needed to focus, get one thing in his sites and keep looking at it, just it and not other things, such as what he wanted for lunch or what might be the best name for a dog or the image of a pretty girl who was passing by.

His present position, while not exactly what you'd call a "position," provided a place to start. Eddie puzzled a minute and decided he'd call what he had now a "launching pad" when he spoke to his boss. He figured he'd first take some notes on what he would say, lay out a strategy. Just then, though, just as he was starting to write, his boss was right there, right in front of him, so Eddie figured that was a sign and he'd just fire up his craft from the launching pad immediately, depending on his rich improvisational abilities to do the job.

Before he could begin, the boss, Harry, started up.

"What in hell are you doing, Eddie? Jesus Christ!"

"Hi, Harry."

"Well?"

"Yes, I was, hoping to see you, anticipating—seeing you later, I mean, but now will do fine, just fine."

"About what? I'm not paying you to write. There's all those boxes there you need to be. . . ."

“Right, Harry. I’ll have them shelved in record time. What you’re looking at is a new Eddie, not sorta new, but top to bottom new, on his launching pad and ready to blast off.”

“Huh?”

“I might be engaged, you see.”

“Huh?”

“That’s not what I meant to say, and it’s not important now. What’s important is that I have it in me to be a new star here in the company. And what’s more I’m ready to unveil that new me.”

“Are you drunk?”

“That’s one thing you can say about me, Harry.”

“What? Can I say that you’re a drunk? I’ll add that to the long list of deficiencies you. . . .”

“Hold it, Harry. Sorry to interrupt, but you’re talking about the old Eddie, and even he was no drunk. I mean, he maybe wasn’t the brightest star in the firmament of this warehouse, but he was a sober one. Always that, at least. And also, that old star bears no resemblance to the new one, who is not so much a star as a comet, a goddamned comet.”

“Just shelve those boxes, Eddie, and shut up.”

“Then I should come and talk with you about a new position?”

“What? No.”

“You all scheduled-up this morning? How about 2:00. You see, I need to display myself to you, without disguise.”

“Well, I don’t want to see you, Eddie, disguised or not. Just get to work. All those piles over there, plainly marked.”

“And then?”

“The skids in 14-B. Think you can handle the fork-lift?”

“Just watch me.”

“No.”

That had not gone the way Eddie had planned, but he felt sure he had made a new beginning, charted a course he now just had to follow earnestly and with firm resolution. Doing a quick self-inventory, Eddie had to allow that even a generous assessment of his life to this point would not give him high marks for earnestness and resolution. If he were a harsh judge, which he felt he now really should be, he might not even place earnestness and resolution on the chart.

So, plainly speaking, what were his strongest assets, his selling points? He was agreeable. Starting with A---agreeable. B for boisterous. He hesitated there, not sure being boisterous was something he could justly claim to be, even if it were a true positive, which it probably wasn’t, not for most positions. B for bachelor. Not for long,

maybe, and, again, not such a glittering claim. B for business-like. Yes, and yes again. That was it. True, he had no real idea what it meant or whether it truly described him, down deep. But surely he could determine what it meant and mold himself to fit its demands. Maybe.

Then it struck him that he was not exactly proving himself a fireball employee in the present, the here and now, which he could not do by making lists---that occupation becoming pretty depressing anyhow---but by shelving and then hitting the old fork lift. Did he know how to run a forklift? Well, no, but how hard could that be?

First things first. Eddie hurried over to the boxes, actually half-skipped and half-ran, a bad idea as he was not in great physical shape and risked both tiring himself needlessly and tripping. So he slowed, just for safety. He then, in his more measured tempos, began hauling the boxes to the shelves and setting them down there, first three boxes in a load, then two, then one, punctuated by a rest or two and a single visit to the coffee machine.

While drinking, Eddie decided to let his mind take a quick journey to the last evening and his date with Julie. Let's see, Julie—yes, Julie Fredericks. Wasn't like he didn't know her last name. Wasn't like it was their first date, either, he didn't think. The reason that issue murked up a bit in his mind was that he'd seen Julie several other times—twice—informally, you might say. Not exactly dates, maybe. But none of that mattered. The reason it was unclear is that Julie worked at a restaurant—a bar—and would sometimes—twice—come to his table and pass the time of day—evening—with conversation and banter.

Eddie tried to remember exactly (or approximately) what they had talked about and how all those conversations—two of them—had lead, inevitably it seemed, to last night and this happy milestone in his life. Was it happy? Was it a milestone? Did it even happen? There's such a thing as too much introspection, Eddie knew. The thing was what it was and here he was, and here was the job (opening onto big things ahead), and here was Julie, possibly in some deep and intimate relation to him. All this was good.

Sorting it all out made Eddie feel instantly reaffirmed, revitalized. He knew enough, though, not to run or to try that three-box move again.

He needed to pace himself, not get run away with enthusiasm, so he made sure the boxes and the seven-and-one-quarter hours matched up pretty well, leaving some few boxes over for the next day, which would also bring to him the mysteries and delights of fork-lifting.

He didn't manage to run into Harry again that day, and when he checked the office at 4:47, Harry wasn't there and had not left word for him.

Sufficient unto the day are the transformations thereof.

Eddie decided to waste no time on a shower or elaborate preparations, just gave his hair a quick tousle and allow a breath mint to substitute for tooth brushing. Then he headed for “Manny’s” to settle in with Julie, make plans.

“She don’t come on until 8.”

“Oh. I guess I’ll go and come back.”

“You do that.”

So he did. Trouble was, it was crowded, very, which was bad luck. He did find a table, one of those high-up things requiring you to perch. He had never liked them, always worried that he might too easily tip over. Not that he had ever done so—well, just the once.

Worse, Julie didn’t even wait on him. It was someone else; “Joyce” said the nametag. Not that Joyce wasn’t pretty and friendly, too, but she didn’t have time to chat, not that a chat with Joyce was in any way on the agenda anyhow. He did ask if she might please send Julie over, that he had important business with her. He asked insistently but politely.

“You bet!” said Joyce.

She must have forgot, though, as Julie didn’t appear, even after a reminder or two, spread around the staff.

Nothing for it but to wait until the place cleared out some and the demands on the waitresses lightened. Trouble was, he could hardly just sit there without ordering, occupying space in an establishment, which, after all, wasn’t set up for non-paying loungers.

It must have been 2:00 anyhow when the crowd thinned. 2:00 or close to it. Thing was, he couldn’t read his watch all that well. Bad lighting.

Finally, Julie came over, even put her hand on his shoulder, kind of chummy. It maybe wasn’t the pat an ordinary fiancé would give or expect, but Eddie knew Julie was no ordinary woman.

“You’re no ordinary woman, Julie.”

“Well, thank you, Eddie. You call me over here just to tell me that? I still got some customers. You want me to have Joyce fetch you another—what are you drinking?”

“Oh. OK. The usual.”

“What is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You sure you’re OK, Eddie?”

“Yeah. I’m first-rate, tip-top.”

“Good. I gotta. . . .”

“When will we get married, Julie?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you ready to set a date?”

“Oh, Eddie. We just had the one. . . . You are serious, aren’t you? Are you?”

“Never more.”

“Do you have a real job, Eddie?”

“Not much of one. But I’ve—you know—rededicated myself.”

“Really?”

“I’d do anything for you, Julie.”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t have much of a life.”

“Me either.”

“OK, then. Don’t you think?”

“OK. I do think so.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

FAMILY IS FOREVER

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.”

George Burns

Travis, that’s my kid, comes home from school saying there’s no such thing as a “family,” not really. He’d just learned that, said, family was only a “construction,” not a natural thing. I had no idea what he meant, but I was sure intrigued. My wife—her name’s Julie—exploded, sent the boy to his room and called the school, made a hell of a fuss. Then she called her mother, some friends, and the PTA. That gave me time to sneak back and talk to Travis about his interesting idea.

If it’s true, I figured, it’d be the best news in years.

Turns out it wasn’t even his teacher said that about families being a myth but some other kids, his friends, giving a report. They were saying, according to Travis, that what we call the family hasn’t always existed, that it’s just an “evolutionary convenience.” (I’m sure he didn’t invent that phrase on his own, but he remembered it, which is something.)

I should have said that Travis is in the eighth grade, I believe. I don’t pretend he’s actually “gifted,” like every other kid in the goddamned country, but he does OK. I was going to say, “He’s no dummy,” which is what my own father always said about me. I hated that, as if the best lie he could tell was that somewhere, in some remote corner of the globe, maybe some island with no books or television, there existed somebody dumber. Anyhow, I’ll just say that Travis can usually find his way to the toilet, dress himself, and keep from taking a hatchet to his mother. That’s what I can honestly report about his intelligence. I suppose I could find out more if I gave a shit; but I don’t, which is healthy.

But we get along, cohabit OK. That made it easy for me to ask him what he meant and get him to explain, like I was talking to some guy at work whose name you’re not sure you got right.

“Hey, Travis. Mind if I come in?”

“Guess not.”

“Won’t keep you. Tell me about the “evolutionary convenience” and I’ll tell you what, I’ll just take your Mother our shopping, make her forget all about how pissed she is at you.”

“You’ll go shopping yourself?”

“To a bar. Drop her off and pick her up hours later. You know how it is.”

“How the fuck should I know.”

“You don’t go to bars? How come?”

“Jesus, Herman!” (My name’s Herman.)

“So, we have a deal?”

“OK. So Mary Kate and Todd gave this report on a book by Engels – you know him?”

“I do. Good guy. A Commie.”

“Whatever. He wrote this book on where private property and the family came from, all tied together.”

“All tied together?”

“You gonna fucking let me finish?”

“Go on.”

“At one time, way back but it’s true, everybody lived in tribes, like, no families and no stupid separations, no small groups that were permanent, just all together. And women weren’t inferior or any-thing. Everybody shared, you know. Babies and stuff were taken care of by whoever wanted to or was best at it. Then private property came along, excess goods you see, and the fucking men forced women into staying in the house and boring their asses off cleaning baby shit and dusting, mopping. But all this is falling apart now, really fast. First off, we have the Jews; you know about that. Then we have almost everybody else getting divorced and moving into communes and stuff—just all together like it used to be, the right way. It just doesn’t make sense in evolution to try and think families are what we need to have or are in any way natural, Mary Kate and Todd said.”

“The Jews?”

“Yeah, living in kibbuns or something, all together and no families. You don’t even know about that? God you’re dumb!”

“Kibbutzim, not that it matters. Thanks, Travis. Now, you just get busy and clean up your room!”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding.”

“Fuck off!”

“That’ll work too.”

People quite often offer the following remark about Travis, at parties and work and, God help us, family reunions (which we’ll get to shortly): “It’s such a difficult age.” At first that seemed to me a stunner, enigmatic, positively Platonic in its sweep and stupefying obviousness. Yessirree, like every other era, our early twenty-first century is full of difficulties; now, that idiocy out of the way, can you think of something to say that would actually lubricate a conversation? After a while, though, I realized—that is, Julie told me—they were speaking not about the world situation or something cosmic but about something local and trivial, Travis. Turns out he was thirteen—Julie told me—

when these comments began back then. I admit I was really puzzled as to what to say, fumbled about, trying, “Is it?” or “I wouldn’t know” or “It’s no concern of mine.” It wasn’t all that long until I realized I could escape most easily by agreeing: “It is indeed!” or “Oh my, yes!” or “What a job being a parent in this modern world of today!” These came to me only after I learned that more enthusiastic forms of agreement—“I hate the little asshole!” or “I don’t think he’s mine!” or “Too bad I can’t drown him like I did our cat!”—were not the thing, not the thing at all. I discovered that. I’m no dummy.

Which brings me to family—oh my god—reunions, actually just one. I don’t pretend they were all of them this dramatic but I’ll go to my grave shouting that the essence of these gatherings and of “family” is herein revealed. But you’ll judge for yourself on that.

This one I want to tell you about took place last August, which here in Georgia is always a perfect time for a sixteen-hour picnic and organized games, not that the weather’s too much of an issue in this case. You might think the wet heat would shorten people’s tempers and lead to what happened, but my so-called family doesn’t need any assistance from nature—fire, tornados, plagues of locust: it’d have made no difference, none.

The first ruffle in our otherwise perfect day came when it turned out that Susan 1 and Susan 2 had forgotten to reserve the shelter at the state park where we were all gathering. What made it worse was that a couple of other cousins, Clarence and Lawrence or some such, were first to get to this shelter. It was about ten in the a.m., and they’d managed a good start on their day’s drunk. (I hope you’re not quick to condemn such early drinking: it was their way, and not a bad one, of greasing the slide through the interminable reunion, a hope for complete insensibility) Anyhow, they didn’t know that the group there at the shelter they’d arrived at were the ones who belonged there, having actually reserved; Clarence and Lawrence figured they were trespassing. What followed, then, was not the fault of anybody exactly, more like a misunderstanding; but you couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for the legitimate shelter-occupiers, especially when they got their asses kicked real good, especially the kids.

Just as things were turning homicidal, the Susans showed up, explaining loudly, and all was smoothed over. I guess it wasn’t very well smoothed over, considering the cops came, but only the ass-kicking cousins were arrested and nobody missed them anyhow, there being about sixty others in attendance who were indistinguishable both physically and mentally from Clarence and Lawrence. I’m not including Julie and me in that indictment, of course, at least not me. Travis, I’m not sure about, though he does figure in the day’s events.

One problem with these reunions is that nobody ever planned anything---like a volleyball game or a hike or strippers. They spoke of “games,” but didn’t bring equipment or even ideas. People just got there, hauled out the potato salad, and sat. Julie said,

after about fifteen minutes, that she now knew what hell was like. For once, that woman made some sense.

So, a few minutes later, Travis hatches the bright idea of getting some of his wild teen cousins and, as he put it, “just get the fuck away from you assholes.” No way anybody could object to such a reasonable notion, at least nobody did, and it sure wasn’t anybody’s fault that the kids weren’t carefully checked for assault weapons. Just kidding.

So the younguns took off, the rest of us staring into space and trying not to count by seconds—one-thousand-one, one-thousand two—since there’d be about of those little peckers.

We needn’t have worried about boredom, as it turns out. I didn’t see how it started and still haven’t learned, but before you could say, “Let me outa here now!” there were two big fat guys taking their shirts off. They’d decided to liven things up with some honest-to-God wrestling. Trouble was they started right in without clearing a space, much less erecting a ring. At about the same time, a group of others, mainly women but not all, were forming a circle to sing hymns, one of them sporting an accordion. And, as if that were not enough, the volleyball game I said nobody planned began, sort of on its own. No net, but still. . . .

All that sounds normal enough, I suppose, just what families figure they ought to do to hold up the myth that they really *are* something together, not just victims of an illusion. They got nothing in common, don’t much like one another, and have no interest in their mates; but they imagine they have bonds, bonds of love—or blood or DNA. In a sane world, they’d be put out of their misery—which is almost what happened.

I’m happy to say I walked up a little hill, just to avoid becoming a wrestler, a singer, or a spiker. That gave me a good view of what followed, which seems to me to illustrate what families truly are—at their best.

Basically, you see, there wasn’t near enough space for all these activities, which had started up independent of one another. Soon, the wrestlers were colliding with the volleyball players and both were bashing the psalm-singers. Of course there was plenty of room in the surrounding territories, but do you suppose anyone would give up his little piece of land, insufficient as it was? You’d think they were each miners in Alaska in 1849, protecting their claims.

Before two minutes passed, laughter had turned to angry shouts and then to blows---men striking men, women striking women, both going after children. Just as this fun was reaching what may have been its height, I noticed people falling to the ground, screaming, clutching legs or shoulders or eyes.

You’re way ahead of me: the youth contingent had gone off to shoot birds and, finding few of them, had returned to shoot their elders. Made sense to me. Only bb guns, for the most part.

So, there you have it. I gotta admit that this reunion was not altogether typical in being so short. It broke up after about an hour, as people needed to whomp on their gun-toting kids, keep slugging dear relations, or get themselves quick to the hospital. I tried to talk to Travis about his part in the melee, just out of general interest, but he still doesn't trust me—more like doesn't like me, which makes sense. Families are like that.

PROVES THE RULE

“Clichés remind and reassure us that we're not alone, that others have trod this ground long ago.”

Miguel Syjuco

“Let’s have some new clichés.”

Samuel Goldwyn

Few of us can plumb the true depths of clichés, even the ones we use and depend on. I include myself in this indictment. Some clichés are actually profound. Yes! True, formulated phrases, called up too often and flabbily applied, do have the undoubted tendency to muddy our thinking, but that's because we're so careless with them, ignore their potential.

Let me cite one: “That’s the exception that proves the rule.” Who really understands that insight into the way we mis-navigate the world? Samuel Johnson it was who pointed out that refutations of generalizations can be both technically valid and also supportive of the formula they imagine they are confounding. If you cite a freakish occurrence to refute a commonplace, that very stretching supports its validity. “White people enjoy unearned privileges.” “What about poor Harry Jones?” “Dictators are dangerous.” “Mussolini enacted key domestic reforms, made the trains run on time, and. . . well, other things.” You get the point. I sure as hell hope so, as I need to assume a certain level of cooperation here.

The other point has to do with reliance on anecdotes. We all know people who reduce the fixed patterns of life to random occurrences. Something might be true for five thousand people, but if Aunt Gladys found a variant in the pattern, that fact outweighs the general truth in the minds of those faithful to Aunt Gladys, when, in fact, her experience counts for—let’s see: nothing! Mother was a great anecdote-citer and it drove everyone around her, me anyhow, bats. I was never allowed to have a bike because a friend of a friend’s kid had pedaled over a cliff. That sort of thing.

So, let’s see how this works out in reference to my own belief that rich people are lousy bastards. I want to hold that belief up to our two propositions: the exception that proves the rule and the uselessness of anecdotes. I won’t be referring directly to them, not wanting to be a big bore, but I ask you to bear them in mind.

There are a good many people who have principled reasons for hating the rich, often political at the core: personal wealth always comes at another's expense; some people, through accidents of birth, are placed in positions that have allowed them a leg up in grubbing for money, goods, power. To take this fundamentally unjust advantage and exploit it, even claim for it a personal virtue, is a double-whammy of deeply odious selfishness.

Well, blah – blah – blah, I say. Maybe that's all true, but who really gives a rat's ass about such general, airy stuff. I mean, what's it have to do with ME?

I hate rich people because of Leon Richards, Sally Lou Gearson, and X. Keep our focus right here, on them. Violent human passions do not often (ever?) attach themselves to anything beyond the material and the personal. Objects of our love and detestation can be non-human – cats, cars, paintings, porch swings – but never abstract. We pretend to have such feelings for country, God, truth, but it's only material things attached to them that rouse us: a nice job, pretty girl, good sex, a musical comedy. It's just that we cannot love abstractions: a country, a God, truth, power. Poof! That's just the way it is. Ask yourself.

When it gets dangerous is when we convince ourselves that our collection of anecdotes adds up and becomes defensible. Thus we get “the love of humankind” or “anti-Semitism” or “capitalism.”

When I say, “it gets dangerous,” I'm not really sure what I mean. Trying to be honest here. It's high-sounding to put it that way; but why we would think our anecdotal added up to “dangerous,” I don't know. Probably we're fooling ourselves saying that.

I'm not sure if the capacity to fool ourselves isn't, after all, rather a good hedge against being high-sounding. The worst people I know boast about being “honest with themselves.” People who have no tolerance for their own fantasy needs are awful. Avoid them.

Let's give this some room. It's good to be able to fool yourself, not to be tied to rigor. As you hang around in this our world, you find how necessary it is to find a comfortable story to live inside; you learn to be adept at making alternations in the plot, ones according not with “facts” but with one's desires, even wild ones.

No need to make all this a moral issue, to call it hard names. We manage to live by our story-telling abilities, as they adjust to keep us from seeing too much, having too much to bear. Almost always, our stories harden into a self-perpetuating tale at which others scoff or yawn. So what? Life gives us so few chances.

Just for instance: my mother convinced herself that my older sister was “a charming young woman” and that I was “deep.” Mother sounds like Amanda Wingfield; but she was neither that interesting nor that consistent, simply because she was a woman forced to live as flesh and blood and not a character in a play. But she was capable of gathering anecdotes, often distorted, into pleasing and repetitive fictions. My older sister

was a long-toothed, chinless, lop-sided brunette who giggled tunelessly when she was nervous. She was smart and witty, but her marketable “charm” resided in her willingness to have sex with any boy willing to ignore her looks and giggles. She had plenty of action until she hit about seventeen and her unfortunate physical attributes made screwing her less appealing than paying someone else for it. After that point, my mother converted “charm” to “spirituality.” Real joke there, as Martha was an atheist nearly rabid in her views. Don’t get me wrong: I like Martha very much, admire her, and imagine I’d have done just what she did with my loins, under the circumstances—she says maybe ten percent of the sex was OK. Martha doesn’t mind being thought charming or even spiritual, and it adds something to the comfort of my Mother’s otherwise pointless days—so what the hell.

It’s a little different with her insistence on my depth.

One day, when I was a cute ten or eleven and subject to grabs from neighbors and family friends, a visitor, one hand on my ass, asked me a question designed to allow him to keep his hand where it was: “How do you like school?” Before I could sort through possible responses—“At least my ass is safe there”—Mother cut in: “No use asking him—like talking to an oyster.” “Ah,” said Mr. Barkin, “still waters run deep,” kneading my butt as if it were a loaf of sour dough.

That’s all Mother needed—“deep.” No longer just rude and self-absorbed, I was running two miles below the surface.

In point of fact, Mother was on target with me, which just goes to show you that every now and then a stopped clock is right—or however that goes.

My depth in reference to our current subject, the odious rich, consists of the following: an ability to analyze the true secrets of the well off, the source of their power and also of their vulnerability. I found quickly that a small expenditure for new clothes and a willingness to suck up would put me in position to use my depth to figure out and then exact revenge on a series of rich people, starting with junior-high assholes and running through where I am now, a sophomore at Stanford University. My junior high was a horrid private school—perfect for collecting privileged assholes—and, as you know, Stanford University is an ivy-league-wanabee collection of snobs and shits. Also perfect!

The plan I devised depended on an initial willingness to suck up. I guess I said that, but it’s important in understanding my plan: rich people are able to draw others to them but also desperately need the affirmation provided by toadies, rendering them oddly dependent on these hangers-on.

Become a hanger-on, then, and you gain power.

That’s step number one. But you need to hate the rich. Too many hangers-on admire their pole star and are happy to exist in the reflected light of their love—for love of a sort it is. That odd mutual dependency can lead to a fixed orbital movement. To avoid that, hatred is mandatory.

Given that hatred, a bit of acting talent, and a strong stomach (the rich tolerate the most egregious flattery), the toady quickly seizes control over the vulnerable rich kid. (Let's start with kids, since I did; though older ones are no different.)

Rich kids have, every damned one of them, established a glossy and glamorous surface, often dazzling – clothes, hair styles, cars, and electronic equipment – but also an ease and assurance, a trust in the admiration of others to support their act. They have nothing but the glow surrounding them, a glow they have no means of regulating, need simply to assume.

Of course the power of such assumptions is usually enough, given how shy and uncertain most of us are around the rich. But when the toady turns, starts thinking about what's going on, the rich are impotent. Their power is paper-thin, sustained by a fantasy it takes two to uphold.

More specifically now: In seventh-grade, there was this piece of arrogant shit named Leon McGarry. Leon was a super-rich pretty boy, truly pretty, parents pillars of the country club. Some rich fucks depend more on appearance than others, but Leon was almost all appearance, from clothes to haircuts to school stuff to special manicuring. (Manicures in the seventh grade? Really? I may be misremembering, but it's MY memory.) In another environment, Leon's dainty pretties might have landed him in deep homophobic hell, but a private school of this quality is very slow to make this association, for obvious reasons: everybody would seem gay if that route were opened. Are you delicate, unathletic, and girly? Only in a posh private school will you be the norm, escape gay bashing.

Leon was an expensive target for me to set up. I pretended I needed him as a fashion consultant, being careful to let him know I could never hope to match, only imitate. I lacked his taste, his money. The last admission was tricky, since Leon was sure not interested in hanging with the recognizably poor. I had to suggest plentitude but with limits below his. I did this so well, Leon began buying me things – a sweater here and a jacket there.

Thing is, Leon started to like me. He would call me and suggest outings, even started hinting at overnights. That's what I was waiting for.

Leon was easy pickings, once the overnight idea came up.

“How about we camp out, buddy?”

“You think?”

“Not if you don't want to, Leon. But you have a backyard the size of most counties. We could set up a good half mile from the house, have all the privacy we want, smoke some pot—I'll get it.”

What I was really considering was attacking Leon through his appearance. He depended so much on clothes, the first part of my plan was to rob him of those. Make him naked, humiliated, reduced.

“Why are you setting up the camera?”

“You object, Leon? I thought it’d be fun to have later.”

“Oh, yeah.”

He didn’t count on the X-rated play I then directed and filmed. It involved slowly undressing a drugged-up Leon in front of the camera, reversing him and painting obscene messages on his butt. Then, I’d make copies, using them to blackmail him into becoming my very own toady, willing to submit to minor servitudes, and further filmings.

Leon didn’t work out too well. He became agreeable so quickly and so willing to **serve** me – that’s the word – that the fun almost disappeared:

“I’ll come over tonight for a blowjob, Leon.”

“OK.”

“God, Leon, don’t you object?”

“Why would I?”

Worst of all, I found myself immensely enjoying conversations with Leon, who turned out to be well-read and quick, trapping me before I knew it into almost – damn it – friendship.

So my first attempt not only didn’t work; it backfired, because of the peculiar nature of Leon and not because my scheme was in any way defective.

Girls are different, I found. Sex is central in one’s plans, had better be. With this firmly in mind, I turned to target number 2, Sally Lou Gearson, and a project more challenging and yet deeply conventional. After all, sophomores in high-school find easy reasons for dating. Still, to date across social classes required that Sally be off-center. She was just that. Sally was kewpie-doll pretty but she was a bit smarter than she looked and a little bored with what was expected of her, though she didn’t know how bored she was. Sally was skinny, boyishly figured, but sure as hell attractive. Naturally, she knew how to dress.

Naturally, so did I. Sally didn’t strain my budget in the same way as Leon: I could get by with saggers and tees, pretending to the cheapest cool type available and countering it with “gentleness” and “sensitivity.” Some bad poetry – though as good as I could plagiarize– went a long way with Sally.

Sally and I started it all off by kidding around in the hall, an outgrowth of an English class where I arranged to be her writing partner—thanks Ms. T. Before long we were making joint trips to the library, attending poetry readings at a local cafe, and drinking lattes.

Sally was, by nature and habit, a modest girl, and her bohemianism was largely theoretical. I soon found that it was a major turn-on (to me) to induce her to write personal poetry that was “direct,” i.e., “erotic.” It became routine for me to get Sally blushing as she wrote, pushing her way past her limits of decency (and experience) by subjects I introduced and suggested that a poet would be wrong to ignore.

“Sally, you have a little time today? OK if you are in a rush.”

“I have all the time you have, Tom. I love being with you—writing.”

“I sometimes think I embarrass you, being so direct.”

“Not at all—well, you do a little, but I need to get over that, really I do. You’re good for me. It’s silly for me to let barriers exist. I should be able to write about anything.”

“That has to do with being able to feel absolutely anything. Can you?”

“I can try.”

“But are you willing to try? I sometimes have the feeling that you hold things back—from me.”

She stretched out over the coffee table there in the café and grabbed my hand, her boyish chest exposing itself as her flowered blouse flopped forward. I could tell her breath was coming fast. “Give me a chance.”

“Well, let’s see.” I leaned forward and kissed her, letting our lips barely touch but extending my tongue to see if she would meet it. She did, moving forward and almost losing her balance.

It was our first kiss, very passionate.

I said nothing, stood and pulled her up close beside me, into me. More kissing in the lounge. She would either be embarrassed past hope or a pushover from here on out. I pulled her close, even running my hands down her sides and then inside her low-slung saggies.

“Not here, Tommy. Oh God. Do it.”

We did it—not there. We managed to make it to the city park, behind some trees, naked and unprotected in any way. Our asses were scratched raw by the gravel, as we banged each other repeatedly, backwards, forwards, sideways.

Funny thing is it was neither brutal nor calculated, at least beyond the kiss in the coffee bar. It was pure teen passion—or, if not pure, then fun, hormone-driven, even lovely.

Afterwards, Sally didn’t seem humiliated, ready to weep from shame. She was laughing: “Well, Tommy, I guess we lost our purity pretty completely! Hope you’re not sorry, but I practically raped you! I gotta pad my ass next time.”

Nice girl, you’re starting to think. Me, too. Before long, I did institute the taping; but turns out she found it “spicy,” hardly the perfect lead-in to blackmail. Then she took on tutoring my little sister, Sally did. My little sister is the dearest person, so how could I ruin Sally after she took on my graceless, sweat-hearted Molly? Plus Sally was the sexiest woman I ever knew, and the funniest: once she gave me a hand job in Latin Class, reaching under my desk and, in a whisper, conjugating an irregular verb as she pumped. And she lured me to the gym and, with other kids there, led me to a corner and proceeded to climb an exercise ladder ahead of me—beskirted and without underwear, doing a little dance and getting me so inflamed that I had no choice but to pursue her

skyward to the upper running track, there to have my way – make that her way – on the curved, heavily banked section.

General point, you are thinking, not yet established. But I am undeterred. I understand the power of anecdotes and the way they can, in odd ways, establish logical sequences that are irrefutable if hidden. There are reasons for hating rich people and I am laying them out here – or will soon. Don't be impatient.

What we have so far is an evolved species, a social type that has moved beyond its elemental form. Of course it has, through natural selection, rid itself of its most obnoxious arrogances, its markers of self-satisfaction and contempt for others. That's no surprise. It has learned "niceness" and "consideration." In order to make our job do-able, we must find a specimen of richness less polished (disguised) and thus closer to its essences.

Which is to say a rich black kid. Rich whites have been around since riches came into being as a form of cultural life. Not so rich kids of other colors.

So X was perfect for me. X was possessed of a charming sort of egocentric bisexuality I often encountered in my freshman year at Stanford, but never to this degree. That he would call himself "X" indicates a great deal of primitive self-consciousness, you could say.

I ran across X shortly after arriving – really did – in a field as we were playing a game of touch football, or, rather, others inclined to such hilarity were playing, while I drove a golf cart. Don't ask how we ended up there. Unimportant.

X, slightly built and delicate, was not well suited to withstand the impact of a motorized vehicle.

"Damn, man! You about knocked me into next week." (Such antiquated phrases, were characteristic of X, a strained way of shooting for "cool," I thought at once.)

I don't know if I need to give you many details on X, those details being pretty much all of a piece. Unluckily, we became lab partners and found ourselves spending an inordinate amount of time together: yes, in moments of what you would call intimacy. It was also X who told me that my mother had died and who came back with me to the funeral, standing as a buffer between me and my brute of a father. He's lent me money on many occasions and he has been instrumental in helping Molly get into a hotshot leftist prep school.

So, there you have it, what seems to me a fine example of causal reasoning and cunning social observation. If I do say so myself. I'd better.

I EXIST

**And gee, I know that she would come to me,
If she could see---her broken-hearted lonesome pal.**

“There’s no time like the present, Polly.”

“That’s just the trouble, Larry.”

“Huh?”

“There are plenty of times like the present.”

“You mean I’m predictable, boring.”

“Not just you.”

“Life in general.”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Us. I’m not saying it’s your fault.”

“I can change.”

“I just said it’s not you—not entirely.”

“It? Women always say that. ‘Oh, it’s not you. ‘It just ain’t working.’ ‘I think we need to give it a rest.’”

“Well, sometimes it is ‘it.’ Anyhow, what makes the difference? You know as well as I it truly is not working.”

“No I don’t. I think it’s working great. I’m very happy.”

“That’s good.”

“I don’t mean to sound so selfish—or evasive. Let’s talk right now about what we can do to make you happier, address the problem straight on. We’ve always been good at that.”

“No, we haven’t.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning we’ve never addressed a problem—from any direction.”

“My footwear, just for instance.”

“You got me there. Major issue. Solved. Bingo. Anything else?”

“I don’t have a list handy. I guess I can’t think of anything right off, but that doesn’t mean we can’t do it.”

“I don’t know how we got sidetracked onto the non-issue of problem-solving, Larry. We’d not need to sputter on about facing issues if we were compatible to begin with.”

“That’s moonshine, Polly. People are not just compatible because of some intangible something. All relationships, even ours, take work, hard work. That’s just a truth. Face it. Work, Polly.”

“No need to be aggressive. I didn’t want to open the door to your advice-column analysis, but. . . .”

“But what?”

“To point what we both know to be true.”

“That’s where you started. Are you saying we have problems I don’t recognize because I’m obtuse or a male or over-invested or. . . ?”

“Stop. As I say, this is not about you. Well, in a way. Anyhow, shut up and let me finish. I don’t see why we need to go into whose fault it is. That’ll just cause pain and get us nowhere. Leave it as it is.”

“You know how many times you said ‘it’?”

“It ever occur to you there’s a reason people say ‘it’ in these occasions, reasons not connected to stupidity or evasion?”

“I don’t believe it. I mean, I don’t believe what you’re saying. Anyhow, our tone is wrong. Regain our tenderness and mutual respect: that’s the order of the day. How about this: give me a week. I know you say it’s not me, but I want to show you I can change. After all we’ve been through, I think you owe me that much.”

“What exactly have we been through that separates us from the hundreds of millions of other pairs who’ve dated a few weeks and discover there is no future, no reason for instituting grinding probes into what went on, for trial extensions, or for counseling?”

“Just a week. Just five days?”

“How about no time, none, zero, Larry. That work for you? Nothing. That OK? We agreed? Good.”

“Hello.”

“Polly, hi. It’s me, Larry.”

“Yeah, I know. Listen, Larry. . . .”

“Wait. I don’t mean to be rude, but give me a minute. Please”

“What?”

“Polly, I’m not trying to be—rude. I guess I said that. I was just wondering if you haven’t had second thoughts.”

“No.”

“Polly, please. Oh please.”

“Damn it, Larry. Don’t do this.”

“Do what? I’m just saying what I should have said before—and often. I love you, Polly. I love you.”

“Larry, this is doing neither of us any good.”

“I love you.”

“I heard you.”

“There’s another guy, isn’t there?”

“Jesus, Larry.”

“That’s what it was all along. I knew it.”

“Think what you like. Just don’t call again.”

“But I love you. True love. What everyone searches for and so few find.”

“Goodbye, Larry.”

“Wait a second. Just a second. Please don’t be angry—or hasty. I know I hadn’t said it much before, hadn’t said it at all. But I know it now, deep in my heart, the deepest part. Look there and what do you see? Pure love, all for you.”

“Larry, you know that poem by Stephen Crane, ‘A Man Said to the Universe’?”

“No, I don’t. But why bring that up?”

“I’ll recite it for you. Then I’m hanging up. Think of me, Larry, as the universe, that immensity. OK? Doesn’t matter if it’s OK. Here it is:

A man said to the universe:

“Sir, I exist!”

“However,” replied the universe,

“The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.”

I DON'T CARE IF I EVER GET BACK

“If a woman has to choose between catching a fly ball and saving an infant's life, she will choose to save the infant's life without even considering if there is a man on base.”

Dave Barry

“The other teams could make trouble for us if they win.”

Yogi Berra

“If it wasn't for baseball, I'd be in either the penitentiary or the cemetery.”

Babe Ruth

“Dad always wanted me to play football, wanted it so bad—didn't talk much about it, but I knew. He had been real sick as a kid---wouldn't say what with---and couldn't play himself, so he wanted. . . .”

“You to be his stand-in, mold you into his wish-fulfillment puppet.”

“You think, Maureen?”

“I think.”

“Oh. Anyhow, I would have played football, too. I would have, really. You know that.”

“And you're justifying yourself to whom?”

“Oh. I decided not to play football because. . . . You want to know the truth?”

“I don't really want to know at all. You want to tell me. Do.”

“It hurt.”

“Right.”

“Made me ashamed, but that's the truth. Junior high football was enough for me.”

“But you starred, right?”

“Yeah, sure. I spent the whole time dodging, trying to appear to be in the game, tripping a lot, going the wrong direction, falling for fakes (and falling on my face) even when there weren’t any.”

“Sounds demanding. No, I see what you’re saying. Not to anticipate, but then, after Junior High, you turned to baseball as a painless substitute.”

“Eventually, when I discovered I sucked at basketball.”

“And you found at last your true love, the match for all that jock ability inside you in baseball, which gives you what you always wanted in terms of adoration and makes Daddy very proud.”

“No, not really, not either.”

“Explain.”

“This team here in Altoona, a wonderful place to be in so many respects, is Class AA. You know what that means?”

“As it happens.”

“My record is 6-7.”

“I see.”

“The only good thing about me is I have a decent ERA, 2.96, and strike out a fair number of the lousy hitters on opposing teams. But I also give up a lot of solid hits, too many.”

“What’s your greatest asset? Think of that. What’ll get you to the big time someday?”

“Glad you asked. I don’t walk anybody.”

“Nobody?”

“Just about. Two all year. My dad used to yell, ‘Put it in there, even if he hits it a mile.’”

“You took that to heart.”

“And sometimes they do hit it a mile.”

“I enjoyed our evening.”

“Sorry I babbled all through it. Next time. . . . Will there be a next time?”

“Let me think about it.”

Ten days later, he was in Pittsburgh, PNC Park, called up because of his amazing stuff, extraordinary savvy, and ability to win the close ones—along with the sudden but total collapse of Pirate pitching, starters and relievers. Two of the starting pitchers had, within a week, been sent to the disabled list and another had been so ineffective and disgruntled he asked to be sent down (to AAA Indianapolis) and was obliged. After trying to patch things together for three or four days, calling up genuine prospects from AAA and shoving long relievers into starting roles, the management finally faced up to the fact that they had to have more arms, any arms, no matter how inexperienced or ineffective.

Thus Freddy's call-up.

It was great fun, truly exhilarating, for the first two days: spiffy locker room, workout room (which he didn't use), whirlpools (which he did), and encouraging coaches. His teammates pretty much ignored him, calling him, when they called him anything, Teddy or Neddy. He didn't correct them, just smiled. He was a rookie, after all, not even that.

Third day was different. Got there early, as he had the previous two days, not because he knew exactly what to do but because he thought that was part of the job requirements for a greenhorn.

"Clint wants to see you."

He wasn't too sure who had said that, but he was very nervous, was mentally packing his bags to head back to Altoona.

But no. "You're starting today, Freddy. Would have told you yesterday, but didn't want you losing sleep. It'll be fine. Todd will go over the Cubs lineup with you, but don't worry about memorizing things. Just get the signs straight and he'll call the game."

"Right, sir."

"OK. Go get 'em."

It was a blur from then on. He did meet with Todd, though he couldn't place him at all, didn't know his last name. There had been a bad injury or two at catcher as well, but. . . . Anyhow, it didn't matter: wasn't like he and Todd were going to the prom together.

Nobody spoke to him, but he knew enough to guess that was to avoid rattling him. It rattled him plenty.

But the time went by and he found himself on the mound, first, forgetting to take his hat off for the National Anthem and, then, throwing the first two warm-up pitches over Todd's head.

He was trying to do too much. "Slow down," he told himself. "Put it in there if they hit it a mile."

The first batter didn't hit it a mile, but did line a very sharp single to left, as did the second batter. Two pitches. Two on, no out. Todd came out to talk to him: "You don't have to groove every pitch, kid. Throw some out of the zone. See if you can fool someone."

He tried to throw the next one out of the zone, as instructed, but the batter went for it anyhow and did hit one a mile, but luckily to the deepest part of the park, where the center-fielder ran it down, barely. He then managed two balls on the next batter, both in the dirt, drawing an encouraging "Jesus Christ!" from Todd. He got one over the plate on the next pitch, though, and the batter connected on a howling shot down the line, somehow snagged by the first-sacker, who doubled the guy off first.

A shutout inning, by damn!!

“Good job, kid,” said Clint. “Got em out—somehow. Don’t worry. They’ll stop hitting the ball so hard.”

He was glad for the encouragement but skeptical, too. Just why would they stop hitting the ball so hard? Was the fix in?

He somehow made it through the second and then the third inning, fooling no batters, not even their no-hitting pitcher, but somehow having balls, screaming liners mostly, finding defenders often enough as to keep those who got hits (two each inning) from getting to home plate.

In the bottom of the third, score 0-0, it was his turn to bat. Just then, he realized he didn’t know the signs, didn’t know what to do. He looked down at the third-base coach, who was wiping his brow, his hands together, his knees. What was that supposed to mean?

He decided he couldn’t go too far wrong by bunting, though he also knew he’d never been worth a damn at bunting. No worse than swinging away, though, so what the hell.

The first two pitches were perfect pitches to bunt, but he missed them, causing the third baseman to move back and presenting a perfect opportunity for crossing up the opposition.

The next pitch, however, slipped out of the pitcher’s grasp, or something, and hit him. Hit him on the foot, said the umpire, though he didn’t really feel it and wondered if it had. The catcher didn’t think it had but contented himself with, “Get the fuck to first base, asshole!”

He got there, leadoff batter stepping in. The problem now was taking a lead at first, just the right length. It must have been, as the pitcher looked over but didn’t throw, pitched instead, a very hard slider for a strike. The catcher, noticing that our hero hadn’t bothered to head back to the bag, occupied as he was in watching the game, uncorked a snap throw to first that sailed into right field.

“Get moving!! Go, idiot!” It was the first-base-coach saying this.

So he did, to second. Took a very short lead and didn’t move when the batter hit an easy ground ball to third. But the third baseman winged the ball well to the left of the first-baseman, bouncing it again into right field.

This time, he knew what to do—run like hell. He rounded third, though none too quickly, and saw the coach waving at him, trying to signal something, “STOP,” as it turns out. But he was on a vital mission and was flying home, trotting home, at least. The ball was there long before he executed a very fine slide, right into the catcher’s leg and the ball.

“Blocking the plate! Illegal!” from his very own dugout.

And it turned out, after a long delay for the challenge, to be just that, making the score 1-0, Pirates.

Wish we could say it stayed that way, that our hero pitched a shutout and won the game, turned the team around and earned a regular spot into the rotation, moving up to Number One, Ace, seven time All-Star, winner of three World Series rings.

He was back in Altoona in ten days, never making it as far as Indianapolis. But he had those innings, that run, that imperishable and crystalline hour. Never mind that he lasted only five innings, exiting on the wrong side of a 5-1 score. Never mind that he struck out next time up, with the bases loaded, too.

Dad, he knew, would have been so proud.

He decided to mention none of this to Maureen.

TAKING A STAND

“I hate all sports as rabidly as a person who likes sports hates common sense.”

H. L. Mencken, *Heathen Days*.

“Can't anything be done about calling these guys ‘student athletes’? That's like referring to Atilla the Hun's cavalry as ‘weekend warriors’.”

Russell Baker

“Games played with the ball, and others of that nature, are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind.”

Thomas Jefferson

“So, Ben, you think this’ll be lively?”

“Violent, more like it.”

“Fist-fights, knifings, grenades!”

“Whoie! Maybe just short of that, Mary. We never had one of these before, have we?”

“Not that I know of. Always been behind closed doors. Wonder why they opened things up?”

“Those two new Board Members, that’s my guess. Campaigned on making things participatory.”

“Bad idea. Just stir the shit, don’t you think?”

“I do, Mary. I do indeed. Cowardly, too. They’ll say they ‘received full community input,’ and then vote the way they knew they would all along, mendacious assholes.”

“Then why we going, you and me?”

“Cause we’re deep-down long-term believers in our democratic heritage.”

“And deep-down long-term fools.”

“That too.”

The meeting started exactly on time, which was annoying to one and all. They hadn’t taken the trouble to come in order to be hustled, shushed, harrumphed, subjected

to uppity treatment from stiffed-necked self-important nobodies. It's The School Board, for Christ's sake, The Upper Monroe Valley School Board, not The Supreme Court. Son of a bitch!

Mary and Ben were seated in the front row, not because they eagerly sought those seats but because they arrived only a few minutes early and found all the choice spots taken.

"So, welcome to all. Let's start right in."

"Before we start, if you please": a voice from the back, hard to ignore as it sounded less like a voice than a trombone, a full set of trombones.

"Yes?"

"I move that we delay things ten minutes so others can get here. I know for a fact that Mike Matheny and his family, along with. . . ."

"Thanks very much, Carl. We appreciate your kind concern, but audience members cannot make motions. We are here to gather input from the community on some pressing issues I'll outline right now."

"Why not wait just a minute?"

"Because we're starting immediately, that's why."

"Oh well, in that case, if you put it that way-----idiot!" The last word was not uttered in a lower tone, but the Board Chairman, Art Yapanski, managed almost to ignore it.

"I won't rehash all the data, the analyses, and the arguments. You all have had plenty of time to study the mailers containing them." He raised his voice here to cover voices straining to object.

"The long and short of it is this: test scores are down, the budget has shrunk, focal points must be established in basic subjects, cuts must be made. That's just the way it is, like it or not. OK. Floor is open. Yes----Alice."

"I don't disagree with what you've said, but I don't see why we need to cut the arts at all. I propose we eliminate football. According to our calculations, which I'll hand out to anyone interested, football costs us about the same as theater, choir, band, and photography, which I count as one of the arts – all of those put together. So, how about it?"

Mary turned to Ben, smiling but also looking somehow sad: "Now there's a proposal sure to attract no support at all."

"Too bad," he said.

Sure enough. Multiple football addicts rose to the bait, a few even giving reasons, or what looked like reasons, might almost pass: learning to cooperate, being part of the community at large, gaining focus, having a reason to stay in school, being fit and staying fit."

"Speaking of fitness," came another voice, "what about concussions, all the studies on the effects of getting hit in the head 600 times a season, which I read, and then,

the poor kids, maybe not immediately but inevitably, contracting all sorts of dementia? How about that? Seems to me we cannot countenance an activity, expensive or not, that is so clearly damaging to our young boys. Just go and see the movie if you doubt what I'm saying."

Of course that argument didn't completely silence those who felt differently or didn't give a shit. It spawned a whole tribe of angry retorts, as predictable as they were repetitive.

Mary finally stood, seeking with nods and waves some sort of recognition from the Board Chair, who was smirking now, broadcasting his tolerance, perfectly willing to let this chatter continue until adjournment time was reached. Realizing she was getting nowhere by following the rules, Mary finally turned around to the crowd, put two fingers on either side of her mouth, and let loose with a whistle she hadn't used since she was twelve.

It worked.

"Sorry for that. Thanks. Look, we're friends here, all of us"----that was a stretcher, but it seemed to work----"and we all want the same thing, what is best for our kids. Right?"

Banal. But who could argue?

"So, let's return to the original proposal, the one Carl seems to think is not a proposal but a fait accompli, er, a settled fact, that we cut not only into but cut entirely the arts programs, all of them, in the name of efficiency and a hard-nosed facing of reality, the fact, the plain fact, of the demands and power of standardized tests. OK, so say we start there, for the sake of argument. Say we agree with Carl: the tests are what they are and we can't fight that. Ben?"

Ben wasn't ready to act so fast, but act fast he did.

"So, what if we said our best bet for improving our kids' scores on these goddamned tests was to retain the arts programs. What if we said that music and drama and all the rest are not inessential frou-frou add-ons but pursuits that have been shown, scientifically, to increase attention spans, open new brain channels, pump up the volume of dopamine flowing to the brain---which we all know is vital---enlarge the capacities of our memories, and produce more active learning."

"Scientifically?" hooted a rude voice behind him.

"Damned right," said Mary. "I'm sure you've seen reports of a study by the Dana Arts and Cognition Consortium, a three-year study even, that shows----just what Ben said."

At least they were drifting away from football, not that what followed was any more organized or likely to pierce the Armor All the Board Members had lavishly sprayed on themselves. The talk drifted away from "studies" to anecdotes on how much fun painting had been or school plays or singing in the choir. Not a few said that "fun" wasn't what they wanted their kids to get from school, that they had plenty of "fun" as it

was from mindless electronics and could use a little less, that what they needed was discipline and plenty of it.

Finally, at exactly ten o'clock, Art stood, smiled, and thanked them all, said the Board so appreciated their support and input, and blah, blah, blah.

"Well, Mary, glad we went?"

"What a joke."

"But it really isn't a joke, is it, Mary. We know what'll happen."

"We do know, Ben, and it is no joke, you're right."

"Makes me heartsick, Mary."

"Yeah."

"Maybe we could recall the Board Members."

"They'd just replace 'em with duplicates."

"Shoot the Board Members---and the football coach---and all the. . . ."

"Yeah. That'd do it. Just make all them sorts clear out."

"What will it take, Mary?"

"Time. More time. More time still. Some day we'll see that hurting kids isn't as much fun as we thought. But right now. You know."

"Wish I didn't."

THE STEUBENVILLE PLAYERS

“Theatre is a series of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.”

Tom Stoppard

Big turnout---bigger than Larry'd expected, much bigger than he wanted, if he let himself think that way, which he did. There's so many different, very important parts in the play, along with heralds and soldiers and messengers and standers-around. Problem was—one problem was—the ungenerous stage couldn't begin to hold half that many. Well, he'd face that issue later---or not.

For now, he needed to introduce “King Lear,” explain his vision of the play and ideas for this production. He'd planned all that carefully, how he would snap everything into focus for the cast by using a single short scene. Deploying two locals, Restelli and son, he'd be able to illustrate his basic idea: the play dramatizes a clash between two worlds, medieval and modern.

Looking around, though, he was struck with what now seemed a much better idea. His careful plan, diving right into the play with what might feel like a lecture (because it was), would seem stuffy, academic. Not that he wasn't an academic of sorts, but this was Community Theater. Didn't get any more amateur than this. Important not to be patronizing. That'd scare them off. No, this sudden inspiration was the lake to swim in, so he did a cannonball right into it.

“What should we call ourselves?”

He should have stuck with the scene, even with a lecture, a three-hour lecture. Would have been better than what emerged.

“The Royal River Company”

“Shakespeare on the Ohio”

“Mill-Town Thespians”

“Not as Bad as You'd Suppose”

“Drunk and Proud”

“Remembering Some of the Lines”

“Rated G—Godawful”

They settled on “The Steubenville Players,” not without some witless suggestions to extend “Players” to “Playing with Ourselves” and the like.

Thank God that was over. Now to it.

You're probably wondering why he was doing this at all. No big mystery: his department in Pittsburgh had decided to put its full weight and more into extensive community service. Issuing a great many e-mail announcements and stressing it vigorously at meetings, the department chair, Dr. Peters (Mike to those in his inner circle, where Larry did not dwell) had made it clear that those wishing to harvest rewards would do well to heed the call. For the tenured members of the faculty, these rewards were negligible or non-existent. For the untenured, Larry in this case, they might possibly include hanging around yet another year on the way to the nightmare of the six-year tenure review.

Larry had not come up with the community theater idea on his own or developed it jointly with Dr. Peters. More like he'd obeyed orders.

"So, Lawrence, this very eager group in Steubenville is poised to take advantage of our expertise, very eager to form a theatrical society, first-rate, that would make available to the community the finest in drama, ancient and modern, American and---err--foreign."

"I see. That's heartening."

"Isn't it? I couldn't agree more and am glad you feel this way, very glad. What do you say, Lawrence, to heading it up, giving them the push they need, the leadership without which they have no chance, the fine tuning. . . ."

"Where's Steubenville?"

"Really, you don't know? Why it's right around the corner. Very handy. They've had their share of rough times, you know. "

"No."

"You don't? Scandals of various sorts, involving football players, accusations of rape, the usual. Thing is they don't have much except football. Unemployment and that sort of thing."

"So, what's a little gang-rape, right? It's football, after all."

"Very funny, Lawrence. OK, we're set then. I suggest something elevated and bracing, challenging but do-able, familiar but not your everyday. Shall we say 'King Lear'?"

Which explains how he had found his way up the river to an old mill town minus the mills, a town sinking more slowly than it should, without jobs, hope, comfort of any kind. Nothing for it but to charge ahead, plunge into the redeeming power of high art, join together these heartbroken people and this heartbreaking play. "Oh, howl, howl, howl, howl, howl, howl!"

“Before we get down to other stuff—we have a lot to cover—I wanted us to get a taste of this play, how strange it is and fresh, unexpected, rock your world, as we used to say. So, I asked Bill and Bill Jr. to read this little section, a father and son dialogue, as it happens.”

“Bill and Bill Jr. doing those roles in the play?”

“We haven’t done casting yet, Alicia. This is different.”

“OK.”

“Right, the scene. It’s short, as I say. Bill and Bill Jr. here are now, in our imaginations, no longer Bill and Bill Jr. but Gloucester and his son Edgar. Gloucester is blind and Edgar has just taken over caring for him—but that’s complicated. What we have here is something else, never mind that for now, as the scene will make everything clear.”

“All you need to know for now is that the good guys, those loyal to Lear, are taking on the bad guys off stage. The bad guys are bad almost beyond belief—unscrupulous and violent, truly evil: they represent the new world, with no fixed allegiances, no connections to anything but themselves, a world where love and truth are bought and sold. The good people are very strange to us, now nowhere to be found: they represent an old medieval domain of pledges and bonds, absolute loyalty and honor—they called it fealty.”

“We ourselves occupy the world of the bad guys, rootless individuals, but we wish we didn’t. Our hearts are with Lear and the values and way of living we can only long for and never move into.”

“So anyhow, the play has started out lousy for the good guys and has gotten much worse, only to turn around at last and make us think and hope we got a happy ending coming. The bad guys are sparring among themselves, and Lear and Cordelia, his one good daughter, are back together, joined with the others who are, in their hearts, allied with them—which includes Bill and Bill Jr., Edgar and Lear’s friend Gloucester, who is Edgar’s dad.”

“You with me?”

An uncertain chorus of yeses.

“OK, then. Edgar has left his old blind father to rest while he goes to find out how the battle is going, telling his dad he expects to bring him good news, give him comfort. We pick up where Edgar, that is Bill, returns to Gloucester, that is, Bill Sr. Go to it, Restelli’s!”

Edgar (Bill Jr): Away, old man. Give me thy hand. Away.

King Lear hath lost. He and his daughter taken.

Give me thy hand, come on.

Gloucester (Bill Sr): No further, sir. A man may rot even here.

Edgar (Bill Jr): What, in ill thoughts again. Men must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither.

Ripeness is all.

“You get it?”

“You mean we get set up to expect a happy ending, want it so bad, then Shakespeare leads us down the garden path, shits all over us? Lear has lost and Bill Sr. just wants to sit there and rot?”

“Well, Carmine, I think. . . .”

“What’s Bill Jr. mean in his last lines, Larry?”

“What do you think?”

A small voice from the back: “I think he means that our lives are pointless, filled with unmerited pain, that we have no honorable choice but to endure, to avoid cringing or ducking, not because it’ll get us anything, but just because. There isn’t any reason to live, but we mustn’t just sit and rot. Ripeness is all there is, all. The fruit develops, gets to ripeness, serves no purpose, and then-----nothing.”

You might say that gloomed things up, but it did allow for a speedy set of readings, casting decisions, and expressions of encouragement (heartfelt) and approval (insincere).

No question: an epic disaster in the making. Why had he agreed to “Lear” for a company and audience (assuming there was one) more suited to “Under the Yum Yum Tree?” Even more suited to parking their butts and drink beer after beer. Maybe he could be more snobbish, condescending, stupid. Yes, he could: he looked again, with a sigh truly theatrical, at his cast list and figured he had, charitably speaking, four actors likely to remember some of their lines, not many:

Lear—his very self

Gloucester—Bill Restelli

Edgar—Bill Jr.

Cordelia/Fool—Maggy Russell (the “small voice from the back”)

Given that so many lines were to be said (flubbed) by Goneril, Reagan, Albany, Cornwall, Kent, France, Burgundy, Oswald, and a Gentleman, things were looking decidedly down.

They had had but the one rehearsal, devoted to reading from the paperback edition, but even that had been – what’s the word? – terrifying. Right from the start. Kent, a nice-looking young kid just out of high-school and unemployed so far (and likely on into the future) had the first line in the play and, to his credit, had got the first six words out in a voice that was quaking but clear enough if you strained: “I thought the king had most.” But the seventh word, “affected” gave him pause, perhaps because alternate pronunciations presented themselves. But what could they be? Finally, he settled on “ef-facted” which did propel him toward the end of the line but maybe not on a vehicle audiences could board.

If only that had been the worst or that Kent was the only incompetent among them. Larry soon stopped correcting pronunciations, hoping to arrive at the end of the

play without going mad or strangling someone. Before long he allowed a whole list of howlers to pass unremarked and unlaughed-at:

Goneril—"felactate" for "felicitate"

Reagan—"avuck" for "avouch"

Oswald—"Prickee" (if you can believe it)—for Prithee

Edmund—"ariclur" for "aricular"

Thirteen hours later (it seemed) Edgar finally ended it all: "We that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long." By then Larry didn't care if he himself lived long – or at all.

He thanked them, said there'd be another read-through before the first of three (just three?) staged rehearsals.

Hustling to get his stuff together and be the first out of the room, he failed at both. Arriving at the door, he realized he'd forgotten his coat and that he was fronted, surrounded actually, by a host of cast members. Not one of them was asking advice (which they needed); all were insisting that he join them for beers (which he didn't need). What could he say? Hell's fire! He still had to drive back to Pittsburgh. Still. . . . He looked around anxiously for Cordelia, but didn't have time to snag her, even if she had still been there—which she wasn't.

The bar was a perfect fit for what he expected a Steubenville workers hangout to be; he hoped the stage sets could be anywhere near as convincing. No ban on smoking had reached this den—nor on cussing, howling, and telling offensive jokes, but also laughing and smiling. Thinking again of his trip back, he knew he should go easy. So he didn't. He had uncounted numbers of beers and, especially ill-advised, a boilermaker, foisted on him when he admitted he was a boilermaker virgin (a phrase he had invented all by himself, one which gave him great pride and real standing among his new friends, Goneril especially).

He'd had his eye on Cordelia all along, but Goneril was an easy second. She was, admittedly, no great shakes as an actress—yet. As he thought about it, staring all the while at Goneril, he decided he shouldn't be hasty, that there was real promise there, once her inner nastiness was released onto the part, joined with those wonderful cruel lines Shakespeare had written for his vilest character. That such inner nastiness was present in his actress, now his friend, he assumed. He figured it must be here in all these women, trapped and impoverished as they were.

He decided to ask Goneril to dance and may have done so—he couldn't remember for sure. Next thing he knew he was there at a table with three others and it was late and he was saying Goneril should tap directly into and release her inner nastiness, only not on him.

Next thing he knew after that he was in his Pittsburgh bed and only a little late for class. How he could have blacked out and found his way home he'd never know. Only he actually did discover it, at rehearsal three nights later. Oswald had driven him all the way back—"it ain't no distance. You'da done it for me."—and put him gently to bed. Holy Hell.

The next three rehearsals (and cast parties afterwards) went by in a kind of blur. He kept trying to get close to Cordelia—Goneril, in the light of day, was truly attractive and truly uninterested—but had no luck. She seemed very shy or very attached to somebody else. The two didn't seem to go together, though, so he decided to make a move first chance he got.

But the opportunity didn't seem to present itself, partly because he was caught up in a growing enthusiasm for the play and the company and partly because of a disaster at school.

First, the company:

Against all odds and human understanding, they were improving, not just improving but doing some parts with what almost amounted to clarity---in the sense that you could hear the words (most) and get the meaning (partial). There were a few places in the play that seemed downright promising. Gloucester and his dear legitimate son were approaching mediocrity in the great scenes on the Dover cliffs (represented on stage by a card-table turned sideways). Gloucester did a good fake fall off the cliff, and his son rescuing his blind old father-----well, that was moving.

The cast was responding to the play in unexpected ways. He'd said things to the group about how wrong Lear was to exclaim that "nothing can come of nothing," that only when the two fathers are reduced to nothing can they have any being, only when they are blinded can they gain sight. But he knew it wasn't his comments but the play itself, reading and hearing and acting it out so many times.

The horror show sections featuring the evil sisters and their hubbies was picking up steam, lots of it. Goneril and Reagan realized that their only sisterly tie was hatred, a pointless competition for men who cared nothing for them. All they had to propel them was some willingness not to give up, to keep vying for a prize in sadism. "Out vile jelly!"

Even the scene where the dying Edmund tries so very hard to repent and gather into himself what little he can-----"Yet Edmund was beloved"-----was played with what seemed like close attentiveness to its absurdity. Not only is Edmund too late to save Cordelia, but he has never experienced any human connection at all: wherefore bastard, wherefore base? After rehearsal Number Three, that great scene set up the closing suffering very well.

But none of this almost-success could counter the lurid miseries confronting him at school, announced, fittingly, by Dr. Peters, who summoned him to the front office with a cheerful note: "See me today."

"How's the play going, Lawrence?"

"Well, better than I had feared, much better, Dr. Peters."

"Splendid. Just thought I'd tell you the wife and I will be attending. Friday, is it?"

"Friday? I think so. You're coming, be part of the audience?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Jesus, I would."

"You're too modest, Lawrence. That's a fault, you know, it truly is."

There's an old theater adage---he knew this from some old movie he figured he'd seen as a boy---that a great first night is always preceded by a lousy dress rehearsal. If so. . . .

Not everything that could have gone wrong, had. The scenery wasn't all that bad, minimalist but functioning, apart from some tall hedges on the heath that kept collapsing. The costumes, too, did their job pretty well, except when Albany somehow managed at one point to fall, split open his pants and revealed that he was economizing on underwear.

But the rest---that is, the acting, the scene changes, the blocking: better to forget it. Forget everything, apart from one scene, the greatest in the play, Larry (and many another) have felt. Now rescued from the storm on the heath and an experience so near death it might have been just that, Lear awakens slowly to make out what at first are many vague forms, then one single form, an angel who he imagines is confirming his death. Soon, though, he starts to see, to see for the very first time: "Do not laugh at me, for as I am a man, I think thou art my child Cordelia." The beautiful and loyal daughter says she is just that, and it flashes in and through her father at once that she owes him nothing but hatred---were such balance sheets part of Cordelia's sensibility. Lear speaks here without bitterness or self-pity. He simply can't yet realize that Cordelia's heart is indeed true, that she hasn't left the absolute world of fealty. "I know you do not love me," Lear says; "Your sisters have (as I do remember) done me wrong. You have some cause. They have not."

The beautiful actress from the back row says, "No cause. No cause." The pause between the sentences was so long, so perfect, it made it clear she was offering something more than forgiveness, was declaring herself a being outside of causality, inhabiting

a pure and illogical country ruled by love. And in this simple declaration she confers citizenship on her old, suffering father.

Oh, one other thing about the final rehearsal, almost forgot: Reagan persuaded him, helped along by other encouraging cast members, to take literally the line “Off, off you lendings! Come unbutton here!” What the hell. He wouldn’t be the first actor to go bare-assed, but maybe the least adapted for it. Not like he went to the gym. Not like he wasn’t fat. So what? By this point, he was beyond resisting-----beyond sanity, some might say. He might as well have been on some heath on the hills outside Steubenville, mad and lost.

It came about, of course, the opening night. He decided not to make the best of it, to suffer through it; he decided to enjoy himself. If he were going to wangle his dick openly in front of these odd strangers (and his boss, and his boss’s wife) he might as well go all out, prepare for a triumph.

Before it all started, he stayed behind the small stage in the smaller room where they all dressed, not really to escape his boss but to spend more time with the nervous, happy, confident cast.

“I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.”

And they were off!

He was so caught up in being so fully inside the play, inside his ideas, the terrible mistakes and final existential triumph of old Lear, that he forgot to measure any errors or triumphs. Certainly there were both, but what did that matter? What were errors compared to this drama and the opportunity it gave to roll out once more a vision of a world lost and gone forever, acknowledging that but also, in the process, bringing it teasingly back to life. Surely we can recapture it, re-enter the land of love and trust.

After the play, he must have said something to the well wishers in the audience, surprisingly large, and to his boss and wife, but he couldn’t remember, really couldn’t. Even as it was happening, it wasn’t there. What was there was Cordelia. And my poor fool is hanged. It all went by so-----before you knew it.

And I’ll go to bed at noon.

“Cordelia, will you go out for coffee with me?”

“But goes thy heart with this?”

“As far as the coffee-shop?”

“And then?”

“All the way to bliss, triumph, love.”

“Love doesn’t last, isn’t there.”

“Just coffee.”

“Coffee’s hard to find in this town. Beer OK?”

“If you keep me to one—three. I have no restraint.”

“Best not to have.”

She was right about the plentitude of taverns and the absence of Starbucks. She was right about a lot of things, Larry figured, though he wished she weren’t.

“So, Larry. Should we pre-empt these critics, these neighbors and these traitors? Get em before they get us?”

“No, no, no, no, Cordelia. Come, let’s away to Martin’s Ferry. We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage. When thou dost ask of me blessing, I’ll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness. So, we’ll live and pray, and sing, and tell old tales.”

“Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, and. . .”

“We’ll take upon’s the mystery of things as if we were God’s spies.”

“Nothing will come of nothing.”

“We’ll flee, my Cordelia.”

“I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. My master calls me; I must not say no.”

“Upon such sacrifices, my dear Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense.”

It seemed for a brief time, maybe a second, we were somewhere else, somewhere we didn’t want to leave. Then we weren’t there.

“What were we talking about, Larry?”

“Whooie. I don’t know.”

“Yes you do.”

“Yeah, guess I do. And you too, right?”

“Yep. We that are young shall never live so long.”

LONELY IS AS LONELY DOES

“Ten days of . . . hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by the civilization he flees, he walks along up the land to become lost in the wild.”

Jon Krakauer

“Hitchhiking is not a sport. It is not an art. It certainly isn’t work, for it requires no particular ability nor does it produce anything of value. It’s an adventure, I suppose, but a shallow ignoble adventure.”

Tom Robbins

“I know you’re ready for this question, fully primed, but what’s the point, Julie? Tell me, please.”

“I am ready, yes I am. The point?”

“OK, smart ass, I know: the point is there’s no point.”

“Now, Smart Art, you’re going to ask me what in the world my parents would think, what would they say about their sweet, innocent. . . .”

“And you’ll tell me this is no commonplace rebellion, that your parents have not one damn thing to do with it, that you’re doing it—why are you doing it? I mean real and true.”

“Because it’s there.”

“Julie!”

“Yeah, I know. OK. I’m doing it because I hate myself the way I am. Not that I’m suicidal. I don’t want to end anything, but I’d love to have a start, something that I could end.”

“Let me go with you. C’mon. Not to protect you but to. . . .”

“What?”

“Try and understand, suck up some of the overflow from whatever it is you’re doing.”

“What makes you think I want you sucking up my overflow?”

“That’s what friends do.”

So, they set off, using a spring break that should have seen them employed in useful activities of a charitable or, at least, bank-account-replenishing sort. They wanted

to know as little as possible and to be as bare as possible, whatever that meant: maybe they knew. It was what it was: thoughtless and reckless. About the only thing you could say to their credit was that they never regarded it as heroic or even original, whatever “it” might be.

They waited until Monday—to avoid the weekend rush, they told themselves. Besides, they needed the weekend to figure how to get to Fallon and what sign or signs they should use to attract all them motorists. The first puzzler unraveled almost immediately: “Drive our car to Reno and fucking park it. Then over to Fernley where we can pick up the road.”

The signs they needed were harder to fix on, though they had ideas aplenty, bad ones:

“Two Worthless Kids Need to Get to Ely.”

“We’re Dangerous But Unarmed.”

“Give Us a Ride And We Promise Not to Sing”

“If You’re Cramped We Can Sit On Your Lap”

“Grandma’s Funeral Starts in Twenty Minutes”

They settled on: “Ely Or Bust---PLEASE?”

“That doesn’t make a lot of sense, Julie.”

“They’ll like the PLEASE and the old-fashioned, depression-era phrase.”

“From what you say, there ain’t any they there.”

“Not many.”

“I know, that’s the point.”

“You know too much.”

Getting to Reno was fun—fun for Julie, though Arthur was near peeing himself with worry.

“Want to do a little detour over to the Donner Pass, take a hike, stretch our legs?”

“And find a stranded party to eat.”

“Right, Arthur. You gotta promise me to put the brakes on your love of the obvious or this trip will be murder.”

“OK. I get it. Sure, a hike would be the thing, the very thing.”

So they did just that, located a trail (one among several hundred) and set off dutifully on it. Nothing happened apart from what always happens on hikes: putting one foot in front of the other in a pointless shuffle. Uneventful. Gave them a sense of ease and security, which was just what they didn’t need, turns out. What they needed, turns out, was what they had no means of acquiring anyhow, turns out.

They found a parking garage, too, not exactly in Reno, but in nearby Wadsworth, directed there carefully by an alarmingly cordial attendant: “You just get yourselves up there, now, bottom of the town, can’t miss it, cost you less than by God half what it’s here. Don’t tell anybody I told you, except Ralph. That’d be OK.” Ralph was the owner or, more likely, the other guy on duty at the garage in Wadsworth, you see.

From South Wadsworth, it was an easy walk to Fernley, only about twenty-six minutes. I know you don’t care how many minutes, but I want to be absolutely accurate about these details, just so what’s to come doesn’t seem to you made-up—effective, without doubt, but not quite ringing true. You mustn’t think that, whatever other views you may come to harbor.

Found the road, Alt 50, set up their sign, put out their thumbs, and waited. Not very long either, though they were still thirty miles from the real route 50, “The Loneliest Road in America.” I withheld that destination and the creepy term deliberately, as you guessed, just so all the clues I’ve been dropping would have this culminating bang, a climactic shiver up the spine. Loneliest Road in America. It really is. There are signs all along it telling you so, signs erected by the Nevada Tourist Bureau, which puts the matter beyond doubt.

Don’t go thinking the Tourist Bureau has been successful, that shops and villages and gas stations have cropped up for all those seeking to duplicate the tired adventures of others. No. There’s not a thing on Route 50. Trust me.

Well, there are nine towns, none amounting to a damn, two abandoned mining camps, mighty few gas pumps, and a coyote here and there. And it is a strange place, meandering boldly through the Great Basin, where some water comes (not a lot) and just stays there for a bit, feeding nothing but the clouds. Not a single river or stream. Most of the road is desert, though there are also a dozen mountains, not offering sanctuary, I would guess.

“So, Julie, we could find a place to put up here in Fallon, get an early start tomorrow.”

“It’s only eleven, Mr. Shaking-in-his-boots. Just put up the sign down there. Hold it for all to see.”

“I will, if you tell me. . . . OK, I’ll do it.”

And he did. There they were. From that point there was no turning back from. . . . Well, if I told you, you would find something else to do, quit reading. That’s not in the cards, quitting.

Took them maybe fifteen minutes to get a ride.

“We’re just going as far as Cold Springs. That help you?”

“Will we be able to get a ride from there?”

“Not likely.”
So they got in.

It was a middle-aged couple, one a male for sure, the other. . . . They didn’t say anything threatening. They didn’t say anything at all.

Finally, Arthur could take it no longer.
“You’re probably wondering what we’re doing.”

Silence.

“Well, you see. . . . You want me to shut up?”

Silence.

Then he hissed to Julie, a hiss that was three-quarters whine: “Let’s get out of here.”

Before she could answer, he erupted, trying to keep his voice level, not too shrill: “Excuse me, but this will be just great. We can get out here, anywhere along here, and thank you very much indeed.”

“Really? You want out here? Where *is* this? You want out? Oh, we’ve frightened you by being pretty quiet, totally quiet. I’m sorry. We’re just tired, tired as we are gay. That why you want out?”

Julie picked it up: “Nah. If Arthur’d known that before, he’d never have said anything about abandoning ship, as if our dream was to get to nothing.”

“What are you after?”

“Arthur is after getting back to UC Davis and the safety of his apartment. I’m the one after nothing.”

“I understand,” the driver said.

“I don’t,” said Arthur.

“I think it’s like Kerouac, right?” said the guy not the driver.

“Probably,” Julie said. “My best source is from ages ago, J. B. Priestley. He said that if you think the world is getting too crowded, get set down in Nevada, where roads lead from nothing to nothing, with plenty of nothing in between.”

“Yep,” said the driver.

They got to Cold Springs, home to no visible anything, and parted from their auto hosts.

The next ride was longer in coming, so long that Arthur several times had to stifle the urge to call somebody to come and get them. He kept thinking, almost aloud, “Call someone, now!” and then, each time afresh, remembered they had left cell phones behind. Deliberately.

“Whoowie,” said Julie. “This make you think of *Deliverance*? Here we are, in it and with no way out, not really, none at all. Whatever is going to happen will happen without asking our permission. It just will.”

“I don’t especially want to think of *Deliverance*.”

“A little squeamish about what might come out of them there woods, work its will upon your hind end?”

“Jesus, Julie. At least there ain’t no woods.”

“Cling to that comfort.”

“It’s no comfort. All this space. It’s worse.”

Just then, a truck, whizzing past and then braking, backing up. The side door opened but they couldn’t see inside, not really, making it seem for several seconds as if there were no driver.

But, whatdya know folks? there was.

“Going on to Eureka. Sure, kids, if you got \$500 to give me and don’t mind a few cuddles along the way.”

At this even Julie was silent.

“Nah. Git in. Love your sign.”

Nothing at all transpired for the first hour, though the confident driver was anything but silent, telling them tales of his youth and not-so-youth and providing what seemed to be fully informed commentary on what lay off the main road, vacant as it was. More vacancy, it seemed, but even more treacherous: “See that sign, kids? Spencer Hot Springs?”

They saw it.

“You take that road, within a minute you find yourself on gravel, which turns into more gravel, which gets narrower, which stops being gravel, and then stops being a road of any kind. Zilch. There you are with the desert beasts and whatever crazy shit is lurking about.”

He looked over and grinned—or leered.

Julie, of course, mistook his pathological insanity as good will: “How come you picked us up? I mean, aren’t you taking a chance?”

He looked at her for a long minute, then, “I know I should say, and you expect me to say, it’s you taking the chance, but I figure that’s what you had in mind anyhow. I understand that.”

“You do?”

“Your name’s Arthur, that right?”

“It is.”

He looked over again for a longer minute, seemed to be considering, which might not have been such a good sign. Arthur had turned from relaxed to petrified in less time than it takes to plunge a knife in the heart of a stupid college kid.

Then: "Arthur was the name of my kid."

Julie it was who said, right then, "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, he wasn't really no more than you kids's age, no he wasn't, though he wasn't in college or anything. Went out here with a good friend, got lost no more than a mile from the road. Never did know what that was all about. They had a tent, you know."

He paused. Arthur it was who thought he saw what was coming. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, they had a tent. Put up for the night, which was smart, I've always thought, figuring daylight would be the best time to find their way back."

"That *was* smart," one or both of them said.

"It was. I agree with you. Thank you," said the driver, "only you know his friend, nice kid, just got so scared and twisted around he killed my boy. Said he was trying to protect him."

"Yeah," both of them said.

"I think he was doing what he said. I get closer to what he meant every time I go through here, know what I mean? I guess he really was protecting."

Now, neither could respond.

"I think we all need protecting."

They nodded, and neither felt any fear.

FARLEY FAMILY FUNFEST

“The family is one of nature’s masterpieces.”

George Santayana

“Family is essential because we all feel like we belong to something greater than ourselves.

Laura Ramirez

“The poisonous idea of ‘the family’ flourishes because it gives us a license to sneer at others, to separate, and to hate.”

Anonymous

He was just driving around, Saturday afternoon, nothing whatever calling him anywhere, loose and floating, the way he liked it. No attachments, nobody telling him what to do, no schedules or appointments tying him down. Free as a wolf—more like a pigeon, all alone.

No wife, no kids.

No one with hooks in him of any sort. No one.

He thought of some favorite lines from Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, spoken by an ancient prisoner from inside the Marshalsea: “Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that--we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace.”

Yessir. That caught it exactly. Peace! Nobody could tell him what to do. He didn’t need to talk to anyone if he didn’t feel like it, see anybody, touch the world in any way.

At one time, things had been different, but he’d escaped, happily. He was very happy, very.

Before he knew it, he was driving in the countryside, somewhere unfamiliar. That made it even better. Nothing like the world without a past, without roots or memories, nothing to awaken.

Beautiful countryside, in a way. Not startlingly beautiful, not really startling in any way: trees, some side roads, here and there a sign advertising something.

He did read the signs to himself for a bit, but they weren’t entertaining, not like the old serial Burma Shave signs, funny ones, his father had mentioned, had mentioned

about four thousand times. Dad had been like that, a teller of tales, culled from a stock of about a dozen, all connected on a tape that recycled any time he had an audience. He himself had been the most reliable audience, or at least the one old Daddy could count on. I mean, what choice did he have, only a kid and not able just to walk away. Wish he could have, just walked away, walked out the door and into the wild, like that Chris McCandless character.

Then there was, out of nowhere, a different sign, puzzling at first, which made it irresistible: “FARLEY FAMILY FUNFEST---TURN HERE, IF YOU DARE!”

Took him a minute to get it, see the joke. He had slowed down, make that stopped, to read the sign, consider it. When he finally deciphered it fully, he turned the wheel, following the arrow.

What in hell was he doing?

It was a good two miles along on this lousy rutted road, but he couldn't turn back now. Oh, no. Finally he saw another sign. “ALMOST THERE—NOT TOO LATE TO TURN AROUND AND ESCAPE!”

These were real cut-ups, these Farleys. How contemptible and how depressingly silly, routine silly.

Naturally, he kept going, turned a corner and found himself before a picnic pavilion, obeying a sign that said, “PARK HERE—DUMMY!”

He sat a minute, trying to take it all in. Must have been a hundred people spread out before him, in the pavilion and out. No, not a hundred, maybe sixty-seventy fewer? It seemed very important to get the number right, or close to right. How could there be this many Farleys? Why would they want to gather? What were they saying in those signs? What did they want with him?

Opening the car door—what was to stop him?—he grabbed his walking stick and set out hobbling toward the side of the pavilion, the one that seemed unpopulated. It was, but not for long.

“Hi!”

It was a kid, maybe ten or twelve. He wasn't good at ages, especially on kids.

He didn't answer, didn't want to encourage the kid.

“Want to catch ball with me?”

I mean, what was he going to do, club the kid with his stick? He might have set off running, had running been in his bag of tricks.

“Where should I stand?”

The kid looked at him as if he might say something mocking but decided against it, only smiled—it might have been a smile—and said, “Wherever you want.” It was a smile, by God, a big one.

Jesus Christ. Anyhow, he did as directed and even managed to catch the ball—and again—and again. The kid started throwing high pop ups and then grounders. Then

two other kids came up and the game expanded—and expanded. He was playing first base, very well, too.

When he came up to hit, he didn't think, didn't think to be scared, just did it. It couldn't be, but there it was: the ball skittering past the infielders, then the outfielders, and then into the lake, and nobody minded, and he scuttled round the bases, and he touched home, and the kid who'd started it all jumped up and gave him a high five and then a hug.

And a big voice said, "Ben, let him go!"

As his name wasn't "Ben," he knew right off something was up, something bad, probably very bad.

"Hi! I expect you're a cousin," the accusing voice said, accusing him of just coming in there and hugging kids at random, or not at random, hugging his kid, most likely, which was something reserved only for genuine Farleys, more exactly, this particular Daddy Farley.

"I'm somebody's cousin," he said, pausing a few seconds, a few fatal seconds.

The guy, the very big guy, looked at him, menacingly. It must have been menacing.

"Is your name Farley?" the guy continued. "Or are you one of them Wallace's got themselves attached, lucky for us, as the Farleys ain't shit."

What was he supposed to say? As he looked around for inspiration, he saw that others had joined, others who were big. "In a pinch," his father had said, "don't ever tell the truth, as that's what they expect you to do."

He was trying not to cry. That wouldn't be strategic.

He looked over his shoulder. A crowd behind him. He was encircled.

He thought of Daddy and decided to ignore him, let loose, break free: "I'm not related at all. I'm trespassing. I'm not supposed to be here. I was driving along and saw your signs and just turned in. Parked and got out. I think I was trying to hide or something. I'm not sure. But William there---Hi, William--!" William waved back. "Anyhow, William asked me if I'd like to play catch, and. . . . I don't know how it all grew so. I don't know why I drove in here."

Nobody said anything.

"I don't know what I'm doing."

Again, nobody said anything.

"I guess I got lost, real lost."

Finally, big accusing and dangerous guy spoke, though it seemed as if they were all speaking. "Welcome to the Farley Family Funfest. We were hoping you'd come. You're not lost. Don't think it."

NO MISTAKE

“Nowadays most people die of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only things one never regrets are one’s mistakes.”

Oscar Wilde

Make no mistake, that’s what I say.

Me, too.

None, not one.

Maybe one.

Yeah, nobody’s perfect.

We are.

Everybody’s human.

Which is not the same thing.

A common error.

Because it’s common, doesn’t mean it’s. . . .

Not at all.

That’s more like it.

But one thing has to be made clear.

One thing.

Several things, but what everybody thinks is clear isn’t.

It’s dead wrong.

Let me say it right out.

Right out.

And loud.

Loud and clear.

THERE WAS NO ABUSE.

Not only that.

If ever anything was, this was

Maybe the only thing in our lives.

Right.

Right.

And the word is.

You ready for this?

Wait for it.

Consensual.

Why's that so hard to understand.

It's because some don't want to understand.

That's it.

Yes.

Not hard to understand but they don't want to.

You think?

So do you.

Yes.

When was it we started?

Long before nibby Aunt Sarah burst in on us.

Not so much as a howdy-do.

Shoved her bulbous body through the door.

Into the room.

Didn't seem to focus at first.

You?

Aunt Sarah.

How do you know?

I was aware.

Of her?

Weren't you?

I was concentrating on you.

You were on top; that's only natural.

Because you were on the bottom – means you're looking about the room, thinking of homework, the latest ball-scores, your laundry, of whether big-ass Aunt Sarah is focusing.

Now, now.

You going to tell me to keep to the point, not pretend to be hurt?

Kind of.

Not quite?

The pretending-to-be-hurt is a major turn-on.

Not what is needed right now, when we're trying to make all this crystal clear, no mistake.

Not what is needed.

But who cares what is needed, right?

Right.

We'll be back.

Picking up where we left off.
Long before Aunt Sarah blew the whistle.
Roused the troops.
Long before that.
We had begun.
Who was it initiated it?
You.
Yeah, me.
I.
Yeah, you
It was a sunny afternoon in April, after school.
It was Halloween evening, right after trick-or-treat.
We're both right.
We were bathing together.
Playing dress-up.
Playing house.
Playing gin rummy.
Before we knew it.
Before you knew it, perhaps. I knew it.
We always knew it.
No mysteries.
No mistake.
There we were.
Naked as jaybirds.
You still had your bra on.
No, you did.
Oh, yeah.
I can remember it as if it were yesterday.
Me too.
But it wasn't
No.
It was long before two-ton Aunt Sarah picked the lock.
Even after that, we didn't slow down.
Parents were flummoxed.
Tried therapy.
Tried denying us privileges.
No desserts for a week.
Tried reasoning.
Where did we think this would lead us?

Good question.

Yes it was.

Still is.

And we both know the answer.

We do.

We knew the answer right from the start, dear sister.

Brother.

We both knew it.

No mistake about that.

OVER THERE

Send the word, send the word

Over there----

That the Yanks are coming!

The Yanks are coming!

“Worth seeing? Yes; but not worth going to see.”

Samuel Johnson

One thing he had to admit: they were thoughtful in their way, attentive to his needs, or some of them. Maybe. Not his primary need, which was to be out of this blindfold and restraints, the car he was in, and peril. But still, it was inescapable: they didn't seem anxious to hurt him, even cause discomfort. Of course, it was probably too early to tell, but at least they weren't being rough.

They had adjusted the cloths holding his hands behind his back, asking, he assumed, “wasn't that better now?” or “can you manage that?” He had no idea what they might be saying, but their voices were soft. It crossed his mind that such murmuring might seem a little ominous. But that was just nervousness creeping in, entirely uncalled-for.

The car – it was a car, right, not a pushcart or rickshaw, ha ha? No time for jokes, so he told one to the kindly restraint-adjuster:

“You hear the one about this Presbyterian, this Jew, and this Islamic guy walk into a bar and there's a parrot on the barstool. So, the Jew says. . . .”

It occurred to him that the joke was a little raucous and that Muslims were Puritanical. Also, the joke made fun of turbans, he suddenly remembered. And then, it was in English. Also, it was a joke, and he should be polite and quiet, agreeable to the end, which wasn't the best way to put it.

Next thing he knew, the car was stopping and he was, gently again, ushered out of the back seat and into a different space, onto a chair, he figured. Had to be a chair. All done without any violent stuff, not even a shove, much less hammers to the head or crowbars to the knees.

Then his blindfold was removed. He kept his eyes tight shut for a few seconds, then longer, knowing it'd be tough to get used to the interrogation lamp they'd have

trained on him. He opened them finally and discovered only routine illumination, gentle like everything else in this experience. But there was a desk. He was on one side of it. Then he noticed there was a man on the other: the Grand Inquisitor, the practiced sadist allowed to work his will on helpless Americans who had come to Iraq as happy tourists, anxious to explore another culture without prejudice and put a few bucks into the local coffers.

The man was looking through some papers, glancing up now and then at a computer screen. He wore a Western suit and no headdress. Such an overload of normal was designed to lure captives into a dangerous sense of security. He knew a trick better than that one: he'd remain on-guard, alert—most of all, silent. He'd keep, as they used to say, his cool.

Of course he didn't: "I like your suit."

The man looked up and smiled, "Thank you." Then back to his papers.

Silence.

"I'm just a tourist, you know, just a tourist, on a group tour. You see, we had this free time."

"Yes, I see."

Silence.

"I thought I'd get a taste of the local culture, you know, just wander about, look in at shops, spend money."

"Well, we can always use that."

"Yeah, I can see."

Holy shit. What an insensitive thing to say, as if he were mocking the obvious poverty, which was nobody's fault, of course. How callous, cruel, and inappropriate to the occasion. This guy would think it was America's doing, wouldn't he, and cast him as the sneering villain, reveling in the very misery he and his oppressor country had caused. He had to act—and fast.

"Can't we all? Use money, I mean. I didn't mean only you people. I assure you I am not some bloated capitalist out to. . . ." Bloated capitalist? How had he landed on that parodic phrase, offensive and vaguely comic?

Silence.

"I guess I'm nervous, which explains, I hope you understand, that silly phrase, "bloated capitalist," which I seem to have lodged in the deep recesses of my memory from when I was a kid, and it just popped up at the worst possible time. The last thing I want to do is to insult a country that----" That what? "That has been so hospitable to me."

The man looked at him with what may have been a faint smile, though it also may have been withering contempt.

"I don't mean to be sarcastic. Not at all. I wasn't thinking of being funny either. I wouldn't try that, even were I skilled—at being funny, you know—, as I'm not."

Now the man was unmistakably puzzled.

“I should explain: I didn’t mean to make a joke about hospitality, after being kidnapped on the streets—arrested, brought in for questioning, friendly questioning, I have every assurance.”

This was a rout.

He made another vow to keep quiet, even clenched his teeth to be sure his mouth wouldn’t open involuntarily. That worked for a very short bit, and then: “I know something about the Muslim faith. I don’t pretend to be an expert, but I know it’s not any more murderous than Christianity, speaking generally, despite some—speaking historically.”

“I see.”

“There’s lots of misinformation about Muslims, shameful misinformation, in our country, myths, ever since 9/11, which wasn’t brought on by Muslims anyhow, but you know how people are.”

“Ummm.”

“Lots of myths floating about, ten of them.”

“Ten? Exactly that number?”

“What I mean is I read this—ah—material on ‘The Ten Myths about Muslims,’ and it really opened my eyes.”

“You seem to be well informed. Where did you read this material?”

“On the Internet. A blog, to be honest. Not like I know a lot, but I’m eager to learn and will listen, without prejudice, to anything you tell me—without prejudice. So fire away. Please.”

“I understand you must be confused and possibly frightened,” the man said, slightly rising from his chair. “Would you like some coffee? A coke? I won’t be much longer with this paperwork.”

The rising from the chair, however slight, made him jump and, just a little, pee himself. Did he want a coke? Was this a trick? What sprung into his mind, right alongside the urgent signals from his bladder, were scenes from Nazi torture movies.

That was the last thing he should mention, so he did:

“Ah, yes, some coffee, a coke. Vee haf our vays of making you talk, Yankee dog!”

“I’m sorry?”

“Just thinking of Nazi torture movies.”

“Were you?”

“Not that you’re a Nazi. I didn’t mean that. And torture, that’s a joke.”

Silence. Oh Jesus!

He wished there were some interrogating. Anything’d be better than this. Well, not anything. Right now, though, he had to pee so bad.

Finally he managed to speak: “That’s very kind of you. I mean you offering coffee or a coke. You thought of coke because I’m an American, right? That’s very thoughtful.

Truly kind. Right now, I think my bladder is not in the best shape to welcome more liquid, if you know what I mean. I'm sure you do, having to pee being something that crosses cultural boundaries, and even builds a bridge across this desk here, you might say."

Why had he said that? This was a Muslim country, and they didn't talk about peeing. Maybe he could now make fun of Allah or tell a funny story about jihads.

"I understand," the man said, "and apologize. This won't take but a minute longer. May I see your passport, please?"

"Didn't my kidnappers lift it?" Why did he keep doing this?

"I can understand why you'd suspect that, but no, nothing was taken from you."

"Yet!" he said to himself. No, he said it out loud.

The man smiled amiably. It looked amiable. "I expect your passport is in some special wallet your tour group provided, perhaps a fanny pack, I think you call them, but I don't know."

He reached into his waistband and there it was. "Well, hell! Here it is. I'll be damned."

"Thank you very much. This'll be quick. I should say that the one thing we did lift from you was your camera. I'll get to all that very soon."

His camera? What did they want with that? Pictures from the airplane window, of his wife, of the guide, of the streets and shops, of—oh my God, his wife in the shower. How could he explain that? Probably a capital crime here.

"I can explain."

"If you'll just give me a minute, please. We'll sort all this out."

"That's my wife."

"Excuse me?"

"Those offensive pictures: my wife. Really, my wife. She is. I don't know if that makes any difference with Islam, but at least it's not a woman I met on the streets, a native. I assure you we are married. I understand marriage is only a Christian ceremony, which you may not countenance, and perhaps it doesn't matter when the pictures are lewd. I admit they are lewd, quite, and I promise I won't do it again, if that makes any difference."

"I see. I am not sure what you are referring to, but if you'll allow me—with apologies—just ninety seconds of uninterrupted space here, we can expedite this whole thing."

"I see. Sorry."

Ten seconds of silence.

"Is this something I want expedited, or would I be better served by delays?"

"Pardon me?"

"I mean, in the American legal system, sometimes delays work to the advantage of the criminal."

“Do they now? Please, just a minute longer.”

Fifteen seconds of silence.

“Not that I regard myself as a criminal.”

“Of course not.”

“Though I recognize that you may. You know, different cultures, different crimes. Different strokes for different folks.”

“Ummmmm.”

“That different strokes saying is outdated, for which I apologize.”

“Oh, that’s fine. No need to apologize.”

Five seconds of silence.

“Our cops – police – authorities – use computers too, or so I hear—makes their work ever so much more efficient. Nab those felons in a tenth of the time it used to take.”

“Ummmm.”

“Still, mistakes are made, and that’s a shame.”

Silence.

“Not that I’m suggesting you make mistakes, not generally.”

Silence.

“Not ever. I’m sure you haven’t ever made a mistake.”

He had to shut up. Some demon was in control of his mouth, and he must find a way to put his mind elsewhere. Unfortunately, elsewhere turned out to be his bursting bladder.

“Would it be entirely uncalled for, you know, out of the question, impermissible, for me to ask to use the bathroom, the facilities. I promise not to try and escape, and I won’t be more than ninety seconds tops, I can guarantee, as I clock myself every time and that’s about the upper limit.”

“Pardon me? Oh, yes, of course, how rude of me. Right over there, first door opposite the thumb screw locker.”

“Oh---I see. That’s a good one.” Was it?

But he found the toilet quickly, timed himself and his flow, and emerged, not fully relieved, in fifty-six seconds, not wanting to press his luck or strain the hospitality of this very nice man.

“Here I am again.”

“So I see. Welcome back.”

“That’s a good one.”

Thirteen seconds of silence.

“You know, if there’s information I can provide, I’d be very happy to do so. You’ll find me open and accommodating. If I had state secrets, hell, I’d let em fly. But you see, I don’t.”

“I think we’re about set here, Mr. Callaghan.”

He couldn't think of anything to say, being so frozen with terror. Should he scream? All he could do was audibly gulp. He didn't know anyone ever did that, gulped, but there it was.

"Mr. Callaghan, did you know you were taking pictures of a military installation?"

"Oh my God. Was I? You'll be thinking I'm a CIA agent."

"Somehow that thought never crossed my mind."

"I'm not. Really."

"Right. So, I assume you were ignorant of what you were photographing?"

"Oh yes. I'm ignorant of almost everything, as you can tell."

"Oh no, I am sure you're not, Mr. Callaghan. Consider the circumstances: being hauled in here, into a place you imagine might be an agency authorized to perpetrate horrors not seen since the Spanish Inquisition. Only natural to be unsettled, not your usual self."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"You see, Mr. Callaghan, the world situation seems to force us into these cloak and dagger procedures. Here you are, a worthy man, an innocent tourist, eager to learn all he can about our country, just snapping away at whatever is in range, in your guileless American way, and you are swept up by ruffians and brought to this unknown place and subject to indignities."

"That's very good of you. I'm sorry I peed myself a little."

"Well, most would have reacted much less stoically, Mr. Callaghan."

"You think?"

"I do. You have nothing to be ashamed of. It is I who should apologize and hereby do so. Here's your camera. You'll be returned to your hotel, with our compliments, along with this little wallet of coupons, redeemable at our finest stores."

"Tell you what, I'm going to write letters to all the newspapers in the U.S., telling them in my own fashion just what a great guy you are, and how well I've been treated. I want everyone to know. Yessir, that's what I'll do."

"I wish you wouldn't."

FRIDAY NIGHT FRIGHTS

**“It’s not whether you get knocked down;
it’s whether you get back up!”**

Vince Lombardi

I am an excellent football player, tough and smart and with instincts that can’t be coached into you: you either have ‘em or you don’t. Only the rare ones, the best ones, are so equipped, and I’m one of them. That’s what my dad says, has been saying since I was in the second grade. I believed him then.

I feel a little differently now. I’m in high school and actually playing football, so it’s not quite the same as the backyard. Things being what they are now, I don’t know if I’d go so far as to say I’m truly “excellent.” Among other things, that would sound immodest, a trait which Coach vigorously discourages. Coach encourages us to think of ourselves more realistically, as worthless yellowbelly chickenshits.

I think an impartial observer would lean closer to Coach’s assessment than to my dad’s---as regards me, I mean. I sometimes catch myself wondering why I am playing football at all, so worthless and yellowbellied and chickensitting are my efforts. I wonder that so often, I finally took my puzzle to a teammate.

“Hey, Logan, why are we doing this?”

“Taking a shower?”

“Playing football—at all?”

“Beats me. It sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. So why don’t we quit?”

“Look, Kevin, it’d been different if we hadn’t gone out for football at all, you know, just hadn’t gone out at all, not shown up first day.”

“Yeah, that’d been different, and we wouldn’t be in this nightmare. But why do we keep doing it?”

“I don’t know. We just show up every afternoon for practice and get our asses kicked regular. Like brushing our teeth. Once started, it’s sort of like beating your meat.”

“But that’s fun.”

“Yeah—bad analogy.”

“So why don’t we quit?”

“And be a quitter? Maybe that’s it, Kevin. I’m not sure. I think about it all the time, but I’m not sure.”

“Me either. You think anybody’d care if we quit?”

“No.”

There you have it, only what it was you'd have I sure don't know. "Real boys play football," said lots of the locals, or they used to. I'm not sure anybody says that these days, even here in tough-ass football country. Maybe it's all my dad, only even that doesn't seem likely.

"You enjoying football, Kevin?"

"Oh sure, Dad. You know."

"OK."

That conversation, without real variation, without variation at all, took place, seems like, every-other day. I don't know why I didn't open up to my dad. I don't think he'd have been judgmental or anything. The trouble was I wasn't used to opening up to him on any subject, much less this one.

Of course it occurred to me now and then that it wasn't my dad or the roughneck, gat-toothed culture of this town that pushed me toward anguish. It might be – and I sort of figured it was – something within. And what might that be? Well, the obvious answer would be that I was gay or thought I might be and was out to prove something that I damned well wasn't.

I didn't ponder that possibility often, which made me think maybe I was afraid even to think of it. The reason I might now be able to think of it was – oh boy! – that it was true! Simple as pie. Absolutely. Quit football and face it, face what's inside me, what I am.

Trouble was, I couldn't spot anything inside me that would lead in that direction. I was almost anxious to find those telltale signals, whatever they might be. Then life would be simple, well, not simple at all, but clearer. So, I set about doing an inventory of my desires, which isn't as much fun as it sounds.

I made a checklist on a notebook page of all things. The items on it were so obvious I'll spare you, and so unproductive I quit half-way down the chart, realizing I was not aroused in shower-rooms, did not seek out boys to brush against or nuzzle, wasn't especially careful about my apparel, and so on.

One of my friends is gay, though, and it finally made its way through my stupid shell that I could talk to him.

"Brent, can I talk to you a second? Well, sorry, I figure I can, you just standing there and everything. What I mean is, don't be offended, OK?"

"No."

"What?"

"I plan on being offended. People never say that unless they want to get away with being offensive. So, what is it? 'What's it like to be gay?'"

"Yeah. I mean, no. I mean, how do you know when you're gay?"

"Oh, that's different. Well, first of all it's not easy. Most people think it is, but they're wrong. There's many hurdles to jump, but you're a gen-u-ine ath-leet so that'll be no problem."

“That’s just it.”

“What?”

“Me being an athlete. But never mind. Go on. Please.”

“OK. I can see you’re sincere, deeply. So you go on-line, Google “Homo Test” and try to answer the questions honestly. They’re searching questions, such as, ‘Do you get a boner thinking about Donald Trump?’ You can’t lie either.”

“C’mon, Brent.”

“How stupid are you? You know because you know, even you do, what turns you on.”

“That’s just it.”

“Nothing turns you on?”

“Forget it, Brent. Sorry I asked.”

“Wait a minute, Kevin. Don’t make it such a big deal. If you’re gay, you probably know it and wouldn’t be asking me and making an ass of yourself.”

“Oh yeah.”

“So you’re not gay. Congratulations.”

“Wish I were.”

“No you don’t. Whatever problem you got now ain’t shit compared.”

So, that helped a lot. Actually, maybe it did, made me see one or two things a little better. Made me see it made no sense to keep at this football farce or wonder why I *was* keeping at it.

Just quit.

As soon as I made that determination, though, my dad stepped in, really did step in, to my bedroom, which he never did. He was all cheery and buddying, which let me know how embarrassed he was, but not as much as me.

Finally, after faking an interest in my schoolwork and club activities, he got to it: “Son, I’ve been thinking a lot.”

He paused there. What was I supposed to say? Good thing he then, at that moment, started spilling it—in a kind of geyser.

“I don’t mean to tell you what’s in your head, but I’m sensing that you and football are not a perfect match, that you’re not enjoying it, that you, really, hate it but are doing it to please me. Son, don’t do that. It’s not that you’ll end up hating me or anything melodramatic like that. But it might be more damaging. It’s more like you’ll hate yourself, wonder what’s wrong with you that you don’t search for pain and misery.”

He paused. I stood there flapping my lips, saying nothing.

“Quit, son. Do yourself a favor. Do me a favor.”

Finally, all of a sudden, it hit me that he wasn’t just saying this, that he meant it. I thanked him, told him he was a great dad. That was the truth. Then I said I needed to think about it. That wasn’t the truth. I knew what to do.

Next day, at practice: “Coach, I want to ask you something.”

“Yeah, Jackson?”

“You know you been asking around about any of us interested in place-kicking. You know, extra points and kick-offs.”

“I know what place-kickers do.”

“Oh, yeah. I can do those things.”

“Good. In addition to being a back-up linebacker?”

“Instead of. Just that.”

“Nothing more? Not maybe sometimes being. . . .”

“Nothing else. Ever.”

“Right.

OLD FOLKS

**“I hate weddings. Old people would poke me, leer, and say,
‘You’re next’. So I started poking them at funerals, saying,
‘You’re next’.”**

Anon

“When I was a boy, The Dead Sea was only sick.”

George Burns

There are advantages to being here and I’m fully resonant with them. I want to say that right away, just so you won’t think I’m an “old crab,” there being “old crabs” aplenty here in this place, or so you’ll certainly imagine, you being no different from anybody else. You have settled views on the subject, the subject of old people, all of whom are grouchy and vaguely (or not so vaguely) disgusting. You aren’t fooled by greeting card images of compliant, cuddly oldsters, are savvy enough to know don’t they exist at all in material form.

You’re a knower, you are. You vicious, ignorant son of a bitch.

You dispute that characterization? You don’t like what you’re reading? Then go and do something else. You won’t be missed.

So, you ask, if I’m so indifferent to your presence, why did I open all this with such a warm, conciliatory sentence? You forget what it was? I’ll tell you again: There are advantages to being here. Here, in my case, is Maple Pines. That’s the name, honest to Jesus, Maple Pines. I know it is idiotic, like Autumn Spring or Eastern South. But who cares, right? Not like the name is shouting in our ears night and day, the name doesn’t matter, when the facilities are so top-notch, the care so consistently fine, the all-round humanity so glowing.

You believe that?

What set my own children cooing about Maple Pines was the detailed and complete schedule, the not-to-be-skipped daily fun and exercise and socializing – the choir and the creative writing and the painting and the (of course) knitting. They were worried about me “having little to do,” naturally. “She isn’t as mobile as she once was, you know; and she does love to read, which is fine and good, except that. . . .” Except that I enjoyed it. That’s not what they let themselves think, but it’s what drew them to this summer camp for the ancient, where, instead of Tolstoy I get to spend my time with

slavering idiots playing checkers or singing hit tunes from “Gypsy.” ‘Let me entertain you!’ Ain’t we cute!

I was saying before there are genuine advantages to living here, though. Remember me saying that?

I lied, though, as I can only think of one advantage, really, one I never enjoyed on the outside. Here it is. When someone knocks on the door, rings the bell, says “Yoo-who,” you know right away who it is. No mystery, no worries about it being Marie from next door, the preacher, a bill-collector, or a burglar. It’s Katie, the candy stripper. Always.

You think that couldn’t be, what with Katie being a part-time volunteer and what with all the other callers: doctors and nurses, friends and relations, solo pipers and barbershop quartets. Of course you would know, wouldn’t you? No, you wouldn’t and don’t. Believe me, it’s always Katie, smiling and up-tempo Katie.

Think this whole account is unrealistic, unilluminating, not up to your standards? Go away. Here’s another chance.

Katie is predictable, you can say that. “How are we today, Mrs. T?” “Are we ready for our bath?” “Are we looking forward to our Bingo tournament?” “Are we ready to take a shit in the corner?”

Katie is pretty and outgoing, considerate in the sort of way every one of taste and refinement hates. Even you do. The world would be better off without Katies. I am too old now to perform such a general service, eliminating all of them. However, I can do my own little part, thinking globally but acting locally, brightening the corner where I am.

Wasn’t that hard. You see, Katie had been trying to feed me Seroquel, hiding it in the gruel or the tea or just putting it on the napkin, imagining I was in a more than usually docile state.

“Doctor says we must take our medicine.”

“Doctor,” my wizened ass! This was all Katie’s doing.

You still with me? Why? Well, in case you don’t know, Seroquel is an anti-psychotic med. It’s useful for psychotics, they say, but for them what ain’t in the least psychotic, it’s not simply tranquilizing but lethal. Yes it is. Not right away, but it’ll kill you in good time, take my word for it.

Katie knew that much, was anxious to reduce by one the number of old crones she had to chirp at, so she kept loading them into me. Only they didn’t go into me, now did they?

You’re starting to catch on.

First, I stored a supply of these---maybe 150---and crushed them, mixed them all up. Then I formed a back-up plan, in case she grew suspicious or resisted. I mean, she was stupid but nasty, and had that wariness common to all the truly brutal. I figured I’d only have the one chance. But that’s the way it is in this life of ours: you get that single

time at the free-throw line; all the rest costs dearly. If you make the shot, it really doesn't matter a tinker's damn in the long run, since there's no such thing as winning. Still, for that one moment, you are draped in golden lies.

You still with me?

I was talking about my backup plan. I was explaining it, referring to it. I don't want to say too much, though, since I might need it again. It's tempting to tell you, since I'm very proud of it and would love to have it out there waving in the breeze for your admiration. But you're not all that trustworthy, and you might just go whining to the authorities. So, let me just say this, my plan, award-winning in the eyes of the dark gods (and all of them are), involved some netting, a pair of gloves, a shoe, some turpentine (ordinary kind, nothing fancy), and a cat.

Turns out I didn't need it. A combination of whining, pretend-befuddlement, and vague promises involving my last will and testament were enough to lure Katie in, drooling and defenseless. Once there, a skilled (and practiced) performer like me had no trouble getting her ass into a chair and some of the loaded tea into her. Quite a lot of tea--three cups! You might say that was overkill, were you given to puns. You probably are. I'm not.

It's only been two days, but so far, the replacement for Katie has been fine: sullen, uninterested, aloof. This life does sometimes give you just what you want. Short doses only, but I'm 93 years old now and haven't all that many decades to go. I've learned to batten on short doses.

You think I'll get caught? An autopsy? Poison easily detectable? Sounds like you know a little about homicide yourself. Good for you. I didn't give you enough credit. As for any moral judgments you might make----that's piffle. You think I'm not the person you'd like to invite into your home, marry off to your son, have hanging around your kids?

Well, shoot me!

LITTLE NELL ANSWERS THE BELL

“It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to.”

G. K. Chesteron

“You realize, Nell, this Ohio Valley League we’re in is about as tough as they come. You realize that?”

“I do, Coach.”

“Ohio Valley’ sounds cozy, I know, like a mother’s arms, but it’s more like a brass-knuckles free-for-all when it’s football we’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You realize that?”

“I do, Coach.”

“This isn’t the military, Nell; you can loosen up. I want to get to know you a little, understand what’s driving you.”

“You mean what bats are flying in my belfry. Why would a sane female want to play football?”

“I don’t mean to say you’re crazy.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“Why do you want to join the team?”

“Because it’s there.”

“Not bad. Not bad at all. OK, then, next question: why do they call you ‘Little Nell’ at home? I assume they do since I heard your brother yell that at you a couple of times in class.”

“That important to my football career?”

“Absolutely central.”

“I was named for my grandmother seven generations back, part of a string of Nell’s, all connected to Dickens’ famous – or was then – Little Nell.”

“I see.”

“Really? You know about that?”

“Oh yeah, most famous child death in the century----fictional child death, I mean. People crowded the New York docks as the packet ships came over carrying the latest

serial part of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, calling out ‘Is Nell dead?’ Almost as if readers couldn’t wait for her to croak. 1840, around in there?”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Language, Nell!”

“Sorry.”

“That’s OK. Didn’t think I’d know that, did you? Took a lot of English classes in college, but I also Googled some stuff last night. It sounded oddly familiar, Little Nell, and there it was, all official and very scholarly on Wikipedia. Nell Trent, your name and hers.”

“And it’s been the name of all my Trent grandmas, Nell has. Pretty goddamned corny.”

“Well, anyhow, foul mouth, tell me about football, which I don’t remember reading about in Dickens.”

“I’m fast on my feet, quick to learn, tough. I can be the best running back you ever had.”

“Running back, huh?”

“You were expecting place-kicker, water-girl?”

“Maybe. God, Nell, running back! It’s not just open-field, you know, little of it is. You go through the line, you block, you get the shit kicked out of you. Not like you’re hefty, not at all.”

“Put me in coach!”

“Yeah, that John Fogarty song. But it’s about baseball, where you’d not end up in seventeen different hospitals. Look, Nell, I’m entirely open to you trying out, joining the squad. But let’s be reasonable.”

“Just give me a chance, coach. Don’t decide yet.”

What could he do but agree?

The physical arrangements—dressing area, showers, uniform, cleats, attitudes of the other players – were simple, simple, at least, compared to letting this little girl (and little she was) be a running back, participate in even a single play at that position. But how could he let her on the squad as a running back and not let her run a play from the backfield? Of course, he could tell the boys on defense not to hit her hard, not to hit her at all, but word might get back to Nell, or the Title 9 people, or his own conscience.

So-----

“You all know Nell Trent, I expect. Here she is, anyhow, and we’re going to go through the playbook, Section 4-A and -B, with Nell at tailback. She knows the plays, I think, and the rest of you idiots sure as hell should. You’d better, as we have our first game in eight days. OK, go get ‘em. Defense, get ready.”

Section 4-A was safe enough, he figured: passing plays where the tailback had sideline routes and some option runs, two to her, but even these allowing her to scoot wide and get her little tail out of bounds.

4-B was another matter: off-tackle plays, a pitch-out that turned inside, some brutal blocking assignments. Holy Hell!

But then it happened. This kid, this Charles Dickens freak, not only could run wide and run routes faster than hell, she could somehow snake through the line and even block like nobody's business, throwing herself at the ankles of boys double her size, getting herself upright in time to throw a second block.

No sign she was getting tired or, more important, horribly mutilated. More likely she'd cause serious injuries than sustain one.

Nell was the only one on the field not surprised by the way things were working out. If anything, she was pissed at herself, disappointed in not shining even more brightly, kicking ass more resoundingly.

The first game went well enough. Nell played maybe a third of the plays on offense, Coach not entirely trusting what he'd seen in the practices, practices where Nell offered nothing but consistent evidence of being the best tailback in the conference—in any conference.

Still, he wanted to be cautious and limit the damage, if damage there was to be. What damage there was, however, was all to the other team. Nell not only scored a touchdown on a long run but managed to clear the way for a teammate to score another, caught two passes and completed another on an option play. Nobody on the field was playing at her level.

What choice did he have?

Nell, meanwhile, wasn't exactly patient, willing to bide her time. She understood well enough what the coach was doing and thinking, but it made her furious that he'd be such a candy-ass. Smart enough, though, not to claw at him directly, she let loose on the kid she was getting used to bumping against in the huddle, the big and ungifted fullback. She knew him mostly by way of his ass, massive, which she followed into the line on straight-ahead plays. He wasn't near fast enough to block defenders on outside plays; the problem was keeping him from getting too much in the way of the ball carrier, her own self.

"That shit, that miserable shit!" she explained to DeCastro, the fullback in question.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand: "Yep. Coach sucks."

"He does that again next game, I'll . . ."

"Want me to talk to him?"

She was so stunned so forgot to abuse him: "Would you do that?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Damn, that's so nice of you—but no. It'd seem like I didn't have the balls to confront him myself."

"OK."

“You like football, De Castro?” She had no idea why she was getting personal, as this blub was the last person she’d want to do that with, assuming she wanted to do it with anybody.

“No.”

“Why you here?”

“My dad. Real boys play football, you know, like they also spit and cuss and fondle their balls.”

“You do all those things?”

“No.”

“Damn.”

“I’m lost out here, Nell.”

“On the field?”

“Yeah, on the field. At school. Everywhere.”

“Can I help?”

“Sure. You’re the one who can.”

LOST FOR WORDS

LITTLE ELEGY FOR A CHILD WHO SKIPPED ROPE

**Here lies resting, out of breath,
Out of turns, Elizabeth
Whose quicksilver toes not quite
Cleared the whirring edge of night.**

**Earth whose circles round us skim
Till they catch the lightest limb,
Shelter now Elizabeth
And for her sake trip up death.**

“And for her sake, trip up death.”

I've been trying to think of that line, the final line, ever since the first redwood. “Earth whose circles round us skim, catching e'en the lightest limb, shelter now Elizabeth, And. . . .” Now I have it, grisly though it certainly is. My namesake, a child skipping rope.

Ted mentioned the poem last night, in the short period between hitting the bar and becoming incapable of speech. “Epitaph,” it's called, or something like that. By somebody named Kennedy.

Thoughtless of him: passive aggressive, just plain aggressive. “Hi honey, here's something to cheer you up, a little poem about a child playing happily and, then--- nothing. Her name's Elizabeth too. Happy Birthday.”

And them to beg off the hike, shameless, lolling at the Arcata motel with a hangover, letting me fend for myself in the wild country, which turns out to be the high country, very high, too, somewhere north of something called Patrick's Point, where exactly I sure can't figure out from the directions written with great care on a cocktail napkin by a guy who looked like he knew the mountains, if he knew anything. He was grizzled, confident, friendly, and extremely drunk. That's my guide to fun here in redwoods. Beautiful they were and thick—only God could make something so lush and confusing and dangerous.

Dangerous, not really, but they hide the sun, which might have given me a clue, and they block cell phone reception.

Suddenly, though, there it is, my phone: lit up and telling me the latest from the stock market, Ted's favorite surfing depot. I spend a minute looking at the quotes for stocks I know he has, hoping they had plummeted, dropped off the board entirely. Then I switch back to the call mode to blast him, get that jerk up here right now, hung-over or not, to find me, he and the whole Forest Service, if that's what it takes,

And then no signal. None. No, not that. No juice. Left it on all the time I was getting lost, expecting him to call. The idiot—not that I feel very smart myself right now.

Doesn't really matter anyhow, as Ted would never ever find me. Those directions---“Start several miles above . . . no sign, but trailhead is clear if you're looking for it . . . avoid the crowds.” What crowds? The drunken woodsman said it was a special place. Hell, this whole area is all one special place, made up of forty thousand indistinguishable special places. Redwoods and hills and gullies and who knew what all else---bears for sure.

Stay calm, very calm, breathe deeply, get back to the road, which means forgetting Ted, forgetting bears, which aren't the real menace, real menaces not existing. I'm not going to start rope skipping: “Whose quicksilver toes not quite cleared the whirring edge of night.”

Thing is to find the road, which has to be simple. I'd hiked in and up, mostly up, for about four hours. That was a solid fact.

“The trees were lovely dark and deep but I had promises to keep,” drinks to down, and vengeance to enact on Ted. So just retrace. The hiking's easy, the forest floor is like a firm lovely mattress, a mattress that, shit, leaves no footprints, no marks of any kind. “Ah, Bartleby.”

If it weren't for the drizzle, more like a mist. I'd been told about this feature of redwood forests: not so much that you get wet yourself as that you're walking through the wet. It's sweet, intoxicating, but it cuts visibility drastically and makes even an athletic type worry about her footing. There are roots everywhere in the path, which is itself slippery-slidey.

And I would mind none of that if I knew where I am or am heading. The cocktail napkin map/directions/piece of useless shit I started out with is now even more impossible to read, and the only clear parts of it are: “Patrick's Point,” “go east, not west,” “Leave the main trail,” “gradual rise, then steep,” “6 miles.” How had I ever imagined that would do me just fine?

For a couple of hours, once my situation sunk in, I was hoping, even expecting, to run into a fellow hiker, eager to help. Now, I find myself becoming, first, angry, then awash in self-pity over the absence of this necessary figure in the story I am running in my head. Hell, I'd do it for her—or even him. “Because I could not stop, he kindly stopped for me.”

One thing I had equipped myself with—make that six things—ample water, a watch, a good flashlight, a hat, a pencil, writing paper. Three things I hadn't: a heavy coat or blanket, a compass, matches. A good idea to make these inventories, a point amateurs often forget—not uncommonly to their very great peril. Why, just last week a lone hiker—that's another no-no, being alone off in the woods. Anyhow, this idiot got turned around in the mountains just above Pasadena, not more than eight-hundred feet up, even less, panicked, went the wrong way, got to a cliff and ascended much faster than he intended---splat.

“Dead, dead, dead—soon we'll all be dead.” Nothing like *South Park*.

I know the best plan is to go directly up, get above the trees and spot the highway, the 101, which surely will be easily visible. Need to be up there, since climbing one of these trees of splendor, hundreds of feet high, is out of the question, out of my reach, you might say.

But it would be nice to see the sky. “None of them knew the color of the sky.”

Maybe the reason I can't make out the sky is that it's dark---at seven p.m.? Suddenly it seems as if that might be, but then how am I seeing to walk? And the answer to that little riddle is that I haven't been walking for some time, just musing the time away in this small clearing. Stupid. Oddly it still has some light, enough for me to write—legibly, unlike my map-maker, a note to the first passer-by, telling her that here I am, somewhere close. Keep looking. Very useful. “On errands of life these letters speed to.”

Would it get cold? I'm pretty high up and it's March. “It is Margaret you mourn for.” Margaret? This is California and even up this far North and way up some mountain, surely it will not I have only my hiking shirt on.

“Nobody came because nobody does.” Why on earth did those grisly lines pop into my head? But they are a tonic, turns out, make me resolute. Why hang around here, waiting for the rescue party that's not forming. Rescue party? “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, snatch them in pity from sin and the grave.” Pity I could use. Jesus will save? Not the salvation I'm looking for. But I can't use staying here meditating or whatever it is I'm doing, being useless.

“I heard a fly buzz.” Couldn't be that. A fly? But it made me want to get moving right away, too quickly. Wasn't like me to panic, and I'm not sure I did, but I set off faster than these tripping roots would accommodate, started downhill too, a big mistake, and ended up flying ass over tin cups, yes I did, and cascaded down I don't know how many feet, lots, until I made contact with one of these Ice-Age trees, hit it with the front of my foot, which bent back and then to the side, doing a major mischief to my ankle.

The thing to do is to build a fire, though of course that particular project isn't within the reach of a matchless idiot like me. “To build a fire.” I try walking and find the pain isn't all that bad—I just need to rest a little bit, here amongst the soft moss and

flowers. Not really flowers but they smell so nice. “Strew on her roses, roses.” I huddle down, now so cold, so cold, trying to wrap myself tighter, arrange my shirt into a full wrap, like a coat.

“And Richard Cory, one fine summer night.” How can this be? I’m in California and I know what I’m doing. I’m athletic and smart, comically cursed with a feckless fiancé and a soggy, useless map drawn by a drunk. The pain is better. “Where are you, pain?”

“The snow was general all over Ireland.” I am so cold and then I’m not. The ball I’ve curled myself into seems to be helping, seems to be protecting me, just so long as I don’t move to look at my watch, move anything at all. It’s a little like going back somewhere, I suddenly think, going home. That seems childish, but I know it’s lucky. That was the word. “Different from what anybody supposed and luckier.” I start to sing, reflecting the odd comfort I feel, the joy. It is so warm and so right, so inviting. “Is that you, death?”

“Here lies resting out of turns, out of breath, Elizabeth.”

PUT ME IN COACH

“Most football teams are temperamental. That's 90% temper and 10% mental.”

Doug Plank

“Football is, after all, a wonderful way to get rid of your aggressions without going to jail for it.”

Heywood Hale Brown

“My God, Bill, you're only twenty-seven. Not even at your peak. Who knows?”

“Me and everybody else. We know.”

“Well, I don't.”

I kept myself from saying the nasty: “Because you don't know, Darnell, means dick, given that your ignorance in this area is almost complete, unmatched.” I kept quiet, which gave him an opening to say something half-sensible, lethally so.

“You've kept yourself in great condition.”

I laughed. As if that's all it took, no experience at advanced levels needed. The idea was beyond absurd. I couldn't let it flower.

“I appreciate it, Darnell. You're a good friend.”

“No I ain't a good friend. I be your lover, that's what I be.”

“Which is another reason I should go with this. The ad says it right here: ‘Gay applicants especially welcome.’ They got a shortage of LGBT players at skill positions. Major funders going to pull their support unless they get some homos at halfback.”

“That your position? I knew it! Bill McKinley! Halfback from Hell! All-Purpose Triple Threat! The Great White Hope for the Stalkers!”

“The Steelers, hun. And they don't call them halfbacks any more. And triple-threat: that's raccoon coats and boola boola.”

“*Frank Meriwell at Yale*. A classic text. My daddy read me that when I was a little chile.”

“Which forms the beginning and end of your football knowledge, Darnell, so I don't know that you're in the best position to advise me, you elitist asshole!”

“All the same, I been readin' up and know what I know, white boy, and what I know is you run the forty in 4.31, which is beyond great, and you got thighs bigger than a normal mule and you like pain, and you got your heart set on it, and that's all it takes.”

Despite myself, I was moved.

“How do you have any idea what my forty time is?”

“Got me a stop watch. Saw you running, trying to time yourself.”

Well, that I did do, not that it wasn't embarrassing to learn that Darnell had ferreted out these boyish fantasies, built on eggshells and air.

I satisfied myself with what I hoped was a cold stare. Darnell satisfied himself with a wink.

“You also know my weight, percentage of body fat, bone density, endurance quotient factors?”

“Endurance quotient factors?”

“Yeah, what are mine?”

Victory! Darnell looked puzzled.

“What're you doing, spying on me? It's invasive!”

He stared at me. I didn't need to explain, but I felt like explaining.

“You're like the fucks watching ‘American Idol’ and ridiculing those who try and fall on their asses—somebody who has been warbling to farm animals, imagining someday they'd sing to millions. Now they know that'll never happen, because they aren't shit..”

Darnell looked like the kid climbing the wall, imaging that there are footholds there for him and friends ready if he falls—only to discover that the wall has been greased and the catchers have all gone home. Payback time!

I suspect I was too exultant to carry off the wounded role. It wasn't the first time I'd worked my way so far out of what I felt that I no longer felt it, wondering who this angry person was. I started out hurt, then wanted to hurt Darnell, then wondered why I ever thought I was the injured party. I was pretending I couldn't help it, but it was a bad act. We can always help it.

Darnell imagined I was hating him, but truth was I had to beat it out of the room, slamming doors and huffing just to keep from hating myself. I hated myself anyhow.

Two hours later—big surprise!—I was right back with Darnell, looking at one another across our beat-up kitchen table, both apologizing, me with ample cause, and discussing the whole thing—not calmly, but with less chance (maybe) of letting my delusions rip out of control and barrel right back into my dear partner.

“My God! Do you realize what might happen, Darnell, if I take this even a little seriously?”

“Why do you think I was reading all that sports material? Spying on you? My own deep interest in sports? You think you keep it a secret, what you want, what you think you might be?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, you don't. Not from me.”

My turn to stare, wondering where he came from, this small and glad-hearted man who loved me so much. Right then, I wanted so badly to jump across the table separating us.

“And yeah, answering your question, I know what’s at stake. But you wouldn’t have this dream if you weren’t phenomenal. You aren’t a guy goes around fooling himself.”

Seemed to me that’s exactly what I was. But I let it pass. Darnell could read me more accurately than I could ever manage.

“What are the odds, though, Darnell? My God!”

“What would have been the odds when you started off, age eighteen, spry but untested, at old North Carolina Agriculture and Mines as their number fourteen half-back?”

“I keep telling you, there’s no such thing as a halfback.”

“You’ll bring it back!”

The odds of that may not have been calculable with our numerical system, but what were the chances the issue would come up at all, right there in The Steelers Digest?
COUCH-POTATO NOSE GUARDS AND CHURCH LEAGUE TIGHT ENDS!

Now is your chance to try out for the Steelers! We’re serious! Come to Heinz Field Gate B at 8:30 a.m, May 22. All welcome. Preliminary tests will be administered in the morning. All athletes passing those tests will be suited up for a workout before the full Steelers coaching staff, including MIKE TOMLIN, 1:30-3 p.m.

No guarantees. It’s extremely unlikely that any contracts will be issued. Still, you never know. Come and have a good time. Contact the Steelers immediately (e-mail and phone provided) and bring to the field all the necessary medical certificates and waiver forms. No one will be allowed to take part who fails to comply with. . . .

Publicity stunt, pure and simple.. It was true that other teams, the Cowboys and Pats among them, had used this gimmick for years, to “stir up interest,” they said. Me, I wasn’t interested, more like terrified. Think of the nerd who fantasizes about the beautiful movie star, returning from school one Tuesday to see on the message pad: “Thurmond—Kirsten Dunst called about the prom, wants you to call right back.”

I still had two weeks to figure out how to back out, get in even better shape, shoot myself, shoot Darnell, let myself go soft—gallon of ice cream a day?—or fake an injury. I thought about it hard for thirty seconds and then called my gym to arrange triple time. Wasn’t like I wanted to do it; more like I couldn’t face not doing it. Imagine Thurmond NOT calling Kirsten Dunst. I’m Thurmond. Calling.

That’s not melodrama; or if it is, so is my life. Ever since I was six, I had thought about the Steelers, not about the Steelers as they actually lined up but the Steelers with me there, not scoring four touchdowns a game—my fantasies were not grandiose—but a serviceable back, OK hands and a durable runner, good games and not-so-good, able to rise to the occasion and, now and then, fail. I have some reason to believe that my fan-

tasies were different from those sustaining most men. In being so modest they were also much more dangerous, masquerading as the possible.

James Thurber said most men put themselves to sleep by striking out the entire Yankee batting order. My dreams didn't occur just at night; I dreamed over breakfast, at coffee breaks, after I had fixed dinner. I dreamed about what might be. My dreams had the power to humiliate me, break my heart – break my life altogether.

I hadn't gone to college. Maybe that had something to do with it. During my junior year in high school my parents began to decline, at terrible speed and almost the same time. I did finish, but by June of my senior year they both were struggling against decimating forms of cancer and the dribbling away of funds that never had been adequate.

They did hang on for two years more, as did their expenses. I knew nobody expected me to take on their obligations. Nobody except my mom and dad, who hated the idea of keeping their son out of college less than the idea of dying in debt. They said just the opposite, but there's something about unrelieved pain must make it hard to lie convincingly.

“Son, your father and I have been talking. We're so worried we're standing in the way of your happiness. You're spending all your time with us when you should be out having fun. It's just not right.”

Perfectly put. Fun vs. duty to Mom and Dad. I never gathered the nerve to say it wasn't a question of robbing me of high old times but of a high old future, any future.

“Mom, it's not like you asked to be sick. As soon as you're well. . . .”

As soon as you're well, I'll get a college scholarship and. . . . You ain't getting well, are you, and who gets to pay for the funeral you've outlined in such detail? No donating bodies to medical clinics for MY parents.

“Nothing elaborate, son. Your mother and I want something respectful is all, simple and dignified. McCorley's has all the information, so you won't have to worry. The cemetery plot is all there and pretty much paid for.”

Now McCorley's, as you've guessed, wasn't the place for dignity and simplicity, or for any kind of economy. And the plot was sure as hell not “pretty much paid for.”

But I could have attended college, had I been a different and better person. My parents didn't ask to have cancer or to have a son like me, a guilt-ridden, ungrateful, self-indulgent asshole. But I did keep in fabulous shape. When I should have been playing for the Panthers or the Trojans, I was working out more ferociously than anyone doing so. Didn't ever make peace with my past, though I did find what few people ever locate. You could spend fifty good lives and never run into a person half so fine as Darnell. But those who said love means everything are wrong. Love can't hold a candle to a perfectly executed play, letting the other guys on your side do their jobs so you can run forty yards in front of 102,000 fans. Nothing could touch that, nothing.

Darnell did all this out of love for me. I would have done the same for Darnell, without hesitation. But were the Steelers to tell me I could make the team, run a single

play in competition, even an exhibition game, provided I dumped Darnel—but why pose ridiculous hypotheticals? The Steelers sure didn't give a shit about Darnell.

What terrified me now, now that it was before me so starkly, was that they would not give a shit about me.

I got to Heinz Field at 5:30, three hours early, only to find myself at the end of a line that seemed, at first blush of panic, to contain thousands, in fact, maybe three hundred. It was one of those May mornings in Pittsburgh that gave no hint of what might come. Within twenty minutes of staking out my spot, though, it began to rain, not much but probably enough to make a mucky mess of the field and screw things up for a back who depended on good footing to show how extraordinary he was.

By eight o'clock, with more hopefuls behind me, the rain, never amounting to more than a light terror, stopped. OK for the weather, but what about the crowd in line? Would the officials running the circus take one look and say, "All a joke—get the hell out of here?"

Not like they were, when they appeared shortly, polite or welcoming, exactly, but closer to that mode than I would have expected. But then I had no idea what to expect. In my dreams, I wasn't trying out anonymously, in a group of four-hundred. That's how many it turned out to be. They soon were dividing us into groups for tests and checks, mostly medical. What organization! Gotta hand it to those Steelers, really a bunch of folks hired for the day to time forty-yard sprints, check pulses, blood pressures, and weights; and dismiss those they figured might die on the spot.

By 11:30, what with one thing and another, we were down to about fifty. By 12:30 to twenty. The guys dropped seemed to me pretty serious candidates, several a good deal bigger than I and not too flabby. I felt the wobblies pretty bad as they pointed at one hotshot after another and wiggled the finger of rejection at him. (There had been two women in the original group, neither one awful but not lasting long.)

At 12:45 the eleven of us remaining were told to take a break.

"Have some lunch and be back at 2:00. Lunch is on you."

As we headed toward the exits, they called us back: "Just screwing with you."

And what a lunch: prime-rib sandwiches the size of hubcaps, potato salad, wonderful baked beans, and Iron City beer. They had us set up at a posh table under the stadium, table cloths and napkins. The only drawback was that the eleven of us were left to make conversation. Bad idea. We seemed to feel we were in competition, as if the Steelers were looking to replace Big Ben or AB or Leveon, with one of us.

There were three life-of-the-parties in our group, and they entered into a competition before I was a tenth of the way through my half-a-steer sandwich. I'm not going to copy down their jokes, though I laughed my ass off when they told them. Thinking back, I will say that they were, all three of them, really good guys, not competing with one another so much as trying to help the rest of us. I believe that, stupid as it sounds.

At 1:45 they took us into a locker room that was as unlike what I would have supposed as a bordello might have been. Instead of banged-up metal cabinets, rickety benches, old jocks, and old jock smells, it was a black and gold appointed suite, complete with lounge chairs and recliners, elaborate exercise equipment, padded benches, and whirlpool baths. All bedazzled, we suited up. Somehow they had outfits that fit us pretty well.

At about 2:30, roughly (exactly), they called us back on the field. I recognized right away the coaching staff, joined by some people whose job seemed to consist of writing stuff on yellow pads and fetching odds and ends. I was so nervous I couldn't really follow much of what Coach Tomlin said: about how welcome we were and how the Rooney family and all of the staff were happy to have us there.

We then separated: offense, defense, special teams, Tomlin strolling back and forth among us and, to his credit, appearing to pay attention. I was with the offense, along with five others, subdivided later into smaller groups, guided through a series of exercises, being timed, measured, and pushed pretty hard.

A coach I didn't recognize spent a good deal of time with a tape measure and a stop watch, then had us do a set of cut and shift moves. He didn't say a lot, certainly didn't drop any compliments. Well, one. After I'd tried hard to do what he directed, start over left guard and then cut it outside, he said, in a word I'll take with me to my grave, "Good." More of a grunt than a word, but I'd fight anyone who said it was not heartfelt.

After maybe thirty minutes of such fooling, we were whistled together by Coach Tomlin for more welcoming, I swear to God. As he spoke, a bunch of suited-up players showed up, suddenly appeared behind us, as if dropped from the clouds. The real fucking Steelers—almost! Actually, they must have been a group from the practice squad back-up, if there is one. But they did know how to run basic plays and to go at it three-quarter speed, including blocking and tackling. At first, they threw each of us hopefuls in one at a time, letting us have maybe five plays with the unit assigned.

I caught two medium-range passes and ran several plays off tackle, without a lot in the way of holes. I did better cutting outside, once on a play designed to go inside left guard, the move the other coach had liked. Nothing spectacular, but at least six yards on the worst run. Not what I'd hoped for, what I'd seen in my head all week. The closest I had come was maybe twenty yards, OK in its way but not as good as it should have been had I not underestimated the speed of the corner-back and let him pin me against the sideline. I did what I could, lowered my shoulder and carried him a couple of yards.

(He wasn't pleased: "What the hell's wrong with you, dickhead!")

After a bit, they set up a full-go scrimmage. I did better there, at least I thought I did, and finally broke one, stayed away from the sidelines and outran a corner.

They let the scrimmage go on for about forty minutes, managing to get two of the original eleven of us banged up enough they had to retire.

Finally, the brain trust whistled for us to stop, held a conference among themselves while we shuffled back and forth, regular (or whatever they were) players beating

a fast exit, their acting jobs over for the day. It was worse even than standing in the morning line. One of the comedian boys did his best to entertain us, but even he couldn't manage it. We found ourselves shrinking together in our little group, as if we could protect ourselves, fighter planes in formation or animals about to be attacked.

I have no idea how long it was before Coach Tomlin called us over and went through his litany again. It soon became so clear where it was all headed that my energy now was directed to holding back tears. I forced myself to listen to his attempt to soften things, tell us we were remarkable athletes and probably could have a future in pro football, were the Steelers less well stocked. As it was, he could only thank us, with the greatest respect and good will. . . .

What could I do? Raise my hand and remind him that the one weakness on this team was at running back, not much depth?

None of us took it well. I think it was making it through the day-long series of cuts, holding on hour after hour, that deluded us into thinking at least a few of us would win. Win what?

I slept late that next morning, trying not to remember what had happened, trying not to think about having gone to sleep the night before without running the ball down the throats of the Ravens, without any of my plays going straight to glory.

I hurried through the shower, got out the cereal, fiddled with the coffee maker, and looked for the morning paper, which Darnell always set out for me. Not today. Was he sparing me the headlines: "Pathetic Loser Humiliates Himself in Steeler Tryout!"?

Halfway through the granola I saw the note: "Hun. Call this number. He said it was direct cell." I set it aside so I could feel sorry for myself full-time. After a second bowl, though, I decided to attend to the note.

Five fucking rings. As I was ready to hang up, a voice came on, gruff and not really familiar:

"Yeah?"

"Hello. I got a note to call you."

"Yeah? Who are you?"

"Bill McKinley."

"Who?"

"Listen you called me, asshole!"

There was a chuckle on the other end. I hadn't recognized the voice, but the chuckle I did. Jesus Christ!

"Sorry, McKinley. I had to study the films. Never thought it'd happen, but you got something, you got a lot. You serious about this?"

"Am I? You could say. I mean. Oh sure I am."

"I guess that's a yes. Come down this afternoon – if you're free – and we'll get you set up with a contract."

“Yes sir. I’m free. Yes sir.”

“This ain’t the military, McKinley.”

“Yes, Coach.”

THE ROAD MOST TRAVELLED BY

“Men are from earth. Women are from earth. Deal with it.”

George Carlin

“Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood.”

Oscar Wilde

“A touch of love, everyone becomes a poet.”

Plato

“Love thy neighbor—and if he happens to be tall, debonair and devastating, it will be that much easier.”

Mae West

“I know just what you’re thinking.”

“What the hell?”

“I mean. . . . I know just what you’re thinking.”

“That you’re a terrifying creep?”

“That’s a good one. I mean, I have this feeling that we’re tuned in together, you know.”

“No.” She edged her butt leftwards on the barstool, not toward him.

This wasn’t going the way they said it would in class.

“You feel like Chinese?”

He had no idea what she meant but didn’t want to appear rude or, just as bad, dorky: “Sure!”

She looked at him in a way he couldn’t decipher, but then he often couldn’t decipher looks. Words either. But he was used to it by now, had learned to cope. No, he hadn’t.

Knowing better than to say anything, he did: “You fond of Chinese---the Chinese?”

Perhaps she smiled at that, looked a little like a smile.

Smile or not, she was very pretty, much more attractive and, for all he could tell, sophisticated than the women he usually met at this sports bar. He usually met no women at all at this bar—or any other. But, as his friends kept telling him, “Don’t give up, Ben; it’s just a matter of time.” Up to now, it hadn’t seemed like a matter of time; it had seemed like a matter of no women being interested. Maybe his luck had turned. Just maybe.

As it happened, the Chinese she felt like was food. Fine by him. The funny thing was he’d never had Chinese food, not ever, maybe the only person around anywhere who hadn’t, apart from very poor people, of whom there were so many, and why did he think of that depressing subject right now?

The place wasn’t too far from the sports bar, turned out. They walked along, mostly in silence. He tried to think of things to say, but truth was he was a little surprised, a little spooked by the route she took: alleys, twists, darkness. But then there they were, a restaurant—of sorts. Pretty dingy, the dingy not altogether hidden by the dim lighting.

The menu was in English, half of it, and there were forty-seven combinations available, very reasonable, too. As it was all the same to him, he decided to go for something in the middle, number twenty-three or twenty-four, that would be, make it twenty-four, moo goo guy pan.

He started to order, then realized his mistake. Wait for her. He was sure she hadn’t caught his slip. She said something to the waiter he couldn’t decipher, so he said, “Me, too. My favorite.” Forget moo goo guy pan.

Both his date—he decided that’s what she was—and the waiter stared at him.

“I just asked where the Women’s was,” she said, but not icily.

“My mistake.”

“You thought I said “moo shu pork,” right?”

He laughed. Neither his date nor the waiter joined in.

To cover his error: “Good idea. I’ll join you—in the Men’s. Not jointly. Then we’ll be ready to order—after.”

The waiter was visibly annoyed, blocked his way out of the booth for a moment, several moments. That was odd. This guy was almost baring his teeth. Weren’t these people supposed to be patient and, at least, inscrutable?

But he made it to the Men’s, which was a little embarrassing, as he proceeded, by habit, to a urinal, only to discover he had no need of one, so he faked it for 30 seconds, which seemed reasonable, washed his hands, and returned.

His date and the waiter were there, apparently waiting for him.

“OR-----“ he began, not knowing here he was headed.

“I’ll have number 4, steamed rice, tea, and double fortune cookie, fortune cookies served as appetizer” said his companion or date, whose name he hadn’t caught – hadn’t heard, hadn’t asked.

“Me too.”

“I’ll have to check,” said waiter, “on the eels.”

“Maybe there’s been a rush on them,” the woman said. She and the waiter laughed.

Eels. Hope they were fresh out. Or at least out. Or fresh.

Waiter shortly reappeared. “Turns out you’re OK.”

His date seemed relieved, happy.

“If you’re short on them,” he began.

“No, no. Got just enough.”

“How many eels in an order?” he asked, before he could catch himself.

Nobody answered, which was just as well.

Waiter reappeared.

“Open your cookie,” she said.

“That sounds raunchy.”

“Yeah. Open your fucking cookie.”

“OK. It says, ‘Advancement will come with hard work.’”

“How true. Wanta hear mine?”

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to absorb the advice I got. Maybe I’ll try it, get a fresh start in life.”

“Hard work?”

“No, just the advancement part. What they really mean is ‘Advancement comes from dating the boss’s daughter.’”

“Am I the boss’s daughter?”

“You could well be.”

“Are you dating me, Ben? It is Ben, right?”

“Ben’ll do. No, it’s Ben. Let’s say I am—dating you, the boss’s favorite daughter.”

“And you expect advancement?”

“Why else would I date you, comes to that?”

“I see. And what can I expect from all this dating? Can I too expect advancement? Are you the boss’s son? Will dating you bring me advancement of the right sort, the sort to which I have become accustomed? Or should I date many, play the field, forget you altogether. Bye-bye. I so want advancement that will serve me well. Can you guarantee me that sleeping with you, otherwise unthinkable, will do that and not the reverse?”

“Ah, as for you advancing, I can answer all your questions with confidence, while ignoring none of your understandable concerns. Yes. In ways that matter most.”

“I have spiritual needs, too, you know.”

“I took those into consideration.”

“Ignoring the physical?”

“Precisely. I mean, no, both: physical every bit as important, balanced like seals on a seesaw.”

“Balanced? That’s disappointing. I expected you were disguising the physicality of all this by faking spirituality.”

“I admit it. Rather, it’s just the reverse. Nothing physical, just spiritual every minute.”

“I’ll advance toward spiritual perfection.”

“Well, no, perfection is unattainable, and you wouldn’t like it anyhow. But you’ll accrue more and more of the spiritual, lay up for yourself treasures where thieves do not break through and steal, moth and something do not corrupt.”

“That sounds good. A vault. Mine says, ‘The road to success is always under construction.’”

“I never thought of that before.”

“You should have done.”

“It’s a tough one, really, meant for those who are not going to panic just because they are faced with a puzzle.”

“A poser.”

“Yours should have said, ‘People will like you better if you stop responding to sentences that contains a noun with a synonym.’”

“All sentences contain nouns, you know, or pronouns.”

How about, ‘Watch out! Run! Don’t Shoot!’”

“Back to my puzzle, Benny Boy. I think it means that women have it tougher, that you, on the other hand, can find success by way of your pecker, which you had no part in obtaining.”

“Though the maintenance is not easy. But you’re right about finding success—and with the boss’s daughter.”

At this point the eels arrived. He decided he’d fill up on rice, which he started to do, losing track of the laborious conversation. His date had not, picked it right up.

“No, we were wrong to limit success to these multiple daughters, considering the range of authority of your well-maintained whang. By flashing it before men senior to you, convincing them that your is bigger, and. . . .”

“And?”

“That you won’t use that against them, will never reveal their inadequacy, will keep your lips and your fly zipped.”

“So long as they give me what I want.”

“A shot at the big time, a seat at the table, a ride on the power train.”

“Which won’t happen for you because your track is under construction.”

“Road, not track.”

“I think these fortunes are metaphorical.”

“I need to hire some poor shits to repair the road before I skitter on to success, right, making sure the construction people are competent, which means no women need apply.”

“Right. No, no. I mean, not that.”

“Yes you did. You are a master of the game.”

“Or caught in it.”

“There’s no difference. So, here’s the plan. You marry me and force your daddy to take me into the firm as a senior partner.”

“Daddy is devoted to me, will do as I say.”

“Naturally, so our wedding will clear the debris, allow me what I want, which is immediate and undeserved success.”

“And me?”

“You’re my steam shovel. Be satisfied with that. They also serve who only stand and wait a while for directions on how best to serve.”

“Well, Jill, you ready for desert?”

“You tiring of our lively banter, Ted?”

“It’s not that.”

But it was that. He suddenly wanted just to go home. He was used to that, going home after yet another failure. Failure was what he had grown accustomed to, and right now it didn’t look so bad.

Then he glanced at Jill, thinking to inaugurate a get-me-out-of-here prelude. But she looked so different now, somehow no longer smart-assed and scary, more like sad.

“You OK, Jill?”

“Thanks, Ben. I guess I am.”

“You know what I was just thinking?”

“Yes I do.”

“Well, I’ve stopped thinking it. Your place or mine?”

“Really? Holy shit!”

MY FUNNY VALENTINE

**Don't change a hair for me,
Not if you care for me,
Stay, lovely Valentine, stay
Each day is Valentine's Day!**

You know how it is. Year or two later, everything seems clear, like it'd been planned. But we all know that's not how it works: things don't happen *because* – there's no because. Sometimes you win the ham in the raffle—I come from a place where raffles don't rise above hams—usually you don't. Most of us never win anything. Nothing.

We were net-surfing at work, a slow time, three-thirty, between lunch and the early-bird specials.

“Why you looking at Anti-Valentine's Day Party Ideas?”

“Came up when I Googled ‘Valentine's Day’.”

“You don't like Valentine's Day?”

“Damn, Bill, I didn't ask for cynical sites – came up unbidden.”

“So you're all for it. You don't seem much like a flowers and boxed candy kind of woman.”

“Like I ought to be playing pulling guard for the Browns?”

“Oh no. I never was very sure what a pulling guard was. Of course I know what guards are; beyond that, I'm lost.”

“You're often lost, I'd say.”

“That's true.”

She looked at me. Then she said, “Anyhow.”

For no good reason, I said, “I'm sorry.”

“Jesus on a stick, Bill, now you make ME want to apologize. Let's start over.”

“You throwing a Valentine's Party? Not that I'm angling for an invitation. I'd like to come, don't get me wrong, but I hate pushing. I've never been to one and don't know if you're supposed to bring a gift.”

“When you're stuck for ideas, a cheap bottle of wine with an obscure label always serves, Bill. Take my word for it.”

““OK, I will.”

She looked at me again.

“Not that I've never been to a party,” I added, just to have something to say.

“So, should we throw a one?”

“Really? Sure, Barbara, count me in. My mother will clear out if I give her a little notice. I mean for the party, not permanently.”

“So we could have it at your place? That’d be fine, as my roommates aren’t sure to be so cooperative as your mom.”

That was about when our boss came shuffling over toward us. Didn’t say anything, and it’s not like there were customers clamoring for the special – chili and house salad—very imaginative – but we figured we’d better not press our luck. I mean, I figured that, not having a lot of opportunities in reserve if I lost this job. I knew Barbara could get a job anywhere.

Just as we were going back to filling ketchup bottles and napkin dispensers, Barbara hissed, “After work.”

“I’m free,” I said.

Customers came in trickles, then a steady stream just shortly after that. Wasn’t like our food was good or they thought it was. We were cheap and the service was fast, since most stuff didn’t need preparing. Just heat a little, slap her on the plate and put it on the high counter separating Barbara and me from the kitchen. We were good at carrying it to tables, getting orders straight, and asking politely how everything was, whether they needed anything, and how about them Browns? Actually, I enjoyed the job, despite the boss, since no customer ever said the food was awful or I was awful, and they chatted a lot. Nothing very personal but it was nice. And they tipped more than they should, I mean more than they could afford, especially some with kids who came in pretty often. Sometimes I almost said something about not needing all this money, since living with Mother kept expenses low; but I figured it’d hurt their feelings. I think it was there I formed this plan to use tips to buy presents for the kids and slip them in under napkins. I’d mentioned it to Barbara, though, and she told me it might be presumptuous. I didn’t agree altogether, but I trust her judgment.

After work I was walking Barbara to her car. That sounds almost like we were close, but it wasn’t that. I always walked her to her car, since it was dark in the lot and we were told to park in the way-back. It wasn’t what anybody would want to call a dangerous area, for sure not upscale but very safe. Still, you never know and Barbara was quite small, despite her joke about playing football.

“OK, Bill, here’s an original idea: let’s us go right now to a diner and plan the party. And if you say we just left a diner, as if I didn’t know, I’ll jam my car keys up your nose.”

“Yes! Let’s go to a competitor, buy the most expensive thing on the menu, plan our Anti-Valentine’s Party.”

“Anti-? You serious, Bill? Doesn’t sound like you.”

“That’s cause you don’t know me.”

“Leave yourself wide-open with a line like that, Bill.”

“I’m an open kind of guy.”

“Confident, been-through-it-all, supple, give-me-your-best-shot, richly experienced...”

“You got me. Only I’m none of those things. I just say dumb stuff.”

She looked at me like she did, so I had to continue: “I am all for the party, Valentine’s or Anti. Let’s go get the pot-roast special.”

We slid into a red-vinyl booth and I grabbed a menu. I’m not sure why I did that, as they had just what we had at our place, though these prices were even lower. I noted that, as I thought it was only right that I pick up the check, even though this diner had been Barbara’s idea. Come to think of it, that made it much more important that I pay.

“What looks good, Barbara?”

Then I noticed she was studying her iPad, not the menu. She looked up at me, smiling a little, and said, “The best they got to offer. Spare no expense, as you’re the one paying.”

“I agree.”

“Shit, Bill, I was kidding.”

“No, no, this is on me. After all. . .” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. That happens to me a lot, but it seemed to matter less this time.

“We’ll settle all that later—best two of three falls—but now we have to get serious about this party. I got some great quotes for invitations. Wanna hear them?”

“Yes!” I was, of course, expecting lines about love, passion, and undying things, so when she started reading, it took me a minute to catch on.

“I don’t think I’ll get married again. I’ll just find a woman I don’t like and get her a house.”

“Whenever I date a guy, I think, is this the man I want my children to spend their weekends with?”

“The only difference between the men I’ve dated and Charles Manson is that Charles Manson has the decency to look like a nut case when you first meet him.”

“You know that look women get when they want sex? Me neither.”

She was on a roll, reading these quotes. They had me laughing so blindly I spilled my water. Barbara just pulled out some napkins from the dispenser—luckily full, good staff here—and wiped up without even looking up from her iPad. But she did stop reading then, stopped speaking altogether. I was a little startled by the sudden silence.

I didn’t think she wanted me apologizing for the water, so I waltzed right into the invitation idea with the one quote I remembered: “The only difference between sex for money and sex for free is sex for money costs a good deal less.”

“That’s not something I would have thought was in your arsenal, Bill, not that it’s not a good one.” She looked, I don’t know, maybe hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

“Jesus Christ, Bill. We can use any of these for the invitations. What will we actually do at the party?”

“Eat, play games?”

She looked at me as if I had just spelled “calliope” wrong at the spelling bee. That’s not really what she looked at me like, but I can’t think of anything more accurate.

“Right. Let’s get some inspiration from others who have registered their feelings and suggestions, very helpfully, on-line.”

“OK. I need inspiration, Barbara. I don’t have a single idea.”

“We can poach others. Here are some. You ready?”

“Shoot.”

“I’ll just let ‘em flow: set up a market featuring gifts from ex-lovers or possessions of theirs you have lifted, watch the movie *My Bloody Valentine*, light Betrayal Candles (whatever they are), play dart games onto faces and bodies of people you thought loved you, use voodoo dolls in the same way, make cupcakes with inventive slogans (supplying guests with materials, I guess), do a can-you-top-this on the subject, “Why I Hate _____.”

“OK,” I said.

“You don’t seem enthused.” Barbara was again looking at me in her way—and being quiet.

“No, no. What should I buy for the party? Mother won’t mind clearing out, and she’ll help me hang balloons before she goes.”

“First things, first: you cannot hide your lack of enthusiasm, so let me attend to that right away. Here’s a site, several sites, which feature people giving good reasons why they detest Valentine’s Day.”

“OK.”

“I know this’ll get that party fever burning inside you. I’ll just quote directly, not in any order:

“It’s a trap for unwary people, make that unwary men.”

“You’re forced into cheesy professions of love, whatever that is.”

“Just buy some flowers and hope to get laid. It’s not rocket science.”

“It’s a day for pathetic insecure people who need validation.”

“It’s a holiday of stress and fear, depression, and guilt.”

She seemed ready to go on, but I couldn’t stop myself from interrupting. “I see,” I said, I hope not too rudely.

Barbara looked at me, more kindly maybe.

We were quiet for a minute.

“Here’s a couple more, Bill. Different. Maybe more honest, though one tries to be funny about it: “On any other day, hanging out with your parents and eating an entire pie is considered festive. On Valentine’s Day, it’s a sign of desperation.”

“That’s a good one, Barbara—I guess.”

“It’s sad, but not so bad as several like this:

“I don’t like Valentine’s Day because I don’t have any friends.”

“Oh, God.”

“I know.”

“Barbara. . . .”

“Yes, Bill?”

“You really want. . . ?”

“To do an Anti-Valentine’s Party?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Me, neither.”

“You know what, Bill?”

“What?”

“I don’t want to do a regular Valentine’s Party either.”

“OK.”

“You agree?”

“Yes”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“We don’t need a party, Bill.”

“No?”

“Not at all.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“Will you be my Valentine?”