



**RONDO FOR RENYS**

**Voices from Away**

**Joseph A Dane**

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Los Angeles: FreeReadPress, 2017

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## PRELUDE

No one remembers, I think, the first time they crossed the border of a state, the first time they handled a firearm or the strange complex of controls on a boat or motorcycle. No one recalls the first touch of the woman they would marry, or walking for the first time into Renys, the piled-up merchandise “A Maine Adventure,” as the storefronts style it. You can remember the gunfire, deafening it seemed then, as the careless shot passed within inches of a childhood friend’s head. You can remember the day you took the call—from a doctor or relative, speaking of a dead parent, or from a lover, the last time you would ever speak. The crass banalities of why she left; or words you heard or saw that day in spring. But you can rarely place the things that truly made a difference—the things that put you within time, rather than simply part of its narration.

So it takes some verbal sleight-of-hand to say: “some years after I entered or left this state for the first time,” “some years after I saw Judith’s face, on her way past her gruff father’s scowl ...” or “in the roar of the motorcycle that day in early spring ...,” “driving south through Oxford ...” Some years after that first spring snow, say, I spent my last winter in Maine, a decade before my last parent died. Some years after this, my last lover, she who would not wait for me, stopped loving me and went her way. And some months after that, I’m told, on April 5, 2011, as I boarded a plane to Boston to read this very narrative, my darling Eloise bled to death in her shower.

I could begin again, then, not with life but its accoutrements. I could refer here to the arbitrary names of things, thinking of these things not in terms of essences but secondaries. One year, I say, what we called local chains of retailers failed; so to avoid naming their predatory competitors, Michael and I used code to speak of them. “Where did you get that?” we would say. And it might be, say, a Have-a-Heart trap, or frames for old photographs, a ball peen hammer, a hunting cap, some paper, shotgun shells, an aquatic pet perhaps, or two pounds of bird seed. It might have once been cigarettes in that distinctive green wrapper, a lamp cord, a candy-bar, a road-map of the back way to Bangor, or oil for the motorcycles. “I went to Ames first,” we said, by way of excuse, the last of Maine’s failed retailers. And finally, we merely said “Ames First,” which became itself the name of the loathsome places we refused to name. And it could have been “Sears first,” or “Woolworths,” or will one day be “Renys First,” when the makeshift storefronts in Pittsfield, Dexter, Farmington and Bridgton, Madison, Bath and Damariscotta, Saco and Wells, now Portland and Topsham, across the bridge from Brunswick, and of course Belfast and Camden itself, right on Route 1—when all these storefronts, distinct yet uniformly blue, announce the final sale of their furnishings.

So now I say that one day I was born in Maine, and one day all who grew up with me left this place as I did. One day I walked out of the storefront on Maine Street and shouted my name, waiting for the familiar answering echo as it once seemed to me: “Ah, a real Brunswick name! a real South Bristol name!” meaning, the name of one who grew up here, whose family embarrassed him as a child, who knew the accents of the place and whose friends spoke French at home until their grandparents and their parents died. Or of those who smelled of bait and fishing waste and spoke, say, of the traffic circle at Portsmouth as a place of phenomenal moment, even to their friends from away.

One day I walked out on Maine Street, finally from away for good, and my name seemed lost in the echoes of the landscape, the facades whose names seemed the wrong names as I shouted my own name, hardly recognizable in the whirr of the tire treads. I might speak here of the shade from elm trees in this place, once everywhere in America, now cut up for firewood, years from maturity, or speak too of your discourse as you left me. But the crass nostalgia is too much for me, too much like music in the worst sense, or so I think: the triteness of the trichords, the rondo’s bland inconsequence—that hateful cycling back to things that music is. I think instead of what my Eloise, who never came to Maine, once said to me, or could have said to me, the words of those who circled through here from away. And it could have been Manhattan in this place, or the closed storefronts of Glasco, off in the mid-west, or waiting for the streetcar that late summer night on Canal Street in New Orleans.

## 1.

## DEER STAND

## A.1 Deer Stand

I am stationed in what is called a deer stand. If life had gone differently, had I stayed married, I would even now be with family, and perhaps I would be afoot in the cedar swamp, a driver now, having advanced through the ranks of the locals. But it didn't go differently. From the deep woods of Maine, Judith came into my life—a hippie chick to a naive hippie kid from the coast, and life was never the same again. Standing there as a twenty-year-old in the November rain, the time so preciously passing with the sun, I could hardly conceive of a life other than the one that was soon to end for me.

Deer stands, as I knew them when organized deer drives were still legal in Maine, are mere locations in the woods, likely never used this way again. Jeffrey will insist I stand here motionless all morning and then he, expert and wild as prey itself, will leave and circle back to find me here again at noon. In our baseless imagining, I will have killed the large impressive buck he will take credit for flushing directly at me. If he does not appear by noon, I can find my way back to camp. This is always the plan that we follow; that is how life is. It is his camp here, or his family camp, or one he owns part shares in. And although we will affect the accents of the place at his instruction, even his speech is forced, like ours, born as he is like the rest of us at mid-century, watching television, listening to late night radio. To his family, these accents mean we are from away, and it must be painful to hear a son's voice in their midst. It must be painful too to hear Judith's voice among them, affecting the cadences of up-state New York and the vulgarism "Oul-bany" or however I should represent that.

We learned or more accurately affected too in those days a certain reticence, I'll say, or so we thought, one not found in all the people of the place we knew. It was a grand taciturnity seen only in a few, the older citizens of the place, who at times took on a notably unpleasant form of speech by inhaling their words "Yup" "well" and things like that, forced down somehow through their vocal chords and barely audible, speaking, as it were, in reverse. Jeffrey has this reticence, learned from Ruel. His voice deepens when he is at camp, hosting us, and it is likely the father's voice he heard instructing him.

The elaborate noon reunions mean walking through the snow. It is like walking through the snow, I think, with Ann-Marie after John died years ago—John who himself spent so much sycophantic time with Jeffrey in the hunting camp. But maybe this has nothing to do with John at the hunting camp. Maybe I reference him only because it is John who drove us to Bedford that September forty years ago. Drove with Judith. Drove

with me. To Bedford for the motorcycles—through the Hartford of Wallace Stevens, the Danbury of Charles Ives, although I knew none of all this nor much else then. Crushed with love for her I was that day, and she would leave me bewildered, railing at what she had done to me, in a guest room down in Bedford, I think it was, down there for the motorcycles. Then John himself will die, leaving us all alone. He clutched his chest falling from the piano bench: I wrote Moments Musicaux in his memory, after the score he left unplayed on the music stand. “I think in some sense I will always be a man,” I wrote, speaking to him as much as it was then possible.

*I think in some sense I will always be a man*

*Walking through the snow with Ann-Marie on a December noon.*

*Because of that, I will be always walking through the snow with you.”*

It is years before that now, years before this walking through the snow. I am driving Judith from Dexter through Abbot, I think it was, although it is hard to find that on a map today, two nights before our wedding. A bear runs from the cedar swamp and within forty yards pulls even with my 1971 Toyota Corolla, not mine, but Judith’s, a detail I omitted in my first draft of this, and she too is astonished at the bear in full sprint framed in the passenger window—the only bear, we will learn, we have ever seen in the Maine woods. The Toyota, Judith’s car I now admit, paid for by her cash-strapped family, maintains its then cruising speed of 40 miles an hour, although for me, everything is in slow motion. The bear noses ahead, seizes I suppose the right of way and runs straight across the road in front of me. I think of this moment during the bad movies, set in the west or in Alaska—the heroes outrunning the grizzly, many times faster than this frightened bear in Maine. The car is now parked on the shoulder and we laugh, as if giddy with the catch or hunt. A hippie chick you would never see dressed like that in northern Maine, her affected speech of Albany, laughing in the arms of her boyfriend from away.

But why am I speaking of these inconsequential things? A bear, caught briefly in the headlights? With John dead, and Judith gone four decades? Jeffrey working in the woods as if there were no intervening years at all?

I speak of these things now because there was then nothing of consequence to think on cold November days. There were no miseries of later November days. There are only ordinary trees and shadows to investigate, only so many hand positions on the rifle stock. At age twenty, what can a girl like Judith teach a sophisticate like you? You are alone on a November day as you will always be. But here, you have no past, you think; you have outgrown the inexistent futures of your fantasies. It is all football and some humiliating moment in fifth grade when you were caught smiling at the girl you dreamed about the night before. You have outgrown now Diana in Fort Fairfield, and you may as

well dream about deer, or smoke the cigarette Jeffrey has insisted you forego for these so crucial morning hours.

I wait in the makeshift deer stand in flickering attention. I think of the grease on my boots I will refresh when I return to camp, the way I have tied my bootlaces. I hear crisp shots in the distance. Real hunters, I think. Those who kill deer. Not those who wait like fools in deer stands, as if life itself were some elaborate fraud like a snipe hunt.

### B.1. Jeffrey

He would become my brother-in-law, through Judith. But in those days, he could hardly know the two of us, warmed in the unbreathable air of the hunting camp, would one day work on commercial fishing boats on the to him alien coast of Maine. He could not know he would go broke, like so many other fishermen, returning finally to the North woods of Maine to work in the woods—the very thing his family had worked so hard to spare him. Fred is in Alaska, Nome I think it is. Wayne, posing in the photo with the beer and my Winchester 94, is mired in the corporate world and good riddance to him, I think. John died on the coast, a few miles from my summer home.

It was as if these woods created roles for us we never filled: the hunting vests, the checked jackets, black and red—the kind of thing only Jimmy would now swagger in, say, at the Common Ground Fair in Unity, his fists still bruised from the beatings, but which in those days were everywhere.

Jeffrey is riding his motorcycle, he says, down a hill in Guilford, and he must be dressed in these same hunting checks. He is in his teens, at least he is as he imagines this. When the motorcycle flips, as we all have felt them flip, he falls head-first toward the oncoming semi-truck. In his version of the story, he will slide completely under the truck and look up free and unharmed as the truck, deftly steered by a cold professional, passes over him. He is fearless in his variant. We do not hear of the driver again.

When I hit the railroad tracks on a Tuesday afternoon in the cold spring rain, I felt the Ducati wheel twist in my hands, and the air leave my chest. I hit the asphalt face first as Jeffrey did and skidded toward the abutment, and I had already broken into a run before I stopped sliding across the roadway. A biker falls, I found, not straight ahead, but obliquely, like that bear I guess, and if you cross into the path of an oncoming car, you will not survive it. It is impossible that a semi-truck, however professionally steered at accident speeds, will pass over the fallen biker, sliding at this angle, and unlikely too that the motorcycle itself, upended on the roadway, will not be struck. All this passed through my mind as I scrambled onto the curb, with gravel in my teeth, and ripped my hippie helmet off.

It is as if in this story Jeffrey had run out of incidents to tell, the deer now slaughtered and the deep woods cut into firewood.

On the coast, in the unsuitable boat he built over two winters, he spent himself into more debt than he could pay. Anyone in the business could have predicted this, swallowing their words as they had learned to do. He sat at the kitchen table in mid-winter, tying trap heads by hand, as no one in the industry had done for decades. It would be the authentic way to begin such work, he must have thought, but it only pitted him against professionals, alienated though they may have been, who bought their traps ready-built from Anderson. You become enchanted with that language of self-reliance, and it makes you do very foolish things, like waste your December dusk on menial work.

His hands were thick, like his accent, and thickened further by the salt of the bait and the chain saws. It is hard to imagine the stroke of those fingertips, so calloused, and he must have used a private eloquence for the women in his life; the coarse and thickened accent, lacking Ruel's inflections, would have done no good for him. Lost on the coast, there was no family house to protect him, and no forgotten wood-lot, and the family whose loyalties sustained him finally deserted him as well. He went back to the North Woods, his hands now toughened with lobster bait, his accent modulated by days on the water and the drugs that clipped his sentences and turned his eyes away from you.

You have to deal with these people. You have to look at them and insist that they look back to you. You have to stare through the drug-based eccentricities and insist that these things be overcome. You must forget about the marriage to the sister, the hostilities of the makeshift family in northern Maine, the accents and the alcohol. You must forget about the hunting jackets and the smell of the bait fish and stare your loved ones down even if you can expect no more than bankruptcy and rehab in the end.

## A.2 Killing Things

Hunting stories you find in magazines claim to be about the animals, but of course they are not about animals, not about those deer flushed over the ridge in Brownville Junction and the shots Jeffrey, but not you, managed to fire at them, or the bear that nearly ran you off the road on the back way through Abbot. They are about killing things, and only occasionally will you read the perfunctory story of the missed opportunity, of the hunter who has his chance, and overwhelmed by the majesty of the game, allows it to "roam free," or however the presumably natural life of game might be described. You see this, of course, in Deer Hunter, even though most of that famous film was shot in Washington and not in Pennsylvania where it is set, and even though the one deer you see killed by the most ignominious of the hunters has only buds for antlers, meaning, not that it

was an insubstantial deer (the point of the script I think) but rather that the whole scene was filmed, and the deer consequently killed, out of season in mid-summer.

Jeffrey had killed a number of deer in his lifetime, or so he claimed. But these triumphs were like falls from motorcycles. It was impossible to get the numbers and the stories straight. You could get a license at age ten in those days, and I first met him at age eighteen. He shot that magnificent buck in his junior year in college, the first one since I knew him. I believe this means the maximum number he could have killed legally before he turned twenty-one was eight. The gutting of the real deer, “dressing” as absurdly known, did not come easy for either of us, and I wonder if he had done such things before or had only read about them in the magazines. Perhaps he had witnessed Ruel’s butcheries. Or maybe these were like the track of the semi-truck, and the motorcycle spinning counterclockwise in the opposite lane.

Ruel is Jeffrey’s father, who enabled all these things, even the car I drove his daughter in, as we pulled off the road and laughed at the bear disappearing in the woods in Abbot. In the five or six years I knew him, Ruel never “got his deer,” as they say here, and I suspect much of that week’s vacation in the hunting shack was spent drinking or telling stories or cooking beans or tending the pot-bellied, coal-burning stove, with the fumes that made the air unbreathable, even in the clouds of cigar smoke.

At the time of the deer kill, and the searching through the warm entrails, Judith was sixteen years old. I want to calculate the number of deer she could have killed, but I cannot do it. There was a hunting story she once told to me, difficult to focus on, no chance that it was true. She lies in the back of the Volvo. We are on our way to Bedford for the motorcycles. John drives us through the rain and the lights glistening of the roadway.

## B.2 In-Laws

Ruel will work a lifetime paying for the schools that enable his son and daughter to escape this place, but they are versions of Ruel himself, versions of each other, and he is repaid badly. Jeffrey returns to the woods to become a worker just like he is, and Judith marries a born-again horse-farmer in Dexter. Ruel works in the factory, as foreman in the factory, building up a cache of toothpicks that I’m told is the world’s supply for a year. Ruel works in a hotel, or runs the only local one; he works as a meat-cutter, and all his friends bring deer to him for butchering. One summer day, when moose were protected in Maine, a pickup truck arrived with two of the ungainly things in the back, their uncounted legs in the air, blocking the rear view mirror. Ruel stayed up all night with them, and the

next day, every police officer and game warden within ten miles of Guilford, as he tells it, had moose steaks in the freezer.

It was at Ruel's camp in Brownville Junction that a classic buck, 200 pounds, ran straight at Jeffrey, and died within a hundred yards of him. We gutted it, as instructed in the guidebooks, then dragged it back to camp. The old men scoffed at our work. Something about mistaking parts of the liver for something else, although only Doc Lightbody could know that for sure. On that unusually hot November, instead of curing, the carcass rotted, or so we were told, now back in college. Maybe Ruel just forgot his promise to cut it up for us or maybe something came up or maybe the story of the inconvenient temperature was true. Judith must have been in Albany or Cobleskill, it was, although I had no inkling this would be of the slightest importance to me. All Jeffrey got out of it was the rack, that is, the antlers, and they graced his dorm room at Bowdoin for the next two years, bathed in hippie music, until they were stolen by one of his classmates.

In the year of the deer kill, Judith still meant nothing to me, having only aged months since the day I first saw her. Two years later she would appear on the arm of Wayne, I think. And maybe that had some effect on me. Or perhaps it was that trip to New York months later or a year after that year that changed everything, or perhaps it was the simple walk in the field outside the apartment complex the day before, when I saw her young breasts beneath the shirt she borrowed from me and which I still own today. Perhaps it was the perfunctory monologue of hippie ideology. Or maybe it was just our age and perhaps at that time we and all our very words were interchangeable.

I watched her grow into the woman I would love. And I have never been so crushed by love (the phrase I cannot seem to change) as I was at age twenty-two; and I will hardly be so crushed again, or so I arrogantly thought and wrote a year ago, with the same foolish arrogance I felt a week before I drove with her to New York with John, dead in decades, for the motorcycles when life would change for me. Drove with John. To Bedford for the motorcycles ...

How could I have written this with such complacency, I think now, stopping to recall the face of Penelope across from me a year ago? A November day it was she called, recalling hideously those dull November days decades past in the deer stand. And with that day, all I knew of her was gone—our histories, our days in Maine, and how we thought we lived. All lost in what she chose to grow to be.

We used to say so much in silence, so she claimed, loving me even on that last day, so she thought, whereas the truth we must have known was that we never said much of consequence at all. It was as if she and I, and all of us, had been living that grand taciturnity I thought characteristic of the North Woods itself, but which I cannot assign to

the speech of anyone I can name. In fact, the kitchens were full of banalities, and the constantly refilled coffee. The kitchen in Guilford, the kitchen in my house in Maine, the kitchen here in California, with her, who would not wait for me.

I stare down at the keyboard, feeling nothing, thinking nothing, and write this folderol of deer hunting, while Judith's face, in a recent photograph, picks out its allusions to the twenty-year-old girl I once loved.

### A.3: The Field in Dexter

Judith is with Ruel; she is ten years old or maybe twelve or fourteen. They are in a field in Dexter. At least, that is where I see all happening, this fiction, since Jeffrey and I often hunted there when we were up-country but far from the camp in Brownville Junction, his muscled and calloused fingers fumbling with the action. Dexter seems the perfect setting for this story. But it is years before I will hear it told or it will mean anything to me.

Ruel stands quietly with her next to the pickup truck. The deer, I think I'm told, the deer walk right out of the woods, then turn away, grazing or feeding or however you describe what deer do when they don't see you. Ruel balances the rifle illegally on the fender of the pickup. Judith aims with the help of Ruel, and pulls the trigger. Her hand is steady, and her fingers would grow soft in their irresistible caress. The deer is facing away from them, and now fatally hit. It is the type of shot, I remember from the hunting magazines, you must resist. Judith then throws the rifle down in tears, a very dangerous thing to do, and that, she says, is the last time she went deer-hunting.

Like most hunting stories, there is a lot wrong with this one, even though it lacks the impossible "wrapping the gun around the tree" motif so common in these stories of hunting accidents or renunciations, one recorded too in Fred Wiseman's brilliant Belfast, Maine. I spent many hours of many days looking for deer, and never once did they "come right out at me," although they once stood at the edge of a field in the pre-dawn dusk, barely visible in the mist. No one helps you aim in those conditions; no one lies with you in the field frost. So how could Ruel have done this—"helped me aim" she says— a critical and insistent detail of the story? Only the shooter knows what is in the riflesights.

And how could you set up on the fender of a pickup? Where would that be? From the point of view constructed for this story, the pickup would be in the middle of the field off "to the left," and the field itself would rise slowly through some apple trees ending at the deep woods where the deer came from. But there is surely no dirt road there, either in the real field or in the one I construct on the basis of Judith's story, clouded as it is with the memory of Judith's hands on my face and clouded as that memory is of the loving hands missing from my face today.

The deer carcass is also missing from the story. In any successful hunt, that is, a real one, such a carcass constitutes a large part of the story, even the one uselessly rotting in early November years later. You should hear my uncle tell of shooting elk in Colorado, high in the mountains, then quartering it and packing it out on the mules. It was so dark the only way to follow the trail was to follow the mules, who don't care what time of day it is. So they put Fred, or Greg, or whoever it was with the least experience, right up behind the mule and told him to hold on to the mule's tail in the dark and never let go under any circumstances, and by God, he hiked six miles in the dark down that mountain with mule shit in his face the entire way.

Deer seldom drop when hit, except on the hunting shows they used to run on the weekends in the fifties and early sixties. Even Jeffrey's buck, shot straight through the heart, ran a hundred yards or two before collapsing. How, with a crying twelve-year-old, could a man be expected to track even a fatally wounded deer, and finally end it all with the coup de grace? Would a man who loved his children as Ruel did leave her crying there by the pickup? while he tracked the dying deer in the twilight? And how much less could he be expected, with the same crying child now in the distance, to kneel down with his hunting knife, and cut the guts from the thing she killed?

No. Judith never killed a deer, I think; nothing died from gunfire, although she knew I would be envious, much as I loved her, to think she had done it. And the only time Ruel's rifle went off during the years I knew him, it did so in his pickup and blew a hole straight through the passenger side floorboards, barely missing the ball joint.

Jeffrey studies the instruments. It is years later, and we are out of sight of land, not in the mist, but over the horizon. For coastal fishermen, hull-down to land is a bad and foreign place to be. Tuna fishing we are said to be, but tuna are scarce for amateurs in this business as even commercial fishermen, as we are, now are classified. Unbalanced landsman that he is, John stands braced with his beloved Ann-Marie in the wheelhouse and I think of the trip to Bedford for the motorcycles years earlier.

I lie with my much loved Judith, who will one day invent these stories of the fabulous deer kill, not knowing what the future would bring or even what the future was. John drives expertly through Danbury, it now must be, where Charles Ives, I think, learned all that he would know. Judith has lost or masked her accent in the vulgarities of Oulbany, she calls it. I study the line from her shoulder to her waist, and realize even then that life will never be the same again.

## 2.

## FORT FAIRFIELD, 1962

When I fell in love with my wife-to-be, I felt I had taken her from the most remote region of Maine I knew—from Dexter, I thought, Guilford or Dover-Foxcroft, somewhere east of Madison, where buses of high school athletes from this region used to go—but there are hundreds of miles of Maine roads north of this region as I knew even then. I still have friends as far north as Houlton, who came there from Portland and retired to a cabin in nearby New Limerick at age fifty. We play golf once a year, and each year I am beaten more soundly than I was the year before.

At age fifteen, I went to northern Maine for the first time, and for one who grew up in the interstice of Gardiner, Bath, and Saco, Aroostook County was then an alien place. Now an adult, in southern Maine you can say “I will drive to Caribou,” where I have never been; or “New York City,” you can say, where I spent years as a student. One is of course more distant, but the driving times are equal. When Rubin and I drove north decades ago, from Bath it was, while the limited access highway was still two lanes, we stopped to rest somewhere between Bangor and Houlton in the late evening. Just so we could say in the future we had done this thing, we parked the car in the middle of the roadway, without pulling off onto the shoulder. We sat on the hood of the car, and smoked our two cigarettes; no cars passed in either direction.

At Houlton, in 1962, what you would now call a minivan filled with teen-aged baseball players, actually a true van as we called it then, turned north. North of Houlton, the roads formed straight lines so extravagant to me then, no later highway I have seen seems quite to equal them. Think of those glorious drives to the Rockies in 1968 or 1971, when it seemed that no one had seen such sights before. Think of Kansas and Nebraska. Think of Linda Jane waiting for you there in 1988. And think too of the I-5 in California that can get you from Los Angeles to San Francisco in an afternoon.

We were fifteen, and there was baseball, and there wasn't much to life but that. In Fort Fairfield, fifty miles north of Houlton, we slept in a barn lined with cots, and the adults, I think, fled to a bar in Presque Isle, or so it was rumored. Near-adults ourselves, we gave a French-speaking friend his first shave, and my condescending voice dropped a half-octave as we did this. During one of the games, tough in my new voice, I cursed out two fat, beer-swilling spectators, rocking in their lawn chairs. They have now, I joy to think, died bad deaths, since they had nothing else to do that day but harass young baseball players from away. The kindly umpire ejected me, as many had done less kindly in the

past. He too didn't think much of the fat sun-stroked locals in the lawn chairs, and I hope he died, if he died at all, much more peacefully.

Baseball skills had little part of this, since we were there of course by accident or default. You can well imagine that not every qualifying team in Maine would drive the light years to Fort Fairfield. And when we got there, after days it seemed of hoarding water on the straight roads through the potato fields, the teams we played were as unfit as we were. They too had won their regionals by forfeit or a "bye," whatever zones they played in, maybe Washington, or Oxford, Madison itself, or Passadumkeag. Why Fort Fairfield, league directors must have asked? And who would answer that?

But this is sentimental stuff at best, and you must trust me to edit that tone away.

In 2005, Linda Jane and I drive to Eastport, then. It was their Salmon Festival, one year when salmon pens were common there, or Chowder Festival perhaps it was, scheduled remarkably the weekend after Labor Day, when all the tourists had gone and half the locals were busy with other things. When we arrived, all there was of the festival was a long table of chowder pots, guarded by the most unpleasant and forbidding women you would ever want to see, and a lone folk-singer playing to an absolutely empty street. A malevolent local sits on the tailgate of a station wagon, guarded by two angry Rottweilers.

It is 1962, I thought. It is Fort Fairfield in 1962 at the end of July. And that is a far better way to begin.

Two girls, girls in 1962 they were, stepped out from what I'll have to call the crowd but really wasn't one, since there likely were no bleachers there and crowds of any kind were not possible. In Fort Fairfield, it must have been an exotic thing for them to have four or eight or however many it was teams of boys their age suddenly exiled there on a late summer day, with school and that strange two-week break for potato-picking only a week or two away. We talked. I guess they were impressed that I had told one of the fat spectators to screw himself and had been thrown out of the game as a result. Or maybe I was just from away, wearing a uniform, and that was enough. I promised to meet them.

I went that evening to where they promised to be, since no one supervising us seemed to care much what we did after losing the game, as long as the morning headcount for the trip back was close. Miraculously, one or both of them was there. I sat on the couch of the adult-less house with the beautiful Diana—and there could be nothing like this in Brunswick, so I thought, since every girl back home had friends, and their friends had friends too, and somehow every stupid thing you said, and God knows these were abundant, would soon be known to every one of them and your life would be shit forever. Going viral, kids would call this sort of thing today.

Years later, I would laugh at such youthful paranoia—no wonder, I would say, teenage boys grow up to be cat-killers, and rob 7-Elevens, abuse their lovers, and leave cars to rot on state highways—something witty or abstruse like that—since they spend their formative years terrified of what this web of women might say of them. How foolish such a worldview is, I would conclude. And then one day I met Stacey, the sociologist, as promiscuous as you could be at age sixty in these newly pious times. And she told me about lunch with her girlfriend, then in her late forties, where they discussed the merits of, let's call him Hugh, whom they had just discovered to their glee they both had “dated.” And I use the word “dated” the way women use that word today, and they may just as well say “slept with” or any of its cruder variants. And Hugh's merits included ... luckily, there's no need to go into that, or even make it up. It was, I conceded then to the lovely sociologist, the most frightening thing I had heard in decades, all this public chat about prowess and sentiment. It is like being fifteen again, I said, snarled in the pernicious web of gossip of the Brunswick girls. My lust for her was gone forever.

In 1962 I sit with the beautiful Diana, briefly free of my then paranoid view of life which I would come to see is the true one. There would be no note-taking on my merits, I wrongly imagined, and for a moment, I even forgot that this girl had appeared not alone, but with a friend. And did I really think that everything on that couch would be private, and not retold in the most disparaging of ways? That somehow we would find a grand ineffable connection, which would place us in a world beyond the petty gossip of teenagers?

Doubtless, that is exactly what I thought, so we made out as it was called then and I tried ineptly to stroke her or did (I was fifteen, for God's sake, and this is 1962) and there were promises to write or talk and then it was ten or maybe eleven o'clock and both of us had to go. Our adults must have been driving shit-faced from the bars of Presque Isle or back from Caribou, or maybe one of the parents who had driven us up here in the vans and station wagons was sitting in a lawn chair outside the barn stroking herself in the streetlight, or maybe her aunt would call the police or Social Services if she were so much as five minutes or a half-day late. Or maybe we just wished adults cared enough to notice we were gone.

Diana must not have spoken. For there are no words or inflections in my memory. Or maybe everything she said was of such sophistication that I had no place for such constructions in my consciousness. There is nothing I recall about my actions on the couch other than their ineptitude, and sometimes, in the darkest hour, I will think later, damn!, if I hadn't been so naive at age fifteen, or had known some of the most basic moves

and truths, then things could have been different. Had I been say 35, I think, still in the darkest hour, well “Damn! There ought to be a law!” and of course there is one.

I smoked in those days a particularly hideous but distinctive brand of cigarettes, whose florid name I have forgotten, and I left the empty package by the doorway of the large open barn where they had penned us in. I imagined her returning, looking for a trace of me.

Why does this still embarrass me? Even being fifteen cannot excuse it, so it seems. One of my more respected colleagues died of AIDS; tragic, it was. Yet when the inevitable tributary pictures were brought out—Richard in his now unfashionable basketball uniform, or Richard as a twelve-year-old, beaming at the camera—all I could do, amidst the forced laments, was shudder for his childhood, for his choice of uniforms. Now this is a man who neglected to provide for his lover, because at age forty, he was afraid to “come out” for fear of what his family would think. He would be dead, for God’s sake! what did he care what his tight-assed family thought? And here at his funeral, I instead worry about a damn sports picture showing him as a kid in shorts, just as I fret now because at fifteen, with juvenile designs on my lovely Diana in Fort Fairfield, I, like Uncle Toby in Tristram Shandy, didn’t know one end of a woman from another. Can’t being fifteen excuse anything?

So I dropped the cigarette package there, and doing so, I must have imagined the music of whatever dreadful movie I had seen most recently. Maybe it was Cleopatra, scored by North, seen at the drive-in, or something awful like that, since the really good movies you might run into at the local theatre or drive-in then—Bonnie and Clyde, Blow-up, or The Graduate—these were still five years away. And listening to that music, staring at the cigarette package, I could see her coming back, heart maybe all a-flutter, looking for that trace of me. And that, the imagined voice-over surely claimed, would sustain me, whatever the word might then have meant.

That night I lay sleepless, as of course, who wouldn’t? then walked in my underwear to the shower or rest room or whatever it was, and a group of boys was there, maybe ten of them, playing cards, all in their white underwear. One of them was clearly older, or thought so, and directed the whole thing. Occasionally he commented on the sexual organs of one of those kids standing there, who didn’t know whether to be embarrassed for being singled out or proud, and we stayed up like that until five, I think, in awe of the wisecracks of a sixteen-year-old, and the next day, somewhere on the 300 miles to Brunswick, I claimed equally proudly not to have slept at all.

When I got home, I wrote to Diana, fulfilling my vows to do so, and God knows what words I might have used in those days. Probably even worse than the words I used

while drunk a few years later, writing to a student at New Hampshire who had found herself with me at some awful college party in the mid-1960s. And I began a long series of conversations with friends about how one would orchestrate a journey to Fort Fairfield, since this was a discussion one would have to have among men, and not with the lovely Diana herself, who must be spared these mere mechanicals.

Well, first, there is the license, I'd be told, as if in the highest of secrecies, but if you do things right, you should have it by fall. Then there's the car, but your parents have that. These basic things?—you've got those covered. Timing of course is critical, that is, the time for the drive north to her and the time to drive back south, and then, there's the problem of the mileage and the gas. Why suppose you wanted to drive to Rockland, because you know how wild the parties are there, much better than in a dump like Brunswick or even Bath. No one checks ID's there. Well that's fifty miles, and if you drive there and back from Brunswick, how the hell are you going to hide that? But I have a friend, you see, who can set the odometer back, and that way, you can get to Rockland and pretend, well hell, it was just to the Rec Hall in Bath you went. And you can tell your folks to go screw themselves if they don't believe you, why check the odometer! you can say. So Fort Fairfield, then, well it was simply a matter of degree. Rockland, Fort Fairfield—what's the goddam difference?

I have never quite envisioned the requisite parent tricked by such shenanigans, as Mother might have put it. The parent stupid enough to trust a fifteen-year-old with a car in the first place, but not stupid enough to accept some dumb cover story like: "I broke up with her, Mom, and I drove around in tears for two hours" (the miles to Rockland and back) or "...two days" (the miles to Fort Fairfield and back). The parent deranged enough to record the readings of an odometer, but not perceptive enough to notice a car or teen-aged child, missing for a night or the weekend. A real parent, by contrast, mine for instance, wouldn't know shit from shinola about mileage and might instead pretend to listen, say, in sympathy to the story of the break-up and quote Hamlet, "You must be cruel in order to be kind." But this real parent and the numb-ass parent imagined by the fifteen-year-old conspirators—these are two different things. And who, in any case, at age fifteen or sixteen or seventeen is really going to drive all the way to Fort Fairfield and back just to have his hand tearfully removed from that young breast?

I assume the letter exchange was a brief one. I think I got one letter back, but I'm not dead certain. I see an envelope inked in green, but that may be the color of the cigarette package instead. I don't recall any singular heartbreak about it all; and humiliation must have been a constant in those days, like what is called the burden or bass drone to some old tune. All I know for sure is that, however many letters there may have

been, it was I who wrote the last one. For why, I thought in my unremembered grief, would the beautiful Diana, from the exotic land of Fort Fairfield, wait for me? What would the lovely and mysterious Diana want with some naive kid from Brunswick, when she could have any man she wanted in such a glorious place as far away as New York City itself, twice again as far south as Boston?

She had a very distinctive name, Nightingale—that melodious bird of the romantics, a name I had never encountered elsewhere, but which I see from the papers is a common one in that region. And some ten years later, I am an adult, watching the evening news. The news forms its perfect narrative: you feel absurdly that each day is critical, that missing even a single broadcast will snap the narrative and you will never understand the news again. But missing months of it means nothing.

The news generally begins with something political, and later on there will be baseball scores, emphasizing whatever it was Boston did, and after that there is weather, although now, for some reason, the conventional order of those three subjects defining the half-hour news shows has changed. Diana has been murdered by her boyfriend in Fort Fairfield, leaving behind her only child. I hear the numbers and compute the dates. She must have had that child at age nineteen, I reason, although my computations may be wrong. Diana has been murdered. Not any Diana. Not some stranger. But my Diana. Mine. Whom I last saw at 10 PM one night, fourteen hours before a cigarette wrapper was picked up as trash at noon.

It is a long way to Fort Fairfield even today. I think, perhaps, I can make that trip as a tribute. Yet when I was last nearby in Houlton, all we did was drive over the bridge to St. Stephen, rip the tags off whatever we had bought, and dispute the ethics of doing so, and maybe that argument made me forget about the memorial trip to Fort Fairfield.

And what would be the point of it? To drive through there, with the barn gone and the baseball field paved over? To stare at the mailboxes, maybe, and finally find nothing but the house of the son left behind, now some meth-head likely, hardly thinking at all of his mom years ago, knocked up by some dumpy fat kid, and finally beaten senseless by her deadbeat boyfriend, who is likely now wandering as free as the shithead who cut my cousin up in Carmel, the year after she visited us in Maine, and left her to bleed to death in her bedroom.

## 3.

## THE LAST CATTLE DRIVE OF RUTHERFORD ISLAND

When Anne-Marie woke up the morning of the last cattle drive over the swing bridge at South Bristol, she was thirteen years old. I suspect I was eighteen, one year into Bowdoin. As all girls that age, she did not fit in, she thought, neither on the island, nor among those she called the mainland kids at the school where all the Islanders were bussed. Despite the summers she worked on fishing boats, she would always be, she thought, from away, like the summerfolk who now overwhelmed the locals on Rutherford Island on the Damariscotta.

It would always show, this being from away. It showed in her accent, in her walk, and in the subtle way her lips met with the slight overbite like Marcelline's, one you will never see among those born in this region. It showed in her name as well, compounded of Saints' names, so common overseas, and less so year by year in Maine, whether inland in French-speaking towns or in old towns of the coast. Even had she known her looks would outlast those of everyone on the island, and the lush though dyed blond hair could still make your heart swell at sixty, well, that was forty years away. And for a girl of thirteen, such time was a millennium.

It wasn't unusual, at least in those days, for local working men, and they might be fishermen or farmers or simply those who worked in factories, to disappear for a few months or sometimes a year. Their Wanderjahren, these periods would be called, had they been of a different class and age. Most had been to Europe during the war, the Second World War that is, and if you got rid of the horror of it, the bodies heaped up and a child passed out from starvation on a wrecked street-corner, it was all pretty wonderful. Flying up there alone in the spotter plane, "It was a great time to be young," my elk-hunting uncle used to say, although he always added or prefaced that with "I know it's terrible to say this," and he was speaking too of the Pacific. It was a great time to be young, because being young itself is a great time to be young. There was war, then a time of peace in the fifties, or maybe you were young in the sixties, when you lost your adolescent anxieties and the world seemed to grow up with you, or maybe it was the seventies when you had a new lover every third day.

Wes was a fisherman, and I call him that in tribute to one who drowned two years after I stopped working on the fishing boats—Wes had gone to war, and made the trip back to Europe on his own. He returned home to South Bristol with the hottest wife on the entire peninsula, from Damariscotta to Rutherford Island; and with her came her two

young daughters, who would grow up as or among locals, with their thick Belgian accents and the brutal charm they would learn from Wes.

He was like a lot of men out there. Or that's what you'd deduce as you sit around today, and talk, not to these old men themselves, since most of them are dead, but to their children, or perhaps to a surviving friend, some old geezer still around and welding bait trucks, say, who could tell you the old stories with conviction. And in those conversations, where familiar stories are told again, and different speakers embellish them or add some omitted incident or a detail from another tale perhaps, everything waxes romantic, you might say, and eventually these old fishermen who once fished out of sailboats walk the earth like giants.

You'll then take a chance, and add a phrase yourself. Or maybe it will be a sentence, just one, that will wrap this all up and it's like some old photo where all the old geezers are perfectly posed, gazing into the camera lens, and your adroitly phrased caption, as it were, will get it all.

But rank outsiders must not be credited; and it might be Chuck or Coley or some grandson or other and it might be Anne-Marie herself—one of them inevitably shakes their head and says something like “Well ...” followed by a long theatrical pause. And everyone in the room will know that you, no longer a local, can't possibly know the whole story, which involves beatings, and screaming at children, and infidelities, and upending the son of some competitor into a bait barrel where he nearly drowned, or Doug Eastman standing guard outside a house door in the back as David or another brutal charmer of that generation dragged some girl into the bedroom, an au pair if they had them then, for God knows what. It's the sort of stuff they don't make videos about and sell at the local historical society.

When she woke up, it was 5:30, still dark on this late October day, but she was used to it. During fishing season, you get up much earlier than that, 3 AM at times, if you have to be at the wharf to “bait up,” that is, wheel the 350-pound barrels of salted bait brought in from Nova Scotia and dump it onto the floats and shovel it into the bushel tubs in the stern. About all a girl of her age could do then was get in the way and sometimes get chewed out for it. No one likes to begin a day that way, even the most professional of fishermen. And all agreed that if you could just get it all done the day before, at the end of the workday when everyone was giddy with the catch, you'd have another hour of sleep in the morning and feel like royalty.

So 5:30 wasn't much, even though it was cold and sunless.

In those days, there wasn't a lot of what is now called commuter traffic, where the roads, even around communities like Damariscotta fill with cars of those hurrying to Bath

or the forty-five miles to Augusta to work at whatever it is they do to support renovations on their homes on Rutherford Island. Maine people lived where they worked, and on what are known as the islands that meant the fishing industry. By October, the roads were quiet as they will never be again.

In those days, there was land to be had and Wes owned the biggest plot on the island—fifty acres it was, a plot of a size difficult to imagine today. Today, of course, you can't walk that poison-ivy infested place without tripping over a Herm or boundary-post tied with a florescent plastic ribbon every ten feet or so, or a pile of construction rubble left over from the last ill-designed vacation home put up on a .3 acre lot. Forget about the sheep and the goats and maybe getting up early on a day like this, taking out the .30-06 and dropping a deer in the apple trees. You can't even fire a rifle legally in South Bristol anymore, and the only deer you'll find on Rutherford Island are those who swam over from "the other side," or were chased off by the tourists on Boothbay, across the Damariscotta River, which still around Back Narrows has a lot of fir growing on it from the old pastures. Why even those few deer who attempted such a swim, you'd say, embellishing the tale a bit, would likely die from exhaustion, smothered in the fumes from the diesels or drowned in the wakes of the powerful new fishing boats.

Rutherford Island is little distinguishable from the countless north/south ledges that lie all over the Maine coast from Casco Bay east to the Penobscot, some forming the underwater ravines the lobstermen and draggers find with their depth sounders, and others high enough to emerge from the water, and some few hundred of those subject to the tenacious inroads of vegetation. Even on the outermost of these ledges, you would one year steam around them and find a topping of green, as in the once barren surface of East Brown Cow off Cape Small, or the ledges of the Hypocrites, south of Boothbay. For millennia, the dust and debris had built up on the rocks that formed Rutherford Island, once no more fertile than the outlying ledges to the south, forming the passage known to fishermen as the Thread of Life. And small grasses had grasped the broken ledges and died and rotted and larger grasses formed on them, just like on White Islands, then bushes, I guess, and then the ubiquitous and fragile firs and spruce. A thin layer of topsoil developed there, covered by the fir, and then the Europeans came and cut it all down to build houses and heat them with the slash, and pretty soon it was all sheep fields like every other place on the Maine coast. Rutherford Island, clear-cut like the rest, had a nice swamp right in the middle, where the mosquitoes bred, and the livestock could drink. And that's what made this magic possible.

There were shows those days on TV, like Rawhide, and you'd have this bunch of clean-shaven toughs with their chaps on, Clint Eastwood first among them, and even Buddy

Ebsen, for God's sake, and it all got confused as the legends of cattle drives and rustling got grafted onto other legends of the pioneers and Indians and Mexicans and sidekicks driving jeeps or the dude riders of today or sheep herders in Montana and pretty soon you couldn't tell what land it was or century. By the time Larry McMurtry began to make some mythical sense of it all, with his opera singers and snake charmers, no one was much bothered by the anachronisms of the American West—at least, not in Rutherford Island where the TV reception was indifferent and everyone who amounted to anything had cable. You could still joke, though, as I did, about being the only one in town ever to check out Brokeback Mountain from the small stack of videos and even smaller display of DVD's in the back of what passed for a general store.

When Wes cried “Head ‘em up, move ‘em out” in the days of bad TV, it was pretty hard to hear Clint Eastwood through his thick Maine accent. Her younger sister had barely enough English yet to sort out in any coherent way the regional variants—Down East, Old West, French-Canadian—but everyone knew what Wes meant and even her young sister got all giggly.

There would be no horses on this drive, though there was something like a Chuck Wagon, as Mom would chase after them in the old Renault bringing sandwiches at noon. Nevertheless, constructing a joke of that got complex, since if you said “Chuck Wagon,” everyone in the area thought you were referring to the burger place on Cook's Corner in Brunswick, truly legendary. The Chuck Wagon grilled hamburgers with names like “Wyatt Earp” and “Cattle Drive” and was the most popular eatery within fifty miles until it was run out of town on a rail or, more accurately, went bankrupt and was finally replaced by a Chinese chain pretty much indistinguishable from the four others that came in at the same time.

And there were no whips or lassoes or anything of that nature, since Wes was a fisherman, not a cattleman. The only knots he knew were in the nautical sections of Ashley's Book of Knots, and when all was said and done, what was being herded to the large field just past Poorhouse Cove on the Johns River were not a thousand head of doomed steers, but a half dozen milk cows that would feed on the grass of what is called “the mainland” for the winter.

In those days, there wasn't a lot to do. The teenaged kids would mass on Main Street in Damariscotta in the evening, and sit sometimes on their car hoods all James Dean-like before the three closed storefronts of Renys. They would then drive slowly south in a caravan to where the road split between two routes, now numbered 129 and 130. Someone would honk and there would be a great screeching of tires and clouds of blue smoke and one group would roar south through Walpole, West Bristol, and all the way for

a terrifying run across the swing bridge at South Bristol, where Wes moored his boat, and past the sailboats crowded into Christmas Cove, too tight to get an anchor in, ending at the Thread of Life. The other group headed east, leaving half the rubber of their rear tires behind at the intersection, through Bristol, down through New Harbor to the end of Pemaquid Point.

On some nights, they would vary the route, driving hell-bent for Boothbay Harbor, splitting there, with one group going to East Boothbay and down to Ocean Point in Linekin and the other past the other swing bridge at Townsend Gut and down to the end of Southport Island to Newagen. And it must have been a mid-coast tradition, based on the peculiar geography of the peninsulas in that region, because a different group of teenagers, headed by a clan of Doughty's, did the exact same thing at Brunswick, beginning at Fat Boy's or the Chuck Wagon itself and racing down the parallel peninsulas, Routes 24 and 123, that formed the bifurcated town of Harpswell, ending finally at Land's End in Bailey Island and Potts Point in South Harpswell.

The idea was that you would get to the end of the point, wherever it was, then fire off a bunch of M-80s, or flash your car lights, or touch off a few rounds with the shotgun, staring across the water to Newagen or Pemaquid or Bailey Island, wherever your opponents were headed for. And if you got an answering volley, you had lost. For this purpose, Fred Doughty, it is said, often brought his gull gun, a single-shot, 16-gauge, modified-choke shotgun that was indifferent to the inevitable rust that built up on it when left aboard the fishing boat. When the skunks got bad in the summer, he would duct-tape a flashlight to the barrel and sight it in by turning on the light in the twilight, cracking the breach, and adjusting the tape until the beam was dead center as you looked down the barrel. You wouldn't even have to aim. You just flicked on the light and lit up the doomed skunk on the lawn.

As the years went on, all these places got built up. M-80s were harder to come by, and it was difficult to get a clean shot off with the gull gun without attracting attention from the rich retirees who now laid claim to the tips of the peninsulas. To drive the entire length of Route 24, the Bailey Island Road, with no lights as Bill Doughty was said to do, was more treacherous, and up and down the mid-coast everyone lost interest in this once vital tradition.

Even today, she would sometimes wake up, no longer as the young girl she was then, and the bizarrerie of driving, or more accurately herding, or perhaps marching the cows across the swing bridge would unnerve her. It may have been the incongruity of the placid cows and the northeast wind roaring beneath their feet under the bridge. Or thinking of the angry drivers stopped by the barricades today, when the bridge opened, as it

was designed to do, for the fishing boats. Or the many times she herself had walked that bridge on the fall days when the sun set early and there would be some spectacular color forming over Boothbay to the west, or light grazing the top of Camden Hills to the east.

You couldn't in those days have much of a life as a thirteen-year-old on the island. At age sixteen, she discovered bras that opened in the front. She claims her mother wouldn't let her buy one, and even thinking of that is tragic, especially to those of us who grew up without such things. It was just when ambitious parents started bussing their children everywhere—to soccer practice or after school ballet classes—and the ones left behind, well, those were the ones that didn't see much of a life ahead but fishing, or doing what their parents did, and most of the time, they just spent their afternoons down at the wharfs in the afternoon. It was all very McCloskey-esque, you might think, and insular, except for the part about McCloskey's kindly old adults surrounding you, because most of the time, adults weren't kindly at all.

The cows would always hesitate as they reached the edge of the swing bridge and the slightly elevated roadway. And it couldn't be the hard or uneven ground that so affected them. These had lived a good part of their lives on Rutherford Island, and there wasn't a square foot on the island that did not have a rock on it, except for the surface of the stagnant water in the swamp right in the middle. So it must have been the series of white lines, marking where the traffic should stop, and where the bridge itself swung out away from the roadway. They were like the fake cattle grates we've all seen on the western range, where the ranchers, rather than constructing a real metal cattle grate across the road—those spaced metal rails that no western steer would cross—simply paint them on the roadway. Or maybe the road bent slightly left, or maybe it was the water running swiftly below them. It was all too much for them, and the orderly line of cows just bunched up there. At that point, Wes would take over and some of his brutality might have come out, as he roughly led the first one across the roadway for all the rest to follow.

All the cars then, or what there were of them, would stop patiently at each end of the bridge, listening to the strangely derisory cries of “Vache!” and “Marchez!” And there was no honking of horns or drumming of the fingertips on the cardoor or Asian kids getting out of the cars with their cameras—“Holy shit! Cows on the roadway!”—or a bunch of tourists singing the theme song from Bonanza like Wes himself would do when all was going well. It was as if the cows on the bridge somehow spanned the years to a past when you could just stop and watch the sheep graze freely on the island.

How different it all was, Anne-Marie would think years later, driving through Texas where they do these things for real. Where the cows won't get to any winter pasture at all but only to the slaughterhouse, and where they endure most of the trip packed bellowing in

protest in slatted cattle trucks. It got so bad driving there in the foreign landscape of Texas, she wouldn't let John stop in the rest areas for the bellowing of the cattle in the idling trucks.

But you can't long live as a fisherman and a part-time farmer, at least, not in the present century. And pretty soon Wes sold the cows to the couple who bought the pasture on Poorhouse Cove, hoping to convert it into some kind of farm themselves. And then they too succumbed predictably to the realtors and the whole thing became a development with a weirdly Down East name. The biggest field on Rutherford Island was the last thing to go, outlasting Wes by more than a decade, but not the woman he had brought back from Belgium. She died a year ago, stricken with cancer, a senior now, swimming in the Olympics.

## 4.

## INVASIVES

You cannot overestimate the force of weaponry in Maine. Just north of the picturesque coast in Wells, Saco Defense famously manufactured the M-60, the heavy, jam-prone machine gun humped around in most Vietnam War films. When finally bought by Colt in the late 1990s, this company became part of the myth-laden history of Colt itself: its western men with large mustaches, its mergers, buy-outs, name-changing and Chapter 11 bankruptcies. During the heyday of the 1960s, with a half-a-million Americans in Vietnam and almost as many M-60's in circulation, it was easy to find someone who would solemnly claim that a man hit in the thumb with a Colt .45 would spin around three times before falling. And in those days, as in these, a loved one could buy a Colt in the morning and blow her head off in the afternoon.

Fifty miles up the coast from Saco, in the city of Bath, with its glorious history of shipbuilding, you would once find a number of half-built Aegis destroyers tied up just below the new bridge on the Kennebec, only blocks from the Renys on Front St. These were ships so bristling with electronics that, like skunks, they could only fire their weapons "stern-to." The U.S.S. Stark was one of these. In 1987, when attacked by a garden-variety warplane owned by our then ally Iraq, all that high-tech electronic gear failed to identify the Exocet missile efficiently, and once it did, the billion-dollar ship could not get its high-tech ass around fast enough to defend itself. But no one now, after two wars with that country and others now in progress, can be expected to remember any of this.

It's little wonder that those of us who lived between these cities at mid-century, between and amid wars, and in the wash of the commuters working for these companies, learned quickly about killing things. Insects, it might be animals, it might even be each other or ourselves. The paradox of sentiment only arose for children literate enough to own, say, an entire set of Thornton W. Burgess books, or those with pacifistic parents, or those obsessed with movies, where animal killing and the killing of large trees as well became in the late last century strangely forbidden, even in the most violent of genres.

From 1955-1965, my family owned a magnificent colonial farmhouse in a now posh country neighborhood of Brunswick, a house they sold for a song. As a twelve-year-old, the three-acre field seemed immense, and the woods behind the house so deep, my friends and I hunted there at all seasons. It's hard to imagine the reaction of a driver today on that finely paved road, seeing such boys on the roadside in mid-spring, white tee-shirts and jeans, armed with shotguns and .22's. But it was a common sight then, and the only

objection I can recall was the query of the unseen neighbor, easily within earshot, about property lines in our forests.

Ignoring a youthful suicide, of no special relevance here, all was pretty routine, except for the time I nearly blew John's face away. We were target practicing on a makeshift skeet course in that immense field behind my house. One of us would throw a tennis ball high in the air and the other would shoot at it with a single-shot 12-gauge shotgun. You should not have to explain the stupidity of this to anyone who owns a gun today. It is often cold when ducks finally come into season and I wanted to see how well I could shoot with gloves on. I faced John. I told him to throw the ball high and straight up. The gun went off a foot above his head. I have often wondered how my life would have changed in that moment had we not been so lucky. He would have been spared, I suppose, the severe brain injury he got from a motorcycle accident some six years later, which he lived with the rest of his life. And I would have been spared much else.

*Fred leafs through his magazines, reading, so it seems, or maybe he just glances at the ads and the price lists. It may be the story of the home invasion where the overweight police chief chased the suspect half-way to Dexter through the woods before realizing his quarry had an ATV.*

### Have-a-Heart

A lot has changed since spring hunting in 1960. For the most part, I've learned to live with animals I no longer kill, the exceptions being those few "invasives," like woodchucks, raccoons, rats, say, porcupines, skunks, mice, and of course, red squirrels, although I'd rather not get into that. Forty years ago, you wouldn't have to put up with this tone of diffidence, the hints of disclaimer. When children roamed the rural streets with loaded shotguns, the dream of gun rights advocates today, you didn't need to worry overmuch about the woodchuck carcass in your garden. But things are different in the present century.

You all know, of course, what a Have-a-Heart trap is; I suppose the brand name is spelled in some cute way like "Duck Tape." The first woodchuck I caught in one smelled like a horse barn, and its teeth rattled and hissed in a surprisingly menacing fashion as I approached. I released it where others were said to be released, miles away in the woods called the Town Commons. There are so many stories like this to choose from: Michael and Michaeline, releasing the trapped mice a half-mile away at their mailbox, to be eaten by owls. Or Linda Jane, with the squirrel in the trunk, driving at 2 AM seeking the "body of water" that must lie between you and the release point, and finding herself on the other

side of the Saco River, stopped by the Biddeford police in her pajamas, no ID, and an empty Have-a-Heart trap in the back.

No one objects to stories like these. No one imagines what it may be like to spend an evening in a cage or a half-hour in a locked car trunk; no one envisions their own release on a beautiful spring morning naked, say, in the middle of the South Bronx, or perhaps I should say one of the seedier areas in the once iffy neighborhood of Munjoy Hill in Portland.

So I will tell you this story, which will stand for all others.

The story is set in a lawn where golf balls have “gone missing” as the Brits would say. I stand in the evening chill, ankle-deep in what I define as “deep rough,” with no club but a five iron, wondering how this setting came to be. I put the last golf ball in the Have-a-Heart as bait, and set the trap in the garden, or what once passed for a garden. I take a photo for my California friends.

I then (in the telling of the story) “forgot” it, although I don’t think that is quite true. And the next morning, it was not quite accidental (I claim otherwise in the story) that I glanced out through the mist at the trap in the garden. A small rain-stricken fox barks like a hoarse dog.

Now to follow the next paragraph or two, you need to know a bit about Maine mythology. When we were young, snot-nosed in our white tee-shirts, there were two things said not to exist in Maine—rattlesnakes and rabies—their mythical inexistence well known to be false. Timber rattlers were conceded on the “New Hampshire border,” wherever that is, and rabies was even then endemic to the state. In those days, rabies was associated with foxes, either in nature or just in our imaginations, and we could back this up with evidence of experience: the periodic rise and fall of the fox population, witnessed on the roads, the rabbits that either were or were not once plentiful. Steeped in these myths, I naively called the warden, thinking or having once been told that wardens would gladly come and remove, kill, or relocate whatever you had caught—skunk, raccoon, fox—this was their job. Yet in their somewhat different view of things, it is not, they think, their job.

“Well, I grew up here,” I said, thinking this might give me a hearing. “And we were always told foxes might be rabid, so I was wondering ...”

“Oh no. No. No more likelihood of that than with any other animal. Rabbit, porcupine, deer.”

“Moose? Bear? So I don’t have to worry about ...”

“No. no. Nothing to worry about.”

“I can just release it.”

“Nothing to worry about whatsoever...’

“I can ...”

“Nothing to worry about.” Here he paused, preparing his best officerial tone. “Just make sure you’re in a vehicle [he pronounced it VEE-HIC-CULL, like on Cops] when you open the trap.”

“You know, sir, I’ve found, that when advised to be in a Vee-hic-cull before doing something, whatever I am about to do, like watch a lighting storm for instance, is not perfectly safe.”

“Nothing to worry about.”

“All right. Now on the off chance the fox is rabid, then do I have to be careful about handling the trap? Having avoided the fox bite, safe in my Vee-hic-cull?”

“Oh no. Nothing to worry about.”

“Infection? Rabid saliva? Nothing?”

“Nothing to worry about.” Another pause. “Just make sure you wash the trap in bleach before you touch it.”

So I sat in the old Volvo, with a rake and hoe and line of some sort out the window and to this day I cannot reconstruct the Rube Goldberg-esque contrivance I used to get the trap open. It was like a feat on the old game show from the 1950s-”Beat the Clock.” The fox ran off in the rain. I ignored the instructions about bleach.

A week later, Bruce, it must have been, before his surgery, told me he had seen a young fox, acting mighty strange, I think he said. I should be careful, so he warned, and he would be glad to shoot it for me, if it came my way.

## Machine Oil

Fred sat reading, maybe reading this, or maybe reading the firearms ads in Uncle Henry’s, and maybe he was cleaning his gun after sighting it in, even though it never really lost its accuracy, and he never aimed at anything at much of a distance. He thought about the shootings on Matinicus, the handgun on the wharf at Machiasport, or maybe versions of the boat-ramming story that appeared on TV that summer, or maybe the procedures now required to get a hunting license. How routine it was in the old days, when there were no “Hunter Safety Courses,” and you didn’t have to sit all day lectured to by wardens, amid sullen survivalists and illiterate rednecks whom you liked more than you cared to admit. Or maybe he was thinking about something that happened in Portland, some assault in the Old Port, and before everyone found out it was just some idiot white kid from Gorham, the Press Herald was filled with racist rants about Catholic Charities turning the state over to Somalis, and we may as well get our guns now and build up sandbag walls in the bunkers.

There was something on TV about a guy in a white tee shirt who lived in a trailer in Dexter or Pittsfield or some place up near Caribou, and of course he and his girlfriend or one of them had ended up shot and you didn't need to be a cynic or to have lived here long to realize drugs were involved, and it wasn't the kind of impotent dope you had in the sixties, but something that turned you into a maniac, like meth or oxycontin or weed so strong it made you forget it was you watching television and not the television watching you.

In the old days, he thought, he cleaned his guns with the oil that smelled like Mother's sewing machine.

### The Year of the Skunk

My dog, the gentlest of creatures generally, hated cats, and, numb as it was, consistently mistook skunks for them in a particularly bad skunk season a few years ago. My yard, like many in Maine, is now a breeding ground for Japanese beetles, and on good years (for them), each evening the skunks leave their characteristic conical-shaped holes all over the lawn. The much loved dog is gone now, and I prefer skunks to beetles, despite their magnificently iridescent shells and their lifetimes spent eating and copulating like the bonobos on the nature shows.

Things were different in the Year of the Dog.

That was also the Year of Walking the Dog on a Leash in the Rain at 3AM, and the Year of Having to Use a Flashlight just to Get to your Damn Car in the Dark, checking especially the nook beneath each wheel-well, the Year of Googling Recipes involving hydrogen peroxide, dish soap, and baking soda, or the more traditional but ineffective tomato juice, the Year of Collaring the Dog in the Back Seat, much to its amazement, before it could get out of the car at night—that year, I'd had enough.

I had at least a family of skunks, and in order to avoid mere “recreational killing” as it should be known, if you kill one of them, you need to be prepared to kill all of them. My plan was to begin by getting the skunk in the Have-a-Heart.

Skunks are not like other animals. When trapped, they do not get excited or distressed, at least, they show no signs of it. In the morning, you will not find them hissing and scrambling in the trap and thinking of you as the murderous and cruel bastard you are about to become. Rather you will find them just waiting there, and in some cases, I have found them asleep.

You can throw a blanket or tarp over the trap, and then you can relocate the skunk anywhere you want. But that is only delaying the issue, letting the natural version of the South Bronx do what you are too squeamish to do yourself. And besides, you need a pickup truck for this, not an old Volvo. You can also, if the tide is right, take the tarp-

topped trap down to the shore. And if there is any further skunk-dispatching to be done, that is how it will go.

I planned to deliver the coup de grace the Old Way, with the .22, then bury the carcass in a pre-dug hole, the whole operation performed in a special suit of clothes, used for no other purpose. I will not go through the details. I will only say that the first one went well, and that proved to be the worst thing that could have happened. For there were two and there may have been three to go and everything that could go wrong did.

*Fred leafs through the shotgun ads of Uncle Henry's; to one born in Maine as he is, it seems absurd that L. L. Bean's will not admit on its website that it sells such things.*

Three weeks later, I was shuffling through the back portion of my lawn, looking for a shanked golf ball the fox had missed. In the ankle high rough, I noted a tuft of black and white fur. Then another. The entire section of lawn is covered, I see, in bits of torn-up rotting skunk carcass, and my former burial site is marked by two, or it may have been four, well-dug holes, each slightly shallower than it should have been in the first place.

In Los Angeles, you learn to live with coyotes trotting past your driveway with a neighbor's cat, once the purest of killing machines, in their jaws. Nothing to worry about, as that warden might say. Just make sure you bury the skunks or the dog you love an extra foot deep.

## Home Defense

Maybe, Fred thought, leafing through the pages of Uncle Henry's, he would buy that 20-gauge, not because he wanted to kill anything, but just to appease Philip whenever duck season was, and you could go down to the shore, right off his lawn, Philip said, and maybe sluice the things right out of the water and watch his Labradors retrieve them.

There was a counter-discourse in the ads though, something about the aptness of these guns, now black with plastic stocks, for "home defense." Foolish, he mused; for there was nothing "numb-er" as they used to say, than buying a stockless or black-stocked 20-gauge, or one with an 18-inch barrel instead of a 26- or 28-inch barrel, or even a 12-gauge instead of a 20-gauge because you were more likely to protect yourself with these variants. You're much more likely to kill yourself or a loved one than any intruder, and you're safer with no "home defense" at all than with what the survivalists might sell you: Colt's "Sporter" version of the M-16, for example, ideal for confronting the military platoon dug in on your driveway or turning away that pesky and threatening deer herd, massing at 800 meters; the obsolete .45 itself or the M9 that replaced it, excellent for executing burglars facedown in your kitchen.

In New Orleans once, a luckily brief room-mate had shown him the drawer where she kept her handgun. A revolver, a .22 he thought, and unloaded, in a bureau ten feet from the bed. He saw no ammunition there, and she showed no signs of knowing the intricacies of loading it, nor how to cock it, nor how the half-cock safety worked on it. But she would not be raped, she said, and he wondered if she would really rather be dead or paralyzed, and maybe she would. Maybe when he was young, he thought, he felt the same way. They fought over proprieties of space and she and her angry girl friend finally left for an apartment on Jackson Street, near the river.

### Owls after Midnight

It's likely true what the warden said, or maybe that was on TV. "If you decide to trap an animal humanely in a trap, make sure you have a humane way of killing it." That's why I now keep a rain barrel filled with water to just the height of the length of the Have-a-Heart trap. This is not quite as straight-forward a method as it may seem. Linda Jane, for example, bought the most expensive model available. It was more complex than mine, and had, by design or accident, a gravity-release latch. To avoid being caught on the far side of the Saco River in her pajamas, she plunged it vertically into the rain barrel and ended with a face full of squirrel.

But I would rather not talk about squirrels.

Let us talk instead about raccoons, like the ones that invaded a friend's house in Los Angeles, using the door built for her semi-feral cat. Cute, she thought they were, until they ripped the refrigerator door off, looking for better things than catfood, and maybe ate her child as well. Related to bears, I said, getting into the sheer horror of it. Rabid. Why the one I tried to scare off the roof from my second story vantage came straight at me until I slammed the window in its face. There is nothing, I said, in an unfathomable allusion to Boito, they would not do.

The first one I caught barely squeezed into the Have-a-Heart trap and looked like he was wearing it in a grotesque parody of Silence of the Lambs. He had rolled it from the porch to the middle of the lawn and dug and clawed and ruined most of the elaborate trigger mechanism.

The next, and the last one, sprung the repaired trap at 2 AM. I decided then that there would be no agony to all this and no suffering. Sid's mother, up there in Madison, might well lure these with hot-dogs and systematically drown them in the rain barrel for eating her turtles, but I would be less stone-hearted than that. It would be in the Civility of Nature, a paradox easy to imagine on a warm August night.

It was one of those serene Maine evenings that you will only experience if you are lucky, or maybe set your alarm, or maybe have a raccoon in the Have-a-Heart, or maybe get old and find yourself up at 2 AM, suddenly and purely alone, staring out at the dark window, as here, onto the flat black surface of the water.

I threw a blanket over the trap. Everything was calm. In August, the water is warm and you can even swim at night here. I took the trap down to the water and now it is windless, and there are owls, great horned owls, hooting and echoing all over the bay. You cannot mistake the serene call of a great horned owl for the hideous cries of a barred owl, I think, that smaller competitor they have now driven away. I put the trap deep into the water and I contemplate all this. In nature, there are few quiet deaths like this one. A natural death is violent, involving pain; it is generally sudden and unexpected. This is perhaps what civility can do but seldom does; the Zen of Nature and Civility, I think of it absurdly: the provision of a peaceful death.

The owls are hooting over the water.

These are the owls that Mother loved, depicted on the table-cloths, or in small figurines bought her by my sister, so I think. And this is the way Mother might have slipped away, I think, or my darling Eloise herself, or the way I myself might die, then as now in tune with all this civil stuff of nature, the predatory owls calling each other and the raccoon drowning quietly in the water now lapping around my thighs.

It may have been five minutes. I am At One with all this. I lift the trap from the water and start back toward shore, in the echoing calls of the distant owls. Somewhere on the seaweed, I am aware of a peculiar sound—a quick almost rhythmic gasp. Air, moving through a constricted place. It is dark. I cannot see this but I can hear. Five, maybe ten minutes beneath the surface, and there is something there, not life, but a semblance of it, the persistent reflexive gasps of breath. The raccoon, or part of it, is still alive.

I splash back into the water, slipping on the unseen mud and seaweed. The owls still hoot in the distance, barred owls now, and there are mosquitoes and the water is cold; the shells and barnacles slash my feet, and for all I know it was raining. This time, those predatory owls seem as common as the hermit thrush that sang all night for the two weeks my Penelope lay here for the last time. This time, the water is likely full of red-tide and sewage and I am tired and losing a night's sleep, and maybe I see a sliver of a grey dawn in the east. I stay ten minutes now, annoyed with the Zen of things, and there is no poetry now as I drag the silent heavy Have-a-Heart back up the bank and toss it there to deal with in the morning.

## Pests in the Guest House

Fred leafs through the magazines. He thinks of the women killed in Fort Fairfield and in Carmel, the lobstermen at war with each other, the battered faces of meth heads on television. Surrounded by all this, he would think, briefly, well hell, it was perhaps ok in clearly fallen times like these to tell the story of the pests in the guest house.

So I own a guest house, he begins, as you know. And it happened in the summer of the year to be known as the Year of the Mouse. That spring, returning from California and arriving at 11 PM, I turn on the furnace, he says, and a dark rank smell rises as if black from the vents. If you have ever had mice die in their nests in your house you don't need it described. Charlie and Nancy had such a nest in their summer home, and even on the coldest days, matting their Chase prints, they could only live in it by prying all the windows open, jammed shut by Richard's last foundation job.

When the mice died of heat exhaustion in the furnace, it took two well-funded trips from Thibeault Oil, now itself mismanaged and defunct, to find them and even then, the problem was not solved until Fred ripped the furnace apart himself, discovering in the process the general operating principles of a hot air furnace, about which he then knew nothing.

A furnace, he found, consists of a sheet metal box surrounding a cast iron "fire box." A blower forces air between the firebox and the surrounding sheet metal box, which then directs it into the ducts. That sheet metal box is lined with insulation (or was). And that is where the mice lived, snug in the insulation, leaving their winter feces and discarded young finally sizzling on the firebox.

When Philip discovered that squirrels had done the same thing to the pink insulation he had so meticulously installed in his cellar over the winter, despite the wire mesh he had laboriously stapled over 99% of the openings, he simply "lost it," and declared a Free-Fire zone for red squirrels on both his and all surrounding property. Avid though he was for killing, it was difficult to keep up with them. He would show up at 6:30 AM on your porch with the 20-gauge "Did you hear it? Can you hear him?" Nothing. "I got three yesterday," Philip says, shouldering his 20-gauge at the very sound of their chattering. Fred knew all about that rage. He had once had squirrels in the guest house, and if it hadn't been the Year of the Mouse that year, he thought, things might have turned out differently.

The guest house was the only salvageable part of the main house, its coda, as it were, bought also for a song in 1965. They burned the rest and dumped it over the bank for the tide to take away, brick chimney and rusted nails and wiring and all—just as anyone would do in those days. Then they dragged the annex fifty yards away, set it on concrete

sauna tubes, and added a tiny kitchen to one end and a porch to the other. And there's no way, in such ramshackle structures, cut from a house built in the late last century, you can staple all the openings shut with wire mesh as Philip tried to do.

He first noticed the squirrel infestation when the paper towels were dragged up past the guest bed over the bookcase next to the garage door. Sharon was due in a week, visiting from China, and when he asked her what her attitude toward wildlife was, he got the sort of ambiguous answer you might expect from someone who grew up in what she called "a tiny inconsequential village of some three million people." He guessed she meant animals were fine, but who knows what it was she was telling him.

He at first thought she would simply have to live with them, as he learned to live with so much else. But when he went to the guest house to clean up a bit upstairs, the squirrels began to chatter at him, in that threatening way so familiar to all who live in any semblance of rural Maine. They were challenging, not what he was doing, but rather his very right to be there, and with that, he had had enough. For the next half hour, he simply, as Philip would later do, lost his mind.

He went back to the house. He got the single-shot, bolt-action .22 he was so serenely cleaning earlier. He took a handful of cartridges and went back to the guest house. And he never considered the fact that he was a bad shot, and his eyes were half gone, and all he was likely to do was break a few windows or a ceramic owl now exiled to one of the bookcases there. He started up the stairs and the squirrels challenged him once again.

The first one **CRAK** he shot on the wall space beside the right hand twin bed and it dropped instantly. He then went downstairs and reloaded. The second one was on the two-by-four rafter you might call it, even though this wasn't really a rafter and nothing is actually 2" x 4" now and wasn't even when this place was built—it was just above the first floor guest bed by the book case and the garage door. **CRAK** That one bounced once on the guest bed and all he thought was that he would have to clean the bloodstain off before Sharon arrived from that small inconsequential Chinese village.

He went back upstairs, expecting to remove the first carcass and just when he reached the top of the staircase, a third squirrel, recognizing now that he "meant business" as the bad ad for lawyers says, dashed past him down the stairs. At that point it made a serious mistake and turned left, into the bathroom. He followed, and **CRAK** shot it a foot from the base of the toilet. Two days later, he will dig the mis-shaped tiny slug out of the cheap linoleum he had installed there a year earlier. He went back upstairs, now somewhat shocked at what he had done, and the fourth squirrel ran past him down the stairs. This one turned right, but that better decision did not help, and by the time he reached the

bottom of the stairs, it was cornered on the porch, so innocently designed by his father years ago. This one he shot **CRAK** in the middle of the porch, a bit longer range for him, and consequently not an instant kill, but there's no need to go into that.

And so, he unexpectedly concludes, that is why most murders take place indoors—this in the version of the story he most often tells. You will read, he says, statistics, and their analysts invoke the angst of familiarity, the drug-induced rage, the way we only truly hate ourselves or those we once have loved, but I know, he will say, it is all much simpler than that. Indoors, surrounded by your loved ones, the ranges are simply shorter. Someone pushes your buttons and you get pissed and you raise the muzzle and your sights just fill with squirrel.

## 5.

## THE PACKIE ON PAGE STREET

So routine is this kind of thing today, no one would speak of it in the future. Unsettled as he was by the memory, he had told no version of the story for years. Why whine about franchising, or seem to? Candy, cigarettes, cheap and unwholesome food—the same things are doubtless sold today, at soul-less storefronts, in interchangeable towns throughout the state. Why disparage the now grown men he once had served? Or note the old healed stitches on the jaw? Consider as well the problems of translating the tale you used to tell so dexterously to the police and to the judges: by the time you got through making the required embellishments, and changing this and changing that so listeners could follow you today, by the time you did all that, it wouldn't seem like your story at all. It would be something alien, belonging to someone else.

Jerry owned what in those days was known as a packie—a package store—in days before 7-Elevens made businesses like his impossible. In essence, a packie was what we now call a convenience store without the corporate storefront or the now obligatory gas pumps outside. In those days, you pretty much took some white-clapboard, single-story shack, or two-story if you wanted to live in the top of it, and hung up whatever beer sign the distributor offered you, or a sign for Coke or cigarettes, and that was it. You didn't have to put things where you were told to, or stock what you were told to, or keep the hours you were told to keep. You did that all yourself. Why during those rambling college parties in the fall, the cooler was never full enough, and you could stay open as long as you wanted selling beer and Slim Jims. And in the summer, when the college had let out and there were only teenagers with fake ID's on Saturday night, you could just close at 5 and be done with it.

Location is everything, we say today, and in that sense, he had just lucked out, he thought, in a small house on Page Street, not only on the route most kids walked to high school, but a quick drive from the campus, so close you could judge the amount of beer you'd sell by the volume of music in the afternoon. Sometimes he would truck cases of beer over there himself, or maybe some under-aged fratboy would swing by and pick them up. And he could get kegs too, but that meant more notice, and that meant also competing, say, with Tess's or Mike's or Cy's, which really wasn't the point of a packie. A true packie doesn't really compete with anyone or with anything.

What he stocked was what you might eat or drink on your way to anywhere else but this. His steadiest customers came from the high school, and consequently most were petty thieves. "Why stock this crap at all?" his son had asked, now half-grown and coming back

from college in Orono. It's too much trouble, and the damn kids steal you blind, and would do more, if six-packs could fit inside their windbreakers. It was the same argument made ineffectively by Rubin, so I'm told, to his parents who ran the store on Munjoy Hill, and one advanced doubtless by frustrated sons of small store owners all over the state. You simply cannot, in a corner store, afford the type of security routine at the larger stores like Renys.

And who knows what Rubin's parents said to that? To Jerry, the case was simple. Well yes, they steal, he might concede, but "blind" is a bad word for what they did, because most of what they stole, candy, for example, wasn't worth anything in the first place (at least, to anyone but them), and in the meantime, they were dumping a king's ransom on popsicles and ice-cream sandwiches and those 16 oz. cokes that in those days seemed imperial.

Why offend them?

And don't forget the beer you speak of, and the weird-ass kid, barely 22-years-old he was, with his periodic cravings for a particular mix—two six-packs of Bud, one Schlitz, a six-pack of Country Club in the tiny cans. No one has eclectic tastes to drink that way, as any son home for spring vacation knows. Why Christ, sometimes that kid's memory seemed so shot he would pull out a piece of paper and look for the order, and sometimes he couldn't even pay it with one group of bills, but had to use two, or maybe three. The mis-matched beer was for the under-age candy thieves, obviously. And if they got away with a Three Musketeers or two during the week, then so be it. There was a mutual respect there, although you couldn't really say this to the son whose tuition bills you paid. And maybe in the end it was all simpler than respect. To make money, you have to spend money, or let it walk out the door in the pocket of some hoodlum kid. That's the way it is.

Or was.

Jerry broods on this at times, sitting on the weakened porch of his fishing camp in Bridgton. He thinks how different things are today. No one seems to know what value is, he thinks. Listen to the way the news reporters talk about the "street-price" of the dope recovered in the drug-bust. They give a figure in the tens or hundreds of thousands and we're all supposed to nod sadly and piously, even though anyone in the old packie-business or anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of retail sales knows the figure is preposterous. It would be like trying to figure out the worth of one's stock by adding up the retail prices of everything on the shelves, or multiplying the cost of a Coke by thousands, instead of just going through the order sheets like you should. And suddenly you realize that none of this stuff, whether Coke cans, dried leaves in a plastic bag, or military hardware is really worth anything. With his son out of school and on his own, it

was time to drop the world-weary smile that sold the beer on weekends and warned the kid to think twice before stuffing the candy into his pocket; it was easier just to retire to the shit-shingled house on Page Street and the fishing camp in Bridgton.

### The Story

In Jerry's view of things, the town was pretty uniform. Exceptional rich kids were sent away to school, Exeter, mostly, or if the family couldn't manage that, St. Albans or Kent's Hill or one of those places. And exceptional poor kids were rural kids, who didn't spend much time in the streets next to the high school. At the packie, you had ordinary kids, like his son and his other would-be sons. No tight-ass scholars with their slide-rules on their belt, and no one in a black jacket with forearms all tatted up with neo-Nazi crap. You could go to that high school and cry out a few of these names: Lebourdais, St. Onge, Flanagan, even his own, and pretty much everyone would know who you meant, whereas if you named some kid who had spent a year at Exeter, or some poor bastard in Moodyville, you'd likely get little more than a quizzical stare.

In the old days, he thought, you knew them well. You could determine what was on their minds by stitching together a narrative from the wise-cracked patches of conversation you heard in the store aisles, or the unnatural reticence of the hippies of the early 70s. And that was why, he thought, the whole affair—the thing he couldn't tell the story of—made no sense. One version had it that they were put up to it, and the mastermind behind it not only got off scot-free, but even went on to have a string of run-ins with the police as an adult, and we're not talking bar-fights, or drunk and disorderly or a DUI, but stuff like larceny and even extortion and things of that nature. Not impossible, that story was. But so often was it told and retold, the police had obviously heard that version too. And if they had been able to nail that prick then, why would they have waited for all the extortions and beatings of the future?

The true story must have been much simpler. These kids? Maybe they were just plain numb, as they themselves might have put it.

First of all, they didn't seem to understand the most basic facts of a packie. For unless it was one of those big party weekends at the college, there wasn't jackshit to be had in the till. There's no "street-value" pile of cash in the register. In those days, there were no lottery tickets for retirees, no Red Bull for the roofers, no condoms and little packs of vitamins. Even the pitiful daily take was in two locations, since he emptied the cash-register at noon, and walked it 100 feet to his front door. At 7 PM on a weekday, there was \$100 in the till, or maybe \$150.

Now of course in the minds of these impressionable kids, there might well be more to the packie business than this. A deeper or more sinister narrative. A packie-owner, for example, could offer credit, and often had to, and maybe even a small loan and charge interest for it. He could also, like the Italian grocers on Maine Street, take bets on the harness races. No doubt that sort of thing could add up, and one of his customers, finding himself suddenly \$1500 in debt, had signed over his camp on Long Lake in Bridgton. Yet what did that mean? In those days, even your basic shoe-shop worker could get a fishing camp, perhaps something on the ocean, for no more than two months' pay. That's why today, you go down to some of these places, Harpswell, or Mere Point, or inland to Sebago or Cobbosseecontee, and right smack dab amidst the half-million dollar vacation homes with their crushed rock driveways and string quartets playing on their lawns, you'll find some piece-of-shit uninsulated camp with an outhouse across the driveway. And you might find Jerry too, remembering the old days sitting there in the evening, or during that vacation time he gave himself.

If you include these fantastic things—the inexistent book-making operation, the hypothesized loan-sharking, the vacation home on the water, maybe some numb-ass kid could imagine thousands lying in the tempting till. Whereas the unimagined real? If you convert what was really there to today's money, you can call it, say, a week's pay, and you can see what a five-way split was going to get these kids. Where were they figuring to find 300 packies in a year? they might as well have put the time in packing groceries like his son.

A couple of them had ski-masks from their trips to Sugarloaf with the Ski Club. One or two of them, I think, thought it was a point of honor to “go bare,” as if wearing a mask were something chicken shit to do, like for a goalie to wear a hockey mask, which in those days was unusual. The idea, I guess, was that Jerry would be so fucking scared there would be no way he would do anything. They “knew where he was,” “where his family was,” all that sort of thing. Phrases they got from TV. And when you really got into his face, he would just about piss his pants and you could be sure there'd be no going to the police, or calling the high school or identifying them in a line-up.

Or so they must have thought.

So you didn't have to be Clark Kent to figure out who they all were, even the ones with the ski masks. There were no vagrant street gangs then from Portland, say, Boston or Augusta, targeting the packies in backwoods towns like this. Forget the bandanas on their face—you knew instantly these kids weren't from away. There was Jean, for example, a short kid with a French accent, who had a peculiar way of walking and reaching for things; you'd never confuse him with anyone else—all so innocent, not some shifty shoplifter, for

example, and until that day, he'd never taken so much as a fireball from the place. Then Dale, tall, thin and stammering. Kind of a goofy kid, who never quite looked at you, but tried. Masked or unmasked.

And then Rob. Incredibly, it seems.

Now Rob came from one of the two black families in town then. Old families. He and his brothers had certain things in common. They all, for example, played sports, and just the way they moved was beautiful; there was no way you wouldn't recognize their grace as they fairly flowed through the store aisles. They didn't speak in that contrived and artificial urban slang you hear black kids use today, here and in every other town across the state, the accent only the youngest of them would ever speak, modeled after actors on TV. Someone from away might have thought there was something mannered in the way they spoke—too prissy, or maybe renouncing their roots or whatever it was. But their roots were in Maine, for more generations than anyone had tracked really, so the only way the kids had altered their natural accent at all was in giving up the “A-yuh's” and the now almost comical dropped r's and those things you hear on recordings like Bert and I. Because any one of those now comic tics would have highlighted their alien race as would a “Yo muhfuh ...” or the “jes' be ...” of an earlier generation.

That must be how he got involved with it. Rob was in the highest section of the high-school tracks you could be in without having an English teacher or college professor for a parent. So it must have been “You in or out?” or something like what you hear on TV. And he felt compelled to “represent,” I've heard it called. For even though he didn't speak like some low-life gang-banger in Los Angeles (the “other L.A.,” as we in Maine call it, thinking of Lewiston-Auburn, of course) there was no way he was going to be less of a man than any of them. So there he was, right in the thick of it, where any equally bright French kid in his situation would have just said “No way. No way,” adding whatever was the tough-guy thing to say in those days. “Rien, my friend. I'm seein' nothin'.” Or something like that.

They still might have made it work, despite their stupidity, or “numb-ness” as they themselves would say. They knew all about the deal with the stolen candy bars. No way the packie guy hadn't noticed those, they would think, or Jerry flattered himself to think. So they knew that he knew that they knew and the whole ouroboric regression of the thing. Given that, what was this but a matter of degree? It was just like, well, it's not going to be candy bars and Lucky Strikes anymore. From now on, we're calling the shots and if it's a day's take, well at least you got your business and your young son and you're not lying in a pool of blood somewhere and no one else, believe it, is going to be fucking with you.

Probably the closest thing to a protection racket the town would have ever seen, but of course this is not something they might have articulated quite so clearly as I've done here.

For a while, all went well; and even the two kids without the ski masks put up quite a show, scaring, or at least surprising him with their tough-guy act, enough so that it took some time for him to associate them with names. And when the others, most masked in some way, crowded around the till and guarded the door and tried to act professional, he was enough disconcerted that he was only certain about Rob, and didn't even recognize Dale until the police later revealed to him some of the obvious cliques in the high school he should have known all along. Somehow, the gun found its way into Jean's hands, who had nothing against Jerry and wouldn't have dreamed about risking his finger on the trigger. Then some car went by or one of the kids got pissed at another for being slow or not tough or professional enough and something went a bit awry and the next thing you know the butt of that gun was on Jerry's cheek and down he went and with that, any notion that he would ever think this was "just the way it was" went right out the front door with them. To the kids, of course, it was the exact opposite of that. Whatever degree of intimidation they had imagined, they had surpassed. And when they took their \$137 out, they couldn't believe how easy life would one day be for them.

He never thought much about it, although it was a big scandal for ordinary kids like this to be sent to the state prison at Thomaston. And after a few months, or a year it was, they began to trickle out and come back home. They had nothing against Jerry, of course, because it didn't take a year or so in Thomaston to make them realize how stupid they had been or, if the first version of the story about them being put up to it were true, what a bunch of chumps they were. And they must have told the story of Thomaston, and it must have been retold, and after a few tellings, the younger kids had no idea it was Jerry's packie, and the bits of the narrative began to leak out right in the aisles by the toothpaste.

That first day in Thomaston, when each one was "put in the hole," as they described it, must have made an impression, because this was the only story that got around, nothing about the \$137 or the pistol butt and nothing about the inevitable abuse and beatings they must have endured for the months they spent at Thomaston. "Breaking you in," they said, or it was said they said, in that space so small you could barely sit in it, shitting in a hole. And it was no friggin' joke, no matter how tough you thought you were, they said. And after that day, so they said, the rest of it, the unrecounted beatings and the like, was pretty much no big deal.

6.  
COVER-UP

The Browning, 1966

John lived in his own annex of the house and, as luck would have it, was three years older than nearly all his friends who played in that neighborhood. By neighborhood, I mean an area about two miles long on the single road that cut through it, and maybe a mile across, although this mile was immeasurable, as it was never used for anything.

Despite his superiority in age and experience, John screwed up most of what he did in life. He didn't follow sports enough to talk intelligently about the Red Sox and even the petition he wanted everyone to sign to persuade the local radio station to play what he naively called "teen-age music" when they rode the bus to and from school—that went nowhere. If you wanted music, you would stay up late when WRKO in Boston was strong enough to give you Arnie Ginsburg and the Night Train Show, not some crappy local station with a signal so strong any kid could tune in to it. His younger friends climbed trees like apes, not merely competently as he did, and he turned out to be not such a great swimmer after all, maybe mediocre by modern standards. Even though his relay team had briefly held the record at the local high school, eventually some real swimmers, dolphin-like they were, Scottie among them, moved in from away and shattered both the record and any semblance of nostalgia for the giants of the old days.

Maybe he thought those years surrounded by kids younger than himself would be grand. Maybe he thought he could lead them through life itself and spare them the pains of adolescence he had survived by sheer force of character. It's just that kids that age don't really look up to their "elders" as he styled himself and others, or at least, won't let each other admit to it. And finally John was reduced to introducing them to the "facts of life," about which parents were unduly reticent in those days, and sharing a few more precise details about what he and some local girl had done or seen in the front seat of his old Ford at the drive-in.

Chris, now a lawyer, still tells the story of the osprey nest, and it's one that John himself told more heroically himself. Chris was obsessed with birds and for years, he and Hank tried to band everything that flew into their nets and ground traps: chickadees, spring warblers, grosbeaks, then more exotic fare, ducks and sandpipers, caught on the marshes at 6 AM, and then they would row out to the ledge on a calm day where the cormorants were and come back with their hands all slashed from their beaks. They decided the pinnacle of achievement would be to band young osprey, just as you see done on TV, but neither of them was foolish enough to try this himself, ospreys having talons

capable of picking striped bass right out of the water and beaks to rip those fish to pieces in seconds.

So they got John to climb the tree.

They put a ladder up to the first branches and for a few minutes all went well, until John reached the end of the ladder and started up through the tree limbs. Then the ospreys, in both versions of the story, began to dive at him, whooshing past, and whirling up again. In Chris's version, likely the more reliable one, at the end of each dive, the osprey would brake violently with its tremendous wingspan and there would be a boom, like a sonic boom, and soon these became rhythmic, and both agreed that if John had ever actually gotten to the nest, the osprey would have ripped his eyeballs out and there would have been no story to tell here. Hank and Chris were left to speculate about the migratory habits of the majestic birds.

John had the most fantastic weaponry. The showpiece was a 12-gauge Browning semi-automatic, manufactured in the righteous wastes of Utah. This was the best shotgun a local kid could conceivably own in those days, Weatherby's, later built cheek-by-jowl with the M-60 machine gun in Saco, being quite out of reach. If you went duck-hunting with him, he would occasionally let you fire a round with it.

In addition to the Browning, he had the .22's you would expect: semi-automatic, lever-action, and one heavy bolt-action, rumored to be the best for target shooting, and pistols too, although there was nothing extraordinary about those he had. A .22 semi-automatic pistol went for about \$55, and you could earn that with a week's worth of lawn-mowing in the damp season. The only thing missing in this arsenal was a deer-rifle, and that might seem strange to those from away; but deer-hunting, for an aggressively upwardly mobile family in southern Maine in those days seemed a bit blue-collar, and not the kind of thing anyone with a taste for Browning semi-automatics would stoop to.

There was a certain scent about him, and I've heard we all have this, and Linda Jane, years later, would speak of mine, but his was unique and unique as well the mere fact that he had it. To a twelve-year-old, this must have seemed like something of the adult world, or of this particular access point to it, because no one else had anything of the kind to show for their stomping through the woods, or rolling in fields, or wading through ponds or shoveling through the mud. It was particularly strong in the annex of the rambling white-shingled house where he lived, and probably haunted it years after his parents moved to the glassy streamlined house down by the water with no room for him.

Of course all the sisters of everyone in the neighborhood eventually fell for him, since he was the only one old enough to have a car and even drive. But he never took these girls seriously and things would always end tragically in a drive-in or in a field

somewhere, listening to Arnie Ginsburg. It would have been too easy to take advantage of these so-smitten things, he must have thought, since his former playmates just looked the other way. By the time he began squiring these young girls around, most of the kids he had led through life knew there was nothing special about John. So who cared what he did with their sisters?

The most important incidents in his life involved Hugh, who lived on the very limits of the two-mile stretch of road. Hugh was John's age, and by this time, most of John's imagined disciples were tired of the whole thing and perhaps old enough to think one day he would get his comeuppance, as Mother would have said. I don't think the topic was ever raised directly.

Anyway Hugh, maybe after a football game at which John was not very skilled, got a little pissed when John grabbed Hugh's obnoxious younger brother and threatened to slap him. Good riddance to the little bastard! you'd think. But all anyone then saw was Hugh leaping off the porch and John scrambling frantically up the large rock, defined as far too dangerous for any rough-housing—a kind of sanctuary, like the hard and perilous granite steps to a cathedral. And Hugh has him by the collar and everyone knew that if John ever touched the younger brother again, he was going to get his face smashed in, or butt kicked, or whatever it was you threatened to do in those days.

Then there was the time that the two of them, Hugh and John, both swimmers on the once mythical relay team, dove from the rocks to see who could swim underwater the farthest, and John came up an impressive distance away, but Hugh, with his dolphin kick, which no one had seen in those days except described in magazines, kept going and surfaced maybe fifty feet further away, and with that kick, you'd think he could have gone another hundred yards or clear across Maquoit Bay. And it was all so damn gratifying to everyone on the shore.

Hugh himself said nothing. The kind of trash-talking common today was less acceptable then. Or maybe his very coolness was trash-talking enough. But John came up with all kinds of ridiculous excuses: he had misunderstood the rules, or what they were competing for, or if they were competing at all. And most of all, he was attempting to surface right beneath the small patch of debris that was floating there or seaweed was it that anyone could see, small strands of the seaweed still stuck behind one of his ears. And this went on five minutes or so until everyone was satisfied with what everyone needed to be satisfied about and they all just involved themselves in swimming.

Well of course this story cannot be about these childish things; for who hasn't heard and read tales of such juvenile spats, and you'd think, all of us having lived through them, that there would be no reason to refer to them at all. The memory, nonetheless, still

unnerves his once-young playmates, of John's older sister, having driven up from Florida in the convertible, referring snidely to them as John's "little friends." The indignity! they thought; why should they be so denigrated by this grown-up from away? It was John, after all, not them, who was hanging out with younger kids.

This sister, in her then astonishing beauty, had escaped the youth she herself had had in this place, and it would be years before any of them figured out how she had managed, with no known skills or education, to come back with the convertible, or how you could even convert (the wrong word, I think) that gloriously mature body into a car like this. So what eventually became obvious was not remarked upon by anyone, and even John enjoyed the rides in the shiny convertible, the likes of which, you would foolishly think, had never been seen in town before and would likely never be seen again.

I can't remember how she got to Maine for the funeral, but I doubt she drove a car like that. Nor could she have been all dressed up like some kind of Floridian hooker, and in any case, by then, no one would have been much impressed by such accoutrement. Maybe she was married and maybe she had kids herself, and maybe she looked no better than the more attractive moms that some of John's once friends realized they had themselves.

John was plagued by all these people: by his whoremaster father, by his mother, once the best catch of all perhaps, and by his sister in the prime of life. The father had grown wizened and wiry, and the mother was now fat, smoking her cigarettes on the newly built deck. In her, there remained some of what must have been the old charm, particularly in the gravelly voice with all its suppressed sarcasm. But there was nothing of the sort left in the grizzled whoremaster of a father. And it was some time before you looked at the sister, and gave the whole sad thing some thought, that the whole family made a modicum of sense.

So John went west to Bridgton, driving perhaps past Webbs Mills and Danville, to build A-frames, he said, which were just the thing then, and required only minimal skill at carpentry. He had plans, big plans, he said in the company of his once "little friends," but he didn't really talk directly to them anymore. No. He was one with their parents now, whom he addressed by their first names, an elder now for real, allowing his once friends to listen in. And since you couldn't then, and can't now, just toss some brazen twenty-year-old out of your house, it was best to put up with it, and after a while, having stood there in the kitchen with his arms folded and rocking on his heels in his tight blue jeans, feeling all James-Dean-like and oblivious to the changes that were about to take place in America, he would just go on to the next house and do the same thing.

Back in Bridgton, things did not go well for him. You can't just hang around with pre-pubescents all your life, and do squat in school, have a few perfunctory dates with sisters, and drive past the kids bicycling with no hands down the road, and take your own hands off the wheel of your car in high mockery of them, and have that as your life and then just go out into the sophisticated real world of contractors and loose-moraled women of Pleasant Mountain and expect all the big plans you had to come true.

When he came back, he was no longer driving, but rode quietly with his grizzled whoremaster of a father. You'd have to walk right up to the passenger side, as you were told to do by your parents who apparently knew more of this than you did. Then with the parents over on the driver's side, and you on the passenger side, looking down on him for the first time, you would exchange some pleasantries about everything being fine.

The last time anyone saw him at the wheel was in the exotic but failing English sports car his father helped start for him, right on the main road outside the house. It was easy then to forget about the old days, when he had, together with this wizened man, removed the entire engine from his black Ford and replaced it in some better painted thing. Both cars must have been sold or given away, or perhaps traded as part payment for the sports car with the bad ignition.

No one ever talked about why it all had happened. All they said was how hard it must have been for the grizzled old whoremaster of a father to wake up and walk his rounds on the property one morning, and find his own son with his head half blown away by the much-prized Browning. So you are left to your imagination, as an eighteen-year-old, when you just believe in such things as nervous breakdowns, or as a twenty-one-year-old, when you realize there are drug issues that can fuck you up completely, or a few years later, when you finally admit that all this is just "stuff and nonsense" as Mother used to say: the only thing that would really motivate you to blow yourself away, as so many young men seem to do, has nothing to do with health or economics or drugs or anything inconsequential like that, but rather something that young woman said, all sexy in her worldliness, the one who finally got the best of you in some high repartee or rejection in the sports car, or, worse, told to all of western Maine the stories you most feared.

For Richard: RIP

Now "you take Richard," as they say around here. Richard, it was quietly said, a half-decade after John died, left behind a fifteen-year-old son, who found him hanging in the garage by a lamp cord. What a tragedy. Who would have expected it? But to me, it was like when Gene drowned, hunting on Long Lake within earshot of the Renys at Bridgton, and Dan said to all of us "Fucked if I believe it; why it's Gene, and if you'd told

'me he fell down a goddamn manhole, or a flight of stairs while reaching for the light switch, or slipped on a frigging snapping turtle shell and cracked his skull on the carapace, I'd say fine. But drown? Something ordinary like that? Never." And you must understand, those turtles used to grow here routinely big as snow saucers.

I was told of Richard's appalling hanging so solemnly that it took some time to figure out myself. "Tragedy" and "who would expect all this" be damned. This is a kid who knew more about Elvis than anyone, back when Elvis was just starting out, and not some bloated, drug-addicted Nixonite in Las Vegas, but who couldn't hum a hit tune on the radio; a kid who talked relentlessly of playing honky-tonk with his uncle who drove the bus for the high school, yet never was seen to touch a bass or a guitar, which were everywhere in those days. Athletic though he was, he couldn't have named a single professional sports team or anyone who played for one. And Richard, single-minded as he was, had a moral streak strong as his stupidity and he would never do what he was written to have done that day.

To get all this right, you don't need to probe Richard's psyche for some mystical insight into what "really mattered" to him back when he was customizing cars in high school. The essence of Richard lay right on the surface, in those polished wheel rims of his '55 Chevy and the ornamental wind scoop that wasn't even connected to the intake. This is a guy who married a fifteen-year-old and expected her to change diapers and become all domestic, which she didn't, of course, even as he left her, taking the neglected son with him. A guy who then "did the right thing" by, let's face it, the "town whore" who had slept with half the men on the island, because she got "caught off the corner," so we called it. A guy who then worked his ass off for Central Maine Power, raising his own son and one who wasn't even his, changing half the diapers by himself. This is a guy who, worn out by all these undemanded things, could only complain weakly about your long hair. "Well, at least you're still wearing stockings," he said bitterly, using a word as archaic then as it sounds today, and made even more so by the strange artifice of the southern accent he had picked up in his Elvis-worshipping days.

This is a blue-collar kid, knocking up local girls, not some fine-ass preppy with a Browning. He could talk deer-rifles-.30-.30's and .30-06's-with the best of them, and you can bet his closet was full of such things, any one of which would have been a better bet than a lamp cord. A guy like that was never going to leave those kids, after cutting him down from the garage rafters, to fend for themselves with the once fifteen-year-old or the near-hooker or the moms of such people.

So it is even more quietly said, years later, that this tragic suicide was a myth or a cover-up. A lifetime of knocking up teenagers will not generate the angst to do such a

thing. The key, rather, was all that grotesque horniness he had talked about from the time anyone first met him in the fifth grade; he had kept it right to the end, “kept the faith” in his own way, you might say, somewhat perversely, as we all keep the faith in other ways. It was simply Richard, as he was, is, and always will be.

Maybe in this, and in this alone, you could say he was ahead of his time. For in those days there were no news reports of this sort of thing, or lugubrious exposés on Dateline; he didn’t have a crowd of horny compatriots explaining to him how to “get off,” as they say, with a hard-on and something as dangerous and stupid as a lamp cord around his neck. It was the one thing in life he had figured out himself, and it would take the rest of us twenty years to catch up with him, to find that there was no damn mystery to it at all, and by then, Gene himself had been thirty years dead beneath the ice.

#### Coda

I wrote all this and even unrevised, it looked pretty good to me. These were simple young men, and their deaths should in no way contradict that. I like the occasional contrast of cultures, seen in their attitudes toward music and women and even weaponry; I like their untrained athleticism, barely mentioned here, their vulgarity, and certain details I know, but chose not to include—the mustached face of the uncle, seen through the windshield of the schoolbus, or the whoremaster father in his pick-up, chasing the yahoos who had just run over his Doberman. Mere ornaments, I think, not central to the stories.

And it was then I heard from an even simpler man another detail of Richard’s story, a response to my own version, which doubtless included some of the sentences I have written above, then fresh in my mind. If Dwight even understood my elegant theorizing, he gave no sign of it. The call to the police was answered by, oh you remember his name, big kid, played football ... Joe, that’s it, and Joe drove hell-bent down there to spend maybe five minutes trying to hold him up in the garage, but it did no good. And it shook him, Joe says, tough though he was, a cop who had seen and done it all, he thought, as he held his dead friend for the last time, trying to hear him breathe. Now Dick was a line-man, a pole-climber, that is, since we didn’t use cherry-pickers in those days; he’s not some guy like me sitting in the CMP office, all gone to fat, and he could fly up the utility pole barely touching the rungs with his feet. The first thing you’d do, wouldn’t it? reach up and grab the cord! Why with one hand, strong as he was, he could just pull himself up face-first to the rafters had he wanted to. The thing was, I’ll get you ... the number, if he’s still around, Joe, that is ... You remember, or maybe not, Richard was neat—obsessed with it, you’d say. And Joe says the garage had been meticulously cleaned, spotless, with

everything in order and the floor perfectly swept, just so the kid who found him hanging there, his own young son, for God's sake, wouldn't have to do it himself.

## 7.

## THE FOULEST MOUTH IN FRANKLIN COUNTY

Richard P., or “Robert” as he was sometimes oddly known here, had the foulest mouth in New Sharon. It was a reputation well-deserved, and it is hard to imagine how he had ended up with the woman from away.

Since you’re unlikely to know New Sharon, in order to get the story right you should probably substitute “Franklin County.” And if you don’t know Franklin County, it can be efficiently described as a typically gerrymandered Maine county, beginning far north in the undeveloped woods near Notre-Dame-des-Bois in Quebec and weaving its way south along the west side of Flagstaff Lake down through Kingfield all the way to Farmington Falls and Chisholm, hard up upon Livermore Falls, the two bisected by the county line. South China lies to the south and east.

Hardly half the people in this county know each other.

No one is sure where Richard went to school and whether he in fact went to college, and what he did when he started work, and no one knows more of his personal history than they would want to know. The common assertion that he is brilliant is generally followed by desultory questions concerning his education, which then fade away with no conclusion or resolution.

Richard is an expert mason, a carpenter, a painter. In this region, where there is no shortage of skilled workmen, that may not signify much beyond itself. John Farley, for example, repairs American cars from the fifties, but few would deny that he’s dumb as a post. Then there are hunters of all types, who do very complex things, like “breaking down” their rifles for oiling, and pursuing game whose habits are unknowable. In winter months, many men must deal with all the intricate machinery and gear required for snow removal. Yet you could barely get a sentence out of some of them, and others, even among their fellows, are best known for not knowing shit, as they might put it.

He is also very artistic, although there is not universal agreement on this. One of the stories, and it perhaps originates with him, involves a video operation. He is a movie-maker, or film-maker as he calls it, or plans on being one. The videos, or movies, or films as he is said to insist they be called, you’d think would have been about New Sharon, or Starks, or even towns of Nordic origin, New Vineyard or far away in Denmark, namesake of the land where Eloise herself would shoot. These are places Richard knows well, and there’s likely a market for that sort of thing. Richard’s videos, however, are not to be of Maine or the local townsfolk or even America. No matter that he himself has never been abroad, never out of Maine, and for all anyone knows never even into Piscataquis County.

His films will be the end of Maine for him and the end of the profession he is known for. Masonry and carpentry?—these are not things anyone looks forward to doing in later life, he says. Such trades were passed on to him, or taught him—no one is quite sure—and once he has the money, or maybe he calls it “backing,” all this will all be left behind, and you can be sure, or you best believe, that there won’t be any fuckin’ videos of fuckin’ masonry in Moscow, or any shit like that.

You need to forgive the language of the last sentence and a few to come. It is difficult to give a good sense of him without lapsing into that register, offensive though it well may be. When people in New Sharon tell stories of him, with the decorative parodies of his way of speaking or at times entire narrative sections reflecting his manner of speech, they inevitably pause and say one of two things. There is one school of narrators who will issue a direct disclaimer: “You’ll have to forgive me, Joan, but there simply is no way I can give you any sense of him without saying ‘fuck’ every third word.” Joan will then smile and pretend half-seriously to have some misgivings about it.

And then there is a second school of narrators that has arisen, Phoenix-like it seems, out of the very ashes of such imagined misgivings: “I’ll tell it, Joan, but I can’t bring myself to speak the way Richard, or Robert as you call him, speaks, since no one speaks the way he does. The best thing you can do is imagine the f-word inserted every other word in every sentence. Thus, if I say, quoting him ‘if I don’t get through this ledge before dinner, why ...’ you must hear or imagine him saying ‘if I eff-ing don’t eff-ing get eff-ing through this eff-ing ledge eff-ing before eff-ing dinner, eff, I’ll eff-ing be some eff-ing pissed.’ Something like that.”

Stripped of its obscenities, Richard’s wit was of the best. He would come to your house for some foundation repair you might need and he would stop dead in the yard, staring at, say, the chimney he himself had built years ago, and he would say (in this somewhat edited and perhaps too refined variant): “You know, whoever built that chimney for you did a damn fine job.” And then, you or whoever it was who had called him, knowing Richard’s agility of mind and wishing to compete, would just as laconically retort: “I don’t know, Richard. Don’t you think it leans just slightly right, and don’t you think that cap could have been set just a bit more precisely?”

And then would come the bartering, and probing of the earth, and eventually he would say something, half ironically: “Ok, if you want me to crawl around down there in the porcupine quills and the skunk shit, I’ll go dig around, and I’ll give you a written estimate, but I’m telling you right now, it’s going to be around twelve grand.” And then it would be yes or no or do you think I’m friggin’ Croesus? or more likely Can’t you do just a quick fix? and he would answer, deftly switching registers, “Now you can probably get some

kid to go in there and shore this up and that up and it'll cost you a grand or so, but I don't do that kind of work, I only do things right, and I'm telling you if you do that you'll be calling me again in a year, and you know it's already the third time I've been down here to look at this."

Of course that is not exactly what he said or was capable of saying, but reduced to its content, those are the kind of things he was known to say on these occasions. It's hard not to miss those days, hearing him speak like that.

Now many claim that Richard, despite the diction that even the most hard-bitten of locals would find exceptional, was much loved by the ladies. And by this they mean not the young beauties (although there is more of that to come), but the older group, now abandoned by their children and their husbands either dead of heart-attacks or maybe just run off, or maybe uselessly idling in their alcohol, or sometimes just retired. More and more the community seems to fill up with these people, coming here to build their dream or retirement homes, and more often than not, the poor husband dragged unwillingly into this fantasy dies in the midst of it. Such a charmer Robert is, these women say. But by this, they are likely not referring to such verbal parry and riposte as noted earlier. They simply mean he's just there when you need the work done and the first one you ask to do it.

Suppose you need a paint job. You call a painter. He answers. He paints your house. If you are more than fifty or sixty years old, you have no idea whether he has done a good job or a bad job. What, after all, widowed at your age, do you know of paint jobs? How long is paint supposed to last in this area? How long will you last? Five years? Ten? You also have not the slightest idea of whether the price is reasonable, since no one "shops around" in a small town like this. And what do all these figures mean in the first place to some failing retiree?

We have all seen our aging mothers stare at a restaurant bill, not precisely in horror, but with a desperate incomprehension. In the old days, you worked for a dollar a day, then it was a dollar an hour, then it seems these days no one works for less than ten and how in goodness name, as Mother would put it, are you supposed to imagine what a bill of \$85 means? Why it's best, the old woman thinks, just to pay it and smile at everyone at the table and prove how modern you are by proclaiming what a great deal it was and who would ever expect to get such exquisite food or service for a price like that? I have seen Mother do this many times.

And thus a good number of us are skeptical of certain central motifs in stories about Richard—the skill of his work, the fairness of his prices. What, after all, is the evidence for all this apart from an old widow's testimony?

Richard had built, with his own hands, a house right next to his trailer. He may well have gotten this land from relatives. It was not prime, nor was it on the main road, and no one could remember its once having been “sold,” as they sometimes called it, meaning passed from a local family into the hands of someone from away. The house he planned to build, so it was said, would be open—the kind of post-and-beam thing one often heard of being planned or built in the mid 1970s. It would have no rooms, or maybe off in the corner somewhere a single bedroom, and off that the bathroom. The bulk of the house would be and likely still is a great hall of sorts, like an Old English meadhall, where everyone would eat or drink or even sleep if they were staying over, and imagine Grendel approaching in the darkness.

It would be a haven for “kids partying,” who now (or then, it was) were too often out in their cars, risking God knows how many lives, or sneaking out into the woods somewhere, or hanging out behind the school or in any event feeling and being treated like damn criminals even though everyone in town had once, of course, been that way and done the same things they did. There ought to be a place for them, Richard thought, and his house might well be it. A safe friggin’ haven, so he might have put it. All this, of course, was before the days when America saw child abusers behind every bush, and looked on the least of kindnesses toward teenagers with suspicion and began to enforce all sorts of ridiculous laws on “contributing to the delinquency of a minor,” which were never written for nor intended to cover the kind of situations Richard had in mind.

Richard’s house, grand as it was on the outside, soon became disused, or more exactly, never was used at all, with the windows framed up but unfilled, and, we think, no wiring in the walls. There is no great mystery to finish work, particularly for a skilled man like Richard, and the general feeling on the missing windows was that he was just waiting for a good deal on some that would fit the window frames he had built for them. At that time, sadly, there wasn’t a lot of building going on the region, and maybe the kind of windows he had in mind (he would only, they say, have settled for the best) were not available at the discount prices he required.

So he lived in his trailer for years, beside the half-built house, and no kids ever came to party there. And if you think this is odd in this region, you need only go to the wildly successful machinery shop a few miles down the road, or actually, a couple of roads and a hard left turn, easy to miss. You will see there, a beautiful and expertly constructed gravel road, with all the drainage calculated to survive even the worst of spring rains, and at the end of that, backed into the woods at the edge of the field is a house that is almost, seen with its garage, constructed in an arc. The lines are in fact all straight, but the illusion is compelling. It is a four-bedroom, two-story house, belonging to the owner of the

machinery shop, and it is now five years old. Like Richard's house, this one too lacks electricity and interior finishing, although unlike Richard's house, here the windows are beautifully appropriate and expertly set in place. Richard must feel more than a bit of envy if he stops to examine that structure from the main road, but he will express this envy, of course, in own characteristic way. The machine shop owner too lives in a trailer, just off the main road next to his machine shop.

The other cases in the town occasionally alluded to when the topic of living this way comes up do not seem quite comparable to me.

One day Richard, or Robert as he was then becoming known, showed up with a woman called "the most beautiful woman ever seen in Franklin County." He just walked into a concert with her, and damn if he wasn't all dressed up (whatever that might have entailed in those days), not in his jeans and smelly old tee shirt which he would have been wearing most of the time then and still wears most of the time today.

It was hard to get the essence of the story straight from anyone. Maybe she was one who had bought that song and dance, or "stuff and nonsense," as Mother used to say, about the movie in the Caribbean. Or maybe she just fell for Richard's bantering wit, so familiar to all of us. "Whoever did that chimney for you ..." But I think I've mentioned that.

Now the key detail in this story, especially when told today, involves the age of the woman, who will be considerably younger than most of us. Although these stories invariably led to disputes about what relative age means as opposed to absolute age and the ambiguities of what "half his age" might mean in the old algebra problems, the conclusion would always be that she was young enough for the entire situation to be unsettling, then or now.

She was not, clearly, "from here," since no one recognized her, and no one could determine where she came from "from away." She didn't have the Titian-lovely skin of Eloise; she was stamped from a later template, where the young are indistinguishable, Maine to California. And she must have worked hard on her unlocalized affect, as I am quite skeptical of studies claiming regional accents were paradoxically less pronounced those days than they are today.

The meeting hall doubles as an auditorium, and tonight will be one of many attempts to establish a concert series here. These usually involve just country music, fraudulent, of course, songs about Alabama, produced in a New York studio, performed here by locals. But sometimes one of the retirees will raise money for a classical quartet, and they will play one of the more familiar pieces in the repertory and everyone will say it was fine and then it will be next summer and no one will know where the money was or is,

and the next time someone wants classical music they will have to start the whole damn thing again.

Richard's hand was just an inch, or maybe it was a half-inch closer to the woman from away than would be normal, even with a traditional couple. Or maybe he sat that half-inch closer to her, or his voice, when he whispered was too low, or his lips, which no one much saw except when forming obscenities, black with the foundation silt or brushed with the white dust of the masonry—his lips that same half-inch too close to her ear and even touching lightly the hair, beautifully but very naturally falling on the right side of her face, and not much distinguishable in its style or cut from the hair of anyone else you might see in this town or the next town or even on the mystery shows on television.

Now here the stories of Richard generally stop, as if the point were obvious. And after a headshake or two, you'll inevitably hear something punctilious like: "You know, the problem with Richard ..." and then there will be some explanation about his language or the way he smells or his upbringing or some Sartrean silliness about being and existence. But you never hear anything more of the woman from away or what finally happened to him and of course the analysis of his character itself is little more than nonsense.

The fact is, you can't really rely on what people in New Sharon say, nor on what I've called, somewhat facetiously, its "two schools of narration" on how Richard, or Robert, is to be described. And it hardly matters whether your fine town analysts are from here or from away, or how long they've lived here, or what their parents do or how many days a week they shop at Renys. When it comes to Richard's case, the people in this town, I think, don't understand the most basic things; as the students at Farmington might say, they just don't get it.

Think of him in that half-dug foundation, with the summer cottage now jacked up and held with a series of cross ties, like the supports of the covered bridge in Woodstock, Vermont or the Cribstone Bridge in Bailey Island you see in all the tourist photographs. Everyone knows Richard all sweaty in that hole, with the dirt caked on his arms. Everyone. Listen to him: "Why if I don't fuckin' get fuckin' through the ..." Read any of the examples I've quoted earlier or write your own lament and lard it all up with f- words. But don't let those obscenities distract you; they are not mere ornaments. There is an essential narrative in them that Richard is composing, and that narrative is responsible for all the bad things one will hear of him today.

Here, you see, is the problem, Richard's problem—the over-curse, say, of his curse-laden perorations. Richard planned, like so many, only for the best of fortunes. The future he saw, whether for his own life, or for the most routine of construction jobs, was always one where things went right. He imagined a life of making videos about the

Caribbean, and he imagined too, a house built or a foundation poured, where each angle would be precisely true and each brick laid to perfection. The work would go smoothly, and his workers, hired from the kids now out of school for the summer, would do all he asked, and learn from him, and one day build house shells for a younger generation to party in as they had partied in his. The days would be cool, as is always best for his kind of work, and the soil dry.

Well, if you know anything about the soil or climate conditions in this region, the video industry, the kind of wood you might get from the local lumber yard, or what the kids have grown to be like, you know that this is all a pipe dream. The ledges rise up where you least expect, and the unstable soil crumbles around them and just where you think you've found that ledge, many times it's not a ledge at all, but a rock, which is basically a ledge that moves—for the mason, a catastrophe. And sometimes, in the worst case, the rock has actually broken off from that ledge and the two are indistinguishable, even to the careful excavator, and the consequences dreadful to think about.

Then the kid you hire doesn't show up or, worse, he shows up to be paid but not to work, and you end up doing most everything yourself, and it rains half-way through a job and you have to redo a day's work or a half-day's work again. And at this point, Richard would curse the ledge and the soil and the kid and the rain and the lumber in the lumberyard in the manner for which he has come to be so famous here. "Work himself right up into a lather," so some would say.

Most people in New Sharon thought it all meant nothing; it was just "his way." And as he went on reviling the particulars of the half-exposed ledge, you might imagine saying to him to calm him down or egg him on a bit: "Well what the fuck did you expect to find down there, Richard?" or something of that nature. "Roses and horseshit?" For there was never anything Richard encountered that was the least bit unusual. The soil is friable in all its varieties here, the lumber yard barely solvent, and the kids, well, they're like you'd expect. It's just the way things are.

Now so far, nothing I have said is the least bit controversial. Most people in town, I think, would easily concede this. But we need to go further. Because we still haven't gotten to what "it" is, "the problem with Richard," "the thing about Robert," what all that head-shaking was about. We all know how loggers or commercial fishermen or local contractors act when the first (or maybe the third) thing goes wrong; they throw up their hands and then: "Why Jesus Christ, if they'd just let you work, why ... well there." And then it's "goddamn this, and screw that and woe is me and fuck my competitors."

The point is, things always go wrong. So perhaps it's time to consider Richard's dirt-encrusted obscenities in different terms: Are these grand laments truly the

consequence of the ill-fortune he confronts? Or are they perhaps the cause? Richard's ordinary and unrelenting curses were the source, that is the fons et origo, in some strange sense, of the very bad things they named. They turned the ordinary things, the brittle earth, into a personal insult, an impediment. His very words, barely printable, brought into being the obstructions they railed against.

Well there. My years in school are not for nothing after all.

If it had been Richard's equanimity alone that suffered, none of this would matter. Although your ears may ring, you have your foundation; the paint dries on the windowsill. But the problem arose as Richard, now "all worked up," as it were, came to the last stages of a job. If you really check his work in detail, you will begin to see, not its general competence, but rather the shoddiness of the finishing. Those details reveal the insidious nature of Richard's way of thinking.

Richard was a man of his word, alas, and always gave written estimates. And unlike some of the less scrupulous workers who have come and gone through here, or those who have taken up and abandoned work here—unlike these sorts, the price Richard quoted was always the price he charged in the end. His work, that is, conformed for better or for worse to its descriptions.

Now forget your moral banalities on this, and just bear with me. Such thinking is an ass-backwards way to be.

Richard scuffs angrily through the gravel. Having cursed his way to the end, he imagines now he has underbid the job, relying as he so often did on the rectitude of his own character rather than the vicissitudes of fate. All these broken ledges and the July rain and the indolent kid—who could have predicted these eff-ing catastrophes? So to keep his bill within his estimate, he starts "cutting corners," as so many workmen here call it. The windowsill above the foundation, where it is stepped on the suddenly emergent ledge, would not, you could see, looking closely, be quite horizontal, but glazed it seemed just enough to trick your eye. Then a second window, seemingly perfect, would develop a barely noticeable jam, although it is perhaps too much to call it that: it would take effort, it seemed, to air out the musts and rots of your summer home. There would be a tiny paint chip missing from the finishing, or maybe one coat, instead of the requisite two, covering that blemish up. Perhaps the cap of the chimney wasn't so perfect after all, or the cement for the crown, when you went up there to look, after three days of sun, not perfectly set.

How foolish of him, many would think, to neglect such visible detail. Far easier, they think, to bury comparable flaws deep in the foundation, where they wouldn't show, at least in our lifetimes. It hardly made sense to be so careless in the finishing, where anyone,

with the least eye for detail, can easily discover the defects, and almost hear in them, the grand vilifications that brought each one of them to be.

There is really nothing more to say.

Let us recall then, by way of summary, a point made by the much-heralded Professor of Musicology in Farmington years ago. Many who went to college in the 1980s have a story just like this one. And it doesn't matter whether they went to U. Maine at Farmington or Gorham (now Southern Maine, of course), or Nasson College or one of those fancier places like Bates or Colby, everyone has a story about a professor making the same kind of claim. And they tell it like this: right in the middle of music class, with half the students absent and many others in high inattention, the Professor finishes playing something familiar like Bolero, or La Mer, or even Beethoven's Pastorale—a programmatic piece like that—then begins to rant as he learned to do in graduate school or the conservatory. “You see? You see?” he cries. “Here the music refers to ‘things’, you see? That’s what is meant by ‘programmatic’. The music is what is called ‘referential’. It refers to Bullfighting in Spain; The Sea; some Awakening of Cheerful Feelings upon Arrival in the Country. But in the postmodern period ... now! ...” And this pitch of excitement might waken one of the hearers momentarily, as he lifts the needle to the stereo or taps the tracks on the cd, then, after the obligatory references to Adorno, finds the track of some now dated modern or postmodern piece. “You hear? Do you hear that?” he says, parroting the glorious seminar papers of his past. “It’s life, referring to the music, don’t you see? This is anti-programmatic. Words and music do not refer to things. Rather the things of the world refer to words and music, that is, to art. The semiotic system,” he concludes triumphantly, “is turned upside down!”

Few of the students were convinced by all that, if they understood it at all. And to many, the consequent disquisition on legal language, where the actions of the world are seen in terms of the written law—this seemed something of a stretch. But it was an insight that might have shaken Richard from his reveries and changed his whole life around. “Holy fuck!” he might have said, realizing his very words brought so many evil things to be. “All this fucking cursing? My own fucking words fucking reify what they’re fucking trying only to fucking signify.” That’s what the Professor at Farmington was getting at.

If you ask around, you’ll soon find that many in New Sharon claim to have attended a similar lecture, even though few I think have been to major universities, and the subject of the remembered lectures often varies. For some the lecture concerns music, for others art, for another group theatre and literature. All versions of the story seem to be independent; at least, no one admits to getting the story of the professor or the lecture from someone else. Maybe it was the same music teacher on a gig at Farmington, then Gorham,

guest-lecturing at Bowdoin, and the people who ended up in town knew nothing of such peripatetics and assumed the stories, coming as they did from different institutions, had different sources. I suspect you'll find the same thing all over the state, but what is unique here, in New Sharon, is the bearing the analysis has on Richard. Anyone in town with the intellectual acumen to follow the intricate reasonings of the music professor should have the wherewithal to see how it all applies to their town-famous excavator. I'm frankly surprised you don't hear this connection made more often than you do.

The professor, doubtless the same one in my opinion, would always, in a great crescendo, close with a list of cases to prove his point, ending with John Cage, no matter what field he was discussing—art, music, or literature. You can see now why I believe these multiple sources are clearly one. Because Cage is not an obvious case in point here. His music frankly seems irrelevant in this context, particularly for those in this town whose experience of modern music is somewhat limited, and of Cage's work, say, know only a few of the Old Standards.

So now the music plays in the musty meeting hall. It cannot be Mozart that they play because there is nothing by Mozart that even the most sophisticated of patrons would imagine people in this region would know or appreciate. But it is a rondo, I think, or I imagine merely the word rondo itself, and therefore it must have been a classical piece of some kind, likely its conclusion. The auditorium where we sit is where they set up desks and voting booths for primaries, and just when you grasp you think the nuance of a bond or referendum, or the middle voices, say, of the music, the whole place smells like high school did. Robert leans left toward the young woman from away, or girl, it seems, this having taken place so many years ago. His lips are free from the dust of masonry. And his words are lovely like the music suddenly; or so they must be in at least one version you will hear of this.

## 8.

## ORIN B. CHASE, AMERICAN PRIMITIVE

I. Marrying

Marrying, picking, and leakage. That's really what it's all about in the antique or resale business. It is the way one finds oneself amid the rhythms of things—that slow circulation of goods and epiphenomenal retrogrades, as the scholars might have it. Marrying is what brings things into circulation; picking is what brings people into it. And leakage? That's how Orin C. Chase, whose name is as authentic as names can be, came to be in the first place.

Suppose you have a chair, and let's say Betsy Ross sat in it, or one like it, or part of this one, or maybe you have the very pen used by Sarah Orne Jewett, or another one, or ten volumes of the Encyclopédie she once owned. People want these things, or versions of them, not just things you can pick up at Renys, just like they want letters from their grandparents, no matter who wrote them, or companions to the old photos they have in some fabric-bound album, even if all they see in those photos are people they despised or some ancient relative they don't know.

You get what people want by marrying things: marrying table legs to a tabletop, odd volumes of the encyclopedia, and more daringly, the objects you have for sale to the stories of their provenance. Now most people decry this sort of thing, thinking it some kind of fraud as if each object or experience should be singular or original. As if life itself were some ass-backwards quest with a bullseye at the end. But they've never really thought about what marrying is or does or what the word original itself might mean. At a baroque music concert once, the grim players held their bows as if each were balancing a Calder mobile. So out of tune it was the audience nodded in unison: It's "the way it was," they thought, Bach himself or Handel or Telemann.

But it wasn't "the way it was" or "how it was." It was just "the way it is."

## The One-Lungers

One year, years before Dad died, struggling, as he always did, to keep anyone from grieving over this, there were five unmarried "one-lungers" stored in the garage. Dad had collected these, I suppose, to forget about whatever it was that matters to men like that—their pasts or their sons growing up in visible neglect of them. Antique engines such as these, I think, were once used in boats and in sawmills. They have one cylinder and no

transmission and that means there's no neutral. If you drive a stick shift, you know the consequences. If not, I can't really help you. That was what Dad collected, what his life was like in general, I suppose.

I've left a lot out here. About Dad and those old photos and hand-scrrawls of his childhood, pasted into an album by his heartless mother. About a boat's steering wheel connecting to the rear wheels rather than the front ones, or not having wheels at all. I'm also not comfortable with describing things in terms of what they don't have rather than in terms of what they do have. This obtuse way of proceeding is further complicated by the present case, since many of Dad's one-lungers, in need as they were of marrying, were missing things that should not be missing essentially: a valve cover, functioning pushrods, a head gasket, or engine mount.

And there we go. Someone asks you about the weather and the next thing you know, you're in the middle of some long discourse on condensation and solar rotational energy and things best seen on the Discovery Channel. There's just no getting all this right. So let's get to the most interesting feature. The most important thing about a one-lunger is that it runs in two directions, forwards and backwards, or clockwise and counterclockwise, if you're thinking of it from the point of view of the crankshaft. But if you don't even know what a stick shift is, there's little chance that means anything to you.

Say you have one of these on a boat and you're coming into a dock, maybe a little too fast, like poor Dad used to do knowing all would go wrong for him, and the engine is burbling away as these one-lungers do. To stop most boats, you "throw it in reverse," which is tantamount to braking, but since there is no transmission with this engine, you have to do something else. You first shut it down completely by cutting off the gas—then the instant it seems to be settling to a stop, you give the throttle a lift. If all goes right, there will be a brief moment of suspense, then suddenly, BAM, you'll catch the piston in just the right position and the "whole shebang," as Mother used to say, will run in reverse. The boat stops right at the dock. Or sometimes. When things go exceptionally well, and they really rarely do.

## II. Picking

The first step for initiates in the resale business is what is called "picking" and picking requires the expansiveness of mind characteristic of all those who truly love this business or truly love anything at all. You have to be open to what just turns up.

Picking is what you do if you're trying to get a little summer money or you're intrigued by the old nautical stuff lying around in Dad's garage or attic that he has never bothered to explain to you—the sextant, the half-hull models, the un-perused magazines, the





It was a mile-long convoy of draftees, sweating on a hot summer's day in canvas covered army trucks. Now convoys are slow, and we have as much time as we need to describe it. So before I tell you of all this, it's best that I return to the subject of old engines and spark advance. It's something, I think, you need to know.

A spark advance refers to where the position of the piston is when the spark fires, and it's the reason those one-lungers were able to stop their forward (or clockwise) motion and run in reverse (or counterclockwise). It refers to where the piston is in its reciprocal motion when the spark actually fires, igniting the gas, not "top-dead-center," TDC as it's called, but before that, "advanced" as it were. Now let's forget about the abstruse formula for the expansion of gasses and say simply, if the spark is set incorrectly, too near TDC, say, "retarded" as it were (if we can still say that), you can get what is called "pinging" or even some glorious backfiring. We've all experienced it. No need to get caught up with the mechanics of retardation here. Let's get on with it.

Let's start by asking someone to imitate riding a motorcycle, the key motif of this story, or just envision it. You'll note when someone is pretending to ride one and revs the engine up, they'll twist both hands, not just one. People do this even though on contemporary motorcycles, only one of the hand grips is functional—the right one, which serves as the accelerator. The parodist twists both hands because on the older machines, say, a classic Indian from the forties when this silly parody developed, the left handgrip was for the spark advance.

Now most of these high modernist bikes of the 20s and 30s were two cylinder, so there wasn't a chance of one actually reversing itself if you screwed up the spark advance. It's obvious but not easy to explain why this is, so just trust me on this. But bad things often happened, as happened to, say, the last production motorcycle I know that had such a manual advance—a 1967 Harley Sportster XLCH to which bad things always happened. And finally, I have reached the beginning of my story.

A friend you can call an old hippie was riding one of these in 1971 on the Maine Turnpike, having come down adventure-free, incredibly, from his crappy apartment in Hyde Park in Bath; or maybe he was approaching Wells or even on Route 495 further south in Massachusetts itself. And it may as well have been an antique one-lunger, stuck in a motorcycle frame, since Harleys in those days were manufactured pretty much as they had been forty years earlier, and I do not mean that in a good sense. In any case, he passes one of those army convoys you used to see lumbering down the turnpike about 35 miles an hour, as if they were in a time warp driving in a column on some farm road in Belgium or Brittany amid the accents of Flanders rather than those of Arcadia in central Maine. This has a few jeeps with humorless officers in sun-glasses, a cache or two of weaponry, but it's

mostly truckloads of draftees probably on their way to Ft. Devens, and as he passes in his hippie hair and horizontally striped sleeves, there's a lot of what we'll call back-and-forth going on. Nothing like a fuck-you or anything, because at that time, you didn't have the antipathy between military and civilians you have today. All the draftees on the truck knew that but for the grace of God and a lottery number or a doctor's note, my friend on the Harley would have been in the trucks with his head shaven just like the rest of them, and they would have bounced around and smoked weed or played cards or exchanged stories of the sexual prowess of distant relatives. Maybe we are, we or they might abstractly think, or did in those days, essentially interchangeable.

Maybe so.

Yet the irrevocable fact, that Heideggerian "thrownness" of the thing if you will, was that he was the one on the Harley, and they were the ones stuck in the hot olive trucks. That gave him an edge, and pretty much, every truck in the convoy got an earful as he passed.

It took maybe fifteen minutes to pass that convoy, from back to front, from the hindmost truck to the foremost jeep, and maybe a mile or ten miles past the last jeep with the scowling officers, and feeling all "Easy Rider" about the whole thing, he felt a shudder, and all he knew was that he had to hit the clutch, which means "disengage" it. And who knows whether he had "gotten a little gay" and maybe retarded the spark at full throttle to blast them all with a final throaty bass tone or shotgun blast of a backfire a few miles back. But the bike rolled now to an ignominious stop with smoke pouring out of the exhaust. And sure, he went through the whole pointless routine, trying to start it by retarding the spark again, and kicking the kick starter, and finally taking a spark plug out, and even though he could see the valve stem all broken and driven deep into the top of the piston, he still, absurdly, gave the kick starter another kick, just in case this was a dream of some kind and he had a pair of penises or the whole army convoy would turn out to be a circus parade of elephants.

And there's no need to detail what it was like for him, standing on the roadway with his hippie hair in the breeze, as the fifty or so trucks of draftees he had so abused passed him, now in proper order, front to back, in the smoke from the engine.

### III. Leakage

When you go to a flea market or antiques fair or book fair, a lot of the action has happened before the doors open for the public. Before civilians get involved, things just circulate.

It's rather like that chapter I imagined entitled "Yard Sales at Matinicus." Matinicus is a small remote island way off the Maine coast, now pretty famous since the shootings there, and back when it was rather quaint, that is, before it became a haven for drug-taking, the locals used to have yard sales in the summer. It was a black hole out there—material came in (thus the car dump in the middle of the island or the cars driven over the southern cliff by teenagers), but nothing ever went out. And what was there, "in the system" as it were, used to circulate in yard sales, all held with high seriousness, all attended with eagerness, and all ending in great disappointment for everyone involved. Everything sold in these island sales had been owned by everyone else at least once, and within a few years of attending these events, all you found was stuff that had been in and through your own kitchen years earlier.

So when you get in this business, one of the things you have to start thinking about is "leakage." You can't, say, just exchange your screenplays with other coffee-shop screenwriters and expect anything to come of it. You have to get your stuff out of the system, as it were. Because if you get all caught up in the circulation of goods and the excitement of great finds and deal-making, you end up like a yard-saler on Matinicus with a bunch of crap in your attic that has already been there twice before.

One of the great leakages concerned the works of an American primitive named Orin D. Chase. At one of the fairs, someone, I'll call him Eustice Smith, had boxes claimed to be from a successful picking operation, but which were more likely obtained in a complex but profitless swap at the same show. These contained old glass photographic plates, and they were marvelous in and of themselves—plates from the 1890s and up until the 1930s. The photos showed Boston Harbor, Gloucester and Salem, and finally the southern coast of Maine itself around Wells, York, and Kennebunk. Many of the Maine shots were barely recognizable from the long views of ocean and a beach cottage or two on points now crowded with summerhomes. But you could easily match places like the Narragansett Hotel on Kennebunk with the images in old postcards and histories. If you were like me, and had once wandered those summer beaches when they seemed (but could not have been) deserted, you could remember them from your childhood.

Most were "dry-plate negatives," a process developed in 1871, and there were even a few examples of plates made by what is known as "wet plate collodion" photography, an elaborate chemical process that resulted in a glass plate positive. In the wet-plate process, the photographer had to prepare and develop the plates on-site, using a portable darkroom, and he must have looked like the snake-oil salesman, trundling along in his wagon, in The Wizard of Oz, with other itinerate salesmen of the day. You can just

imagine what the bad roads of Maine looked like for a Boston-based photographer in those days, when so many summerfolk came up by steamer.

The thing about most of these plates? They were really really good, even by the standards of modern photography. Unlike a modern photograph, the shutter speed for these is slow, and that means the depth of field is extraordinary, far greater than what you get on a modern camera and far greater than what even the human eye can produce. It is comparable to the infinite focal depth of a pinhole camera, but the images are of course far superior. If you can just visualize for a moment some pre-Raphaelite painting, say, by William Holman Hunt, or a street scene in Balzac, you'll understand these prints. In Hunt's giant paintings, each detail is painted with precision; everything is in focus, no matter where it is on the canvas. It's not like a camera lens, which forces a viewer to look at a particular spot against a background where everything is slightly blurred. And it's not like an Old Master painting, where a school of apprentices slaps on the background after the master has done his exquisite work with the faces and hands. In the Hunt painting, as in the descriptive passages in Balzac, you can look everywhere, and when you do, what you see is always perfect. Such art is not thus an image of the world, imitating what you see. It is the world. But here, maybe I'm getting a bit dithyrambic and my own enthusiasms are showing through.

Presenting the world itself, unmediated by concerns of focus, the glass-plate technique is ideal, as it happened, for vast seascapes shot over Boston Harbor or in those rarer prints, that great sweep of beach in Kennebunk where I can still smell the sea-moss that used to dry there in the sun. This is the sort of thing you just have to have—a picker's dream, perhaps, however you imagine it. And pretty soon, after a few car trips and bartering and exchanges and maybe even some cash, they were all in your garage, or Dad's garage it was, with the unmarried one-lungers. And since your kids' tuitions and other bills don't leave you the luxury of just circulating "have to have" stuff around, Orin E. Chase, American Primitive, was at the moment of his conception.

You could simply sell the whole lot of them, but you'd likely become enamored of a lot of crap owned by the guy you sold them to; you'd end up with a garageful of other stuff, but without a dime to show for it and what's to come of that? To convert these plates to a profitable business meant not selling them but reproducing them: you don't kill the chicken and sell the parts to tourists like Mrs. Berry did; you collect the eggs.

Now fortunately, you or was it Dad? and your wife, some wife, work for a big insurance company. And so many great artists of America—Wallace Stevens, Charles Ives—so many have one foot, you might say, in the business of insurance. Perhaps that's because in this business money is made not when things actually happen (a catastrophe or the like),

but when they don't. So when times are good, that is, when nothing is happening, you can always find someone, semi-retired or simply indolent, who can help you here—say, a guy who is a photographer in his spare time, which is mostly all the time. And you can now make modern prints from these glass-plate negatives, matte them and sell or trade them to others who can in turn distribute them to shops and galleries all over Boston and up the coast to Maine in the antique strip around Wells. The plates start leaking out, you see, or some version of them does, and the money starts leaking in.

Of course everyone knows or should know that what you're peddling isn't the real thing exactly, not a real century-old photograph. But then, that glass-plate of Boston Harbor isn't the real thing either, not Boston Harbor itself. If you want reality, you have to make it yourself: photographic prints from that early plate—allusions, if you will, to the originals the artist himself might have envisioned if the technology had been there for him to produce them. What each customer then gets is a unique print, unalterably real, carefully numbered in a series, like the prints of an engraving or lithograph. Not Wells Beach, and not a photo of it. But the thing itself, ipsissimum, as it were: "Wells Beach, 1915, series 5, no. 12."

All that remained was to rid these plates of their insidious anonymity. Now for photographs like these, there's little documentation about who did what and when. You might run into names like "Jones," who may well have done some photographs back then, or "Rand," who certainly did. And easy though it would have been to increase their already prodigious output, why risk stealing from these noble names? It seemed finally the prudent thing to do to attribute the whole collection to an otherwise unknown Orin G. Chase, and let the living heirs of Jones and Rand be damned.

For a while, you would simply write in pencil on the matte "attr. to Orin P. Chase, 1915" (which of course, became true in the very writing of it), and, once Chase had gained some notoriety, even in these small circles, you could simply say "Orin T. Chase, Boston Harbor, 1907." These prints began to sell like hotcakes, whatever hotcakes are, or to beat the band, as Mother used to say, whatever that meant. Because anyone who took a liking to the stuff, and everyone did, would eventually want more, not one Chase print, but all of them. And it didn't matter whether it was #207, or ser. 6, #14, or the same number repeated on all of them, or finally how Chase-like the thing was to begin with. Pretty soon, you barely needed to glance at the numbers in the tuition bills you paid.

You would think that older customers would like these best. Here were the images of their childhoods they could still recognize. They loved these things, those old coots did, and would come to the booth in Quincy Market or in Wells and oo and ah and put their

fingerprints all over them, and wonder if maybe it was Aunt Jane playing with herself beneath the umbrella, staring at Orin V's camera lens.

But the old coots ooin and ahing never bought them, since their attics were already full of stuff like this. Only the young people seemed to buy them, as if to invent a past they never experienced. It's not a matter of forgetting. Why, you've already told so many stories and reconstructed the images of the past so many times in your mind it's all pretty much indelible. What you don't have is what precedes those memories: that emptiness, something told to you by your parents, and you think, maybe if you could just fill that void, then life would have some continuity to it, instead of all these staccato memories and their increasing number of gaps. Maybe you can find in the old Chase print a primary for which all life experience is a secondary—past, present, and future. And that's why you buy these prints of the old days, with each detail in such perfect focus in the carefully numbered series in the grey mattes.

But life intrudes, it seems, as it always does. And it isn't just the neglected one-lungers or the ass-backwards history of attributions. You find with the kids off to college, you come home and instead of hanging out with old army stuff and making love with each other or just eating some nice steak, you have a stack of orders that needs filling and mattes to number in some abstruse sequence, and the next thing you know, you're up at 2 AM dealing with them, falling into bed and up by 6 to go to work in the morning. And who needs that kind of reality?

So one day, you get an offer for the whole business. And that offer you translate immediately into the Cape Dory 33, the best sailing boat in the harbor, whose nameboard "Orin Z. Chase" is still on your wall in the house in Bath, where there is no longer a single matted Chase print to be found. Not hanging on the wall, not stored in the garage. The fact is, you'd rather sail in the fine-lined hull—oh, that fungible Chase fellow, someone once had said—than stare at the brilliant but too-often-reprinted examples of his work.

There's a catalogue of Chase somewhere around the house. But it is surely incomplete. If you want more of his work, you'll have to check the articles and notes readily available on the internet.

INTERLUDE:

IN THE VOTING LINE: THE COMMERCE OF BRIDGED COMMUNITIES

I. Traffic Stop: A Dialog

When he stood in line to vote that morning, or it may have been both of us that day, half the town was missing. Not those at work. Not them, for you couldn't say "missing" of a CMP dispatcher, or Diana driving a bus full of school children, or some poor bastard preparing class for them. Nor was it the fishermen, up at dawn anyway, or those who had to make the long drive to Renys in Gardiner or to Newcastle. Those who worked the voting booths also couldn't be described as missing, even if they weren't voting today. Nor could you include the retirees, for you can't expect someone who can barely breathe or who is pissing through a tube to be up and about at this hour.

The cold can trick you on such matters, he thought, stamping his feet in imitation of himself, cold in the makeshift deer stands as the frost worked through his soles.

Now you take Bruce, he thought. Bruce had been up and about a week after surgery, driven home in the pickup by his mother, both now dead. Bruce even showed us the scar on his arm as proof (of what? he thought) and if it hadn't been for the blood clot or whatever it was, he would have been out of the hospital the second day after surgery, he said. Bruce too never stood in a voting line, even when alive, because after that, rather than tending his meticulously ordered garden, with its straight rows of tomatoes and all the dirt screened so that the carrots grew in perfect symmetry, after that he had "let himself go," as they say, although no one really did say that with exactly those words. Bruce moved into what must have once been a guest house, then into the main house when his mother died, and they say he just watched videos or "surfed the web," back when that was extraordinary. He got fat; he didn't change his shirt; and his teeth went all bad, and although he maintained his jocularity when you saw him, or when he chased Cassandra down, you could be sure it was just a matter of time. Bruce didn't really count for not being there either, as he spent the last four years of life home on his computer, with the fastest DSL connection in town. To get the four car lengths from the top of his driveway to his mailbox, he drove.

Then those, he thought, at college, home for the summer. How would they be counted on a November day? There was a party held for the girls of Intervale Rd., just turned 21 or 22 it was, right across the causeway, and the music had been so loud that day he finally just resigned himself to sitting on the porch and listening to the thumps of the

bass notes work their way through the trees. There had been rows of cars parked in the fields next to the gaudy tent. “The only ones more than two years old,” he had once quipped, “were forty years old and restored to perfection.” But Bill I think it was just looked at him quizzically. Was that because numb-ass Bill was thinking well why couldn’t there have been, say, a ten-year-old Mercedes in the field, or even an old Ford pickup like his, or even worse? Or was that dumb-ass wondering how anyone could have investigated the field so closely and how remarkable it would be if it were really true that there were no cars there from the 80s or 90s?

Some day, he thought conclusively, those of us from here would put an end to all of this. You wouldn’t have to turn away when Ralph signed the registry, because who in town would say “Why Ralph doesn’t live here any more, his house now razed by outsiders, and thus has no business meddling in these matters,” when some lawyer or banker from Bangor could just walk in and within a month get his name on the voting list? Why Ralph had been here all his working life, taking over his father’s business. And you wouldn’t have to study the way he tied the loops in the laces of his left boot that morning, just as he was doing now, when the guy from California had registered to vote at the Grange Hall without a peep of complaint from anyone. And despite the California IDs strewn across the table, Ruth the Registrar had just said “Of course he lives here. I see him jogging every day past the Post Office.” That was that. And if the political situation hadn’t so deteriorated, that too would have been an amusing tale to tell whenever he got the chance, and he could have added: “And that was one more friggin’ vote for the Democrats.”

Some day, on that grand day, if you wanted to amount to anything, you would just have to get up at town meeting and state your name and history straight up like Buddy did years ago, and if you couldn’t drag your wheelchair in or your Prius wouldn’t fit in the parking lot or you had a meeting with the CEO of your company or you couldn’t drag your butt out of the sack of the guy you were cuckolding, that would be just too bad. And no one would have to freeze their ass in a frost like this one, keeping their eyes cast down from their neighbors’ eyes, with half the town missing on a cold November day.

He stamped his feet in the voting line; it was as bad as deer stands years ago.

But I of course hear none of this.

*It was the traffic ticket story that most galled me, I was thinking at the time. The things one never gets in order. Years into the future, told by people you never knew, retold back then told to you again, with the names changed as if the protagonists themselves were interchangeable. Listen to what I heard in two short sentences:*

Jimmy, you know, got a ticket once.

He was driving 55 miles per hour down the straight stretch ...

In reverse!

*Nicely turned, I thought—the particulars just write themselves, you might say. Off to Bailey's Store, maybe, where the lethal curve that killed your best friend Alan Wright in high school was finally taken out by contractors. The sheriff used to park in the store lot, you could say, ticketing anyone speeding past the 30 MPH sign where the old lethal road began again. You could talk about the house where Jimmy started from and retell the old story about Jimmy threatening the guy with a shovel, as if a shovel could do anything but dig your own grave, as it were. You could add the many stories of AA, although Jimmy hadn't liked it much, and had only gone to the meetings ordered by the court.*

*And then if there was time, you might add what I'll call *The Myth of the Menstrual Machine*, associated with his hard working mother, now what you'd call a single mom, and if you were lascivious or perceptive enough you might now see the tough and sexy woman hidden in that schoolmarm's frame. Some pubescent friend, Gene it was, told of sitting up next to her where she had placed him for discipline and "hearing it," in his mythology. "Hearing," he said, the "motor running," not I think in metaphor. And we all forgot our sisters or immodest moms at home, or the girls we knew excused from gym during their time of the month—all of us too damn numb in our perplexity to think to critique such things, and it was years before the *Menstrual Machine* finally faded from our consciousness. Tough and long-suffering, Mrs. B. did not deserve a much-loved son like that.*

*But the real story, of course, was nothing like the most familiar variants. There was a certain crass simplicity to it all, not involving great stupidity or eccentricity but pure exigency, you might say. It's a function of the car Jimmy owned when the beer ran out, its bad transmission worse each day, and then so bad that finally there were just two gears left—second and reverse. And you could sense the error of the short-quipped narrative immediately. You don't just slap that old column-shift up to reverse and head off to Bailey's, arm draped over the passenger seat and twisting around trying to steer the whole ungainly thing like the lobster boats owned by his neighbors. Even sober, you'll never even reach that former curve where Alan died.*

*So now the boring bos'n's truth is out. There simply is no "waling in reverse down the straight stretch." Jimmy backed out of the driveway, crossing both lanes of traffic, barely missing the sheriff himself, maybe on his way to lunch break at Estes, and then nudged the car forward in second, easy to do on the small fallen rise there (curious phrase!) and roared off, as he always did, in second gear (the only one he had) when he finally got the clutch out. And by the time the sheriff had found a place to turn around in safety and catch up to him, maybe he was doing forty, or maybe fifty or maybe one hundred and fifty.*

*The point was, it didn't matter worth a damn what his speed was, nor even which way the car was facing, and the sheriff finally sputtered "What the fuck is wrong with you?" And misinterpreting the whole thing, Jimmy said, "Well hell, all I got is second and reverse." And you can see how the whole tedious incident just took on a life of its own in the telling.*

Jimmy got a ticket once.

For fifty-five on the straight stretch ...

*But there's hardly cause to go over it again.*

## II. Bridge

The reasons for the reticence of the voting line that day were simpler than those we had imagined. No one in the thick of things, no one who stood with us, could have a fair perspective on what was happening. It didn't come down to particulars, even though, as you can see, the only way we could think of it that day was through particulars: Diana and Bruce, and the kid from California, the details of a traffic stop. And this, as you can see, got us nowhere. A more reasonable view would be that particulars had nothing to do with it. In the end, a cynic might extremely say, every one of these pisshole communities is interchangeable with all others, and the sooner people resign themselves to that, the better off we'll all be.

You have, you see, two main sections of land in this town, just as in so many other towns in the state. These form an icon of all other splits: rich and poor, local and away, old and young. The two sections here and elsewhere are often due to complex histories of gerrymandering, I suppose, and sometimes just to the topography of the land, or maybe accidents of road construction, or occasionally, like Dover-Foxcroft, say, some wheedling act of politics. If you open a Delorme map or Google it, for God's sake, you'll see it everywhere in Maine. To get from, say, Town-section A to Town-section B, you must inevitably pass the geographic center of town, which is often simply a theoretical point like that pinprick in Kansas, the center or mid-point of America, whatever that might mean, where, unsurprisingly, no one a century ago had the wherewithal to put a Grange Hall or Community Center or any other building where you actually might gather to speak or to vote. Often in Maine, you will find a bridge there at this mathematically central point—one bridge might be older than any of the residents themselves, another built so recently people still grumble about it. In such "bridge" communities, there is no other way to get from section A ("West Whatever" as it was known) to section B ("Whatever Proper," say), unless you want to go way out of your way to Waterville or Augusta, or Presque Isle for that matter and spend the whole day on the road. And from the most remote section of West Whatever to the most remote plot of land in Whatever Proper is about a forty-minute

drive, or a 25-minute drive even with the new bridge. This is not that rare a thing in Maine, with its wandering rivers through hyphenated towns inland and prickly peninsulae on the coast. And why towns should form like that or anyone should grumble about the bridge that makes it possible is beyond me.

So what happens, inevitably, is that, say, ... oh Christ, you know what? I may as well just call it East Bumfuck the way Julie calls these places ... say, this part of town has a school and Bumfuck Proper has a school, and one of them needs to be closed because all the kids are moving off or going to private school or whatever they do, or half the town is geriatric or infertile, and then there is some big squabble about which school will be closed, and you begin to hear these old and boring tales “Oh I used to walk to school with Jim, here, and it was there I put down roots, and without them, why we might just as well give up the town to the fags and the retirees.”

It really has nothing to do with the back-to-landers, with malfunctioning plumbing and the retirees in big shingled houses, and the same-sex couples and woodsmen with their piles of cordwood meticulously tarped at 48 inches in height. And nothing whatsoever to do with Diana or Bruce or some guy in old suede on his way to pick the tomato worms from the vines at the Common Ground Fair, or some old lady sucking her oxygen from a canister while she waits for her nurses in a subdivision of Bumfuck Proper, just outside of Bath.

It’s just that these obvious divisions, East and West Bumfuck or Bumfuck Proper, rich and poor, and local and outsider, and those with kids and those without and those who worked and those who had lost their jobs in the recession or those who have respectable jobs like logging and those who don’t, like store clerks in Auburn, say, the A-section of L.A., or those who work here and those who work away or those who attend town meetings and those who don’t or those who buy their food at the Vegetable Corner and those who look for the close-out crackers at Renys, and those who got old and those who haven’t, or those whose children ended up in jail and those who have none, or those who cuckolded the locals and those who pretended not to notice, or those who died in the accident in 1964 and those who heard the ambulance siren change its pitch in the distance—it’s just that on simple matters of yes and no, like most ballots are, these divisions do not always “make up” quite logically, like, say, they “made up” in the old days when true Bumfuckians didn’t have to deal with the people of East or West Bumfuck except to despise them. And the rifts got so overlaid and tangled, that finally you had nothing but the incoherent musings of a man in the voting line, wearing a hunting jacket with its potshard pattern of black and red that hadn’t been used for hunting since that day in 1976 when he had gone along with his

heavily-accented friends, and they had all gotten drunk and cold and it finally rained so hard he had barely staggered home by midnight, leaving the .30-.30 rusting on the roadway.

When we saw the numbers of the final tally, we all doubtless felt the same way: “That many,” we would think. Who would imagine “that many” people packed into a town like this. And we would forget, momentarily, whether we were talking about the bridge town of today, or the ones shown in those old maps reproduced by Delorme, with the tiny squares depicted on the roadways representing the houses. Maybe there was a number 638, 1638, 16380. You stare at that and try to understand what it means in relation to the landscapes you pass every day. What does the 6 mean? the 38? What does it mean when you plot those against the tree-less landscapes seen in all the old photographs from around 1900? Those fields now buried in the dark modern canopy of trees seen in the aerial photographs or by anyone flying into Portland?

And you think of that land and the numbers there, and you could line all those people up at the Grange Hall or Recreation Hall or Community Center or whatever the town decided to call it in the last, invective-laden town meeting, and count them forwards and back, and you can almost see the old photo with its grand expanse of fields and a tiny line of voters shuffling toward the doorway, as the unseen waves beat the shore and the rain soaks through the marshes.

### III. Rototillers in Winter

This is a story I often tell to my friends whose houses I can get to only by crossing the bridge. In winter, I say, my garage was open to my neighbors. Or rather, it was Mother who should get the credit. And it wasn't that she left it open, it's just that when you live as we (or I should say she) did in those days, that is, on the end of a gravel road, you are really subject to all those you bathe in the summer dust from the gravel as you drive the road to whatever it is you do in the morning. Everyone on the road knows who you are and who visits you and all imagine what your sexual habits are, even if they involve only women from away whom they have never seen. They know which of your doors is locked, where you keep the spare key, and of course, the point of this story, the storage space of your garage.

You would think that once a family starts thinning out, a garage would too, and that I would say something like this: “Finally, after Mother died, there was only one car left there, and maybe a trailer with something not quite usable on top of it.” But the neighbors had made inroads here, and the garage became a winter home for exotic summer equipment or sometimes malfunctioning winter equipment owned by them. There were lawn mowers, and wood-chippers, and parts of snowmobiles as well that occasionally “summered over” there. There were rototillers, and edgers, and dirt bikes, and sometimes

spare chain saws (never the best ones). There were inevitable bicycles, and had this tradition survived, I'd have a garage full of kayaks and half of those would have developed intricate bends and shapes as neighbors debated how they should be safely supported out of the water.

It's discomfiting to enumerate these things, because as I tell the story, so many other crucial things—far more important to the story than these are—simply cannot be so easily named. Not the names of the people, not the companies that came in to exploit the town and caused the whole thing in the first place, even the town itself, which I have chosen finally to obscure through some dark parody of town names in Maine. You can see the hostility, even in the simplest of things like the opening narrative—a querulous old man or two of us standing silent in the frost on an early Tuesday in November.

Suppose you went to the hardware store, and, since your political views were well known, suppose you simply repeated them. The hardware store owner would then stare you right in the eye, and you had to feel for the stress he felt, and he would say “Goddamn it, I told them. The Allen Road Hardware Store does not have a position on this issue. That's what I said. And as for what I think, that's no one's business. But the business, I mean my business, which is not ‘nobody's business,’ you know, the Allen Road Hardware Store does not have a position.”

Everyone would then nod and assume, just as I did, that as customers, we had some deep affinity with him, and finally, of course, when all was said and done, we knew he agreed with us, although “us” of course includes people with completely different political and social opinions. And on the days when all of this seemed so critical, you felt you finally had to stand up and do something, and not just rant and write letters to the editor in the next town's newspaper, and if that meant pulling your money from certain businesses, why that was what a good man would have to do. Thus what my neighbor was saying made a certain hideous sense to me, even though it would never be my money that would have to be pulled from him.

But even here, I find it difficult to get it right: the point is, everyone already thought the way they would think in the future. That's better, I think.

And that's why you couldn't really tell the tale with the particulars, because you'd find when you did, that some joke you had made to what you thought was a group of sympathetic listeners would come back to you, and the next thing you know you'd have some neighbor on the phone, I'll call him Gus, since there's no one by that name here anyway, and there would be an exchange of threats and insults, most or all by Gus, and he would talk about your drinking habits, and your lineage and education, and this would not really be an exchange at all, because the best thing to do in such situations with Gus is just

to use a lot of “sirs” and apologies and wait for the whole thing to blow over. And you’d realize listening to this crazed invective that it really had nothing to do with what you’d said, but something about one of those clashes—East or West Bumfuck or whatever it was, and Bumfuck Proper, rich/poor, local/from away, the money you made, who you had for homeroom in high school—something or other, and the only way to avoid such things was to speak in insistent abstractions like the Allen Road Hardware Store owner used to do. Because trying to sort this all out through the particulars—that is, the names and faces and histories—you may as well leave all that to the local Historical Society.

So each spring, being now “from away,” I would come home for the summer and the first thing I would do is open the garage and take inventory, and one day I got there just as Bruce was hauling the rototiller away, and I think that was before his surgery and before his teeth went really bad, the year I fell in love perhaps with Eloise, and you’d think he would just take a pass at my garden, as he had done one spring in the past. We could then have had a pact of sorts—one winter storage, two hours of rototilling. But to Bruce, these were separate things. There was no real commerce here, but rather a series of autonomous kindnesses. My own: offering the garage, unwittingly, without a word of repayment. And his generous, and completely unrewarded, working on my garden. It’s rather like an unbridged town, I suppose, but I’m not sure how that is.

The spring following the whole bad business of the voting lines, all those enumerated things in my garage were gone. And I must add, even though it makes the narration somewhat more complex, I had experienced such a thing earlier, well before the “bad business” of the referendum. One spring, years ago, I arrived home much later than usual, hoping to avoid, I think, the slow progression of Mother’s last illness; and most of those once-stored things had been put back in use. There were no rototillers or edgers or chain saws or broken-down lawn mowers, and only a few engine parts and pieces of old trailers. Perhaps this seems irrelevant, and maybe I could have simply omitted this detail or rewritten it for convenience, but it has some bearing here, because it explains why I was unruffled, as it were, opening the garage the spring after the vote. That prominent though empty space was eerily familiar to me and I had no thought that it was in any way related to the events of the previous November.

Months passed, or maybe a year, before I suspected what that vacancy had meant. Maybe one of the versions of the story of these stored things I had concocted at some party or other in the other section of town had gotten back here to West Bumfuck itself, through some laughing ex-hippie or Libertarian wolfing down the zucchini. In any case, the garage was empty now for good.

In my version of the story told in East Bumfuck, one day my father or better still my mother, who simply wanted to be left alone, had perfunctorily said he or she “didn’t give a hoot” if they put a lawn mower in the garage, and that in West Bumfuck, “not giving a hoot” was a contract of sorts, and this passed down not only past my father’s death, but past hers as well and on to me, and God knows who else might have inherited it, if a lot of things had gone differently.

The point is, I would insist, amid the home-grown turnips, the point is, there was no way, asked directly, I would have said “Keep your goddam crap in your own fucking garage,” speaking then as Richard, the foulest tongue in Franklin County, might have spoken. But perhaps for them, I add (and now I’m talking about my neighbors), to them the overt contracting just wasn’t worth the risk, and certainly it wasn’t worth upsetting any neighborly relations, which seemingly would last forever, despite the strokes and heart attacks, the belligerent death threats and the like, and gardens overgrown with weeds.

So I didn’t realize the consequences of what had happened until the spring after this, and even the spring after that, when the garage remained empty, and most of the neighbors started waving at me again when I drove my familiar car past their houses and filled their lawns with gravel dust, and then I could tell the story, although still only in East Bumfuck, and I would get all up in the role I assumed for them and say “Why they sure showed me!” and you know, you could just see them sitting around their damn open fires in the evening and they would say: “Oh yes, we sure showed that sonofabitch. See if we put our ATVs in his friggin’ garage again.”

Well there.

## 9.

## OPENING NIGHT, 1999

Linda Jane did not wait for the alarm any more. She could chart the season by the gain or loss of the sliver of grey in the window. It would be a long day, and there would be no curling up by the fire with a good book, if she had ever done such a thing. Even if all worked out well today, she knew she had had enough of Belfast.

Few suspected what would happen that night, and it would be a cold day in hell before Fred Wiseman was welcomed back to town again. You'd think anyone in Belfast with the sophistication to know what a film-maker does or even what a film-maker is would know enough to check Titicut Follies, or think back to their days in film class or psychology class at Colby or at Orono and remember the strange and bizarre technique of the films of Fred Wiseman. The silence. The unnarrated score-free scenes. The starkness. The relentless ten-minute takes. But no one ever thinks, I guess, watching Titicut Follies, it could be they themselves before the camera.

Linda Jane woke up that day in March knowing she had had enough. To keep her in Belfast would take more than a few moments of celebrity for her friends, the town itself, and maybe herself, if her house were caught in a passing shot. For despite the new organic market, despite the number of pleasure boats in the harbor, and despite the newcomers dedicated to building the town up again, driving Route 3 to Augusta with an uncooperative kid in the back on the way to quality time with Dad every other weekend—it was all too much. As for the hoodlum kids in the High School, they were finally (or was it “merely”?) ineradicable.

Do you not know Titicut Follies? It's something you do not need to see. You can just watch fifteen minutes or so of the film we're talking about here, Frederick Wiseman, Belfast, Maine, 1999. Titicut Follies is about a mental institution of the kind common in America in mid-century. Just think about the legends of, say, Pineland, where many of the black residents of Malaga Island in Casco Bay ended up when the state “cleaned up the island” just before World War I. Filthy, desperate, hopeless, declared to be insane or mentally incompetent or simply retarded, depending on what diction you adopt. There are no apt adjectives for Pineland or its residents. And did the good citizens of Belfast in the late last century really think that when Fred Wiseman came to town, down from his summer place in Northport, tucked in among the tiny multi-colored Victorians built by the Methodists, it would not be Titicut Follies all over again? Like Pineland, say, where the least fortunate exiles from Malaga Island were sent a century ago; all that right here on Route 1, with the traffic noise in the background, and not in some remote region of Gray.

Or perhaps they had never heard of Wiseman's Follies, but saw only the romance of the camera crew, and perhaps to them Pineland itself was just a "3000-acre working farm, diverse business campus and educational and recreational facility," as described on the website.

It didn't take a four-hour film for her. Depending on how she would tell the story, Fred Wiseman was hardly more than the last straw.

Wiseman's film opens with a mischievously traditional shot. You see a lobsterman working on the water, on the most picturesque of mornings. The color is subdued, so subdued you will later remember this entire film as black-and-white. It is filmed on what appears to be the grimmest of October or November days, right in the midst of this most beautiful season in Maine.

If you are familiar with work in the lobster industry, you will be slightly uneasy, since the boat is old and the lobsterman is old, and there is something tired and hopeless about the whole thing. But maybe, you think, this means to invoke nostalgia for the old days, and the pride of working on the water and the nobility of it all, that is, the "cultural life of the community," as the blurb on the back of the DVD claims. This is Maine, after all, and Belfast has a proud place in maritime history, although I am not certain myself what I mean by "proud" in this context.

And that is the last you will see of the independent fishermen of Belfast in Wiseman's film. You cut to a shot of grooming, something you know best from nature films of primates; half-way through the take, you realize that what you are seeing is not the promiscuous bonobos but a social worker picking lice from a client's hair. Instead of proud workers on the fishing boats, you see workers in the famous Stinson Canning factory, where the soul-destroying work of fish-packing takes place; you see the incongruous potato processing plant, way down here in coastal Maine, and it is only an accident of history that you do not see the chicken factory, which in the old days tossed its waste into the Passagassawakeag River to be carried out into Belfast Bay then out into the West Penobscot and past the grand summer homes of Camden and Rockport and perhaps in sight of Wiseman's summer home in Northport. Instead of the lovingly restored homes in the center of town, you see tenements and the trailers of Swanville, and instead of the testimony of builders and restorers, a nurse talks to a three-pack-a-day smoker immobilized in his wheel-chair. A social worker listens to incoherent narratives of a client; she surely knows she can do nothing about the pregnancies and beatings and poverty. There will be no relief from scenes such as these.

The Colonial Movie Theater in Belfast is now a three-screen theater, the only true movie theatre in town, old, as these things go, and advertised on its website as “Authentic Downtown Movie Palace.” In the film, there is a wonderful shot of it, beautifully set and lit, and it was at the Colonial Theatre that the premiere of Wiseman’s Belfast, Maine took place. The whole town turned out. Well, not the entire town, of course, but you know what I mean by that.

Some knew, or had been warned, that Wiseman’s final cut had been four hours, and it was not impossible, they reasoned, that their ten-minute interview with Mr. Wiseman, or the generous tour they gave him of their neighborhood or home’s interior with its lovingly restored staircase and out-sized balustrades, was included. Why should such footage end in the ignominy of the cutting-room floor? Few in the audience suspected how radical Wiseman’s editing would be, “highly manipulative” though he himself would term it. He had been filming everywhere, and there wasn’t a person in town who wasn’t familiar in some way with what seemed for a while like the ubiquitous film crew. What Wiseman had was 110 hours of footage, and this massive, four-hour film, which in some scenes is crushing to endure, is only a small part of it.

Linda Jane had had enough. And this despite the small early twentieth-century house she had restored to a state of near grace, with its clean walls and hardwood floors and a garage you could finally park your car in without being terrified of falling debris from overhead or a raccoon challenging your very right to be there. This despite the picket fence on the lawn, with its intricate history, known in detail only to a previous owner, now repainted, and despite the now civil relations with the neighbors. And yes, you could now walk your dog to the beach with only a small series of incidents with local cats, and there were no Rottweilers or irate locals in nightwear to disturb you.

The restaurants had improved, even in her time here, and you could now buy home-baked goods downtown. The wharf had gotten rid of almost all traces of the chicken factory and the Stinson’s Cannery no longer dominated the working waterfront. Even her son seemed content here, although she worried he might one day waste his life on drugs and complaint or move to Freeport with his father, and there would be no more long drives on Route 3 with him strapped into the back seat.

She had had enough.

You could teach in the schools, and in small towns like this, it was in some ways like the fifties, when teachers were known throughout town and respected. Years later, she would stop at Renys on her way Down East, a tourist this time, and the customers or some store clerk would stop her “Ms. K., Ms. K.,” and there would follow a story so devoid of

interest and so filled with banalities it was like the day she had woken up and known—this day, I have had enough.

She would likely get her son awake and into his appalling clothing so he could get to school on time, and she would arrive at her own room, tired and harassed with a day planned out. There would be the incident with the kid from Swanville who might tell her to go screw herself, but here, that sort of thing really wasn't any worse than it was in a town like Brunswick, where not only would the kid tell you to fuck off, he would then have the backing of his parents, and sometimes a team of lawyers. One thing you could say for Belfast, the parents didn't give a shit, and the teachers could pretty much work in peace.

But she had had enough.

After school, she would spend a couple of hours with the girls trying out for tennis, the most enjoyable part of her day, if it didn't mean she had to rush out of there and find her son and feed the dog, then get dinner, then finally make her way to the Colonial, since this was the premiere of Belfast, Maine, and the whole town would be there. She hoped the rumor of four hours running time was a mistake. But at least everyone in town was pretty much in the same boat.

How bad could it be?

Linda Jane was not in the film and her neighbors with their lovingly restored Victorians were not in the film and Alex Turner, who had revived the waterfront, was not in the film, but Bill Murphy, known as a legendary teacher at Belfast High with his absurd whale tie, was, and if you had only the transcript to read, you would have experienced him at his best. He was speaking of Melville, and there, in the words, you could see it all: First he sets the scene, "... put a harpoon in 'em the harpoon was attached to a rope which was attached to the boat and the whale would sound ... and you can imagine yourself hooked to a sperm whale ... Dangerous work it was hairy work ... you're out there in the middle of nothing ... huge Leviathans ... and there's a scene where a little black boy is knocked overboard ... in the middle of this immense ocean ... and Melville goes into his mind ... you can imagine yourself floating alone in the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

And then the analysis: "It's an epic it's a tragedy and it's also a book about whaling. ... where the hunting becomes factory work ... You get this picture of working class life in America. ... The real hero of it is ... Ahab. Melville has written a tragedy. ... And he makes the tragic hero a fisherman from Nantucket ... a commercial fisherman from Nantucket. Why is that an important moment in literature? ... The rise of the common man. The common man is as good as the rich."

He then goes on to talk about Melville's Confidence Man, which these kids have never heard of and will never read. About how Melville has no faith in American art or

religion; “the American Dream,” he says, “is false.” The scene ends with a shot of the industrial facade of Belfast High School.

Everyone in the room, listening to Mr. Murphy, has grown up on the water. Surely they know that Moby Dick is not just about whaling and two centuries of tradition, but about life itself, and what it was to be alone, or adrift on the water, and how you dealt with good and with evil, and what compromises you had to make and how you maintained your dignity even though your share or stake or “lay” as Melville called it, was a pittance. And somewhere in all that, maybe in the best of them there must be a glint of recognition that the whole tale was told by a burnt-out schoolteacher, Ishmael, just like the tale told by Mr. Murphy and maybe the tale told by Mr. Wiseman himself.

You might hear this in the words, maybe even in this version of the words, but this is not what you see in the film. The classroom is dominated by a life-sized poster from John Wayne’s Hondo, and just to the right of Mr. Murphy’s face, a smaller poster, magazine size, of an older John Wayne all done up as a World War II general—maybe from Cast a Giant Shadow or perhaps The Longest Day. And there, you see the stare of Mr. Murphy, not over the seas of the Pacific, but over the sea of faces of students at Belfast High, with John Wayne posters surrounding them. They are serious but inattentive, perhaps embarrassed by the camera, with their books half opened. You realize the answers they provide are always the correct ones, despite how hesitant and embarrassed the inflections are. These are things they have said before, as a whispering chorus: “Rise of the common man,” they murmur, exactly when he calls for it, and complete his sentence “... as good as the rich” exactly when he cues them.

The shots where they look at the camera as any high-school kid would do, are edited away, as we are supposed to know they are edited away, since there is one of Mr. Murphy himself, stumbling over a line and smiling in embarrassment at the camera crew. It is as if it were all the same to them: sitting there listening to the Life Lesson told in the Great American Novel, or living the life of a celebrity, with the camera all over them, or just falling asleep from staying up too late and thinking who would feel you up on the weekend. But there is no way the poor kids in Swanville or even Belfast imagine for a second they are as good as the rich kids in Camden, away at Exeter hearing the same thing.

Linda Jane lasted longer than the rest, since she was one of few to appreciate the ironies of the lesson in Mr. Murphy’s classroom, or rather, to be crushed by the ironies of it. Others may have thought it was the one redeeming scene in the film, but by then, they sympathized with those who had walked out earlier, whether in boredom or anger.

What does Rex stand for?

It’s setting you up to be the fool.

The blubber is the fat that surrounds the whale.

The seats aren't full, because it is Thursday night, a workday for many of the viewers. Most of the key figures in the film are in the strictest sense from away, I guess, in Swanville, say, on the road to Bangor, their generations sometimes marked by the number of trailers on their land. This is not what anyone in the theatre has come to see.

For the audience, there is nothing revelatory here. There is nothing they do not already know, and even for those of us with no real connections to Belfast, there is nothing in the film we do not know. The dying old woman in the hospital bed. The judge handing out perfunctory fines. But as the hours wear on, and particularly at intermission, you could feel their impatience growing. Linda Jane, half-dead with exhaustion in the lobby, with two more hours of this to go, tries to explain to a listener what this is "really" all about. There is more to come, she says. There is a certain nobility, redeeming, she says desperately, in the ordinary affairs of ordinary people, in the workers at the incongruous potato processing plant. This is not The Beans of Egypt Maine, she says. There is a subtle respect for the struggles of the people in Belfast, even if it is those people we wish not to see.

But this is not what she really believes, and her listener is not really coherent in her objections. It is boring. A kid of 10 years old with a damn video camera could make this. There's no music at all, nothing in the background, and as you sit in the theatre, why you even hear traffic from Spring Street.

"But that's the point, perhaps. That music from the street. It's like the patient in the courtyard in Titicut Follies, playing 'My Blue Heaven' on the trombone. Don't you think Wiseman wants that traffic, those rhythms of the snow tires, to be part of all this? To hear that traffic quieting as the evening wears on, and then at 11, or when it all ends, it will be us, our own tire sounds, as we drive home through the streetlights."

No one cares a whit about such things. And it's because they do not even make an effort to care that she feels it is ok that she has had enough. It's just that here, on a Thursday, in a public place, she is still a teacher, not a disinterested viewer, and she finally is duty-bound to uphold the dignity of the families she teaches, even if Wiseman has depicted them without sentiment.

And so finally, as if to no one, she says: "I want to see more of the strength found in these people. Their resilience. And I think that's the point. It's an easy thing to show the glamour of working on the water, and some fisherman staring into the fog. But it's far more difficult to show that of a man beaten down by the work in Stinson's Cannery. To him, the work is the same as this picturesque working on the water, which Wiseman shows in the opening credits isn't unreservedly picturesque at all. It's the smell of fish, actually,

and the fish in the cannery is likely superior to what the fisherman on the lobsterboat endures—all that dragged bait packed in salt or the frozen brim from Nova Scotia.”

But no one is really buying that today, and it is time for the second half of the movie.

Linda Jane, Ms. K, of Belfast High, will go to bed tonight knowing that she has finally had enough.

“This is where hunting becomes factory work,” Mr. Murphy says, and as you watch the film you recall an earlier scene, of dragging the tagged deer off the carhood to be weighed on the scales of the tagging station. What you may recall from the scene is that it is a story not of hunting, but of renouncing hunting, of the bullet from the damn kid’s gun hitting the tree trunk a foot from your head and your “wrapping his gun around the tree.” Anyone who has lived in Maine has heard this story before, always with the same detail—the gun wrapped around a tree—even though such a thing is not possible. And that’s why you “don’t go deer hunting anymore,” this story and perhaps your own hunting story concludes.

“The blubber is about that thick, and they boil it down for oil ... They put it in these big pots in the ship. ... this pure creamy oil. And there you are. ... When your hold is filled, you go home.”

The blubber is the fat that surrounds the whale.

## 10.

## ACCEPTANCE

Phil E. was not a bad kid, not a shithead, or a thief, or a cat killer, and no worse than one of the fucked-up locals the guy in Eastport told me about that time Linda Jane and I were there for the Salmon Festival. You remember the story: the guy was sitting on the tailgate of his old station wagon, a rarity in and of itself, and tied to that tailgate were two ropes, not good ones, and each ended in a large unhappy Rottweiler. You couldn't call him fat, or wouldn't have, but he was unkempt, and unshaven, and not really keeping in the shade, since all the tailgate seat provided was the oven-blast of heat from the old station wagon.

"Nice dogs." And now, moving closer in an unthreatening way, appreciative of dogs, "Do they bite?"

Like all owners with vicious dogs he answers: "Nope. Never." Then, after a long pause and a quick glance, furtive you'd say, at nothing in particular: "Except at night."

Except at night? "Except at night?"

Another glance, this one less furtive. "You know," he says, then with a lowered, more conspiratorial tone, "when they," referring not now to the dogs, but obviously to what he imagined Phil to be, "when they ..." then more softly "... come 'round." And there was a certain malevolence in the cadence "come 'round" to let you know that it entailed something you, an outsider, need not ask or need not know. In Eastport, all but the most intransigent of locals is finally "from away."

So Phil Jr. wasn't a bad kid, and he was unlikely to be eaten by Rottweilers tied to the tailgate on Main Street in some East Bumfuck or other of Down East Maine. The only reason he gets any notice whatsoever here is that his father once worked for a New York publisher, back when they were making lots of money and every night Americans read themselves to sleep. It had all gotten to him, the tireless dad, that is, the endless working days and the height of the slush pile.

So Dad, that is Phil Sr., left New York, taking Phil Jr. with him, just a child, and moved to Ellsworth, "Gateway to Arcadia" it's called, a half-mile or more from Renys on what is now the east side of town. He bought what might well become a picturesque saltbox, once he put enough money into it, and he started what he called "his own imprint" with the money he had made in New York. For a few years, he turned out a few modest titles each year, mostly of local interest, and even sold them in modest numbers and, through the magic of accounting, life itself was modest and good and his kid ran happily in his neighbor's woods behind the one-day-to-be-picturesque house.

That was before computers took over both the business and the raising of children, and soon all this changed. Books were written but not read; the slush pile built up, and his somewhat amateurish website, although ignored by book-buyers and lovers, somehow got discovered by every self-deluded author in the country, it seemed. His son meanwhile spent most of the time in the bedroom, playing with the computer and texting his deadbeat friends. At least, that was Phil Sr.'s view of things.

Phil Jr.'s view was different. The way things looked to him, life was largely about being "from away" with a bunch of bullying kids his age, and it was better most of the time just to stay home. It took no more than a year or two of that to make him something of an expert in the family business, even though the rest of the family had no idea he was involved. You'd think a dad who spent most of the time reading through papers and sending e-mail as he claimed to do would know something about the technology on which his business now depended, but he didn't. And it was actually a rather simple matter, in Phil Jr.'s spare time, to hack through the inexistent firewalls of Dad's business folders and into the endless e-mails and attachments that seemed to come to him. All just for the hell of it, and as a break from the usual things one might do, like tying a neighbor's dog by its ass to the saplings.

Phil Sr. was often heard to rant about the changes in the publishing business. There was a time when authors at least had to make the investment of a typist or a ream of paper, for God's sake, even, he would add, in the days when books were so common every retiree in the country wrote two a year. These days, all you had to do ... And then the rant became incoherent to all but those "in the business," he used to say. And what you could piece together from all this was that Phil Sr. had left New York with the idea that everything would slow to a manageable pace, and he could fill his modest imprint with a few cookbooks and regional histories and maybe a few commissioned things and he and Phil Jr. could live the life he thought he himself might have come close to having back in the fifties, although he was pretty vague about the details, and when he described that life, he found he was often using phrases from descriptions of Ozzie and Harriet or maybe from the show itself. And that was ridiculous, he knew, since Ozzie and Harriet was shot in the seasonless valleys of Los Angeles, and had nothing whatsoever to say about Maine with its appalling Februaries and springs so deep in mud they made jokes about burying horses in it. Didn't he say (or think he said) as much to half the authors in the slush pile? You write about Maine, but goddammit it, this scene could be a bad episode of M Squad or Father Knows Best or Dobie Gillis, if they had any idea what that meant.

Here in Ellsworth, he had once thought, or so his listeners could guess, the flow to the slush pile would slow to a mere trickle. Maybe one or two letters a week, from the

most studious and sensitive of writers, a call sometimes from an agent, all very professional. And only occasionally would the large, two-volume box arrive with the ramblings of a near illiterate, missing, it is said, only the conclusion and something about the hero's late childhood, with perhaps too much of "himself" in it.

"Dear Mr. Smith- Thank you for the opportunity to review your 'A Life of Platitude: A Kid in Katahdin,' which we read with great interest. We are sorry to report that it does not fit our needs at the moment, and we will be unable to publish it. Please do not take this as a reflection on your work. ..." In recent years, he would add: "Given the economic climate ..., " since everyone could relate to that, here in Ellsworth and elsewhere.

He had once imagined that when Phil Jr. was older, maybe thirteen or fourteen, and he himself in one of his more sentimental and loving moods, they might sit together and he could then share his thoughts and knowledge of the business. Surely Phil Jr. would want to know what Dad does, and it would be like when he asked about sex: "I mean, how does it work? When you want to do it, do you just do it?" And Phil Sr. had said, with perhaps too much irony, "Why no, why we'd have kids running around all over the place," instead of just the one Phil Jr. here, that is, and the wife gone to Michigan or maybe it was Wisconsin, wherever Lacrosse is. And Phil Jr. might say something like: "So they write this book and send it and you do what you do then it's in the bookstore?" And he should have laughed that wise paternal laugh and said: "Why no son, why we'd have books heaped all over the kitchen." And bemused with his own wit, that would have been that.

But the real and imagined moral platitudes blurred together. And at some point, instead of the perfunctory and misleading statement about the frequencies of marital intercourse, he must have gotten serious and explained the entire business to his son as a Great Life Lesson, he supposed: the work, the hopes for the future, the ego, the fashioning of the manuscript, the chances of success, the inevitable failures, the crushing of the would-be author's dreams.

There were multiple perspectives on the business, perhaps he said. You must see this from others' points of view, not just the editor's own, where he acted, seemingly, as a great monarch, wielding his arbitrary and awful power. It wasn't enough to think of Phil Sr. alone before the slush pile worrying that his pontifical pronouncements were perhaps not infallible in the end. There was the view of the struggling and dream-dazzled author too. Phil Sr., like everyone else, had experienced this state himself, before switching to the regality of the publishing house, and that was where the true Life Lesson well might lie. We perhaps are not, you see, son, unique as we might think, and all the Great Things that we do must some day be judged against the Great Things others believe they do; we must each one of us put our work in the Slush Pile, and until it's over and the reports are in,

there's no telling how the dice will roll. Because in the end, it's a Crap Shoot anyway. One day you're sitting in the slush pile with all the Confidence of a spring day, and the next day, you're parked in the Shithouse with a rejection slip in one hand and a half-drunk Beer in the other.

And then perhaps he showed Phil Jr. the actual letters, a day he was really getting into it, as they say, and the author's responses and his own ripostes. In these days of e-mail, all that was easy to do, although some of the files he wanted proved unfindable. And perhaps in the old days before computers, he would never have made the mistake of sitting Phil Jr. next to him, feeling the warmth of the child he had once helped nurse, with both of them reading through the e-mail files as he discoursed on the Exigencies of Life.

Anyone could predict what would happen, except Phil Sr., of course, who was lost in the reverie of guiding his impressionable son. Phil Jr. hadn't learned jack-shit about life and didn't have much interest in it. All he knew was that his numb-ass dad couldn't even scroll through the e-mail without that curious disconnect between speaking and typing that you often see with old people when they try to explain something obvious on a computer screen. But he did get that whole bit about aspiration and the like (even though that wasn't the word Phil Sr. had used or he had heard) and the crushing of the author's ego and inept ways Phil Sr. had of "softening the blow" he called it, but it was all like trying to "soften the blow" of the half-feral cat you were trying to kill, and what finally was the point of that?

That's when the whole thing started.

It was an easy matter to check through the files, since Dad knew next to nothing about how high-speed connections and passwords and locked accounts worked and who could see what and when. The only thing Phil Sr. had ever managed to do (it was during the time of all that publicity about kids checking porno sites or taking up with child molesters in chat rooms) was to have a long rambling and stammeringly naive conversation about the dangers of web-surfing, which was no more informative than his discourses about love-making.

Phil Sr.'s computer was accessible to anyone. You could have sat right there in the cheap swivel chair from Staples and done it all. And maybe Phil Sr. would have come in to find all his files open on the screen and there would have been a scene, and a bunch of excuses and another one of those stern and embarrassing lectures before things got back to normal again. It was, therefore, much more of a hoot simply to reroute part of those e-mails right to his own laptop, where he could work in peace, just as Phil Sr. imagined he himself, here in Ellsworth, worked in peace. After that, everything else just fell into place.

Maybe none of this would have happened, if it hadn't been for that week he had to write some damn thing for English class and Dad must have been in one of those strange

moods that often got to him, or maybe he had knocked down an extra Dogfish Ale that day, but anyway, sometime after dinner the paper for English class had come up, then Phil Sr. had gotten all goofy and the next thing you know he was trying to pass along something that had come in the slush pile, some piece of crap thing about the sadness of a camping trip and it was full of things like: “The young boy’s eyes met. He looked into the future, which he had always dreamed about. The stars were out and the boys from the next camp were singing the song about the blankets and he knew then ...” Crap like that. So on a whim, with Dad especially ebullient, they had made a copy then cut it down a bit, and deleted the note where Dad had written “Thank you for the opportunity to consider ‘A Boy’s Life in the Canvas Tent’, which we have read with interest, ...” and he had written, or calqued more accurately, “In summer, my parents [why even correct to “My Dad?”] sent us to the overnight camp. It wasn’t a day camp so we got to sleep in canvas tents. I can still smell ...” You get it, I’m sure. So that was the first step, when he and Dad collaborated, you might say, on the paper for English class. After that, he was on his own.

This past year, Pup-Tent-like things came in maybe twice a day, and this must have been the reason why Dad would sometimes rant about the internet and how these “frigging” (he would say) submissions and “queries” (or “queeries” he would say) now never stopped, and sometimes it felt like being back in New York, as bad as that. So one day, Phil Jr. just scrolled down through a bunch of them he had rerouted to his own account until he found a particularly heart-felt piece entitled “Swimming in Lake Meguntocook, A Memoir,” 20,000 words, which Dad had taught him on that half-remembered day was a length that was unpublishable in any form: the Corvair of submissions, he had said, whatever that meant.

“Dear Mr. Smith:” Phil Jr. began. “We have read your draft of ‘Meduxnekeag Memories’ with great interest. We feel this can be a great contribution to the sense of longing modern readers wish to feel, and we would desire to see the full manuscript.” And sure, that sounds a bit sophisticated for his own voice, but it wasn’t difficult to look through Dad’s account and find the template for one of these and simply change a few particulars. Then he added something about WORD-files, and “looking forward to,” like Dad wrote, then sent it off. And it was like when he and a friend once spent the afternoon phoning numbers at random, and someone would answer and then you’d say “Is Fred there?” and he’d say “No”; then the deal was you’d call again “Is Fred there?” and the stupid bastard would say no again, with a little more sauce in the voice, and then the story goes you’d call and say “This is Fred. Any messages for me?”

At least, that’s how it was always planned. But usually by the second “Is Fred there?” they’d both just collapse in laughter on the floor and have to hang up. And only

once that afternoon did some shithead see the incoming number and call them back and call them a bunch of fuckhead kids and threaten to turn them into ATT or Verizon or Fairpoint now it was. Lots of luck with that, they'd said, but it was all a bore and pretty soon, they went on to something else, burning large insects with a magnifying glass or some such thing.

You can never predict what might happen when you started shit like that, but of course, that was what Dad had been trying to tell him all along. You couldn't just see things from your own point of view: "This is Fred. Any messages?" You had to see them from the other person's point of view, that is, how the guy you call sees things: "Fred? ..." So of course, some jerk-off kid tries to mess with you like that, and any idiot knows the incoming number is right there, so you call back and say "Listen, you little fuck. Get your shithead hands off the fucking phone and stick it up your ass." Something mature like that. That was what this "point of view" crap was really all about.

It took about a day to get the reply and if he hadn't been farting around with Dad's slush pile just for the hell of it, he probably wouldn't have noticed it at all, and God knows what Dad would have done if he had run into it. Probably nothing.

"Dear Mr. E or Philip if I may- Thanks for the interest. Quite certainly, I am happy to send the complete manuscript, which is here in a series of Word Perfect files, but I think it's not the latest version. I apologize in advance for the page numbering, but that's really hard in Word Perfect. Chapter 6 follows chapter 5, even though the page numbers are backwards. Chapter 8 begins on page 1 again. Let me know if you need something further. I assume you want a brief biography. I attended public school in Jackman ..." Crap like that. "Please call me Jack." It was pathetic.

The files were full of stuff about tents and pubescence, all fucked up and disordered. "We used to fish in the pond. I still remember waking up from the nap in the empty tent. It smelled like my Dad's old army backpack. Where were they all, I wondered. Or where are they today, I might wonder. And Mr. J. who we called Jim came in and said to me ..." It went on forever or at least 20,000 words, however long that was. 50,000 more would not have improved it.

"Dear Mr. Johnson: We have now completed your re-titled 'Canvassing the Night Skies', which more than fulfills our hopes. We are certain we will be able to make an offer to publish. Perhaps in series with 'Treehouses of Cobbosseecontee', which you may know. Please consider a new title. Perhaps we should concoct a paronym [quoting Dad directly here, of course] on the word tentative. Or ten. [Phil Jr.'s voice.] But this may be premature. In the meantime, I will meet with my board ..."

Phil Jr. was a bit hazy about what “board” meant, so he asked Phil Sr. directly, explaining that he was following up that so affecting ethical discourse on *Dealing with Failure*. And Phil Sr. explained, *sotto voce*, that that was all just bullshit. There was no “Board.” “Gosh. But what would it be, then? This board? I mean, if it was real?” “Board or no board. It’s a bunch of horseshit,” Phil Sr. said.

But Phil Jr. persisted, as boys will, and eventually got it straight. Apparently, at the big firms, some group of hot shots met every week or month or so, then all the grunts like Dad would have picked something out from their various slush piles and they would present this to these guys, “The Board,” and urge them to approve it. In publishing, The Board was a big deal. Or once was. So “Please be patient,” Phil Jr. wrote.

But of course the guy wasn’t patient. “I think the title ‘Pup Tent Tempestuance’ might have too much of a military theme to it. Father of course was an Army corporal as you know and I discuss the man at some length as well as my troubled feelings in chapter 5 (what is numbered 3 in what I sent earlier). If you want or wish more of that, I think I could expand, because the army represented ...” Maybe patience meant something different to someone in his position. It was all that point of view stuff Phil Sr. had been getting at weeks earlier.

“When Father awoke at Ft. Devens, working in the body bag department, he must have imagined bivouacing as we did, here at Lake Maranacook ...” It was hard even to think about stuff as idiotic as that.

“Dear Mr. Jackson: I have now had the chance to meet with the board [quoting Dad directly] and I am happy to offer you a standard contract of ... a \$5000 advance, half payable at the signing of the contract [now again quoting directly] and half upon delivery of the final manuscript ...” Then there was a bunch of stuff about royalties which was kind of difficult to follow and he just cut and pasted Phil Sr.’s words about it, even though many of Phil’s recent acceptance files barely mentioned royalties or advances or anything like that.

The guy hardly batted an eye. It was as if checks for 5 grand rolled in every day: “I hope it is not too early to bring this up, but since our correspondence began, I have been feverishly working on a sequel, long incepted I admit, involving the awakening of my, or let us say, yes, one’s ethical and in fact sexual self. It is, I think, more deeply personal and my title, proffered with no small temerity, is ‘Dawning Love in the Mercury: The Drive-in East of Mesalonskee’.”

Then there was some allusion to European rights, which he didn’t really understand but agreed to, then not-so-subtle hints about a contract and the cashier’s check itself. So he cobbled together something from Dad’s files about patience and sub-departments of the company, and he figured he could get away with anything as long as the

numbers were big enough. “Although the initial contract is approved, I will call the board next month, and I will like to prospect to increase your advance by another 5,000, because the manuscript is complete as it is. Except for the small editorial changes you mention. If we send the money now, the board ...” Difficult as it was to find his own voice here, there was no reason to get the guy all bent just because he wasn’t being paid enough.

Phil Jr. could see that the whole thing would soon be a pain in the ass, and he’d have to go on to something else, loosening, say, the shingles on a neighbor’s house so that they would all blow away in the next storm. And still the files of “Pup Tent Particulars” piled up, now interspersed occasionally with its variously entitled sequel “Petting Preponderance.” And pretty soon there was a whole lot of embarrassing detail about kids masturbating, and looking for animals in the rain and driving lessons and canoeing with pervert counselors and crap that you couldn’t imagine would be related in any way. And every time the chapters got too convoluted, he would e-mail the guy: “OK. Our subeditors will deal with that. The board has still not met.”

And then came the photos—first, just an inconsequential family shot, like all those things we have in the closet, then suddenly a dozen or so JPEG’s of old Polaroids or instant cameras, all in black-and-white and all posed, and with none of the faces recognizable. And finally, some embarrassing full color 2MB file of an old man, gazing, it seemed, at the upper left-hand corner of the photograph itself, and maybe that was supposed to indicate how tortured thinking of the pup tents was. “I have procured some photos for your Publicity Department. I am certain I could have them in the requisite black-and-white but ...” So just to jerk the guy around, he gave him some crap about needing an 8x10 glossy, whatever that was, not these JPEGs, which were beginning to clutter up his mailbox and it turned out it would have cost the poor bastard about \$30, who suggested, somewhat petulantly he thought, that it should perhaps be deducted from his still unseen advance. But not, of course, before going on about his third project, which had the unique distinction of being worse than the first two.

The fact was, Phil’s heart at last was just not in it. Or better still: their two hearts no more beat as one, as he once thought he read. And after all the contract offers and negotiations and revisions and proposals, the now cold legalese culled from files dated the year they moved to Ellsworth, the e-mails grew sparse and their wording terse. Maybe the guy talked to someone who finally explained to him that the veiled warnings from the Press meant you had to chill out if you wanted things to go right, and just let things happen, and these were Busy People and you had to cut them some slack. Maybe the guy had called one day when Phil Jr. was off in school and he had gotten Dad, and Dad had been real cool for a while and had finally lost it and said “I must tell you, sir, that while I appreciate your concern, I

really don't know what in God's name you are talking about, and here, at Bumfuck Press, we gave our last advance contract in spring 2002." Or maybe it was finally a second call, of hope and of despair, and there was something about "I regret that you seem to be the victim of a scam of some sort," because there was a plaintive e-mail that arrived one day in his mailbox, "I am deeply troubled to learn and ..." Too lugubrious to quote or even read, with its allusions to lawyers who advertise on television, and the poor bastard was really broken up by it all. So figuring it was time for the guy just to suck it up, he let the whole thing go, and one day he was sitting in the kitchen, texting some friend over the spaghetti, and Phil Sr. walked by shaking his head, saying "Jesus Christ. Un-fucking-believable." And you just knew it had to do with the poor bastard and the pup tent. So he went back to razoring out bug screens in the outhouses down by the public beach of Bumfuck Pond and never heard from the guy again.

11.  
OFF THE GRID

The Common Ground Fair web site describes the Fair as a “celebration of rural living that promotes organically grown Maine produce, alternative lifestyles, and a common ground for a variety of organizations and ...” It is hard to follow this dithyramb past the ellipsis. The committee meeting where that sentence was constructed must have taken place in the enthusiasms of spring, like the original town gathering where the town’s name was selected. By 1886, Unity was said to have twelve public school-houses, or one for every hundred residents. I suppose if you didn’t like the way they taught algebra at one school you just walked to the next one.

Two men, once known as young men, strong and completely at home here, brush past each other at the Fair and exchange barely discernible expressions of contempt.

The day we went to the Fair, driving up past Renys distribution center on Route 1, it was raining, that cold fall rain so common in Maine, one that makes cotton the worst of materials, though most of the fair-goers are committed to natural fibres regardless of such efficiencies. Slogging through the woods to the fairgrounds from the parking lot made it all eerily like Woodstock—a common word muttered on that day and likely on any day of the Fair. I must be with Linda Jane this day, quiet and word-less, but still beautiful on my arm. It is her face that seems set in disapproval, although the object of her scorn is rarely clear. Or it may be a different day with Ann-Marie, an arm-length away from me, discoursing on the failings of one of the two men who have passed.

“You’re just like Gene.”

Topeka, Kansas

The roads leading to the fair are lined with anti-abortion rallyists, to whom the hippie fair-goers look like things they have nightmares about. Linda Jane worked for years in Topeka, and she is with me today, meaning the day I went to the Common Ground Fair, since no one is really with me today. “In Topeka,” she says, referring to the anti-abortionists pelted with cold rain, “they do these things for real.” I can neither forget nor clearly remember how much I loved this woman as little as three decades ago.

I have difficulty envisioning Topeka. When I imagine the red brick building facades, I realize I am thinking instead of towns in Maine—Stockton Springs or Belfast itself, so uncannily real in Fred Wiseman’s film of it—or perhaps it is Tulsa and the many weeks and months I spent there cuckolding a man I never knew or met. The weather is hideous in all three places.

In Topeka, you live in a broken down tenement so disreputable that when you tape your own name to your mailbox you mis-spell it. That is what she thinks. You will never feel at home here, Linda Jane thinks, in the middle of Kansas, in the middle of the heartland or the farm belt, in the middle of America itself. It doesn't matter how many calls you get from your quietly adoring father in Maine, or visits from him. Or visits from the man who has never abandoned you. It is impossible to imagine what "home" means to those living in this most American of places, where everyone greets you with a studied, alien joy that masks all forms of contempt. You acquire an odd assortment of friends, who too seem alien to this place: a former novitiate, with ties to the local monastery seen in the tourist photographs, now married and serenely supportive of everything you do. Women who work in jobs they refuse to describe for you, who are abrasive and when shushed in a movie theatre challenge whoever dares to quiet them. Then those who visit, passing through. The smell of fertilizer is everywhere at certain times of year, and it is nothing like the decaying leaves in the damp ground of Unity.

The sad old men with their shocking pictures of dead fetuses on the road outside the fairgrounds mean nothing to her, but I form as tasteless an insult as I can for each of them. They are too obtuse to understand vast numbers of those attending the Fair have political and moral views bizarrely similar to their own. We walk through hard mud of the walkways. I want to reach out and stroke her and forget the last thirty years: the hippies with their home-grown food, the old men with their photographs. She says nothing. She feels my contempt is contrived. What could I know of these people? Or about the local fishermen of Maine? Or those we call our friends who barter vegetables for half their livings?

I escape the mud of the fairgrounds into a greenhouse of hydroponic tomato plants. I examine them as I was taught to do, following the tomato worm "poop," as it is known, upward to the inevitable and revolting worm. It is a hideously efficient method of discovery taught me by Julie. But some poor would-be initiate has been charged with picking the worms off before the lay fair-goers arrive. The fruit beams as if nothing had happened. You try to sermonize on this, as Linda Jane studies the fairgoers. You reconstruct the bad cliches of your upbringing. But nothing quite works when Linda Jane stares like that, patient but expressionless, outside on the walkway. So instead I remark on the contrast with the oxen stalls, where the same meticulous ephobe sweeps away the straw dried manure, leaving the oxen behind. And there must be a way to make this work, I think, if I simply tell it right.

New York, 1971

In the summer of 1971, my wife and I drive to New York on one of the last weekends of our marriage. We pretend all this is a lark, as most things were, we say, in those days. The most vivid of the details we both remember, one we will repeat much of the way back and for the few days or weeks left for us, was driving into New York and asking for the Bruckner Expressway. I cannot reproduce the Hispanic accent, one that you would never in those years hear in Maine, and I certainly cannot reproduce our version of it, as we filtered the words through her up-country Maine accent, the one sullied by her time in Oul-bany, she called it: “The Bruckner Expressway?” our version goes. “You are on it.” Maybe you pronounce “the” as “thee” and form a cadence like the concluding feet of a Virgilian hexameter. But I feel I now have lost you as completely as I lost her.

I believe it was on this drive, or perhaps it was the drive home, that she told me in deadpan nonchalance the story of the deer kill. I am now dead certain the story is false, but I have given earlier the reasons for thinking this. That day, I fixed my eyes on the roadways and lane dividers and I could not detect the characteristic widening of her eyes when she told me the way the deer came out of the woods—the steadying of the rifle on the fender of the pick-up, the hushed instructions of her father.

I was remembering then, and I remember now, the sad faces of the young women in the waiting room, many with their mothers. The bad music or perhaps it was the lack of music in the waiting rooms. Of staying the night with a friend near Greenwich Village when you could still park easily, and Michael telling us of his then shocking encounters with complete strangers at 2 AM on the public streets. That was before anyone had heard of AIDS and we were all so young we thought all ills were curable.

A stupid neighbor, enamored of her, once tried to convince me that it was his child she had been carrying. That memory is only mildly irritating to me today, and not for any of the reasons you may imagine.

### Cape Cod, 1993

Between Gene and Jimmy, the two men passing on the fairgrounds, you have used up nearly all the charm and grace there could be. Both have women by the handful, or so it seems when you first meet, and when they tell you of the way they live, all the compromises you have made in life seem duplicitous.

Gene is from Massachusetts or New York or maybe it is Indiana. He would live off the grid; at least, that is his goal, or rather, that is the phrase we use to describe his goals. His brother lives on Cape Cod in a family house, so maybe Gene comes from there as well, but in my recollection it is only a summer home. Gene is settled now near Unity, or perhaps I should say more accurately “somewhere in Waldo County,” and he is now

economically inseparable from his draft horses, so I am told. A distant neighbor, in what must be described as a front yard, has a totem-like tower of solar panels, manufactured in China and shipped there by a freighter registered in Africa.

Gene was once nearly married to Ann-Marie, who has convinced me that I share all his worst characteristics.

In Gene's terms, "off the grid" means no vehicles of any kind, no running water, no portable gas or oil, and nothing delivered to you in any way. The one exception to electrical power he makes is for his record player, now run by a complex system of batteries, taken from old World War I communication equipment, and linked to a transformer, somewhat more dangerous to design than you might think. It provides the minimum power needed to play the records. He has no computer, of course, and a single telephone line. As a consequence, he writes the most exquisite letters you will find in contemporary Maine, generally about books he has read, never about the ethics of the life he leads, and the phone will connect him with Anne-Marie, who grew up among brutal fishermen, and thus as everyone knows will never agree to live in an electricity-free house with him and crap in the outhouse for the rest of her life. Living in the woods has always meant something else to her; it means a hand-built house with a sweeping garden that grows maybe half the food she eats in summer, with woods from which her husband, missed by all of us, used to harvest all the firewood needed for winter. That plus a job in town, whose wages can be used for travelling.

Gene, in his freshly washed work clothes, studies the animals, which to me are the same animals you will find at all the fairs, or more accurately, the same fair everywhere: Topsham, Cumberland, Skowhegan, with their rides and cotton candy, and in the old days, the most derelict of strip shows. Whipping a team of oxen across the eyes as they pull a drag of cement—that, he thinks, is a waste of energy. And you don't have to be some tree-hugging sentimentalist to object as the oxen pull their heads back in annoyance because some kid doesn't know how to use the switch right.

Jimmy, by contrast, and he makes no bones about it, inherited from his father, a man whom he neither loved nor admired, a small piece of land outside Newcastle, across from Damariscotta, and inherited as well some soon to be obsolete machinery. A pickup, of course, a front-end loader, a flatbed with a winch mounted on the front, with a makeshift crane set up just behind the cab. From this, he could run a cable to the winch and haul eight or sixteen foot sections of logs up onto the flatbed. This is the old way of doing things, like his father used to do, and it's dangerous, since the truck was never intended to go off road where he sometimes takes it. It's easy enough to slip, as I saw him do, and any time you drag things of that size with a cable, your well-being depends entirely on the

strands of the cable itself, whose weaknesses are hard to detect. A rope goes strand by strand, and fiber by fiber within each strand, and each weakening is apparent to anyone who looks for it. There are no pernicious secrets about rope as there are with cable, and on the small commercial fishing boats I worked on once, there was no cable to be found.

In 1985, Jimmy was asked, not about the future, but about the equipment itself, since it required diesel and oil and maintenance and was it really possible to obtain all this “off the grid” in any way? Or would you simply let the equipment rot some day? or barter and plow driveways or what exactly was it? And how was that different from getting a few pieces of paper for that work and converting those fungible things to the oil and fuel you needed? And Jimmy never liked that line of questioning. Not because it challenged him, but because it was the sort of objection anyone whose life was entirely compromise would formulate, or what the worst tongue-clucking bourgeois in America would say.

His house was two stories, plus a cellar, and barely a room per story, a structure common among those who built their own houses those days, not unlike Josh’s, which burned to the ground in an afternoon, or Julie’s or hundreds of others across the state. The design has to do with the simple formula maximizing volume for a given surface area (that is, building material)—a formula that reflects both the economies of material and the economies of heat loss in the winter. The answer is of course a sphere, which you then compromise given the straight nature of the wood you buy or cut from your own sawmill, and the amount of waste you leave, and whether the waste is your own free waste that you can subsequently burn for heat without guilt or expense, or sawmill waste which you have to buy, and how heat rises in an artificial structure and the relation of the above ground structure to the foundation and the relation of air and ground temperatures in the winter and what is now called the R-factor of each of the materials you use. It is impossible to do these calculations but easy to recognize houses that have been built according to various interpretations of them.

You can of course simplify these things by narrating them or by just building a house yourself.

Jimmy was married at one time to Linda Jane’s sister, and maybe he beat her (whatever “beating” might mean—sometimes the word was “abused”), and derided her for selling her ideals to the hospital where she worked as a nurse. She left him finally for the gentlest of then organic gardeners whose sister sang in folk groups all over the country and retired back to New England, now sober and heavily tattooed, at the age of fifty. Such uneventful and quiet sobriety was a damn sight better, both said to Linda Jane, referring obliquely to the old days with Jimmy, than freezing your ass on the way to the shithouse on a December morning with bruises on your ribs.

Jimmy wears wool red checked jackets long after laws regarding florescent orange have made them unfashionable. You could barely see a hunter dressed in one of these in the woods, and there were many hunting fatalities in those days as a consequence—anti-hunting advocates will sometimes add “Not enough.” Jimmy didn’t care about that since he hadn’t hunted legally in over fifteen years.

Jimmy and Gene pass, Jimmy in his hunting jacket and Gene in the nondescript working clothes he’s always in. They take little account of each other. Jimmy is talking somewhat too loudly either about the government or the Second Amendment or people from away, and doesn’t care about gentlemen farmers who live within the abstractions they themselves create. To him, it is all about the lifespan of unmaintained engines. Gene knows all about these people. He is surrounded by them, and turns away in indifference, something hard for those “from away” to do, with our bourgeois scorn for such survivalist rants.

Gene with Ann-Marie, Jimmy of course with the sister of Linda Jane—here it is here I reach an impasse. The thing is, Linda Jane’s father reminds me too much of another father, and even shares with him a first name (or nearly so). Whenever I talk of either of these men, the fathers, I mean, I end up talking of the other one, and think too, at times, I may be describing Jimmy’s family about which I know nothing. Describing what I call their charm, a word I use too often, I realize I refer to all of them—Jimmy and Gene and Linda Jane’s father—and maybe the father the father resembled. And at that point, I don’t know whether the best thing to do is to stop, admit my mistake, and start again, or simply continue, since no one really cares about the accuracy of these stories and no one I tell them to is likely to meet these men.

This paralysis, I am told, is another reason “You’re just like Gene.”

One day, I say, initiating the story for which this section is named, Gene rents a car and drives to Cape Cod. No one questions how the car is compatible with the grid-free life he leads. No one questions where the money comes from because we bourgeois hardly deserve a hearing. Gene’s brother lives in the family house that Gene imagines will one day pay for his retirement, whatever that means, but it clearly will not, since his brother is lax with tax-paying and does nothing but irritate the neighbors of Provincetown.

Gene’s brother is a hoarder, as Gene is to a lesser and less pathological extent. Gene drives to Cape Cod to help his brother clean up the trash he has been accumulating and thus pacify the neighbors another month or year or so—parts of cars, old radios, furniture once left by the neighbors for the trash collection. The yard is cluttered past capacity and the house is full of old newspapers. It takes Gene two visits and a good part of the previous day to convince his brother that it will be permissible to rent a dumpster and

remove at least the yard debris and perhaps the more dangerous piles of unread paper in the house.

Gene is a big guy, as it is said, and so is his brother, or once was. The two of them, working as they were taught to do as boys, from nearly dawn until well past noon, have managed to fill the dumpster: car tires, a damaged refrigerator with no doors, perhaps the door itself, a grill, passable, aluminum framing for an unidentifiable piece of equipment, a chair, heavier having been soaked in rain, many chairs, lawn furniture, engine parts, lawn mowers of course of all ages and designs, edgers, no longer functional—it is all piled majestically in the dumpster, and there is even time, toward the end, for a few giddy runs to the magazines and newspapers that fill the house. Even the brother laughs with the joy of it and surveying the evidence of the work they have accomplished.

It will not be the end, but it is a start, Gene thinks and doubtless the brother agrees as much as he can agree, and perhaps the start of a new life for his brother, who has rarely shown the enthusiasm he has shown today. It is like being boys all over again, just before dropping in near fatigue and coming in for supper.

Gene has filled his wallet with cash—enough to pay for gas and tolls, enough for dinner and even to pick up the tab for his brother if it comes for that. He is exhausted, which is not a state he is used to. Maybe his brother, who has worked shoulder to shoulder with him all day can now “turn it around.” Maybe the two of them can work in Waldo County for a day or two or a week in the future, barter their labor, now family, as he barter his labor with his neighbors. He is tired and hungry; he will have lunch. But his brother, giddy and exhausted, waves him off. He’s not used to such intense work and he’ll take a nap instead.

When Gene returns, the dumpster is empty, its contents strewn about the lawn and most of the magazines back in the house. You can almost hear Jimmy laugh in derision when he is told this story.

### Family Court

The first time he hit her, it seemed almost an accident. It was simply a point of emphasis—a wild gesture such as we all make when excited. You know the feeling when the sweeping palm meets flesh. It is as if time has slowed, and a remarkable thing it is, even as the wailing follows, as if from a source outside the room. It’s difficult to believe, you think, that there will be no repercussions to such an accident. Or that your darling Eloise will just stare emotionless as you curse at her, intent upon the movie, intent upon the curbstone at

the airport. It is someone else, not you, you think, or just a script she has imagined from her childhood. Then things and history proceed as always these things have.

In Jimmy's case, the arguments grew more physical. I don't remember if there was ever blood involved—maybe from her face the time his closed fist met her eye, and there was certainly his own blood streaming from his nose when she had elbowed him while they were wrestling for what may as well have been a steak-knife, but was probably something inconsequential.

The problem here was simply getting the narrative in order. For when you thought about it, there never was a logical series of incidents, first this one, then its consequent, then the consequent of that—one after the other forming a sequence that terminated in a particular event—the kind of story you would tell a policeman or a judge or a lawyer—someone fixed on the narrative of how things came to be. Instead, there was only the wailing, or the phone call and the surreal feeling that it was impossible that this was happening now, or impossible that this was happening again.

The crucial events themselves occurred in the present and the future, it seemed, yet all anyone claimed to care about was an artificial history of the past. How did you come to use an old truck with a broken down winch to skid your tree logs from your own back yard? Where were the boards milled for the siding? So you said this, and it led to that, and finally there was some glorious summation of it all. Or perhaps it was all Hegelian in a strange way, with your assertion contradicted by a word or by a blow, then some grand tussle of a synthesis, and when you described it that way, those listening cocked their heads in disapproval and demanded that you just be serious for a minute. It was pointless to displease such people. It was never the truth they wanted, never your honest reconstruction of the surreal sequences of it all. What they demanded was only their own version of things, from front to back, all in logical order like building a house from its foundation, as if time moved in no other direction but from the past to the present. Like statements in a police report. Like engines in their slow decline, the rising costs of fuel, the obsolescence of the machinery. Like grid-based thinking itself and its obsessions with bill collection. It was what you hoped to get away from in the first place, and simply let the nameless animals be born and die and end up quartered in the fall, giving way to other nameless animals in the spring.

On Fred Wiseman's "Family Court," shot in Waldo County during the filming of Belfast, Maine, you can see how it was for them. Domestic court was instituted to protect women from their brutal husbands and lovers. You could file complaints against them and the police, unlike the police of the old days, were required to take action. At family court, you could finally tell your story properly. You could get court orders and have the guy

kicked out of your home or maybe he would reform himself and you would both get months of counseling. Wiseman shows that things do not work the way the good-hearted legislators planned. We see no couples at family court, but we do see the defendants, as few of even the most brutal of men flout the law and its summonses. Perhaps they have court-appointed lawyers who advise them against self-destructive displays of arrogance. Perhaps they are told in hushed terms what is likely to happen. The judge reads the complaint. On such and such a date, the plaintiff such and such made the statement that such and such during the course of an ordinary work day did both ... There is no perfunctory “How do you plead?” as in the scenes of civil court in Wiseman’s earlier film. The plaintiff is not there. She is not there for the next case. Nor the case after that. And the judge is reduced to “Case dismissed.” And Case Dismissed again.

Cumberland County, 2008

I am walking with Ann-Marie at the Fair, among the large animals and even rabbits whose fur you can wear, and as we are walking there, I realize it is another Fair altogether—not the Common Ground Fair, established in 1977, three years after the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association received tax-exempt status, but the fair I have been going to since I was ten or even younger—the one travelling through the state—Skowhegan, Topsham, Cumberland. This seems like a decadent, blue-collar version of the Common Ground Fair, but it is of course much more venerable and the locations, unlike the paradoxically named Unity, interchangeable.

The Cumberland or Topsham or Skowhegan Fair was all rides and the smell of farm animals. When I was in high school, three of us staggered off one of those gangly machines on a rainy evening. I grabbed both handrails, and the entire ungrounded power went through me, leaving me only will enough to scream. Craig stood helplessly, thinking I was crying out in enjoyment. But Allen, the oldest of seven brothers, knew instantly what was happening and knocked me off the handrails and the iron staircase. Allen, who likely saved my life that day, now lives in his studio in Albany amid the art he has created for decades and will hate the political allusions he sees here. They fixed the lethal rail, I noted a day later with my girlfriend, with two turns of electrical tape.

I am walking with Ann-Marie at that Fair, thinking of the taped handrails of more than forty years ago, and she is talking incessantly about Gene, and each consolatory remark I make is answered “You’re just like Gene.” It is, I think, what Sarah also said to me, dreaming as she did of her dope-growing lover, fighting off the lawyers and thieves and criminals in California, a charmer like all of them. She left him finally, and after that I think she hardly remembers me.

Ann-Marie and I are both too old for the rides, too old to be intrigued by the strip shows; we have no children to excuse us. We walk, instead, in irony—eating the cheap fried food neither of us would permit in our own kitchens, then moving, parodically, on to the tractor pulls, which we imagine will be amusing, but really are not. Watching an old V-8 throw a rod is no better than watching work animals tormented by inexperienced drovers.

Despite her dismissals, I am in fact nothing at all like Gene; I am, I think, as far removed from Ann-Marie's Gene and Suzie's Jimmy and Sarah's Matt as I can be and still associate with such people. My academic job pays well and requires very little work or time. I live exactly how I want. I will retire whenever I want. I will change what I teach or write about and no one will care. I can leave for a week or more, pursuing some affair, it might be said, and no animals will get hungry or die or even notice I am gone or I have not been to Maine since fall.

In my usual version of the story, which I may as well repeat here, I claim that whenever Ann-Marie says I am just like Gene, I weigh the alternatives: forty years of friendship versus one smart-assed remark concerning the particular and tragic way in which Gene and I actually differ in respect to her. I say nothing, just as she said nothing forty years ago. It was almost forty years ago. But I think I just mentioned that.

“You're just like Gene.”

In the Brunswick I grew up in, there was an A&P Grocery store with a parking lot on Maine Street. It has since become a number of different groceries, all put out of business by Hannafords, and the last time I looked the building housed a pizza chain. You could park in the lot without penalty, and that is where I spoke to her. We played the Emperor Concerto three times that morning, or maybe it was a week earlier we did that. That is why she will always be music to me, even though she was indifferent to music herself. It is just the irony of the way music is.

Speaking directly and saying things directly must have been an easy thing to do for a twenty-four year old sophisticate like myself, and should have been no more difficult to listen to for a fisherman's daughter who had barely turned nineteen. There really is nothing to it. You simply explain your own sudden eccentricities as the result of some overwhelming emotion of the kind that normally afflicts people of that age. It doesn't matter what you call it: you can call it love or feelings or longing or desire or whatever you want. Everyone of all ages knows exactly what you mean, whatever words you choose, and there's hardly a reason to be unsettled about it. What often leads to confusion, you think, is the build-up, the long prologue, as if one believed that this simplest and most ordinary of things, after centuries of the refinements of a language, needed somehow to be expressed in a unique or startling turn of phrase.

But there can really be no ambiguities about any of this.

This might have gone the usual way, and by usual way I mean that one of the persons involved says something oblique, which the other, feeling flattered and fearful of it, misunderstands, or pretends to, then finally says something about their own emotions that they fear they will later regret and the two participants stand dumb in the strange assurance that both, remarkably, feel a version of the same thing.

Only it did not go that way on this day. It went the other way, where you stammer out something and the other person nods and smiles and you have no idea what they feel about the whole thing or whether they understood what you just said or even what it was you said to them. The way it was on this afternoon was something like “I just wondered whether you knew why ...” But it’s too embarrassing to proceed. And she nodded and smiled. And that was that, and the next thing you know, you were making arrangements to go to some place with a friend—the three of you.

Had this been years later, I would say it was the like the time we went fishing for bluefin tuna in Jeffrey’s lobsterboat, even then doomed for the auctioneer. John is with us, doomed also to die in a decade, and his now beloved Ann-Marie is with us too, for the air perhaps, having grown up herself with and among fishermen and the pervasive smells of South Bristol. I still have pictures of her, still with John, lounging in the folding lawn chair in the working area in the stern, and only an authentic fisherman’s daughter like herself could bring such a summer thing aboard a lobster boat and not lose face. I have pictures too of her in the wheelhouse, but not, oddly, of her dancing on the bow, ripping her bikini top off when we urged her to draw the tuna in. “We’ll have whales aboard,” I yell at her. But she laughs, likely misreading this as some kind of compliment rather than confession. And other than the tuna, which leapt completely out of water, big, as I said then, as boxcars, we saw nothing else that day.

We steam, as it is known, far from land; Jeffrey gloriously reviles the snarls of the makeshift tuna lines. And I will one day wonder what it is, this brutal charm of the fishermen, the charm of those who live as Gene and Jimmy do, off the grid. How they articulate the things they do. Sawing and splitting their winter cords of firewood, living without mediation, and working, so it seems, without contacts, somewhere far from any town out on the water, fishing for groundfish, or long-lining with its slow and boring rhythms, baiting and flipping the hooks overboard from the five-bushel tubs while the sleet slicks the washrail.

“You’re just like Gene.” And it may as well have been Jimmy, or Matt, or John himself, dead for a decade, or Fred, flipping through the gun magazines, or Richard, criticizing my footwear. Mother too, I will say in my defense, never let the dust settle or

foul up the keyboard, but caught the wayward motes in the dust-pan before they touched her meticulously maintained surfaces.

12.  
COURTSCENE

Betsy was quite simply the most beautiful woman James had ever seen, and she must have cut quite a figure, even on the avenues of Camden, where I'll set this. He noticed her, not because she was extravagantly or even conventionally perfect among her young competitors then at Colby; anyone could have seen that she was not a classic beauty at all. And likely, she wasn't that even twenty years earlier, maybe not quite tall enough, statuesque, you would call it, hands unpampered by a studio. Now, with three children, maybe thicker than you'd want that stunning beauty to be, with a certain hardness in her skin, much less creamy and unspoiled like you'd see in the women in the photographs. But here, beaming among these pouting adolescents at Colby, she seemed the only real person in the room.

She had an affinity for these Colby students, although they were in no way, he thought, her equals. Perhaps she assumed a barely discernible maternal attitude toward them, even though they weren't her kids, and her kids were nothing like these kids, at least not yet, and besides all that, all three of hers were boys. Maybe because of that, she had "seen it all" in respect to them: a roomful of civil and well-behaved graduates of the best prep schools in the Northeast could do little to dispirit her.

Beautiful herself, she had consequently produced the most beautiful children imaginable, at least for that part of Maine. Blond, each one of them, and all tall not quite to her shoulders and ebullient; and they would run in a pack of sorts, not a real one of course, Betsy beaming in the midst of them, and they would come out of Renys or Hannafords (Shop 'n Save as it was then called) overwhelmed with goods, and some of them riding on the grocery cart and load up her peculiarly inappropriate hippie car—a VW convertible! goodness!—hardly the thing for a carload of kids, and they would drive, I suppose, to their spacious colonial out towards Searsmont, where it was a straight shot to Waterville for class.

There was a divorce, but it was not his nature and certainly not mine to pry and you could sometimes see those boys with the former husband instead of her, massed on the streets of Camden. And he, Dad, although not beaming, always evinced an air of contentment at worst, while the boys, a bit more restrained, but still full of as much life as you would expect from such well-to-do's as these, would torment each other quietly in the restaurant. Today such kids would doubtless be on their computers or cellphones texting in such a place, making a quiet commotion by pecking their incomprehensible jargon into the phones' small screens.

She was the kind of woman, he thought, finally you “could bring home to Mother.” She was his age, a God-send, she would think (Mother that is), and known to all the women like herself (that is his mother), maybe for her connections in the to him remote region of Skowhegan. Betsy would stand beaming in the classical concerts given at the Bixler Music Center at Colby or at the Rockport Chamber Music series in the summer, somewhere in the third or fourth row from the back, always dead center, and she would be with an older woman, quite dressed up, and we all assumed this was the mother who had provided her with status and that first marriage and came from somewhere in Skowhegan. So where do you get that kind of money up there? we would silently ask. Even if you owned the New Balance factory itself, what kind of music do you suppose you’d listen to?

Inevitably, it seemed, he would ask her out for dinner. Such a thing, I suppose, you should call it a “date,” but “dating” these days means something quite different from talking in a restaurant. Whatever you wish to call it, for a woman with three young boys, this event was something of a production, and on one of these nights, he was a bit taken aback by the exchange she had with them. She had no baby-sitter and had decided this was time for the great experiment of leaving them alone together. And almost sadly and with her voice breaking, she had pleaded “You won’t fight, will you? Please, you won’t fight.” And all this meant, of course, that the younger one would be beaten to a pulp (not literally, of course) and would end up screaming and throwing stuff and be found later in the evening sulking in his room. James would witness none of that. He dropped Betsy off in her driveway at the grand colonial near Searsmont, neither saying anything of consequence, and he heard nothing from the house itself. No screams, no odd light formations, nothing to report to authorities.

It was one of the fancier restaurants they went to, but they ate in the Lounge section where things were considerably cheaper. Telling this story later, he would say or think that he had taken her to “Primo,” I’ll call it, even though it had cost him hardly more than twenty dollars to do so. It would be absurd, even in the story, to have such a conversation over two Senior Specials at the Rockland Cafe.

“We could, of course,” he said finally (since there is no reason to delay things further) “just get married. That is what we ought to do.” He used that particular inflection that meant he was making a joke of the whole thing, shamelessly flirting as he conceded to be doing then. “Mother of course thinks you’re perfect, my age and all, and with that hard, unthreatening skin.” What he said was not quite that; likely he did not include the details of age and unthreatening skin. You can, he thought, say what you will, but there isn’t a woman on earth who isn’t sensitive about such things, and really, what wasn’t perfect about

a beautiful 35-year-old who fifteen years earlier would have stopped all the traffic on the streets of Skowhegan?

“Well,” she said, still beaming, making it impossible for him to determine whether she was responding to all the sub-texts in his suggestions or simply play-acting at perfection, as she always did. “Well, I think you’ve left something out here.”

“And what might that be?”

“The ring, of course, and then the announcements and the planning of ceremonies.”

“Nonsense. What’s all that? Who needs that?” It sounded like an insult, although of course he had not meant to ridicule such things. “Us?” He added quickly. “We live beyond such conventions.”

“But more,” she said. “You’re leaving the important thing out.” He was certain of those words. First they had to fall “madly in love,” she said. And sit and stare at each other and say certain things. “You know exactly what such things are.”

“Nonsense!” he declared again, and here, he later realized, was his mistake; for there was no way she could have understood what it was he meant, or at least, no way he could be sure she did. She never stopped beaming. “Why that’s the easiest damn thing in the world. What’s to that, falling in love?”

Yet what he meant by this was not at all what she may well have thought or perhaps what you yourself just thought. Here she was, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, brilliant and sophisticated, and she could go to classical concerts with him, and appear with him in public, and instead of sitting in the corner either alone or with some equally shy woman on his arm, he could just stroll through and it would be like the later years he of course knew nothing of then, when he briefly went to such parties with a tall and dark Polish woman with a slashing smile and the wildest hair you have ever seen, and people would just come up and say “Wow, you are the most attractive couple I’ve ever seen.” Or maybe the word was “striking.”

The future he alluded to, that “easiest thing in the world,” was very similar, but it was a much different and articulate woman, this light-haired woman who was with him, and it was all Maine people at the party, none of the California types who had so admired him with the Polish woman, actually an Americanist from Oxford, and I don’t mean of course the county or the town in Mississippi.

To fall in love with her, that’s what he had meant. There would be nothing easier than to fall in love with her, not just anyone, and the whole point was, of course, that he could do so right now. She, after all, was one he saw a future with, and this was not simply the adult variant of the lascivious and inconsequential groping he used to do in high school.

Yet none of it mattered. It was too late. And he later realized she had heard him say something quite different, something disparaging of love and its mythology alike. Let us say: “Oh that business about love is all hogwash, and who needs that? All we have to do is utter some forced banality ‘I love you’ and that will be that. It’s as Molly Bloom says in Ulysses, ‘May as well him as another’; for finally we are all interchangeable.” It was no wonder that this conversation, promising as it seemed to him then, and promising as it seemed even years in the future when he reconstructed it in his mind, went nowhere. Because if that’s what he had actually said, and if the unspoken cynicisms were thought true, why then you might as well pick the one with the biggest bank account or the biggest cock or biggest pair of boobs and be done with it. “See here, Strether!,” he could hear her object had he said such a thing.

How could he have been so foolish?

“No, no. What I mean is something different.” For in fact, people are not interchangeable, and love is not nothing. “That’s not it,” he might have said.

He had felt that passion, as all of us have, and had been married as she had been, and doubtless there were days and weeks that he had experienced the precise emotions she had described: when you stare into the face of a lover in astonishment and wonder how you could possibly be so unique in the world as to be feeling this, this, whatever it was love is, suddenly more, to your amazement, than the most extravagant of clichés claims. And maybe that isn’t “the easiest thing in the world” at all, no matter how you inflect that phrase.

“No. I mean you. It’s you I mean. I say now, as we sit with this over-priced food arranged before us, that as I look at you, I realize here that to love you would be the easiest thing in the world.” That’s what he should have said, omitting maybe the reference to the cost of the food; then she would never have imagined that bit about Molly Bloom.

And then he would look at her, as if unsettled by what he had revealed. And how easy that would have been. That truly would have been “the easiest thing in the world,” and he had, quite frankly, blown it. God knows the nature of the future he had missed. Family and theatre and classical concerts every evening. And it wouldn’t just be a bunch of old standards in the repertory.

It is now early August, years later, and he tells everyone that this is the season he most loves. You can wake at dawn on these now shorter days, he says, with the dew so cold against your feet it feels like frost in October. The water in the Penobscot is just warm enough to swim in and you can start looking forward to the tourists leaving in September.

He is at a dinner party, and he has maintained contact with just enough small-town socialites to be invited to such things. Betsy is invited too, although he has only seen her once since the disastrous dinner at Primo. A year ago, it was, on Main St., or Route 1 as it

had come to be known in Camden; maybe her boys were with her and maybe some new man more articulate than himself. Tonight, she is late, rather mysteriously late, a half-hour perhaps, and for a host like this one, you knew that was unacceptable.

Someone is in the midst of the story of the home invasion—the only one known in Waldo County, it is said, but that cannot be true. It was actually only a break-in and the woman (hereafter “the victim”) wasn’t really home, but in her art studio a hundred yards away. The local police chief, who styled himself so modestly “from Mayberry” had raced fifteen miles to the driveway and seemed to fairly slide to a stop in the gravel. The way he tells the story, he had never fired a shot on duty, and so tired was he from travel he found himself standing beside the car, not with his requisite shotgun, but with the deer rifle that doubled as SWAT gear and the car door locked behind him. In his version, the detail repeated so often as to become a leitmotif is “I’m so glad I didn’t have to shoot him in the victim’s home.” Over and over. But it was like a fireman’s condolences who works for the mere thrill of it and doesn’t care what you have lost. It made no sense.

And he thinks, apparently, just as the police chief thinks, that this is all becoming routine. That the state has degenerated to such a point that a man of the law will threaten burglars in doorways every day. And then this thought is dispelled by a greater concern, apparently, as the burglar flees to the woods and to an unseen ATV: he fears that this is unique and he will never experience it again.

Betsy sits down as the story concludes as if in reverence of her. She is beaming as always, with the food almost cold, and he thinks staring at her, it is as if nothing has happened in the years since the calamity at Primo when his words were so badly misconstrued. All the convoluted conventionalities of conversation proceed, with the most sparkling of twists, exactly what you’d expect from such brilliant talkers, he thinks; and since he had gone to school in New York and spent some time in California, you can’t dismiss this judgment as baseless or something just some kid from Maine would say, who had no clear notion of how things were elsewhere with people “from away.”

It is some time half-way through this exquisite dinner that the topic of the brilliant and beautiful boys comes up, and he realizes he is missing something. Something about this day everyone at the table knows but him, and even now, the explanation is so indirect he will have to fill in details for himself weeks or months later. She is attached to someone finally, maybe the man he imagined he had seen in Camden and maybe she is married. Well of course, he thinks, what could be easier than falling in love with her, and finally someone had the good sense to get the words right, he concludes, reasonably enough, and you would not expect someone like her, barely forty, for God’s sake, and destined to have in another five years or so “three grown boys,” to stay single forever.

But the new consort is not there, not amid the brilliant repartee over the ingeniously contrived place-settings. He has taken some job in another state, it might be Wisconsin or Michigan, and the job is one that even the perfect Betsy cannot keep him from. She has fallen for the bait of the perfect utterance James never quite got out himself, and she will follow her new man to this so foreign place before the month is out. No wonder she appears so jubilant.

“So what did the judge say?” she is finally asked, beaming over the cold untouched food on her plate, and he can’t imagine what this is about judges and legalities. Isn’t it all about saying the right thing?

It turns out she has come from court, although it is a while before he puts this together, and her beautiful now teen-aged children have also come from court, and her former husband has come from court although only she has come here to dinner, and all this “stuff and nonsense,” as Mother might say, about love at the age of forty is, as far as the law is concerned, a crock of crap, since what matters is not what these grand passions are, but rather where the kids, inseparable from both the well-respected parents, as everyone in town I heard speak of this insists, what matters is where those boys should go.

And something within these much-respected parents made them think that all this “where the kids will go” was finally “up to them,” that is, up to the boys themselves. You can see disaster already. The parents think in their goodness and perfection that the way to settle everything is to have their children stand up before a judge, in all his august majesty, and with both parents now in audience, the boys will make their choice and state the unadulterated truth.

To extract God’s truth from our loved ones—this is, we sometimes think, just a matter of finding means to do it, and the right moment for this so crucial thing. Reticent though they may have been in the past, one day, and the day may not come in life itself, one day our loved ones will stand tall and they will proudly speak the truth. And what a grand day that will be. We will tell our grandchildren of this day and they will be struck dumb with admiration.

We never think or can conceive that what we will hear that day might not be what we wish to hear and not what we have heard in our imaginings. That two once-lovers in all good faith have fantasies that are finally incompatible and that the best thing to be heard in life can satisfy no more than one of them.

Once James knew where this story led, he could not bear to listen to what the beautiful boys were said to have testified, hideously under oath before the judge. And of course the story concluded not with the motif of the grimly disappointed husband, disdained by all at the table, suddenly disabused of the laughable delusion that he primarily

and he alone finally mattered to those kids. It led, rather, to her, in this room, telling this, with that show of equanimity that even to him seemed shocking and curiously disreputable, as if all that had been said about her for years and even his mother's imagined approval, all of this had been for nothing. For there was no way, as any rational person should have known, not to mention those as shrewd as those listening to the story at the table, no way that the kids were going to head off to Michigan with Mom and their newly appointed stepdad and leave their real and perfect dad behind.

He will see her once more years later. She is back in Maine, back where she left her now grown children, and she still lives in the old colonial near Searsmont. Not, as you might imagine, with the poetic justice of the failed second marriage, but rather with this new consort still in hand and the only failing involved in the whole unpleasant thing his having been fired or having quit in self-righteousness (James never got that story quite straight) the ill-advised job he had taken out there in Michigan or Wisconsin or Lacrosse, was it, where she was certain the kids would follow her, with no more than a diplomatic shrug for their father.

Mother would have liked it, he thought. She would see it all as some kind of comeuppance, which people of her generation pretty much saw in everything, and if she had not died, so inconveniently, in the interim, it would be a story he would have been most certain to perfect for her.

## 13.

## THE WOMEN FROM AWAY

## Feeding the Animals

“The rabbit is still pooping; that is the main thing.” It’s what she says, when you have forgotten, say, what rabbits are, or what they eat, or whether they are prey, wild, or live perhaps in a spare bedroom where the gerbil maze once was. She has stayed with you until today, whatever it might mean to stay, when you love the woman from away, never writing the letter she knows that she should write, never making the phone call she should make. It is more than you deserve, but you say nothing. It is easier to speak of animals.

Sid came to Rochester by working her way through Xerox Corporation, having started, I think, fresh from Reed College, somewhere in Portland, before she “gave up,” she tells me, years after the glorious days of tantric sex at that high school reunion of her past. I forget who else went to Reed College, but I find them on both coasts, north and south to Los Angeles. I pretend this is because Reed was modeled after Bowdoin, so I’m told, and Portland itself named after the city in Maine. Allyson, children of friends I’ve just met—maybe it is one of them with the tantric sex, but who would have told me this? After work, you could drive your Volkswagon van, anachronistically painted in flowers, the van that is, across the Cascades of Washington or through the central hills of Maine to the Common Ground Fair in Unity.

Mom is a biologist, Sid says, retired in the now family home in Madison. She came to Maine as a high school teacher, after being left by her dead husband and as a consequence working her way to an M.A. degree in a university out west. As a biologist “from away,” many animals ...

“My father was an amateur ornithologist,” I say, interrupting her. “For years, every dead or wounded bird in town ended up with us as did news of banded birds on neighbors’ feeding trays.” There was nothing we could do with such reports, the unread bands likely pliered on by Chris or Hank next door. There was also nothing we could do to save the wing-wounded unfortunates that came to us, as Father wrung his hands helplessly and Mother turned away in disgust. Like that great blue heron, trapped by two ten-year-olds and a suicidal teenager in the woods of French’s Island, out of its element; shaking finally its noble beak free of the blanket as Father stood by with John’s wizened whoremaster of a father, and tried to exchange gruff pleasantries with him. There is nowhere for this tale to go.

Sid grew up with what I thought her mom’s exotica: a snapping turtle I once assumed cornered by an hysterical neighbor, although Sid, speaking on Mom’s authority,

assures me it was bought in a department store—maybe Renys itself, if Renys in those days carried pets; maybe Woolworth’s, which surely did, or maybe one of those short-lived failed competitors that Michael and I pay tribute to with our “Ames first” epithets. A few box turtles, some of which still live with her, or rather did live with her until they were killed by raccoons a year ago, themselves finally trapped by Mom, so un sentimentally, one by one in Have-a-Heart traps. She carried each by wheelbarrow to a bathtub behind the house, once a drinking trough for large animals, then stuffed the drowned carcasses into trash bags and left them, illegally, for trash pickup on Thursdays. There was also an incident with a neighbor’s cat, I believe, that unaccountably ended up in the pet shelter in Palmyra, and you have to believe Mom’s Have-a-Heart trap was involved. The owners were persistent, and within a week, it reappeared, crouched by the hen house. Whatever one might care for or protect or feed to something else—insects, toads, snakes, even dangerous ones, stalked on the warm roadways—Mom, unlike Father, mine I mean, never gives up on them. The once show rooster, for example, now paralyzed, lives propped up by a shoebox and nursed with Bulldog or is it Redbull sports drink and mineral oil enemas, crowing erratically in its non-musical way, but crowing still.

It has taken years to construct this, and I am doubtless missing more than I know, since Sid has no interest in narration or the logic that applies to it. To her, there are no developments or complications here. Listen to her tell of the dognapping, for example. On one of her last walks in Los Angeles, was it a decade earlier?, Sid is in Griffith Park with a family dog, thinking of James Dean, or “Moo” as he is called in the famous scene in the planetarium. The dog is suddenly whisked away by a dog thief. He took it generously home, she later found, to his charming and guileless eight-year-old daughter, who would tell the police all about it, right in her thieving parents’ face, when they questioned her. As the dognapper sped away, Sid ran to the first car she saw and jumped in, she says. “Follow that truck!” she screamed, just like in the movies. The driver was aghast, as who wouldn’t be?, caught she realized pleasuring himself. She runs from the car; how would she ever get her dog back? A minute later, the car pulls up to her and the door opens. “It’s ok,” the driver in my version says conclusively. “I’m done.” Yet in Sid’s version, it is difficult to know where the emphasis is felt to be.

To Sid, all this is just the way things are, not how they all become, and you might describe your lawn, say, by selecting whatever blade of grass you happen on. Much of what I learn comes in response to questioning. I ask, always probing, always seeking one more detail, since she might well add, as if an afterthought, “And that was the time, of course, we had the barn owl living in the kitchen.” “Barn owl?” “Yes.” “In the kitchen?” “Why yes.”

“Where you ate?” “Of course where we ate.” “You never mentioned that.” “You never asked about an owl. His name was Mr. Morrison.”

I’m not sure how long Mr. Morrison lived in the kitchen. Sid is not certain either, since as a child, time is not the same as it is for me and for you. She says that it was exiled from its home when it became “overly aggressive” (the very phrase she used) but I’m not sure what aggression means in her lexicon, and she could not herself recall. Nor was she certain whether there was one Mr. Morrison or two. One lived out the rest of its angry life in the largest cage Mom could construct behind the shed near the turtle pond.

The owl ate rats, I’m told. And Mom bred them from a pair ordered by mail, intended I assume for cruel experiments. They were spared that fate as Mom “lined them up on the kitchen counter” (but how was this possible?) and killed each with a whack from the butt end of a very large and heavy kitchen knife. Holding the blade, could it have been? A half dozen or dozen at a time, Sid said. “But what ...?” Mom then wrapped them up in individual plastic bags and stacked them in the freezer. “The freezer?” “Of course the freezer.” “With the food?” “Of course.” “Like your ice cream?” “Well, we were poor and didn’t eat a lot of ice cream in those days.”

Every day, or every other day I think, Mr. Morrison was given one freshly thawed rat. In the morning, Sid and her sister would find nothing but the rat entrails, always carefully arranged across the dial of the rotary phone. “The phone?” “Why yes.” “The working phone?” “Well, we didn’t make a lot of calls then.” “I would think not.” “At least, not in the morning with the rat guts in the way.”

I loved hearing about Mr. Morrison, but it was difficult to learn more of him. For Sid, there was nothing extraordinary at all about a barn owl living in the kitchen, or was it two?, and thus no reason whatsoever to note any but the most striking of incidents. Like the entrails on the rotary dial, if they really were there more than once. Even the stories of its fatal aggression were vague and abstract. What sort of aggression? Were there lasting wounds? Did it keep you up at night with surreal hooting of some kind? Or is that another kind of owl that does that? It was just a barn owl, for goodness sake. And it lived in the kitchen, on the top of the cabinets where Mom kept the dishes.

Years later we walk together in California. In the late evening, just north of Los Angeles, the air cools as the sun sets in the hills near Alta Dena. There, in twilight, the bats appear in what those who are afraid of them describe as swarms. And seeing this, Sid said as casually as one can when speaking of such things: “Don’t you just love them? We had some living in the closet in Madison, before I started working at Renys.” “In the closet? You mean ...” “Oh no. Goodness no. They didn’t move in there, or live there. They didn’t come from outside.” “You mean, they weren’t ‘from away’?” Don’t be silly. “Oh

no. They were mailed to us as small babies.” “Mailed?” “Why yes.” “Then they really were from away.” “Oh yes. Far away. Everyone knew Mom, and so someone, I forget who, was having an attic redone and they found a nest I guess it is of bats or whatever it is bats live in and so they sent them to us out of pity.”

Mom put the bats in one of Sid’s old and soon to be unused coats, and for days or weeks they fed them something that would substitute for insects, vomited from adults I suppose, and this became bits of chicken, scraped and cut across the grain finer than fine, she says, and a little baby pablum, whatever that might be, with honey, perhaps all crushed up in milk—all spread or dropped into a shallow jar lid, so the young bats could drag themselves up to it “on their elbow wings,” she said, and drink. They loved all this, she says; they would come down out of her coat onto the shelf to gather around the jar lid. And then they would fly, as they grew to maturity, flitting, as one speaks of bats’ flight, about the room, emitting their barely audible, high-pitched shrieks to keep their bearings, echo-locating, it is said. And you know exactly what that’s like if you’ve ever closed your garage only to find you’ve inadvertently trapped one there.

“It was magical,” she said. “But don’t bats ...” “Well of course they do. So for all that time, I would just pull the sheets over my face ...” thus shielded from the flecks of guano “... and fall asleep listening to them.” The only bad time she had of it involved sleepovers, so important for a girl her age. “It was wonderful to share all that, but no one ever came for a second night with us.”

Sid now feeds the animals in the suburbs of Rochester, where I drive, curiously, through other Rochesters in New Hampshire and Vermont. There are no cages or rescue missions or biology experiments as there were when she was growing up in Madison. Urban rabbits, cardinals, birds of all kinds are there, squirrels of course, kept from one feeder and directed to a cache of food all their own. In the winter, Coopers hawks fly to a high platform for hamburger and the occasional unwary ground-feeders, and crows too get their share in the early morning with their shrieking young, like those so many of my guests resent when they come to my own lawn at 5 AM loudly demanding food. A kindly neighbor shoots the rats for her.

I question her. In Rochester, I interrupt to ask why, for example, we need fifty pounds of corn, or what the chicken gizzards, which we don’t eat, are for, or what “going shopping” or “being low on food” really means when I am visiting. “Did you ever,” I might add, “have a barn owl living in the kitchen named, perhaps, ‘Mr. Morrison?’” And all of this becomes even more complex when at second-hand, I hear her describe her visits to Mom.

Difficult as these stories are to extract from her, you can see in my own story that there are also gaps, and in this case, you do not have the opportunity to ask for clarification. “Were you ever, say, delayed in JFK, with a woman from, say, Rochester?” “Did you discuss with her the women from away?” “Did you mistakenly address an e-mail, intended for a different woman from away, the one who would not wait for you, read instead by Sid?” “Could you specify the woman that you loved?” “Did she continue to love you, thinking it would be only months before you left?” “How was it that she drove away from you, her car harboring the last of her domestic pets?”

There is something not quite right, you may have seen, about this love she has for you, of the itineraries or locations, about Xerox, Reed, or Eastman Music School it may have been, the warm asphalt in the evening. The allusions to the bats in Alta Dena seem equally disjointed, even to readers familiar with Los Angeles, the “other L.A.” as we know it here, although there are surely enough bats in Lewiston-Auburn to make the same tale plausible. What is the unspecified origin of those mailed to a child’s home in Madison? Are the two Portlands—Oregon and Maine—really one? Why does her drive with her domestic pets make her a woman from away?

### Spring Gathering

When Marcelline arrived, no one imagined, much less Mother herself, she would sulk on the bow of Charlie’s Hampton, its rudder shaped too small to turn the boat efficiently. Who would predict she would face away from me, her feet in the wash of the bow wake, the entire afternoon? In the swirl of the tides off Basin’s Point in Harpswell, who would have guessed that small French girl, whose forehead reached barely to your chin, could feel such alien resentment?

It is difficult to know where that began—perhaps the love-making so startling I dismissed it years later as professional; no one knew, surprisingly, what I meant by that. Or was it her accent? or how she herself construed what she heard of it? For two days she complained that she would never really be from “here,” meaning from America, not knowing what it was to be from Maine itself, and using the word Maine in her stories as a generic placename for America. What Maine reader would hear of such a thing? He read her stories and so misplaced were the references, this “man from Maine” she spoke of, the man she wrote her stories of?—he assumed she meant a province in France with some Francophone lothario.

She would speak and she could count on no one to correct her. Too many of the real Americans, so she must have thought, whatever they were, those from here perhaps, found her undershot jaw and pure tensed vowels so alluring they would never think to

change them. And she would practice what she called her “gitter,” unaware that most of her provincial listeners assumed she was speaking of some exotic European thing, and not the common six-string guitar that in those days nearly everyone in America could play.

So she merely said, by way of defense, as if speaking of the aerobics class she taught in her panting English, “Lots of men ask that, why I move so fast the way I do ...” “at the end,” she meant, or something like that—something embarrassing even to think about. And something sneering like “You couldn’t handle it,” meaning her full attention let us call it, simply because what you wanted was finally a small thing. You did not want, it seemed, the attendant emotions, the irrationality of desire, the future—all those matters suddenly accessible on those unexpected days. You didn’t want all that with a woman from away, on her way to Paris, for good, she said, stepping on the plane to JFK from Portland, even though she showed up in Los Angeles two weeks later, then again two years later, then became unfindable anywhere, writing articles in English for a Paris paper folded years before you found it. You said nothing as the hull of the Hampton cut through the sea surface.

Mother must have been forty years older at the time, cold and invincible. Lean and lock-jawed, two decades from her death. It was not done to walk like some French sophisticate or other rank European across the freshly mowed grass with your breasts exposed and free. But it was also not done to complain about such shenanigans, as she would have put it had she tried. Mother’s forebears had scraped the footrot in the shipholds off Ellis Island. It was a small thing now that she was asked to do, her husband Nate now dead from the tumors. Unlike cleaning the footrot in the shipholds off Ellis Island, all things were finally small things she was asked to do.

So she limited her complaints, noting only, as she did, that “she” (that is Marcelline herself of course) “never really cared about us,” the family she meant, as if some smoking hot French girl should be profoundly interested in a bourgeois widow stuck in the provincial Northeast, daughter of the famous immigrants of America, when she could instead sit on the couch next to him, feeling his lust right there in the living room. Wasn’t it enough to speak, in those days? Or simply ready your lips as if to do so?

The beach was not a real beach. The rocks that formed it fell from the fragile cliff, which broke down in sheets during the winter storms, then to barely skipping rocks by fall. The rockweed took hold and one careless step would mean slicing your hand open on the barnacles. You never see photos of such spots in the tourist magazines.

She walks from that beach across the lawn, back to the guest house, her completely exposed breasts answering her careful steps: “sagging breasts” she had muttered the night before, and it was years before he knew enough to know to say then “Nonsense,” or

something more Richard-like “What the fuck are you talking about”—the same sort of things he would want to hear, had he complained about the growing lines around his eyes. So European she was, surly on the newly mown grass. Not the thing one would see in Maine in those days, or should, as Mother might have added. And of course, not what one would ever see out West, in Reno, where she moved at age ten from Brittany, or Los Angeles, where she worked the last four years.

He expected to introduce Marcelline to Ann-Marie, but this was less an introduction than what could be crassly termed a set-up. He would place them together, and then the two of them would “babble on in French” was how he put it. And it wouldn’t be the French you heard in Maine, oh no!, that old Acadian rag!, it would be real and authentic. He never once thought that the bantering might be just clipped and halting platitudes that he would neither translate nor comprehend. Like being told to speak English into the microphone, to a distant acquaintance.

Predictably, at the spring gathering, on what seemed the first warm day of summer, they stood together nervously, as if he had asked them to start a threesome or some damn thing like that; then Marcelline sat on the table and she said something or other and Ann-Marie tried briefly to be compliant and act like a hostess then something else, or maybe he misconstrued the whole thing entirely, and pretty soon they were just looking down on the ground at a piece of lettuce, blown from a paper plate, and they may as well have been waiting in line at Renys, with the local cadence framing their silences. Guests joked in the exaggerated Maine accent formed to Marshall Dodge recordings. But there is no way a French girl could hear such parodies, and the last thing she asked was why they spoke the way they did.

Ann-Marie turns away, leaving Marcelline sulking on the picnic table, set in the wedge of lawn where no one wants to join her. I will recognize all these faces in later years, aging, beards, and grizzled-back-to-earthers all, it seems, and all of them from away. One day, I think, or rather I thought then, I may be one of them. But I do not and I cannot think that either on that day or on this day. Because I am never one of them, leaving at the latest in November. Staying here only long enough to lose the things I love on other coasts. I am always here with an alien girl and it may be Sid or Marcelline or Ann-Marie abstractly, or it may be a Maine itself. These men and these women, angrily washing the apples for the cider press, will talk of winter among themselves, and it is a conversation I cannot join, even though I am the only one born here and the only one whose natural accent is the one from the place itself, rather than modeled after all the published parodies.

So Marcelline, in the end, became, now famously in his memory, that brooding tourist on the cut grass in Camden, wearing the ridiculous tee-shirt with the puffins on it,

manufactured in Cambodia, so tight he could hardly stand to sit next to her, and there she sat sullenly on the bench by the harbor staring at the schooners. It was then that she, from Brittany as she was, complained that Ann-Marie was Belgian, and the accents they exchanged were mutually contemptible. There was nothing then to do but stare down on the lawn or stare at the schooners, thinking of the rancor of love-making, or realize that despite her, the true love of one's life, whoever that was then, was elsewhere. That everything she scorned in him was true.

### Mother

My grandfather came from Sweden, I'm told, in the early twentieth century to join his brothers and their laundry business in Colorado. He married my grandmother—somehow in Iowa—and raised a family, six girls and one young son—and put them all through college during the Depression, grumbling about unions and FDR until he died at 100. Mother was the oldest, took to music, then left the family, grim-faced about it all, I suspect, first to Augustana College, still off in the mid-west somewhere, then finally to New York City, and I believe she followed there, although this was never made clear to any of us, an older Jewish man (which must have raised the hackles of my grandfather) and she ended up at Columbia Teacher's College, studying her music, specializing in keyboard.

I hear stories of an ASCAP strike, maybe from my father, and that kept her from making a living playing in bars with groups of black musicians, smoking weed, or whatever it was called then, and living a life that was unimaginable to anyone who spent much time with her. It must have killed my father with envy and jealousy to know of this, but the confirmation absurdly comes from him, my father, that is, who had an unnatural I think love of Louis Armstrong, the down-trodden, and made us all root for the underdog at any sports event. She went to Oberlin and there she met him, seven years her junior, and the day they got engaged, the Dean demanded that one of them resign immediately. This sort of thing, he said, just would not do.

I never got her side of that story, any more than the story of the bars in New York—this is all recorded in correspondence from my father to his advisor in Illinois. I have written of this and I do not wish to write of it again. They move back to New York, or Connecticut it turned out to be. Something about the birth of my brother, and taking baths in a tub in the living room, like my sister-in-law who grew up with fishermen would do decades later, and her hair falling out in handfuls. Then the war in which he never fought came, and she left for a year or two in Colorado, caring alone for my brother, with I assume her young sister who would die of cancer before any of them.

She was not much for speaking about any of this, Mother was. Neither in Denver nor in Maine did she speak of this. She would consequently never be from here, given this, wherever “here” might be, with no accent to betray her origins. Exiled in Colorado—away from the music, away from the sophisticates of New York. Exiled here to Maine—hating sailing, and hating the north winds. Heating her large colonial with the cheap oil of the 50s. Adverse to weaponry. A woman who never held a shovel until her husband died and then was forced to dig her car out of the snow in order “to get the groceries” as she termed it.

She would sit in the rare July sun on the porch and darken her white Swedish skin, while Father ran his errands. Then later in the recliner, with a book or The New Yorker, smoking her cigarettes next to the half-drunk martini. She taught English, to the “numb kids” as we called them, like Cathy’s poor kids from Swanville, outside Belfast, most of course from the town I now live in, those who could not speak above a mumble, or, as it could be said, had no accent to speak of. They pretended to read when she called on them, and the brightest of them answered questions for the rest.

On the day my father should have died, wracked with pain and delusion from convulsions in the alcohol de-tox center, she sat in bed. I am in the doorway, twelve years old. My aunt pretends to offer help, but the two women have always resented each other, and my aunt, I realize, must relish the pain of it, even though it is her brother, her own flesh and blood, for God’s sake, tormented by visions in the hospital bed. My mother says merely “I think I’ll sleep. I think I’ll sleep.”

Of course he did not die that inconvenient day, and the last time I saw him was twenty years past the day he should have died that first time. He would die now in three weeks, maybe from the same cancer that took my young aunt, this one my mother’s flesh and blood, or maybe one from the cigarettes that killed so many men of his generation. He is in the car waiting to drive me to the bus station. I am with my mother, stoically preparing pretty food for Christmas. I break down. She holds my shoulders and as stern as she has been in thirty years she says “Don’t you dare let him see that. Don’t you dare.” So he never saw such things from anyone. And by the time he got the last letter I wrote him, where I spoke of this directly, he was too weak to read it.

I try to find with her a history, but how can a loved one become a narrative? She is in Colorado, on the train back from New York City—“not my mother” I cry when she steps onto the platform. She is sitting silently in the sun, or maybe it is the perfunctory calls on Sunday. Her memory fails and she can no longer watch TV coherently, or listen to the Red Sox on the radio, or drive competently on any but the most familiar of routes. This was

the beginning of history for her, so it seemed, and before that she was just a presence with her inscrutable past.

Where are the anecdotes? Mother sobbing in the bedroom, not when Father was about to die, but when the inconsequential gift-giving on a Christmas Eve had not gone well. Or maybe at some concert, where it seemed with Nate gone, we could enjoy the music in some peace, but found that was impossible. Or maybe her laughing as she came down to the water where a friend and I were swimming or perhaps it was where I was swimming, and conceding she had no idea what it was she was to do if something had gone desperately wrong.

Coda: To Her Who Would Not Wait for Me

And I have now come sadly to the famous joke I once told, told to her who would not wait for me and she told back to me a year ago, the last time she would ever be in Maine.

The joke is straight-forward, and it rarely fails. It needs to be told, as it is not now, when everyone is giddy with absurdity and their thinking grooved in a series of jokes we all know well. You must have heard this many times: after a few jokes of the “What’s black and white and read/red all over” variety, you say: “What do you call a newborn cow, with green stripes, three legs, born on December 5th?” And when your victim, marveling at or weary of your wit, gives up, you answer as dead-pan as you can: “A calf.”

And of course you can tell it all kinds of ways: you can tell it with strangely colored cats, born on impossible days, since everyone knows what a kitten is, and sheep will do as well. You can say “A newborn eight-legged dog, with the personality of an embarrassed zebra,” for example, self-referencing the joke form itself. The particulars, of course, don’t matter at all; and the punchline isn’t clever, it’s just obvious.

She nearly pissed herself laughing when she first heard it; so years or maybe one year later, I told her a second joke, dumber than the first one. “So a guy from Portland comes to a farm in Hartland, near St. Albans, and says, wow, look at the chicken and the Hartland farmer grabs it and says, ‘No, we call these pullets,’ and the Portland guy points to a rooster and says ‘Wow, a rooster,’ and the farmer says no, we call that a cock. Then the guy sees the farmer’s donkey and he’s just about to say something when the donkey kicks up and runs off and the farmer hands him the two chickens and says ‘Here, hold my cock and pullet while I chase my ass around the barn.’”

Well, you can imagine anyone moved by the three-legged variegated kitten joke almost fell off the road when told this one, and it didn’t matter whether the joke was funny really, or just expressed that naive sense of humor characteristic of twelve-year-olds and the

miracle that two adults, lovers then, could still communicate on the basis of such nonsense. So recovering she said “It’s like that other joke.” “What joke?” And slowly and deliberately she continued: “What do you call the presidential mansion?” “Well, ok. I’ll say ‘The White House’.” “Right. That’s right. OK. And what do you call the rooster that crossed the road?” “Let’s see. ... Ok. I give up.” “The purple rooster.”

And I stood there in utter amazement, thinking “what the fuck joke is that?” meaning not “Say what?” or “I don’t get it,” but rather just what joke can you possibly be alluding to here? Why do you not make more sense to me? And it turned out to be the calf joke, or the three-legged kitten joke, or the zebra-striped puppy joke and I must have told it with purple a year ago, a year before the last year she would ever come to Maine.

I write this, now alone, in a cheap restaurant in Los Angeles. I am staring at my plate. It is a meal she has not cooked. How could there be, I wrongly think, more grievous things than this?

## 14.

## EN ROUTE TO THE REST HOME

I-95

The old Volvo was a 1967 blue station wagon, one of the last of the Model 122-S once ubiquitous in Maine, but unknown on those drives from the Rockies or from New Orleans finally back to Harpswell. It sat winterized in the garage for years, surrounded by broken edgers and rototillers, and I sold it to Tracy Fides, who lost it in a divorce, then died of cancer four years later. The last fictional drive it made was also from New Orleans; it was last seen on a road shoulder whenever I wrote that chapter and I know even less of its future than I know of my own.

I put a then impressive 120,000 miles on that car, did a complete tune-up every month, and blew the oil seals twice. It became, through that, a near antique, perfect thus for car auctions and fiction. The nearly 300,000 miles I put on the car that replaced it, a 240DL with electronic ignition, overhead cam, and self-adjusting valves, meant nothing. If the old couple hadn't driven just such a yellow Volvo station wagon in Beetlejuice, had not a second been wrecked by Romeo in a cloud of color in Agata e la tempesta, this would be the first allusion to one in art of any kind. They sent it to the crusher, and maybe now you're drinking out of it or wearing it on your feet.

The story requires that I abandon the old car, although I can't recall why this had to be. High point, climax, conclusion? Maybe I simply lost heart or interest in this last car I got laid in, I crassly say, in a rest stop outside Dexter. There is no garage; there are no ramps or blocks, no afflicted buyer in this narrative. Allegorically, it will be about abandoning an old life, I imagine (although I had lived nothing to abandon), and somehow fresh, I will then hitchhike I think to Maine.

I know my mother, the fictional one, had died; I remember this not because the scene is fresh or because I had written so movingly about it, but because she, the real one, was the sole reader of the final manuscript, and kind about the whole thing, considering. At one point during this conversation, she said "Well, I see you killed me off." I guess this was a joke. She was, after all, an English teacher, despite her music degrees, and had taught poetic license to a generation of "numb kids" in southern Maine. "Well, I see you killed me off," she said. That's all? How could she have added nothing further, I remember wondering at the time? Even Dad, now dead for decades, picked his made-up melodies on the keyboard or recorder, while staring intently at scores whose annotation he could not read.

There are few details from the wretched thing I still recall. Something about hunting may be in there, and a bomb scare too, I think, and a lot of unfocussed rants about leaving and returning to Maine. But in the closet where this manuscript is stored there are other sheaves of paper, which I haven't looked at in decades, and it's possible even these scenes are from different piles.

*... In his toolbox, he had a file, large-too large for the point file required to keep the ignition functional in such cars-and a ball peen hammer ...*

I can't remember whether the engine stopped on its own, that is, in a smoky break-down involving a broken valve stem and cracked piston rings, or if less dramatically he simply flicked off the ignition. In both cases, he would have to be careful to disengage the clutch, although I remember nothing of that either. What was particularly vexing was that just when I was to leave the car behind, or he was, I began to imagine "getting caught." And it was like being afraid of failing a breathalyzer test, or having a hash pipe fall out of your pocket or suddenly not knowing when asked who Samuel Johnson was.

So without explanation, he begins to remove all traces of himself from the car—the registration, and any papers with his name, and even small things, like, oh, a green cigarette package with his fingerprints. Then I have him remove the ID number from the car.

You have to remember, this car was made in 1967, the year I met my wife-to-be, I suppose, and there certainly weren't VIN numbers on the dash in those days as there are on cars I drive today. Apart from the metal sticker in the engine compartment, I had no idea where these numbers might be. Given this, I should have had him proceed calmly and methodically but without detailed explanation. Thus the readers (if I even imagined there would be readers for such narcissistic claptrap) would feel respect for the competence of this character who, by saying nothing, apparently knows cars far better than they could hope to do.

But I stumbled mightily.

Some of those ID's are hidden, I now know and I suspected even then. So I had to invent that large metal file, even though in those days I never carried more than a point file in the toolbox, ideal for cleaning battery terminals and the contact points in old distributors. And I needed a hammer, or conjured one—a ball peen hammer I believe that hammer-type is called, although I've never owned one myself—and then even more "paraphernalia," as Mother might call it, since against a steel frame, nothing short of a cold chisel will really do. What finally happened to all that stuff, I don't really know. And he chips and files away at the iron or I guess it's steel (whatever the real difference is) and pretty soon, there are no signs left of him in or on the car and he just walks away.

*... In the distance, the windshield caught the last rays of the afternoon sun—an hour before sunset. He turned ...*

And all this nonsense is because his mother has died somewhere and this is his inexplicably appropriate way to get to the funeral.

I didn't realize then, of course, that there was no reason for all this mechanical folderol (Mother's word again) that so worried me at the time. There wasn't a chance anyone who had read such maanderings this far, even with enthusiasm, would have for one second imagined that anyone in that unreal landscape, or even in a real one, would ever care who had abandoned the old car. So what was finally the point of the ball peen hammer, the cold chisel, and the curiously massive point file? I could have had him just stop the car.

*He lifted his foot from the accelerator, and the engine slowed to what seemed an idle, but a fast idle, itself consequent on the coasting vehicle, still in gear. The road was straight, and it was like driving through Kansas years earlier, when he lost all sense of speed, following the straight road to the widow's door. Cars passed, the second and the later ones more quickly, and within a minute his own car, now in neutral, was coasting slowly enough to be a danger, and he steered it to the shoulder. And automatically it seemed, but unnecessarily of course, he disengaged the clutch, and the car rolled to a stop. He had not touched the brake. ...*

That's the way it would go. The cars passing are only an oblique way of saying "he slowed down," thus the second one passes more quickly, and the third more quickly than that, at least they would if all of them were moving at the same speed and in the same direction, which is not always what "passing" means in this context. And it would be pointless even then to worry about whether there might be other cars on the road, or an entire Army convoy for that matter, or whether they might at that time be going north or south, or whether they might interrupt the greatness of the thing by stopping, in the days long before cell phones, and saying "You need help, kid?" Or even what the route number was, since there were all kinds of ways of driving north from New Orleans, once you got past Lake Pontchartrain. Why worry what tools were most appropriate for him to have, or bring up all the things that might have happened had you actually been foolish enough ever to try such a stunt as the kid pulled off in the novel? You just stall things for a paragraph or two while he goes through the car, collecting what he can carry, tossing the rest in the convenient field or woods or wet ditch and then go on:

*He closed the door. The thump was nothing like what you hear in the movies, when the door clicks so crisply shut, a sound always dubbed in the studio, or so he had heard. He crossed to the passenger side, and as his feet met the*

*angled shoulder, he thought about the Divine Comedy, where Dante's uneven footfalls explain somehow the topography of that conical mountain or ravine and the professor would then thrill with his speculations on the chalk board. And why? he wondered. Readers regardless knew that he was going down in the Inferno and up in Purgatory, and whether or not he was turned toward or away from the sun, or if there was any sun there at all, or deep into the pit, right or left, and what the ground was like—all this finally made no difference.*

*From a distance ...*

You see there, you don't even really have to say "he walked away." He just is now away.

*From a distance, now on level ground, the car looked like he had seen it that day when ...*

Or better:

*Now on level ground, he could see the car in the distance, and it seemed as it had seemed to him that day in ...*

And here it wouldn't matter what day, really. It's just a matter of repeating something from an earlier scene, although I can't remember clearly what those earlier scenes were about, and if I try to guess, I'm just as likely to engraft some other vile and incompetent narrative onto this one as I am to get it right.

*... And then there was nothing but the fading light, and the sound of his resoled boots on the gravel by the roadway. ...*

Or something like that. I like the detail of the resoled boots, because it suggests a history, even though you don't have to go into the banalities of what it takes to get some cobbler to do your soles. And it's not as if anyone is going to say, "But hey, those soles have a pattern that you can match with every cobbler in New Orleans," any more than they will say "Wait. I just saw on Law and Order: SVU that there's a hidden VIN on the axle, and all you have to do ..." This isn't In Cold Blood or an international thriller, for God's sake. He walks away. That's the point of the story. And even if there was that bomb scare earlier, there really weren't many terrorists around in those days, and the inconsequent scares that have since gone out of fashion were pretty common then.

He walks away, and you leave the car in the distance. That's what you do. And it's sad really, if you do it right, and let the focus or the soft twilight, if you will, fall on the car and the memories associated with it: some lover, say, or drive he made through the darkness, with his wife perhaps, or wife-to-be, on the road through Abbot, or something seemingly irrelevant, like stopping with his friend Rubin somewhere on Route 95 to Houlton. Or maybe it is Marcelline, with her undershot jaw and implacably professional

love-making, although he could not have remembered that future then. Or Linda Jane, widowed in Kansas.

I think I can extract the actual passage from a particularly embarrassing, and now damp cardboard box in the guest house, but it will be a while getting through all the old photos, the squirrel remains, and even the small packet of weed Howard left me thirty years ago, before I will find it. There is a picture there of Barb-Wyoming, 1968 it must be—alluring as she always was and for me will always be, staring at the young man who holds the camera.

### Route 202

Sometimes you drive Route 202, and sometimes the coastal route through Belfast and Camden, and once you took the looping turnpike, getting off at Pittsfield, half-way between Waterville and Bangor. You do that, absurdly, because it is the only Renys in the state you have never visited. It may be thought a desecration of the visit to leave her so early. “I have to be back by dinner,” you say. In fact, you need to arrive in Pittsfield before closing time at 5:00 PM.

Driving Route 202 to Bangor is like driving cross country at 50 miles an hour in the old days. Three different cars, I think, all with their characteristic Maine plates. The highway, or turnpike as everyone in Maine calls it, is the least direct route to take. To Los Angeles. To New Orleans. To Bangor.

From Gardiner, Interstate 95 heads straight north past Madison to Newport, then, as if suddenly frightened by something or thinking better of the entire thing, turns abruptly east and dashes off past Dexter and Pittsfield, ending (or once did) in Bangor. Thirty years ago, you would say it then trickled north to Houlton or something of that nature, ending as a metaphorically dry creek bed in Fort Fairfield. Somewhere on that road, Rubin smoked his cigarettes, parked in the driving lane from 11:25-11:40 PM. But now the highway is featureless, with no allusion to the old two-lane, limited access roads that shot through the country in places like Wyoming and were so impressive years ago.

You can stop in Albion, on the China Road, or it might be Lakeview, somewhere past Unity, or even Hampden, and you can tell anyone when you describe these trips that, well, visiting Mother these days, it’s just as well to brace yourself with a golf game or waste some time in an antique store on the way, looking at old photographs. That’s an amusing way of putting it, even though the truth is somewhat different. It is rather the visiting of Mother that is the excuse for golf, which otherwise is indefensible for one who plays so poorly. Or for antique stores, where you pore over glass negatives but buy nothing.

There are large barns, all well-built but for their finish work, everywhere on this road, and the first time you describe it, you will doubtless concoct a narrative about how peculiar it is to be up here in the middle of nowhere with East and West Bumfucks, as Julie calls them, all around you and nobody who needs or uses a damn thing, and here are all these barns full of who knows what. I mean what in God's name, the dinner story goes, are they storing there? Is it a decade's worth of toothpicks from the old factory in Guilford? is it last season's compost?

Not bad, I think, but Brother, taciturn and lawyer-like, shakes his head and says, "I don't think it's compost they're storing there, and I don't doubt they're mostly full." And it was time, you thought, to incorporate his full-time resident wit. For it was obvious what those barns could be said to hold, of course. At least, once the motif was included that Brother had raised two sons in this wilderness. Detroit and Brooks and Dixmont ... Don't you read the papers? Even Phish came here, to Starks, up between Madison and Farmington, and they talked about it as far away as California. And when the police called to tell Brother they had found the empty car his Phish-loving son took out for a drive one night, he told them, as he would have told them speaking for his clients, just to park it in front of the police station and let the stoner kid work his way back to it himself.

"So I'm driving down Route 202 now, and I don't take the highway, because you know, visiting family, well, sometimes a round of golf and a box full of glass-plate negatives is not enough. ..." And the whole thing, driving the new version of the old 122-S, can be made even more surreal by adding the giant landfill, just before the main Bangor exit.

"It's quite contemplative driving this road at mid-day," you say, "until I look at the well-built barns there, preparing for the Phish concert, all strangely new. And even though there are only one or two drivers an hour on this road, I see those barns and now I think 'My God, I'm the only unimpaired driver between Waterville and Bangor.' ..."

And here is the place for a direct reference to the highway, maybe that bit about its turning right in horror and fleeing east to Bangor. Or returning south, say, the reverse perspective, turning left at twilight, and plunging south toward the coast and its summerfolk. It's one thing to drive Route 202 at mid-day, you say, with a golf game for an interlude, and quite another to risk it after dinner with the storefronts closed and the sun setting in your eyes, the deer standing in the road and one out of five drivers, so they say, with a loaded Colt in the glove compartment, "good for killing things," as you in parody once said.

For this trip, there is a third route south, avoiding Route 202 entirely, and that is the route I finally preferred to take. I drive along the east or west side of the Penobscot River on Routes 1A or Route 3, ending up at Route 1, which all the locals say to avoid. Despite what these traffic experts assert, at dinnertime, even in the summer, Route 1 seems like a

private highway. Coming down that way, you have not one Renys, but at least three of them, in Belfast and in Camden and in Bath, and you can even take that detour through Damariscotta, just for the hell of it or for some detail in the story, although all three of its blue storefronts by that time will be closed.

There were a few bad years on this road. “Don’t be ridiculous—Nate never taught at Bowdoin,” I reported she once said to me, quickly correcting herself, recollecting the thirty years her husband spent there. Soon doubtless to forget again. I made this call to Barbara, the last person to see Mother at her own home, her wrist broken in seven places, barely able to hold the martini Barbara mixed for her; I made another call to the West Coast, from the parking lot of the Bangor nursing home, I think, and then I couldn’t really get a word out, but just sobbed in the car with the dog licking its feet in the back seat. Sometimes I would “drop in” on Michael and Michaeline in Bowdoinham, and pretend I had come down from Gardiner rather than admitting I had driven an extra thirty miles or so up from Wiscasset on Route 1 just to see them.

You and Mother had many conversations in the days before that second series of strokes and systemic infection hit her and they moved her to the nursing home, where she never did have much to say anymore. So relaxed was she those days, in the apartment with the cleaning and cooking and bill-paying finally taken care of, you couldn’t believe that all was not fine. You could imagine that none of the confusion and despair she had shown over the past three years was anything other than what we all experience—our resentment that the cell-phone keys are too small, the DVD remote incomprehensible, our annoyance with the teenager texting in the restaurant.

We talked of Wells Beach and Camden too in the old days and how the families used to come up from Massachusetts on the steamers before Route 1 crossed all the vagrant streams and made those sea routes obsolete. Our words were second-hand and more, with their origins at times in narrators we both despised. None were tested by experience and it was easiest just to treat them all as true.

These aging parents do not “become like children,” as the desperate sententiae would have us think. We do not become parents to our parents, and the metaphors are wrong and pernicious. You can teach a child, or correct one. And children, admiring you, will learn from you, or perhaps just grow up a bit and their synapses will align or fire or whatever it is they do and you can finally leave them to their own devices, sailing or building both their houses and their lives their own way. But a failing parent is not like that at all. You will learn one day that nothing will be learned, and you will just give in to it. And if they don’t know “shit from shinola,” as she once said in a more articulate time, that’s just the way it is. Now you may think it odd that phrase “shit from shinola” (so quaint

it seems!) is one I still remember of all the things she said. She rarely used the one word, so she said; she wasn't certain what the other meant. But what is the point, we must conclude, of dragging out the recording or the lexicon? It's easier finally just to talk about shoe polish.

You were always twelve, you think, in her eyes. Not yourself. Even on that last Monday, when the Valium made her pale flesh so angelic when she saw you, it wasn't you she saw in sudden wonderment. Nor was it you on the final day, when her eyes never focused and she attended solely to her left hand on the chair arm.

There is a painting on the wall of what we used to call the study, taken from a sketch of her drawn when she no longer had the will to protest such things. Too old, those sketches made her look, she seemed to wish to say; not like the face she remembered and the one she always saw in the mirror. The background must be Van Dyke Brown, the details in a lighter brown, the left hand resting on the chair arm, somewhat more gracefully than it rested there that final day; her right hand supports her chin. Years later you will stare at that painting, which no guest has ever loved, and you will think of the old Volvo, laboring as if in mild irritation through the dips and hills of Route 202. It is really nothing like Route 40 through Manhattan, you will think, when those you knew as Linda Jane waited there in the land-locked plains with the coffee as you drove the continent to California.

## 15.

## HOMECOMING

## High Street

I am walking past High Street, east to west I think, and I realize I have dreamt about this street recently. In my dream, we (those strange plurals of dreams) drive through our old childhood neighborhoods. Topsham, across the footbridge to Brunswick, and Bowdoin College, where I am walking today. We think, wrongly in the dream, that High Street is one way. I say “we” but of course I have no idea who is with me or experiencing this with me in the dream. I am embarrassed, I remember, at our nostalgia for this place. Still dreaming, I imagine again wrongly that High Street ends at a stop sign, a dirt road, and a difficult left turn. It must not be High Street at all, but a composite of streets I have seen in Maine. Best, I think, to let this dream merge with other dreams I have of Maine Street in Brunswick, walking through Maine Street, late for an appointment, driving through Maine Street in the snow to the bridge to Topsham, trying to find a familiar storefront among all the new and surreal businesses that have set themselves up in my dream state.

I lived in a house on High Street until I was ten. It is difficult to think of that life as mine, yard-confined as I was in that narrow space between neighbors I never met. There is something about a dog, hit by a car. The fire-hearth in the living room. Falling from the second story window into the lilacs, long since cut down. We move when I am old enough to realize what it is to move, and I am then walking in an acre of fields, an acre of woods; one day I will be sailing on Casco Bay. That there are neighbors within earshot is unimaginable, then and now. The humiliations of grade school, it seems, are past, but are the same as those of high school, those of adulthood.

I am walking west past and perpendicular to High Street now, so alien to me, since on my way to teach I rarely deviate to intersecting streets. The hill is predictably less impressive than I remember it. I feel smugly that my selves now are grandly one. Field-free, a breeze from the southwest, discoursing with my girlfriend of age fifteen on the meaning of commitments, arrogantly correcting my professors. At age thirty-three I can now speak splendidly about it all, sailing out of Harpswell. I am a college professor, no longer a mere student, but as I pass this street I know I am really the ten-year-old son of a college professor, himself one decade into his legendary career at this place. I am the crossing guard on this street corner, where the Catholics from St. John’s on Pleasant Street, I fear, will defy my badged public-school authority. I am a townie, they were still called in those days, that sullen and cocky (they would say) high school kid, some kind of brashly-striped athletic jacket with leather sleeves and patches on me; my hair slicked back in a way

that will never do once I make the transition to adulthood, which I incredibly think will be the day I cross the street from the high school to the college quad.

I am walking well past High Street past the turn to the high school, Page Street it is, where Jerry's packie used to be, and I lose track of all these identities—those I myself initiate, and those I contend with when I am on campus: Nate's son, the hippie student, some young snot right out of graduate school, looking to reform those complacent dodderers who once were his teachers. The irascible Prof. Hall still sees me as the infant son of the classicist whom he considered far less distinguished socially and intellectually than himself, although his own distinction barely transcended the town limits of Brunswick and Harpswell. Others in this building might remember me as a student here, the least distinguished again of those English majors they taught into crass indistinction—most now not professors of course, but with terminal master's degrees from the second- and third-rate universities where their proud advisors sent them.

The dream dissolves as the snow washes off my boots, leaving the tell-tale line of salt at the ankle.

#### Dakota Winters

The year Father died was the year before this year, walking past High Street. Father died in the worst of the Dakota winters, thirty-five years, it was, after marrying the woman from away, the woman from the plains of Colorado. Things had gotten, I believe, disorderly, or maybe his death made it seem so. It was difficult to know just where you were, or what season it might have been, or why you were returning to Maine at all for the summer. Why to Maine, to this childhood place, and childhood home? Even your dark-eyed Norwegian girl, her skin hardened by the midwest wind, could not console you.

You never saw him die—it was simply reported to you in the prose of a brother little used to such composition, his rhetoric and turns of phrases variously sentimental and self-conscious and embarrassed, not with the unpracticed wit he uses of his stoner son. No one can prepare for this; for most of us, our loved ones die just once. All you can do is revise until you think you have it right, which is too like, I think, a statistic in the cancer charts. Even that last meeting was orchestrated—Father walking across the quad where you had walked as a child, as a student, and later as a professor yourself. All jovial he contrived to be, staggered by the chemotherapy. You recognized him only by the grey winter coat he wore, out of fashion for a decade. For the most part, he detailed his schedule for the spring—and it was like constructing lesson plans and syllabi for the courses you least cared about. Sitting, instead of standing for his first class, he said, an office break before the next.

These were precisely the monstrous calculations Gabor engaged in the year before cancer killed him as well, killed him in this same lethal place.

The snow was deep enough to walk through, I remember, like the snow the year that John died decades later. You would leave the next day for New York, it was, then on to San Francisco, and then back to the Dakota winter, where you would call home and all the brave and assuring things of life would be detailed again. And this could have been pulled off, perhaps, the whole damn familial thing, were it not for fifty years of smoking, and a diagnosis not as ambiguous as you all claimed to hope. Father, by the time you completed this circle, could no longer speak on the telephone. He died in the care of nurses, as Mother bit her lip so stoically in the then empty house.

It was best not to remember this at all, you finally thought. He became the man they spoke of in the obituaries—a dusted-up version of himself, or over-wrought caricature, laughing at the camera, adored by his students, trapped in the platitudes of those who sent the cards to you. Instead of these jovialities, he died in terror of what it all might mean for him, pretending to read his Horace in the hospital, the terror of what his entire life might mean, gilded by the photographs taken by his proud mother and compatriots of the old days. The photos by his students on Parents Day or Homecoming. The year that Father died, you left your Norwegian girl back in the Dakota sun, the same sun, so it was she said, that broke the farmers of the place who died young, barely a decade older than you were. It seemed so wise of her, as banalities of lovers always seem so wise to us, unconsoling though they all may be. Her own father, broken by the sun she said, split wood all winter long in the Dakota snow. Yet what did she know of the man beaming in the photographs? the man splitting the kindling? or the woman dulled by Valium or setting her jaw in oblivion? And what did she know of her rivals from your past, with their taut and flawless skin? not knowing even the right names for things? It was to New Orleans that you fled that spring when Father died, not to your dark and caring Norwegian girl, but to the cheap hotel on Toulouse Street in the French Quarter \$7/night sharing a bath with hookers.

I fled to New Orleans where my childhood names awaited me. They had come to this alien place through my ex-wife, I think, years before this year. They will follow me, working their way through several acquaintances until I am rolling cigarettes in that cheap hotel on Toulouse Street, just as the photo claims. My old lover, unseen now for a half-decade, still with her taut and flawless skin, calls me her pet diminutive from my High Street days and even, as the camera clicks, some far less witty things like “J. Dane from Maine,” the worst of all of them, vulgarized in the accent of Arkansas. It is hard to place her, here, in this quarter. Here Maine is where the Kennedys and Rockefellers live, I remember, from too many talks with New Orleans locals years ago. The hookers with

their elaborate face-paint are startled to see me in the hallway, and unnaturally kind to me. My lover, from Little Rock, she is, still calling me the wrong names, will wash her flawless skin in the rest-room of the bar on Iberville. It was never you she loved; it was the way you seemed to live, when the drafts of bad novels lay crumpled in the wastebasket, like your wife's letter to the lover she left for you. And it may be 1975 now, with Father still writing you his letters in that distinctive scrawl, or 1980, when the letters had long ceased.

Father died, and you would return then to a summer in the guest house, Father now a version of the image in the photographs. You left your southern girl with her taut and flawless skin and wrong names for things, down in New Orleans, angrily avoiding the hookers, and left too your Norwegian girl, with her incongruous French name, out on the Dakota Plains. And you left others too. Your ex-wife, sowing your name where your name should never be. And some woman with her millions, calling you from Italy. A mock-professor now yourself with Father gone, you were done with such stuff and nonsense, as Mother used to say. These girls were like mere incidents of childhood, so you thought, returning to your childhood home. Like the street, angling toward the old house behind the lilacs.

Then something went awry with a woman from away, something untoward in the talk of the picket fences of our future, the dearth of the Dakota plains, I forget what it was, something about some shenanigans away, off there in Italy perhaps, or the southern rain, or the California coast itself, where she slept with someone else, and you were left here alone in Maine for the winter, a mock-professor in the winter, in a winter like Dakota winters in the rain.

The river ran past the tenement, a river once so filthy it rotted the house paint and the paint painted over it, just as in Rumford or in Mexico. You could look at the river through the waist-high windows, but you could never see the sky, and the yellow foam you saw floating on the surface, you thought, was no longer the sulphur-laden foam of the paper-mills of your childhood, but something from the life-giving mud itself, brought to the surface by the turbulence.

### Boat Launchings

That was the year you fell in love with Linda Jane at the boat-launching. And thirty years after this year, the year you fell in love with Linda Jane, you called her once again, in love with her as you had always been. You remembered how you had fallen in love with her, twenty years old she was, at the boat-launching, or when she moved away to Boston, years ago, and once again today. It was like, you thought, that day when you lay with your wife-to-be in the back of the old Volvo and nothing of the past, you thought, meant shit.

And you never forgot that day, or days it was—Linda Jane helping you launch the sailboat, helping you clean the dinghy, or maybe just standing there with the camera as you worked.

It was the day, thirty years later, or the week, I think, the boat incongruously fell on the car, that you called Linda Jane and without a word of introduction you said let's begin again, as we began thirty years ago: you can live as you want, do what you want, I'll follow you wherever you go. It will be like the day we launched the boat in Harpswell and it will be that day forever. We can grow vegetables or sell photographs or sail and write poems and live off my retirement. I love you. You know I love you and I will always love you, or some such banality it was. There was not a word or note of duplicity in it, even though she remained expressionless, stroking some new pet it was, despairing of the future. And I thought of Tom Coffin, then, who spent a lifetime charming his victims and building that commercial seiner, laying it up strip-built on the timbers. And when he died I wrote "*the unlaunched hull unfinished now for good.*"

Boat launching, one would think, should be a grand thing, a return to a natural element, or a birth into that element. There should be a Queen, you'd think, or at least a dutiful functionary with a bottle of champagne, safely wrapped in a towel. But boats are built ashore, and only the most romantic of them do not die ashore, wrecked in the spectacular storms of history books. There is nothing in fact good about this launching business except the moment one feels the deck buoyant on the water beneath one's feet.

The way boats were launched in the old days was brutal and simple. The boat rested, wrongly stressed, in a wooden cradle. You hired a flatbed truck to come to your yard and it winched the boat violently aboard. The truck hauled this load to a gravel beach at low tide, and unloaded boat and cradle onto the exposed sediment. A boat left ashore too long on such ill-fitting cradles will deform from its own weight—"hogged" it's called. You can see this in the old photos of abandoned sailing hulls. You realize that the quiet symmetry of a modern yard, with the proximate hulls neatly aligned on the jackstands, is a fragile one.

David and I study the lobster boat, unnaturally held in its cradle on the gravel beach, waiting for the tide. We are dressed in our no-nonsense working clothes, and it is earlier—ten years earlier, I think—and I have a swagger that I then believe is well-deserved. I work for him. It is enough then to work for him, and my hair bleached by the sun, my hard arms, and even the smell of me speaks with perfect clarity to what it is I do. David calculates we have two hours before the rising tide lifts the boat from its cradle. We leave for breakfast, and it must be his house or maybe some coffee shop in town, where we speak in the theatrically reticent tones and accents of commercial fishermen.

When we return, the boat is rocking in his cradle, although that phrase is of course all wrong in this context. The water has raised it so that it could now float free, or even impale itself on the once supporting arms of the cradle. Absurdly, the engine will not start.

How, I angrily think, could a professional like David not test that bank of batteries before launching day, something even the rankest amateur like me would do today? And how, when the engine did not start, could a professional like him, who could find any buoy in the dense fog without so much as a glance at the compass, how could he frantically and stupidly reconnect the batteries in parallel, to get power from both of them, he thought, deluding himself that this saved the boat from being blown ashore freed from the cradle? Even the amateur boater knows that the only thing that saved him was disturbing the connections. The terminals corrode—that's all there is to it. And a point file and a small piece of sandpaper will solve the starting problems of marine engines far more efficiently than a circuitous replacing of starter engines or batteries, or the frantic reconnection of the cables in a pinch.

These are thoughts a crewman by convention can't express. David lies red-faced in the engine room, frantic with the battery cables, ignoring my silent sycophancy as I watched him work. I think of helping my father, in the way, in his way, as one of his small boats lurches toward the water on the wooden rollers in the smell of his sweat. Or maybe my own boats, and sometimes I stand in them as they are eased into the water on the expert hydraulics of a modern trailer, and sometimes I miss it all, and sometimes I dream and dream each spring of forgetting the boat altogether, the wax and the bottom paint, the revarnishing of the toerail, and missing an entire season of sailing.

### The Guest House

When Father designed the makeshift guest house, more than a decade before his death, ingenious as he was, he put in a garage door between the house section and the porch, thinking he could then haul his small open boat, with its obstinate outboard, up the bank, through the removable screens on the porch, and right into the house, where he would store it for the winter. But the screens were recalcitrant, twisting and rotting into their frames, the boat heavy, and Father's plan never worked. What it provided instead was an inadvertent porch, open to the house, and anyone who stayed there slept downstairs in the cool breezes from the open garage door, listening to the hermit thrushes and to versions of the story of how that garage door came to be.

Such things never go as planned, it seems, and Linda Jane or Linda Jane it was and I make love on the carpet, laughing at the dream of a boathouse.

I could tell of the boat-launchings with Linda Jane, since each is as halting as any of the others. No one laughs as her Circe's precarious mast rises into the fittings; and I am always wading in the waist-high water as the boat slips off the rotting trailer. I could tell of Linda Jane and Tom sailing Circe on the jib to the mooring as the engine failed: rowing, I forget who did the rowing, as the wind failed as well. I could tell of trying to start the engine myself as Linda Jane held the bow against the trailer and realizing, as it roared to life (insofar as a small engine can roar at all), that for a cheap engine like this, with no transmission, there is no "throwing it into reverse" or even neutral, and the instant the spark caught, as they say, the boat lurched forward, like Father's boats on the rollers, and then of course directly into Linda Jane's chest, pinning her to the trailer winch.

That is the clearest image I retain of her—crushed there on the trailer. It led to the most rational thing I ever did for her. When a boat has fatally impaled your former lover, I thought, you must not look at her in panic. Instead, a cold professional like yourself must fix on the solution. You must study the engine closely and efficiently for the kill switch, and once stopping the engine, you can then turn to look at your once lover, or what is left of her. She will be shattered, and the sight will be unbearable and that is why you did not hear her so much as cry out in agony. Instead, she has simply pushed the bow to the left and is laughing to cover up the horror of it all. To her, a boat meant sailing in the Penobscot sun—that open bay with no dangers where you could fall asleep at the tiller and wake up still on a straight tack to Isleboro. Here she is trapped in this liminal space of land and sea, trapped in this liminal space with and without me. It must be like walking away from me on the airport concourses, turning away for the last time on that dry trail in the San Gabriels; it must be like her who would not wait for me, hideously dialing her new lover at the train station. Or perhaps it is like Linda Jane herself, sitting there in silence and in tears on the transom.

It is the same, I think, as it was with David that day, with the boat freed from its cradle, as he lay there with wrenches all rusted from the salt, all his extraordinary fishing skills useless in the bilge of the engine room. All my awe of him in abeyance. Or Father, hunched over on his small boat as it slips on the rollers. Or those dreams I have in early spring, every early spring for decades, where, my boat too remains unlaunched for good.

In the photo, we pose in front of the old Volvo, in joy and insouciance, the four of us; and this time it is Linda Jane, and Chuck and Julie. And it may have been launching day, or the last sail of the season. Everything has gone well and everyone feels competent at what they do or imagine they have done. That is how we look in the photo. But no one has really done anything, and I have done nothing. It is all hydraulics and waiting for the tide to fill the Basin. We pose majestically for the camera lens.

My friends gather dutifully in the summer dusk, admiring the photo, the photos of themselves from years ago. They are unnerved, it seems, to be in the company of their younger images, to be in the company too of this makeshift professor from Los Angeles, the makeshift sailor from away, stuck in JFK, it seems, or on the way from LAX to Boston. Now instead of dozens, there are only four left, sitting at my table in embarrassment. Some new lover sleeps in the guest house, and we all pose majestically for the camera lens.

Homecoming, Los Angeles, 2010

It was the day the boat fell on the car I knew I was dreaming.

In the boatyard, the winterized boats are lined in neat and proximate rows, supported on the jackstands. My unbraked and unattended car rolls slowly past the majestic hulls out of their element this late fall day. I stare in amazement. The car on course will hit or graze the jackstands and a boat will fall and I realize then that I am dreaming, because boats cannot do that in the natural world. Boats fall that way in dreams, with gravity to the ground, defying it, the phrase is, in the air. They sound that way in dreams: the Dolby groan of the movies. I calculate the costs: 38 thousand for the first hull, noted in the sign taped to the shrinkwrap. To the left, the second nautical domino will cost me more than all my bank accounts. There are two more boats I think. The last in line, I remember, as the glass spills off the black contours of the car and onto the gravel, is a Hinckley-1.7 million it must be. My house, I think, retirement, all my future gone in this preposterous calamity. But the boat instead falls to the right, falls on the car, crushing the hood and shattering the rear window, and I know I must be dreaming. That I am sailing, dreaming still; the tide has left the Basin, and I am sailing or drifting in the mud.

It was the day the boat fell on the car I knew I was dreaming.

The day the boat fell on the car was likely the day Penelope stopped weaving and unweaving and left me now for good. I will wake, he writes or speaks, and I will turn to her and I will tell her this amazing dream-the boat falling on the car!-and then that hideous part about her call from California. The dream that she has left me. And she will laugh at this lunacy, and call me some pet name I cannot allow myself to repeat, and we will sleep again.

Because I am without her, I am still in Maine I think. I am dreaming still. I am eating a meal in this restaurant, but it is one she has not cooked.

The clock reads 4:06AM, and it is only time that matters, he concludes, not his grand eloquence, not the fraud of his insights, and not his inapt metaphors. "It was like this"; "it was like that," he writes. But of course, the banality of her absence was too

singular. The metaphors were no clearer than the truth. It was as if he would wake from this another way, turn this pain into the very act of writing it and wake from it again.

Love could, he thought, become that metaphor, and not what he once called “the bos’n’s truth” with its lethal exactitudes of clewpoints and courses. That state where each word referred to one unambiguous and killing thing, and there was no question about who she was herself or who it was she was not with.

Because I am without her, I am still in Maine and dreaming still.

He spoke her name that last day, staring into her face now turned away, but he had never spoken her name before. It was a trick he had learned in his old rakish days, as in passion, you never knew quite what you would say or who you might cry out to, and if you just used pet names all the time, why everyone you loved was interchangeable, like the preposterous towns of Maine itself, and any mistake you made would pass unnoticed.

But he spoke her name that day, because this, she said, was the last day, and he should speak, he thought, her name, making love for the last time. But it wasn’t her name at all, the name, her name, the name he rarely used, and he choked off the wrong name just in time. It might have been Paulina or Linda Jane herself or some other name, these women he had loved so far in the past and where, he wondered, did their names come from on this day when she was, as he told her, still everything and everywhere, just as he had written on the flyleaf of the book he wrote for her.

Perhaps it was the very silences, as she herself once fictioned, where they most clearly spoke. But they never, he now knew, said a thing of consequence at all. Love is not consequence. Happiness is not consequence. Staring into a lover’s eyes is not consequence.

Yes, it was the day the boat fell on the car that I knew that I was dreaming.

And it was a week later or two weeks it may have been, when I finally called the mad and Titian-lovely Eloise, the grand passion of my life, I claim, to purge these brutal singulars I write about—that call from California, the untouched meal, the vicious precision of the clockface when you cannot sleep. From the deserts of Santa Fe she came, with her caressing Danish hues glazed by the sun. I love you, my Eloise, I will say and would say then to her. And “I love you, Eloise,” I did say, as she stood in the doorway, as she had ten years ago, keeping her appointment on that late November day, and I fell to my knees with the white rose I had promised her. And it was lovely there that evening, with my darling Eloise falling asleep by the chessboard. All that talk of the future, of Maine, of dogs that we would care for, of picket fences on the pathways.

Yet at 4 AM that same day, Thanksgiving Day it turned out to be, I hear, somewhere in the apartment it must be, a voice that is saying the most extraordinary

things—to get her fucking ass out of the fucking apartment this fucking day—things of that nature, and I cannot imagine whose voice that is or why there is such noise at 4AM. Why is that voice so like my own? And has some voice like hers said something to elicit this? Is it her voice calling me? rejecting me? My Eloise? Why is my voice the voice so crazed on this November day?

I tell you this, my Eloise; it is the God's own, it is the bos'n's truth. We drive I say despairing down the freeway to the airport, my mad and Titian-lovely Eloise and I, stopping at each exit and turning home then giving up again and circling back to the airport, and there must be a geometrical formula that describes more accurately than I can the complexity of this journey. All ends at 8AM at LAX. The startled travelers stare at us, wondering who is filming this. I stand in the roadway now desperate. The unbraked car rolls away from me. I scream of my love for Eloise.

And I will turn to my lovely Eloise and I will say: “My darling, I have had the most amazing dream.” But I do not know who it is I will wake with when the dream ends. And I cannot thus know what it is I will then have to say to her.

16.  
SILTING IN

Dream I: Silting In

The worst dreams I have are about the most natural of things. Last year, or the years before that, it was Mud in the Basin—inconsequential dirt and topsoil washed into the sea by the inevitable rain. That these were the worst dreams—that is what I used to think. That is what I used to write. I used to think this before I got your call from Los Angeles, a continent away from me, in a place where everyone it seems is from away. Another woman held me then, from here she was or claimed to be, days before the phone rang in the October rain. I would learn then, amid these frivolous dreams, that the interchangeability of the places and the placenames does not efface the singularity of the people who live here, those from here or from away.

The day you called it was dark over the Basin; staring out into the starlight, I could not see the tide, or hear the wind across the water. The mist formed on the panes, and it was that day I began to rewrite the following passages, to forget your history. What misery, I write, it would have been to watch her grow into who I realize now she is. For it is you, and not the places you have been to that I miss: not the Basin I look out upon, sitting next to you, pointing out the forms of the firs on the cliff. It is not these contours that you traced that day that are what I am.

I once described this place as if a simple thing of history. The Basin, I wrote, is a deep-water tidal bay a mile long and a quarter mile wide perhaps, shaped like a childhood place, opening to the ocean in what Delorme maps call a reversing falls, where the current, flooding and ebbing with the tide, rarely reaches speeds the most obstinate of outboards cannot negotiate. The tourists from away park their cars in anger, I wrote, claiming to be cheated by the guidebooks, when only the slack water of the tidal flow has duped them.

Today, recalling this, I stare past and through the firs still depicted in your painting, growing precariously on the edge of a drop-off to the water. I stare out to the moorings and to the storm moorings. And I think now, not of a scene of firs and greenery, but you, drafting its contours in the paints I poured out for you. I see the outline of the canvas once fixed to my wall in Maine. The trees, too green for the reality of green I see there, wasted by the fall winds, with you finally gone for good.

B.1. John Turcotte

Not one person ever drowned in the Basin. Not one of those irrevocables I neglected in my reveries of silt and mud. Not Oscar, of astounding wit, with his left hand

bent from arthritis, but still expert on the controls of the tourboat. Nor Teri, Linda Jane she is, lost in the mid-west somewhere with her inseparable child, nor Kathie and Bob, lying in the hammock next to their fire rings. Not Mother herself of course, nor Father—their ashes scattered in the tides and in the junipers she claimed to love.

The sole boat that foundered here was John Turcotte's power boat, not worth the price of insurance, down to its gunwales and finally settling in the tide right on top of its own mooring chains. Like his own life, I would think, constructing the bad allegory, snarled in the arrogance of his descriptions: tuna-fishing, long-lining, working out of Gloucester. He was the best of them, he says, making thousands. And so, each says, is every fisherman, every lover I have known. Yet all those thousands of his discourse could not save the family cottage, which sold at auction when John's father died, his businesses mismanaged into lifetimes of debt.

The yard was full of fishing gear: buoys found only on commercial boats, displayed prominently, coils of line, fragments of aluminum and steel, their functions known only to the fishing cognoscenti, I presume. No one after bluefin tuna needs such gear, I thought. Nor was I comfortable with how John explained to me LORAN-C, then the latest in navigational gear. There were certain oddities of its operation—where it leaves you a half-mile from the bottom where you need to be; and about all this John seemed to know nothing, as he discourses on his glories on the water.

He was like Buddy, he tries to swagger, but the resemblance is lost in his boasts, and in the slackness of the jaw as he tells you this, committed as he is to the inaccurate TD's (time-differentials they are) of the LORAN charts. Buddy, by contrast, worked through years of alcoholism, never missing a day on the water, and for him, navigation is staring through the glass on the wheelhouse, listening to engines of distant working boats hidden by the mist. He is well done speaking of these things. You can see the hardness in Buddy's jaw, and the tell-tale limp of a man who has worked for decades on the water.

The Coast Guard denounced John's sunken powerboat, although John was now indifferent to the calamity, boasting of his glories out of Gloucester. Most of the unused fuel had already leaked into the water, fouling swimming for a week. The wrecked hull, pumped to the surface, consequently sat on the bank opposite my house for five years, its fittings slowly filched, then rotted or disappeared into a winter bonfire as I left for California.

John attended the auctions and his last act as a local was to drive the price of the family cottage up, promising to find the money, perhaps lent by all of us, he thought, committed, one might have imagined, to the continuity of names of neighbors. But the money of course was never there, and the inflated price paid by Philip, as it happened, all

went to the bank in the end, and John is now in Boston, singled out by his accent, working at a lumber yard.

### Dream II: Tidal Flow

In the late nineteenth-century, I once wrote, hoping to explain a recurrent dream, a tide-powered grist mill was built across the narrow mouth of the Basin, leaving two large rock pilings still of what is called “navigational significance” today. The tide now ebbs and floods through three swift and variously marked channels.

The locals who live on these waters, I dream or once did in my dreams of this Basin, cannot see the peril of the place. They assume, I thought with the arrogance pure thought is, that things will stay this way forever: their families and the places they look out upon, the deep water anchorage, the Basin filling and emptying twice daily with the tide, just as it has done for those who came here a hundred years ago or even in mid-century and bought ten acres for barely the price of the wood still left on it. They assume, I thought, that the things one loves will just grow old with you.

But I omit too much as I describe the tide flow; I omit the trees depicted in your painting, the house overlooking the basin, owned by one so loved by me I wrote poems about her and held her in the musty recesses of her cellar—her mother smoking cigarettes in oblivion on the porch. Was it not Cassandra I first saw setting siding it must have been with Bruce, soon so pointlessly obese he could not climb a step-ladder? All of this in the reversing rhythms of the water flow, flood and ebb, into the Basin. And none of this with me now when I awake three hours or more away from dawn.

My dream of the Basin is thus as I describe it here. The dream I used to have before you, who would not wait for me, made dreams impossible. The Basin in this dream, its moored boats oblique in the currents even as I write this, mine among them, suddenly is mud, silted in, like the marshland tourists cross in Route 1 in Freeport. Magnificent summer homes, built at what will one day be “the turn of the century,” line, it seems, the “banks,” as they will then be known. At an abrasive meeting with the town, there are or will be threats and abstruse calculations thrown up on a chalkboard, to the droned burden of the Land Trust’s paeon to its mudflats and marshlands, as if they had hosted egrets nests for aeons. Why, we may as well be in Hermit Island, some one will scoff, backed up onto Georgetown, where Linda Jane got married years ago. I sail or walk my boat out in the ankle-deep stream, as often happens in my dreams, and of course I’ll wake in a sweat.

In those days, writing arrogantly of the dreams of the Basin silting in, I was oblivious to what history is: the words of those who discoursed on the shale in the Basin

and now call from California with the worst and most unthinkable of news. You have Maine and because you have Maine, I will not be coming back to you.

## B.2. The Other Woman

She is at her work-bench. She is the “other woman,” the woman from here and from away. Cassandra holds me in the October rain. I wrote a poem of this once then lost it in some misprinting or misfiling or computer catastrophe and rewrote it, now radically condensed, trying to recall the phrases I had constructed for her: Something like: “*Your lathe, your mitred cuts, the sanding / -Let’s be frank. / There is no poetry in them ...*” These precipitates of memory. “*Your eyes focused in the dark musts of your laboring.*”

It is her house, overlooking the reversing waters feeding the Basin, where at mid-tide, words are lost in the sound of the waterflow.

When Cassandra walks, she affects the round-shouldered masculinity of those who spend their lifetimes on working boats. And her hands are strong like the hands of men she admires. It is the men she sees here, from her porch, working on the fishing boats, Buddy Moody himself perhaps, the nameless skippers she can see in Boston Harbor, home for her, the boats rounding the point in the storms. Or perhaps she is remembering her father, who taught her all these things and left all those intricate machines for her. She speaks to you from that place—the angry complaints she grew up with—of economies, the intrusions of the state and neighbors—the familiar platitudes of the place and the duties to one’s family. Cousins, and aunts, and grandfathers, and the litany of the long dead. She comes from Boston into this tangle of names on the Basin—Stover, Estes, Bibber—names found in the oldest maps of Maine, names of those you grew up with, even in the next town from away.

“Do you recall,” I ask her, driving up from Boston in the old days, the tugboat caught in the mud in the marshland of Freeport? The coast was full of such waterways as ours is today, I say: Wells, York Harbor, and Cape Porpoise. The river and the waterflow washed the silt into the sea; it seemed such things would last forever. There is no trace of the tugboat today, and contemporary tourists gazing at the marsh can only conclude I am imagining this, I say. Does she remember it? And what do you say of the Muddy Rudder Restaurant, overlooking the marsh today, with its charming deck and stupendous quantities of bugs? Is not the name alone proof that what I am saying here is the God’s own truth? You don’t need a rotting hull in the stream, I claim, if you have a living witness in the name.

In the old days, I discourse, though she is skeptical, the schooners were hauled up these streams to load or off-load their wares, and some were built nearby and launched into

them. And thus you have names like “Carrying Place,” and “Schooner Landing,” I say, now carried away myself, and things like that where all you see today is a mosquito-infested swamp or some stinkhole the biologists tell you is a critical habitat for wildlife. These streams were large in the old days, as their names testify, and they were large in the old days not because everything was large then, but because the water ran freely in the streams and the tide just as freely and insistently ran up and down those streams twice daily, full, doubtless, of smelts and alewives.

“When summerfolk began to come to Maine,” I say, invoking history, trying to get this story straight but now weakening, by automobile, those streams needed crossing, and the old steamer landings whose pilings can still be seen in major harbors fell into disuse. To get from Yarmouth to Freeport, say, could with the proper roads be a five-minute walk or drive, and not an hour or two “snaking your way inland to the head of the stream or waiting a day for the steamer.” Route 1 crossed every stream and river on the coast, pinching their banks soon fatally with the bridge supports. Yet to the engineers in those days, these streams and reversing waterways seemed part of the natural stuff of Maine, stuff that would last forever, as everything they had seen in their lives so far had.

Cassandra shakes her head, knowing this calamity will never come to be, that we ourselves will never come to be. You can trace the line from her strong hands to her shoulders, muscled and exposed in the sun, and find the delicacies of her features, the profile of her face, warm in the summer sun. And maybe her hand will find its way to my shoulder and I will remember sitting on the steps with her that final day of the season—last season, the season before last season.

### Dream III: For Eloise (1963-2011)

In my dream of her, my darling Eloise slowly turns her Titian-lovely face and looks down over the water. She breaks its placid surface as a dancer might. It might be in a film she made or starred in as a student, always poised, always posed, drawing on her dancer’s grace, her arabesques on the walkway.

For Eloise, history was not as it is for you and me. It was as if time could flow directionless and she could be that thirty-year-old, her body magnificent as she held you, or years later unchanged in the doorway reaching for the white rose you promised her. She and she alone knew who and what you were, and she and she alone spoke of what apart from time you could become. Drawing her, her form just formed itself in your fingertips and on the pencil edge.

*When I am BIG*, she wrote, authoring her childrens’ book, *I will be a trapezoid artist. When I am BIG ...*

Her Titian-lovely skin glazes the surfaces of the paper. The water glazes the surface of her form. Her grace of movement and her grace of form so unlike the stare always to the left, it seemed, toward a light source, a window, toward a movement you cannot see, somewhere outside the picture frame. Outside what you can see and know of her.

We sit in the restaurant. Lit perfectly, she laughs and I laugh too at the bad and alien dishes we concoct, talking of Maine, where we have never been. There are other women, other men. We read the book she wrote for me, in its stupendous colorings. Even I was speechless when the galleys came to me, all my imaginings narrowed by her words and her descriptions of the thing, never, I now see, the right words, never ones to bring this book to life.

In my dream of her, my darling Eloise lies back beside the last and loving note she wrote to me, or writes to me, the note my Eloise will write to me. But it is one I must now write for her: Eloise draws her final bath in Southwest sun. She thinks of you, she writes, and she would weep, but she has cried all night and has no strength for this ...

She tries to form the words as she was taught to do. They are calqued from old scripts she has written, and her characters, she now can see, are always drawn by rule and rote, unworthy of her love for you. And that is why, you say, that is why, you claim to think, she leaves all these so crucial things undone.

Eloise dies alone. Not wounded fatally, as history says, but drawing her last bath, or reading the last note you wrote to her.

Ten years ago, Eloise drives away from me, betrayed by the way the phone rang, the way I turned to her, the inflection in my voice as I professed my love for her. On days she left, she finally said, relaxed I wrongly thought, she never left, but hid just blocks away from me, staying hours in the coffee shop, reading her papers, composing her books, waiting, I suppose for my call that came long after she gave up on me. All day she would wait, she said, since days those days to her were little things. For me, those days are simply one. She defies me, this day, on her way to Santa Fe, to Denmark, the East Coast it may have been, parking her car in my driveway as I have just forbidden her to do. When I call her to revile her, in a vile invective-laden message, I find her asleep in the driver's seat, waiting as she always did until the end.

Eloise dances at the bus station. The wary travelers stare in astonishment.

Perhaps this is how her rescuers might find her, dying calmly in her last bath. Or so I think today, despite how she has scripted it. Dreaming, she might be, of the morning she seduced me in the coffee shop, or I her, or the two of us laughing at the shocked patrons of the place. Or walking arm in arm on city streets that last day. Thinking, that day, walking there, as I promise not to die as long as she may live, we might return to other days

ten years ago, or start those years again. “*My great aunt’s pawn-short chess set,*” I once wrote for her. “*Those book defenses, good for black.*” An arabesque on the campus lawn. The pencil tracing her pose on Orchard Avenue, or her artist hand bringing my face to sudden life as I can never do for hers. We doze in music, Dvorak’s twelfth it must be, my American, I call it, composed in this alien southwest. Or some film, it was, with its rhythmic, flickering scripts.

*When I am BIG, she wrote, I will be a namer of the dog.*

Eloise lies in her bath, I write, her would-be rescuers delayed by traffic. The phone will one day ring as in those first days of this century. I will hear her voice, and I forgive her even this, I think. How else was I to free myself of you? my darling Eloise will say, months into seclusion. Weeks, it took, she says, to script all this; you know my antipathy to dialogue. The halting pieties and platitudes of friends and relatives you read on my memorial, could you not hear my broken voice in them? Could you not sense me in the trail left cold for you? When I am BIG, all will be clear to you.

*When I am BIG, she writes, I will be a collector of the Danish alphabet.*

### B.3. Buddy Moody

When the Boatyard first moved in next to my house on the Basin, everyone knew deep water would be needed for its moorings. There was a famous and brief rumor that they would “dynamite the gut” to open the place up a bit, they said, the rocks and debris, I suppose, piled on the shore, even though there was no feasible way to effect this thing, and hardly dynamite enough in Harpswell to begin. I remember the owner, a charmer if there ever was one, Oscar scoffing and laughing at this lunacy—why, you can run a 50-foot tour boat right through the gut an hour before high tide as it is, and what on earth would be the point of deepening it?

And despite that, Buddy Moody, whose lineage Cassandra once sketched for me, spent a day collecting signatures, visiting all those he had intimidated on the water, deriding plots of rank outsiders. The years in AA had hardened him and set his jaw somewhat; his sandy hair would never be described that way again. But Buddy was not a man in those days anyone in town would say no to. His clipboard big with forms from Augusta; a score of supporters sat restlessly behind him.

What a shame it is, I used to think, these rumors were not true and what a shame the locals weren’t more spineless than they proved themselves to be. What a shame they had instead all backed up behind Buddy like they did when he stood up at the Town Meeting as none of the rest of us dared to do, and damned if he didn’t seem a small-town Demosthenes, denouncing the mythical dynamiting of the gut. Where did he get such

eloquence, I wondered, sitting there with my useless degrees in the speech and languages of the long dead? R-232, I think it was, was pulled from the rezoning map, and it would be a full year before the protests were forgotten and the boatyard zoned for commercial use without a trace of objection. What a shame the dynamiting of the gut hadn't proceeded just as the boat falling on the car had proceeded in a distant dream. If such waking from the dream had come to be, then the recalcitrant rocks forming the three passageways in the gut would now be gone, the silt washed away, and the only cost to me the memory of my father and brother who so many times and so obstinately tried to sail through, often against the tide, and so many times got hung up on them.

### Finale

History and dreaming: these are the same, I think. The silent rifle fire, the women all away for good. The narrowing of these waterways, I write, restricts the tidal flow, in and out of the lazy streams from Wells to the one now gazed on by the diners at Freeport. And over the years, the complacent silt built up, and with each deposit of silt, in and around the pilings, the water flow was restricted more, and finally, the last tugboat ground out in the river and was left to rot there until removed, not because it was non-functional, but because it was unsightly. And finally, I think, now forgetting what I tell you here, you, my loves, gave up on us, I guess.

I could continue this discourse, expanding on, say, the schooner wrecks at Wiscasset on the Sheepscot, victims first of the war and the silt and finally of the petty vandals who built the last fires on them. But these speak of an old complacency, and that too, I think, is an evasion of what I realize I am here now to discuss.

I stand there at slack tide, shaking my head at the predicaments of deep-drafted watercraft, ignoring the girl, then too young for me, staring at her workbench in the cottage where I seek her out today. This waiting is as if waiting: not the thing itself, not weaving and unweaving, but dreaming it, pretending to, or something similar. And maybe it is this complacency of not doing, of not being fully here, of not being fully with the people of this place that has left me here alone, staring at the tide.

I think of them then, now awake—Buddy Moody, my father, my brother, my neighbor with his stupendously enthusiastic dogs in the duck blind. I think of lovers dozing in the hammock, or one finally with my arms around her, relaxing into me for the first time. Or some woman from away, the crushing banalities of mud and silt she left me with, the trees fallen over the roadway in that windstorm in November, with a continent between us. Redrafting this, I see so clearly I had forgotten all this or not known of it at all, as all played out their majestic dramas of here and from away, in their accents, in the way they

left, and in the way they cut their wood or heat their homes. Kathie and Bob, Philip and those tangled relations near the tide flow. Like Cassandra at her workbench. Like Eloise, reflecting on the end of things that April day.

Her face is turned away from me. She too is from away, having grown up with the accent of the place, with the intertwining of the names of coves and old roadways, working now in Boston, sitting with me on the steps of my own house with her muscled arm around me. Or is this face my late lover's face, dreaming now of leaving me? Or Eloise, looking down across the water?

The phone rings for the last time.

The trees fall in the November wind and rain.