

CAGE STORIES

by
jwcarvin

Copyright © 2000
Joseph W. Carvin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review, without written permission in writing from the author.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2001126126

This version has been created as a .pdf file for digital publication on line. It differs slightly from the original with respect to margins, pagination, and correction of certain spelling and punctuation errors, but is otherwise identical to the original version published by the author and printed by Morris publishing of Kearney, Nebraska.

To my children, and theirs

CONTENTS

The Big Pool	1
My Father's Closet	7
The Bunk Bed	15
The Jungle Gym	19
Wee Ranch	22
Head Games	27
The Secret Room	32
The Big House	37
The Monkey's Cage	41
The Bathroom Door	47
The Thompson Cage	53
The Dummy	59
The Kiss	67
Descent Into Hell	71
Space Odyssey	84
The Magic Circle	99
Invitation	107
Consequences	110

CONTENTS (CONT.)

Family Business	123
A New House	136
Daniel	145
The Roof	149
The Mountain	155
The Stick	160
The Courthouse Steps	164
Bintu of the Magibuti	169
Diluvius	172
The River	177
The Godfather	186
The PFD	194
The Coffin	201
The Quantum Leap	211
Walking Proud	218
Taking Control	225
At the Head of the Table	232
The Last Escape	246
 <i>Poems</i>	 257

For my father,
Who rests now in the grave,
Having passed me crumbs

And passed on life
In the empty days of winter;
For my mother,

Whose heartbeat I knew
Long before any other;
And for their hundred

Fellow travelers
Who stood on deck
Before the salt winds

Of the ocean passage;
For each of them,
I write these words.

T/HE BIG POOL

Among rows of pews that formed an octagon around an altar, we sang off key, echoes crossed in opposing frequencies:

*Abba, Abba, Father
You are the potter, we are the clay,
The work of Your hands...*

My brother David wanted to bury Dad's ashes in Pennsylvania. Chris wanted them taken to sea. My mother had refused to express an opinion on their disposition, insisting that Dad's soul was now free of them. What they were had nothing to do with him, she had said. She now sat dry-eyed, black-veiled, confident that her husband was now with his Father.

After a homily by the old priest, two altar boys in white and red robes walked up the center aisle, one with a chalice, the other with a golden box. Chickie entered the aisle behind them, taking confident strides forward, causing whispers and chuckles among the crowd. As the priests began the Lord's prayer, Chickie knelt on the altar's carpeted step; while the priests consecrated the Eucharist, a friend of my father's enticed my oldest brother back to a pew. I thought of the shower I had taken with him that morning, when I'd washed the dried excrement out of his leg hairs.

My sister Corinne, out of the hospital for now, sat beside me. On the other side of the church sat my wife, my three daughters, and my son, who was fidgeting in a jacket two sizes too large. With them was my youngest brother, Jim, in a bright blue shirt and a white jacket, which I am sure he had chosen for symbolic reasons of one kind or another. Jim, you see, was mystical. Born a Presbyterian, he had converted to Roman Catholicism, gone to an Episcopal Seminary, and eventually converted to Greek Orthodoxy. For several months, he had studied under a Swami from India

how to “levitate” above the ground. Jim’s position on the disposition of Dad’s ashes was stronger than anyone else’s. He wanted to save them in an urn and build a shrine for them under an icon of the Blessed Virgin.

After communion, I felt it my duty to say something about my father. I went to the lectern and delivered a eulogy, describing the stages of his life as I’d known them, from my childhood fear of the black alligator belt that hung in his closet, to the recent occasion on which I had cut his hair.

Deaths cause us to think of such things.

The service over, aunts, uncles, neighbors and friends gathered at my parents’ apartment, bound by tradition, emotion or momentum to speak of the past. I began to reflect on the many episodes of my own existence that had led us all here. I hadn’t written in my journal for years. In my reminiscence, I resolved to return to it.

*

*

*

My great grandfather was an immigrant from Ireland, a Catholic who made money selling liquor during prohibition, then lost it all gambling. My grandfather was a storyteller who sold rayon stockings during the Depression, using his gift for ethnic dialects to charm his customers. He spoke with a loud, musical voice and was the center of attention wherever he went. We called him “Pop Pop.”

My mother’s family consisted mostly of Presbyterian ministers and their wives. Her father was a bookkeeper who counted costs per yard of cotton; he spoke with a quiet voice, deferring often to my grandmother, whose nickname was “Noise.” His family attended church services in Lancaster, Texas, praying so that heathens might be saved. We called my mother’s father “Danny.”

My Irish father went to mass every Sunday with the Catholic boys. His mother was an alcoholic. His father was always on the road, telling stories. When he was thrown off the high school basketball team for smoking, he started his own team, *The Nicotines*. After enlisting in the army during the Second World War, he drove himself, a girlfriend and a case of beer off the road, tumbling down a hill. He was taken to the hospital, where he spent an entire year.

Danny had brought his family from Texas to New York in 1939. One evening in May of 1945, my parents met. In less than a year, my father proposed, but my mother turned him down. The Carvins, of course, would have preferred that their son marry an Irish girl. And the Logans couldn’t tolerate the thought of their daughter marrying a fast-living Catholic.

Matters got worse when the Carvins insisted all the children be raised Catholic. My parents argued. They split up. He kept calling. She fled to California and got engaged to a Presbyterian. He refused to accept defeat, and kept calling. By July, 1946, she finally said yes, she would marry him on one condition: the children would *not* all be raised Catholic.

All the girls, she insisted, would be raised Presbyterian.

Sonny agreed. They eloped and were married in Santa Monica, California on August 4th, 1946, by a justice of the peace.

It was from this union, and from the gene pools that produced it, that my siblings and I would come into the world.

On August 6, 1947 – a year and two days after they married – Julia and Charley Carvin had a son. To preserve the family heritage, they named him Charles III, like a king. But the baby's eyes were slanted and crossed; his head was small and round; his fingers and feet were stubby, with creases in the palms and soles. The doctors had a different name for the baby – they called him a “Mongoloid” child. They informed Charley and Julie that the child would be severely retarded and would have a short life.

They called the baby “Chickie” – like a yellow bird with a broad beak emerging from a broken shell.

Science tells us that during meiosis, when the chromosomes replicate, they are supposed to split into two separate chains of DNA. But in Chickie's case, a stubborn 21st chromosome had refused to split from its genetic twin. Clinging tight to each other, these frightened twins had shown up at the wedding of sperm and egg as a couple, both seeking admission on the same invitation. During the posturing of the genetic ritual, when it came time for my father's chromosomes to align with my mother's across the dance floor, there were, at position 21, two nervous chromosomes on one side of the aisle facing only one on the other. Like that moment in “musical chairs” when the music stops, there was only a seat for one. Yet neither was willing to defer. Two chromosomes squeezed into the same spot in the egg. The result was an awkward, confused moment, and a child with a condition the medical literature called Down's Syndrome.

Charley and Julie sought a second opinion. Finding none, they went to Florida in hopes that Julie could get her mind off her child. Plans were made by others about what to do with Chickie.

On November 23, 1947, from a hotel room in Florida, Julia wrote this letter to her mother-in-law:

Dear Mother C,

Your letter was wonderful and I really think that was so thoughtful of you to write me just what you knew I wanted to hear – all about Chickie. I miss him so much I don't know how I'm going to stand it. Charley has been wonderful in trying to help me get my mind on something else but even though I say I'm going to, my darling baby is ever in the back of my mind. I know you are all helping to take good care of him and I do appreciate it so much. Wouldn't I love to see him eating his vegetables now. Does he love them like he does his pablum?

Hope Dad can come down next weekend because Charley and I are having a terrible time making any decisions. Wish we could get a place soon because living in a hotel doesn't offer much for me to do except think and that's always bad. If I had something to do to keep me busy it wouldn't be so hard.

Thanks again for keeping me posted on the behavior of my little one. Here's much love to you from Charley and me –

Julie

"Send him away to a home," the experts said. "Forget he even exists."

After much struggling, Charley and Julie followed the expert advice. Resolved never to see him again, they sent Chickie to a home for the mentally disabled, run by Catholic nuns, and set about conceiving another child. My brother David was born on September 23, 1948. His eyes and his hands and the soles of his feet were normal.

In an old trunk, I have found various relics of these days. First, there is my parents' 1949 Christmas card. It is signed, simply, "From Julia, Charley, and David."

Second, there is a faded, yellowing newspaper clipping from 1950 which announced my birth:

Second Son to Carvins

Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Carvin of Claremont Rd
have announced the birth on July 10 of a son,
Joseph William Carvin, at Lawrence Hospital in
Bronxville. This is the Carvins' second child; their
first is a son, David, now nearly two years old.

The third is Pop Pop's 1950 Christmas card. It refers to his son Charley (my father), who "has two sons to keep us all busy." Pop Pop's 1951 card has pictures of "the grandchildren" – both of them – David and Joe. Just as

Chickie's existence was denied in the newspaper announcement of my birth, he never appeared in any of Pop Pop's Christmas cards. It seems a Downs child would be out of place – an embarrassment, perhaps – to the men in the family, and the skyscraper world in which they lived.

My parents, meanwhile, had another problem, and unbeknownst to me, I was at the center of it. They now had either two children or three (depending on whether you counted Chickie) but either way, all were boys. My mother and her Texas relatives were ready for a Presbyterian. Catholic tradition called for me to be baptized shortly after birth – but I was not. Instead, I was neither Catholic nor Presbyterian – unbaptized in either faith. I imagine my body being held by my mother and father, arguing perhaps about the current tally of Catholics and Presbyterians and whether Chickie should be counted, my mother pulling my right arm toward Presbyterianism, my father pulling my left toward Catholicism.

In May of 1952, my sister Corinne was born. A girl! A Presbyterian! But only one girl, compared to two (or three) boys. Still, I was not baptized.

My mother was a beautiful woman, but in the style of the times, she dyed her brown hair blonde and she painted her fingernails bright red. My father, who'd once boasted a lustrous brown pompadour – I've seen it in photographs – was growing bald. Like her mother before her, my mother stayed home to raise her children. She read to me every night from my favorite books: Little Black Sambo; the Uncle Remus stories; and Pinocchio, with his penchant for telling tall tales. Stories were always followed by prayers:

Now I lay me down to sleep;
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
And if I die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Saying these lines aloud night after night, then feeling my mother pull the sheets up to my chin, seeing her turn off the lights, I came to understand how fragile was my hold on life itself, and how lucky I was when the morning came.

My father, like his father before him, worked in the City and didn't get home until late. He made sure we had a membership at the Westchester Country Club, where there were two swimming pools: a deep, Olympic sized pool for adults known as "the big pool," and a shallow wading pool for toddlers that we called "the baby pool."

One day, my father told me it was time for me to go with him, to swim in the big pool. I resisted. He said he'd go in with me, to make sure I didn't drown. He picked me up and carried me to the edge of the pool's deep end. Holding me tight, he jumped in, and we went down. As he sank, he kept a tight hold on me. I struggled to get free. When I couldn't, I panicked, my lungs burning as I kicked and pushed against him.

It wasn't until he came up for air that I was able to breathe again.

M Y FATHER'S CLOSET

Our house in Scarsdale sat on a little hill and its front yard sloped down toward the street. In another house across the street lived a boy named Mike. All I remember of him is that I liked him a lot, and I remember his smiling face. Years later, my mother told me he had a crooked spine, walked with a limp, and had six fingers on one hand. Apparently, his dance hadn't gone so well either. But I, apparently, didn't notice such things.

Something I did notice was the little girl next door. Our driveway cut a channel into the hill between our house and the one next to it. On the neighbor's side of this channel was a large bush, big enough for two small children to hide behind without being seen. It was spring or summer. I was playing with the little girl on the street side of the bush, and we were both giggling. I asked her if she could untie her shoes. I got her to take off her sundress, still laughing. Then I told her to take off her panties. I was so caught up in our laughing that when she expressed some reluctance to remove them, I TOLD her to remove them. There she sat, naked.

I stood up, puzzled, and realized I didn't know what to do. I began to back away toward the safety of my own home. Suddenly she stood up, crying out loud. I ran as fast as I could toward my own house. But as I leaped across the embankment, the little girl's mother called out:

"Come back here!"

She nabbed me and pulled me by the ear through her door. The inside of their house was dark, with dark furniture and a musty old carpet. The mother -- a wicked queen -- sat on a large wooden chair that squeaked. The little girl stood on the floor in front of her, naked and whimpering.

"You took her clothes off," the mother said to me. "You put them back on her."

How could I do that? I had wanted the little girl's clothes off because I was curious about things I didn't understand. There was this lacy, frilly stuff on her underpants. *What was that for?* Even if I could have figured it out in more favorable circumstances, I could never do so under the mother's penetrating stare.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

My limbs wouldn't move. "I don't know anything about girls."

"Hmnn..."

"I can't." I stood there, repeating it feebly.

The woman eventually dressed her daughter herself, making me watch. Just when it was nearly over, the mother insisted that I put on the girl's socks. Having gotten out of the rest of my punishment, I tried to escape again.

"I can't," I said.

"Yes, you *can*," said the mother. "And you won't leave here until you do!"

So, I had to move closer to both of them – within easy walloping distance – and touch the girl again. I had to touch the socks that represented my shame; I had to handle those little feet under the glare of a mother enraged I might have touched them before. When it was over, I ran home as fast as I could.

I remember that incident to this day, and I wonder what that mother thought of the little Catholic boy next door.

*

*

*

In 1954, President Eisenhower proclaimed the domino theory, Congress outlawed the Communist Party, and I was finally baptized a Catholic. My father must have had a very good year that year.

We also moved to a new house in a town called Mamaroneck. Its basement was large, with steel posts holding up the rest of the house. A full sized shuffleboard court was painted onto one section of the basement floor, subdivided in geometric shapes. In another corner was a large wet bar, complete with black iron stools. My father described the basement enthusiastically – it would become an enormous playroom, and he described all the things we would have in it. (Within a year of moving in, we did: the wet bar and the shuffleboard court were joined by a ping pong table, a

Lionel trains table, and an area rug around which were couch, chairs, and TV table. With all that, there was still plenty of floor space for makeshift games between the steel posts.)

Upstairs were the living areas and children's bedrooms. I remember picking up the black telephone in the new house (all phones were black in those days) and hearing the operator ask, "*Number, please?*" Soon there were telephone trucks going down the street in front of the house, their sides covered with signs advertising the newest technology: with a dial telephone, a person didn't need to talk to an operator; a person could just stick his fingers in the hole in the wheel, listen to mysterious clicking sounds, and dial the number himself!

Up the next stairs, off my father's den, there was a large, wood-paneled closet filled with books, mostly Alfred Hitchcock and Ellery Queen Mystery magazines. In the back of this closet was a little half-door which led to an attic. Exploring the attic one day, David and I learned that it continued as a small crawl-space for twenty or thirty feet across the front of the house, emerging at last in another large walk-in closet off our parents' bedroom.

The crawl space, small enough that only children could travel it, beckoned to us. My parents' closet, at the other end of it, was off limits, my mother said. But that was hardly a deterrent. We scuttled through the crawl space to the forbidden bedroom closet like mice in search of food.

The bedroom closet was hung with my parents' clothes. From our secret entrance in the back of it, we had to part my father's suits and slacks to enter. On my mother's side were robes, skirts and hatboxes – in which pins held silk flowers to hats – and a rack of colored shoes. On my father's side were a clothes dresser and a collection of business suits, sport coats, ties, and leather belts.

One belt, David told me, was an alligator belt. He described for me how much pain the raised hide of the gator's back could inflict, thrashing across a bare bottom, compared to the other, smoother belts. I remember the first time I emerged alone from the attic crawlspace into the tight spaces of the bedroom closet – finding the alligator belt among the others in the half-light – feeling its ridges.

Once my father realized the reverence we had for it, he never used any other.

I don't remember the first time my father whipped me, but I do remember one whipping in particular. It was late Christmas day. David and I looked up, hearing the voice of our father at the top of the basement stairs,

yelling at us to come to him immediately. We found him standing at the top of the stairs. In his hands he held the big orange basketball he had given us that morning. It had been punctured, and was slowly deflating.

“How many times have I got to tell you kids to take care of your toys?!!” he demanded.

We said nothing, but looked at each other, alarmed.

“Up to my room, right now,” he ordered. “Get my alligator belt.”

In unison: “But we didn’t do it!” At least, we didn’t know whether we’d done it.

“Well, you kids have broken every toy you ever got. And you’ve probably done a lot of other things you’ve never gotten whipped for. So if you didn’t ruin this basketball, this whipping will be for all the things you never got caught doing.”

And so my education began. I would eventually come to understand my father’s sense of justice, and his belt, quite well.

I began to attend Mrs. Davis’ Nursery School in Mamaroneck. Mrs. Davis told us how, in Russian schools, the teachers showed pictures of Russian slums, then lied to the school children, telling them the pictures were taken in America. I was thankful that I lived in a free, non-communist country, where there weren’t any slums and the government didn’t tell lies.

A psychiatrist lived across the street from us, and in the little apartment over his garage lived a Negro family who worked in his house. One day I played “doctor” with their daughter, Delores; we took off all our clothes in our garage. When my mother discovered us and reported the scene to my father, he whipped me pretty well.

My relationship with David, meanwhile, began to fall into a pattern. Being more physically powerful, David exerted his will over me through a toolbox of headlocks, arm holds, “noogies” and pins. By an early age I realized if I was ever going to get anything in life, it would have to be through my wits, my virtue or my luck. If I relied on my physical strength, I would lose.

So as David studied for his first communion, learning the different types of sins, I was happy that he taught them to me. First, there were “mortal” sins, the really bad things like killing people. If you committed a mortal sin and you died, you would go straight to Hell. There were also “cardinal” sins, and they were almost as bad. At the bottom of the heap, there were “venial” sins. I no longer remember the exact difference between cardinal sins and venial sins, but it was comforting to know that we could do some things wrong and we wouldn’t necessarily go to Hell.

David taught me that Adam was made of clay, that Eve was made of a rib from Adam's rib cage, and that ever since Adam and Eve, babies are born with something called *original sin*. It seemed to me that God's wisdom in coming up with "original sin" was rather like my father's wisdom regarding the Christmas basketball. Original sin is what makes us all sinners, regardless of what we have done, or not done, or what we might ever do.

I learned that sin creates a black stain on the soul, and that the act of penance purifies and cleans the soul again, making it white. Before I could ever receive communion, I would need to confess my sins.

The confessional at Holy Trinity Catholic Church was a tall, ornately carved wooden box, which stood in the back of the church and looked like a triple-wide coffin standing on end. It was triple-wide because the center section, behind a heavy wooden door, was a compartment where the priest sat and heard the confessions. On either side of the priest's section there was a compartment for confessors. The entrances to these were shielded by heavy drapes. I had seen my father go behind these drapes. Whenever he did, I could hear the deep, rumbling sound of adult male voices. But the drapes and the thick wood of the confessional muffled the words and the sentences so no one outside could hear the deep secrets being passed inside.

I tagged along for David's first confession. My father and I sat in the pew near the confessional, waiting for David to take his turn. Several nuns meted out discipline to any children who failed to show reverence. Other adults were present to support their little first-time confessors. My father knew most of the other fathers – some lived in our neighborhood, some commuted to the city on the same train as he did, some were on the same church committees he was.

It was probably some of these same men who (my mother later told me) had prodded my father into being the chairman of the parish anti-pornography committee. My father was well known in the community for his outspoken anti-communism, so he likely seemed a natural choice to lead the church's fight against smut. (When I was older, my mother told me she'd seen some irony in Dad's being asked to chair the anti-pornography committee – from time to time, we both knew, the mailman delivered unmarked brown packages to our house.)

In any event, when David's turn in the confessional arrived, he drew the heavy curtain, entered and disappeared inside. I waited, bored and fidgeting, while the priest heard the confession of the unknown boy in the opposite compartment. Then, though I couldn't see him, there was no

mistaking that the priest had turned to David, whose young, childish voice rang out, shrill and loud, its high pitch easily escaping the heavy drapes.

"Forgive me, father, for I have sinned," he began loudly. Had someone forgotten to tell David to whisper?

Nuns, parents and children alike, sitting in the pews waiting their turns, listened to David's *Act of Contrition*, followed by a whispered mumbling (the priest), followed again by David's clear recitation of his sins:

"I teased my brother Joey," he said.

That one got my attention. Had my father heard that?

"And I didn't mind my mother. And ... and... I looked at *dirty pictures*," he enunciated.

This was not the ordinary thing one heard from a first-time, seven-year-old confessor, and the recitation of this sin had several adults and children shift in their seats. The pews squeaked. Some of the adults looked at my father. There were further muffled tones from the center of the confessional as the priest apparently asked for clarification.

"I found them in the drawer in the closet," David explained.

For the first time, the priest's voice could be heard from outside the confessional:

"*What closet?*"

The church was quiet. All the children, adults and nuns listened intently for David's answer.

"I found them in my *father's* closet," he said. "The one where he keeps his alligator belt. In his dresser drawer, under his pajamas..."

Once David had been absolved of his sins, we left the church in a hurry.

Of course, the first chance we got, David and I tunneled our way from the mystery magazines through the crawl space to the forbidden closet, so David could show me the pictures he had seen. But by the time we got there, Dad had cleaned out his drawer.

It had been my first lesson in the power of confession.

*

*

*

By the time I was six, I was learning all the important things of life – that Babe Ruth had the all-time home run record; that Don Larsen had pitched a perfect game in the World Series, and that the New York Yankees were the best team in the world. One day, as I watched my mother sitting on a toilet in some distress, then heard her say she was having a baby, I learned that babies are born in bowel movements.

On Wednesday afternoons, the public schools let the Catholic kids out early to attend religious instruction at Holy Trinity on Mamaroneck Avenue. There, I learned from the nuns that there are three persons in one God, just as there are three corners in a triangle. And that God's organization is not patterned after baseball – three strikes in an out, three outs in an inning; etc. – but after the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, who are three distinct persons, but just one God.

In case I might have thought Babe Ruth or Joe DiMaggio were the perfect creatures, I learned that Jesus, though entirely a man, was entirely God at the same time, that he walked on water, and that he rose from the dead. Catholic priests were called “Father” because they were very powerful too, as they could turn a wafer of bread into Jesus' body.

I learned that it was a sin to chew the bread, since the bread was Jesus. After David took communion, I tried to detect where in his mouth (and for how long) he was able to store the bread he could not chew.

I therefore looked forward to my own first communion with much curiosity. I was finally going to find out how long I could keep that Jesus wafer in my mouth. My mother had bought white pants and white socks and a bright white jacket for me to wear. I would look just like the thirty other boys and girls who, also dressed in identical uniforms, would receive their first communion together. Because my hair was one of those blonds that was itself shocking white, I would be whiter than any of them.

As for the sacrament of Penance, based on what I'd heard at David's first confession, I knew that I would whisper my sins quietly so no one would hear them except the priest and God himself.

But I had a different problem: what *were* my sins?

I certainly hadn't *murdered* anybody. I had not stolen anything. I had not told any lies. I did have a little sister, but I really didn't remember picking on her. The disrobing of little girls never crossed my mind -- the list of sins in the catechism didn't include disrobing people, and the nuns never mentioned such things. There was nothing in the catechism about deflating basketballs, either. So I couldn't figure out what I was going to confess. Surely, I couldn't go into the confessional and tell the priest that I didn't think I had *ever* done *anything* wrong....

When the moment came, as I knelt in the confessional and whispered my own first *Act of Contrition*, I still had made no decision. The prayer over, it was time to confess. To avoid an impossible moment, I lied.

“I teased my little sister,” I said. And to add authenticity, I added, “Twice.”

Now, I am not saying I had never teased her. But at that time, from my perspective, I did not really *believe* I had. I just wasn't able to think of any sins. I confessed this fictitious sin not because of any actual sense of contrition, but because it sounded like a plausible, acceptable thing to confess.

It actually worked rather well. The next week in confession, I was able to confess that I had, indeed, told a lie.

Thus began a string of sins. Thanks to them, I could vouch for the validity of original sin. Thanks to them, I would always have something to confess. I had found my way into my father's closet and, it seemed, I'd also found the way out.

T/HE BUNK BED

My brother David prevented me from entering rooms he didn't want me in. He always made the decisions about what I would do, what I would play, when it was time for me to do this or do that. Sometimes he wrestled me to the ground with knuckle noogies and held me down. In short, he exercised all the privileges of the first-born.

My frustration grew and, over time, became intolerable. I remember one night deciding that my hatred for David was too great to be satisfied. That if I were to kill him – I imagined this both with a gun and with an axe — the physical presence of his body would still be an unbearable burden. I would have to find a way to dispose of it – but even if I cut it into pieces, I would still have the pieces. I needed to obliterate him. If I pulverized him into dust, how could I crush the dust into nothingness? And how could I ensure there was not a fleck left in the air for me to breathe?

When Chris was born, David and I were moved into a new room with a bunk bed. David, of course, decided who would get which bunk, and he chose the bottom one, making me climb up to the top. Then, every night, after the lights were out, David would make me come back down. He would say, "Joey? Please come down and scratch my back." At first I tried to get away with not doing it. But as I resisted, David's requests turned to threats, and I wound up scratching his back, just as I responded to my father when he called.

Whenever I could, I built fortresses by myself, with blocks or "Lincoln Logs," peopling them with toy soldiers. I had a bag of dark green plastic GI's that I called my "men." With one of these "men" in my right hand, I engaged in hand to hand combat with another "man" in my left, the winner standing proud on the fortress wall, the loser tumbling from the heights.

Imagining the camaraderie of the troops, I marveled at their agility as they leapt from high towers and did combat with the enemy.

At school, my desk adjoined that of a beautiful girl with long black braids. Her name was Robin Powers. We had taken an interest in kissing in the classroom, where others could see. It attracted much attention from our peers and I was delighted to be at the center of it.

Over the Christmas holidays, our teacher rearranged our desks – I was no longer seated with Robin. As if that weren't enough, all of Robin's attentions toward me disappeared. Had the teacher told her mother what we had been doing? Had her mother ordered her to pay no more attention to me?

I spent the month of January brooding, pining for Robin and her kisses, but she seemed to be keeping her distance. She never said a word to me. On a piece of construction paper, I drew a picture of her with her long, black braids. As Valentine's day approached, I resolved to do something to demonstrate my love. I bought Robin a present -- a five-cent package of chewing gum -- and I added a big red heart to my picture of Robin, planning to give it to her as a Valentine's card.

When Valentine's day came, I waited on the sidewalk in front of the school, my drawing and gum in my pocket. Eventually, I saw Robin approaching. My hand retrieved the gum from my pocket -- I held it up for her to see -- I opened my mouth to speak -- but she was rapt in conversation with a friend and didn't notice me. I lost my nerve. I couldn't bear to speak to her in front of her friend. I threw the package of gum toward her, and it hit her in the face.

Not realizing that it symbolized my undying love, she yelled at me, angrily:

“Stop that!!!”

and walked past me in a huff.

On the way home from school that afternoon, I stood on the bridge by the bicycle stand at the end of our street. I looked at my crayoned portrait of Robin for a long time. I gave it one last look, tore it up, and dropped it into the trickling water of the creek below, piece by piece.

At about this time, my parents revoked Chickie's exile. My first memory of Chickie – perhaps the first time I met him – is a visit we made to Saint Colletta's. The nuns greeted us and gave us a tour of their very clean facility. They spoke of their work with the handicapped children and of their hope for the future. But most of the children, they said, were learning faster than Chickie.

The nuns brought him to us. His eyes were crossed; his voice was throaty and garbled. But he did seem able to see, and with careful listening, we could understand his simple words.

Dad took us out to a restaurant. After the meal, the waitress brought David and Chickie and me bowls of vanilla ice cream decorated with candies placed to look like clown's faces. I had finished eating mine when I noticed that Chickie, with his crossed eyes, was just staring at his, watching it melt. My father told Chickie to eat.

"No," he said.

"Why not?" asked Dad.

Referring to his clown, Chickie replied, "He happy."

*

*

*

Chickie started coming home for the summer and for holidays. And although he was my oldest brother, he did not bully me like David did.

He could put both his ankles behind his head. I strained until I could do likewise. He could put his legs into the "indian" position. I stretched and stretched until I could do likewise. He could reach his arm back behind his shoulder blades in ways that, no matter how I strained, I couldn't match. Later in life, I learned it's common for children with Down syndrome to be loose-jointed. For me, Chickie was simply a brother of many talents. And his greatest talents were his happiness and docility. If I told him to do something, he would just smile and do it.

Though Chickie was my best friend, his subservience to me clearly created an opportunity which original sin compelled me to fill. One day, I decided to test his limits. I found a bottle of white shoe polish. I brought it to Chickie and told him it was milk, that he should drink it. He said no. I insisted -- even to the point of sitting on his chest, pinning him down on the expansive basement floor, telling him it was just milk, he *had* to drink it. I was lucky. Though he never tried to push me off his chest, and though he never tried to tell anyone else what I had done, Chickie knew the polish was not milk, and he refused to drink.

*

*

*

Ida was a Negro cook who'd worked in Pop Pop's house since the 1920's. Nancy, a laundress who had joined them in the 1930's, had been born to slaves on a Georgia plantation. She was our nanny and called us her "white children." She'd come stay with us when my parents were away, fascinating us with tales of her childhood -- killing chickens, wringing their

necks, whirling them around until the body separated and the chicken ran headless in the yard. Nancy would often reach for the flesh of our necks with her crooked fingers, her flesh hanging low from her bones. She'd peck with her fingers against our necks, like a chicken in its pen hunting for food, tickling us, making us laugh. The flesh of her fingers was cold.

"Good meat!" she would say. "*Mmmn, Mmmmmn...* This is such good meat!"

Every night, after I had scratched David's back and climbed back up to the top bunk, I recited the prayer my mother had taught me. "If I die before I wake..." A tree outside our window cast moving, moonlit shadows into my closet. I was sure that if I did die before I woke, a creature from the shadowy closet would be the cause of it, and I had recurring nightmares. One was of a building with infinite rooms. Going through door after door, finding no way out, then panicking as the floor began to give way, I would be swept into a vortex, a vortex which carried me down into the earth, into a fiery center. Nancy would appear in the vortex. Was she there to save me from the fiery center? No. In the dream, Nancy would turn into a cackling witch.

In most of the nightmares, ape-like monsters raided my house. They collected David and Corinne and Chris and my mother in a group at the foot of the stairs. They ordered them all to stay put, under guard, while other monsters searched the house for ME, the lone holdout. I wondered if the monsters would eat my family. But, mostly, I wondered if they would eat me.

I would try to run from them, but after a few successful steps, I couldn't move my legs any longer, and I would wake up, my legs tangled in the sheets and blankets of my bunk.

T/HE JUNGLE GYM

Pop Pop had gone into the converting business on New York's 7th Avenue. He'd been named Man of the Year by the New York Conference of Christians and Jews. His talent for humorous ethnic stories was applauded in *The New Yorker* magazine. Everybody loved Pop Pop.

In fact, he had been so successful telling stories and selling textiles that he'd sold his house in Scarsdale and replaced it with three homes – one, an apartment on Park Avenue in New York – another, a whole community of villas on the ocean in Florida – and the third, an estate home across from the Boardwalk in Ventnor, New Jersey.

The Boardwalk was famous for its magic shops, shell games and carnival attractions, the home of the Miss America Pageant and of Steel Pier, where a great white horse ascended a tower and dove into a pool of water below. Excited about a trip to the shore for the summer, I packed all my blue jeans. But my mother removed them from my suitcase, explaining that my grandmother – whom we called “Mom Mom” – would be upset if she saw any of her grandchildren wearing such clothes. My mother took me shopping and bought a summer's worth of knee socks and Bermuda shorts.

Pop Pop's house in Ventnor was a four-story concrete palace with a grand stairway that led up a colonnaded porch across the front of the house. A matching colonnaded balcony stretched across the house outside the second story windows. Inside, huge oriental paintings looked out over bronze Buddhas and porcelain statues of oriental men in multi-colored robes, with long, stranded black mustaches falling from little holes in their faces. There were ceramic statues of green Chinese dogs; the largest of them stood three feet high and had glossy eyeballs that could be pushed and turned independently in their sockets.

The first floor included all the formal living areas where visitors were

entertained. A stream of friends and relatives with names like Murphy and Young and Carmody and O'Brien and an equal stream of priests and nuns circulated in and out, some just for the day, some for several nights, some seeking a loan or other favor, all eager for another round of Pop Pop's dialect stories. I lounged in the rolling leather recliner in the library, explored the cabinets in search of aromatic cigar boxes, and plucked the strings of my grandmother's golden harp.

By day, we crossed the Boardwalk to the wide, white beach on the ocean, where we raced across the hot sand to the surf and played until our skins were red. Too late, we rubbed tanning lotion on our faces and limbs. Later, we donned shirts and fishing caps and followed Pop Pop and his priests as they fished on the marsh flats of the bay. We caught plenty of flounder from Pop Pop's power boat, and back in the kitchen, when the day's catch had been brought home for dinner, David and Chickie and I crouched next to the pails of salt water in which the fish lay. We marveled at their flatness – pure white on the undersides, where they had nestled into the muddy bottom; dark muddy brown on top, to camouflage them from above. We marveled even more at the placement of the eyes on their lopsided faces. Both glossy eyeballs projected from the surface on the topside of the fish.

This had been explained to us, of course: a fish that spent its life lying in the mud has no use for eyes on the side facing down. But seeing both eyes bulging up, scrunched together far too close to the lips, moving independently, as if crossed, was a disturbing sight we couldn't leave, even as the eyes got duller and death approached the pail.

The first night, Pop Pop came up to our room on the third floor and told us a story about an old adventurer he called "Bob-o'-Link." (We had never heard of the bird by that name; the only Bob-o'-Link we knew was the one Pop Pop described for us.) That night, Bob-o'-Link took his ship and his crew of adventuring sailors to the South China Sea, where the conniving "Chinamen" they encountered came alive in Pop Pop's voices. The next night, Bob-o'-Link sailed to darkest Africa, where he encountered giant Watusi warriors and a tribe of pygmies. The next night, Bob-o'-Link was at the North Pole, and the night after that, with the elephants in India. At dinnertime, we would watch Pop Pop, seated at the head of the long, formal dining table, regaling his guests with other stories. Every night, David and I clamored for more stories of Bob-o'-Link's bravery, his loyalty to his men, and his narrow escapes.

One day in second grade we were playing tag on the jungle gym, waiting for the morning bell to ring. It was a large iron cage-like structure – perhaps five cubes wide, five cubes long, maybe four cubes high. It wasn't as imposing as my grandfather's concrete palace, but it was just the right size to challenge me. In its center, at its highest level, was a single cube of iron bars. Whoever was "it" had chased me, and I had climbed to the top, bar by bar, through each cube to a higher one, until I found myself facing the highest one. It projected like a tower over the rest of the structure. Would I find refuge in it? I thought briefly, and decided I would; so I pulled myself up into it. Once inside, I saw that "it" was coming up after me. I decided to grip the parallel bars in my hands, lifting my legs up in the empty space to avoid the tag. "It" could only get me from below. I could see farther than I'd ever seen before. But the iron bars in my hands were too far apart, and my arms were too weak. When I tried to lift myself up to escape the tag, my arms abandoned me. Suddenly I was falling through the empty spaces of the cage, clunking on the iron bars to either side as I dropped, landing on the asphalt below.

Stunned, I picked myself off the ground.

"I got you!" yelled a voice from the top of the tower. "You're it!"

Just then, the bell rang. I drifted toward the building. As other children converged on the entrance, a girl stared at me and said, "Joey, what happened? Look, you're bleeding! Your chin..."

I put my hand to my chin, and when I looked at my hand, it was covered with blood. I got dizzy and passed out. Later, at the hospital, when my chin was sewn up with a needle and thread, I passed out again.

I can still feel the scar on my chin. Like original sin, I suppose. It has been my companion now for forty-three years, reminding me how childhood leaves its marks.

WEE RANCH

Mimi and Danny, my maternal grandparents, had moved back to Texas, where they had bought a 90-acre sheep ranch in the hill country northwest of San Antonio. They called it “Wee Ranch.” In the summer of 1958, David and I were put on a plane to visit them.

Wee Ranch was nothing like Pop Pop’s concrete palace on the Jersey Shore. The main house was a small, single story house with a rifle rack in Danny’s room and a Bible stand in the living room by the piano. Near the main house was another small house for guests, called “Yawls.” An earth tone ceramic ashtray on a table at Yawl’s pictured two angels high in the clouds, one saying to the other, “And if we’re good, we’ll go to Texas.”

Wee Ranch was bordered by a white fence that kept the sheep penned in. Under the gates on the pebbled driveway were trenches dug across the road and covered with lengths of pipe spaced a few inches apart. The cattle guards allowed vehicles and men to pass, but the hoof of a sheep would get stuck if it tried to cross. A barbed wire fence limited the back of the ranch.

With us was our cousin, Robert, who was called by his middle name – the family name – “Logan.” David and Logan and I had watched cowboys fighting Indians on television, and had watched Davy Crockett die fighting Mexicans at the Alamo. After seeing the real Alamo, we each got a “flat top” crew cut and cowboy boots and a little knife in a leather case decorated with colored beads “Indian style.” We were thrilled to get real, broad-brimmed cowboy hats. We swam in the creek that flowed through Wee Ranch into the Guadeloupe River. Around the ranch we found skulls and other bones of deer and sheep, picked clean by vultures, blanched and baking in the sun. One day we found a full carcass, the rib cage still intact. We shot a water moccasin with a .22 caliber rifle, and we collected scorpions and rattlesnake tails.

We found Indian stone work – arrowheads and other tools. On the Fourth of July, we had our own firecrackers and fireworks display. Mimi made sure we read our Bible verses at every meal.

One night we went “coon huntin’.” We set out on foot, following the neighbor’s hunting dogs. Eventually, their yapping and yelping told us that prey must be near. But we killed no raccoons that night. After the dogs came upon a skunk, I had to ride home in the back of the pickup with the dogs and the stench they’d found.

Mimi and Danny had two house dogs, “Rocket” and “Sputnik,” names from the regular news stories about the Russians surpassing America in the space race. Newspapers carried photos of mice, dogs and monkeys being prepared for launch as part of our effort to catch up to the Russians. (The animals never survived such launches.) There was talk of bomb shelters, and whether and how to build them.

Of greater interest to us was George, the Mexican ranch hand who lived in a tree house above the driveway. My grandfather said he was a “wetback,” but advised us not to call him that. George spoke little English, so communication with him was more difficult than it was with Chickie. But George treated us kindly. For our part, we looked with admiration and envy upon any man who lived permanently in a tree house overridden with spiders.

On Sunday mornings, my grandparents faithfully took David and me to the Catholic Church. They dropped us off in front, their big Buick proceeding on to their own Presbyterian Church with Cousin Logan in the back. Unlike the Catholic churches in New York, with their oil paintings, marble statues, stained glass windows and donors’ plaques on the backs of pews, the church in Kerrville was a flat-roofed wooden structure full of folding chairs. There was no air conditioning, and the fans were small and few. David and I were the only Anglos in attendance, and the parts of the Mass that weren’t in Latin were in Spanish. We were thankful when the mass was over and we could return to Wee Ranch in our cowboy boots and wide-brimmed hats.

It was a glorious summer. Like Pop Pop, Danny was a storyteller. He told tales of being captured by enemy soldiers, of being strapped into a chair, of having the slow *drip, drip, drip* of water land on his head in subtle torture designed to make him release his unit’s vital information. He told tales of the Indians who had once inhabited the hill country, and told us of his personal encounters with them.

At summer’s end we returned home to Mamaroneck with a prized

collection of arrowheads, scorpion corpses, rattlesnake tails, and a squirrel hide I had tanned myself. I felt that when I died, if my prayers were answered and the Lord did take my soul, I would, indeed, go to Texas.

*

*

*

In the autumn of 1958, Scott Dufault and I became best friends. We played football in the vacant lot next to his house and we used the pinecones around his house as missiles in pinecone wars. Born only two days apart in 1950, we discussed the odds that we would live to see the year 2000. Pricking our fingers with a needle, trading blood, we vowed that if we did, we would do it together. We bought kits to build model cars and warplanes. We talked about soldiery and heroism in war, and about how happy we were not being girls.

Scott asked me questions about religion. What did we Catholics do when we left school early on Wednesdays for religious instruction? Was it true that we could be as bad as we wanted, and that all we had to do was to confess on Saturday and everything would be all right? How could we believe that hundreds of little bread wafers got turned into the body of Jesus? I told Scott the answers I was being given by the nuns. I wondered how such things could be so certain in the eyes of the nuns, and so silly in the eyes of Scott.

One day I learned that Scott's parents were getting divorced. His father moved from the suburbs to rural Philmont, between the Catskill and Berkshire Mountains. Scott asked if I could spend the weekend with him at his father's new home. If I did, I would miss church on Sunday. I said I wouldn't be able to, unless I called the father to get permission to miss church. Later, Scott laughed when he learned the father I had called was not my biological father, but the priest at Holy Trinity.

I found the white clapboard house Scott's father had rented on a hilltop in "the country" as comfortable as blue jeans. The thirty acres that surrounded the house had a barn, a corral, hills, meadows, cattle, a stream that ran through the middle of the property, and thick woods that surrounded the meadows. Scott's father bore no resemblance to mine. He had a bushy mustache and wore flannel shirts and jeans. He had made hundreds of his own tin soldiers and, in fact, he had even made the molds to create them. In the barn there were boxes of tin soldiers, thousands of figures he had hand-painted. Infantry and cavalry, even cannon and caissons, teams of horses harnessed to them, each horse and each soldier an individual. Scott and I marveled at the intricacy of the painting -- eyeballs,

mustaches, some with black hair, some with brown – occasionally even one with blond hair – fingers molded around gun stocks, stripes on shoulders indicating rank – several generals on horseback with shining silver swords raised high, the painting on these officers more intricate and detailed than all the rest.

One figure which Scott took out of its own, velvet-lined cigar box immediately won my heart: it was a standing figure of an officer in a blue uniform, with gold epaulets, a double breasted jacket with silver buttons, a mustache and beard painted so finely one could see the individual waves in his hairs. The general was studying a map which he held in white-gloved hands. The tiny tin map had creases from being folded, and on it was painted the terrain of the coming battle: we could see railroad lines and roads, buildings and fences...

As soon as the sun rose early the next morning, we carried the boxes from the barn to the cow pasture, where we made stone walls with pebbles and picket fences with twigs, dug dirt roads in the ground and set the soldiers up in rows and columns – well over a thousand soldiers altogether. It took an entire morning to set up the troops in opposing armies. We hooted with dismay against the bell that rung to let us know it was lunchtime, and we hurried back to the battlefield as soon as lunch was finished. In the heat of the afternoon, dust kicked up from the little roads we'd dug where our soldiers marched and died. As the sun fell at the end of the day, we picked up the dead bodies, knowing that if a body was left out overnight, it could be crushed by the hoof of a cow.

In the evenings, in the white house on the hill, Scott's father would sit in his blue jeans, play his banjo or his guitar, and sing "Ole Black Joe" and other songs from the hills. Scott's sister, Tina, played the piano, and Scott and his brother would join in on their guitars. One night, after the singing had ended, Scott's father read a poem he had written about the battles at Marathon and Thermopylae.

*

*

*

Once, back in Mamaroneck, Scott telephoned me to invite me to spend the night at his house. When I got my mother's permission, I ran upstairs, packed a bag, and raced to Scott's house on my bicycle only to find Scott standing in his kitchen, phone in hand, waiting for me to come back on the line.

That night at Scott's, after we were supposed to be asleep, Scott produced a couple of Playboy magazines. We marveled at the pictures of

women and contorted ourselves trying to see around the furniture or the robes or whatever the photographer had used, for that particular picture, to deny us what was most important –a glimpse of that region in which girls looked most different from boys. We giggled and laughed and talked about what we saw and what we didn't – quietly, we thought, so no one would hear us. But Scott's mother heard us and came in and found us in the midst of our pleasure. She called Scott out for a talking to.

I counted the moments and imagined what hell Scott was going through.

A few minutes later, he came back in.

What happened?

If Scott had been whipped with an alligator belt, he showed no signs of it. Scott described what had happened: his mother had told him that whatever he wanted to know about women, or about sex, he should simply ask and she would be happy to explain.

I was dumbfounded. Things worked quite differently at my house.

HEAD GAMES

My father was commuting to New York City by train every day, working at the Chemstrand Corporation, wearing business suits and ties. He bought a black 1957 T-bird convertible, and when the Kentucky Derby was run, he held a gambling party for business clients in our basement, complete with slot machines, roulette wheels, crap games and women in black net stockings to serve mint juleps.

He rarely spent time with David or me, and when he did, it was often to take us to a movie or to watch something special on television. Dad was the first one in town to buy a color TV, and though all the shows were still broadcast in black and white, he loved the station breaks when the NBC peacock fanned its colorful feathers. On the television set in my father's den, I watched the Lone Ranger and Roy Rogers. My favorite was watching King Kong break free from his chains and scale the Empire State Building.

Sometimes, when I'd kiss my mother goodnight before going to bed, my father would ask for a kiss for himself. As my face approached his, I could smell his aftershave, and I grimaced as my lips touched the sharp, bristling whiskers on his cheek.

One Sunday morning, my father and David and I walked on the sidewalk together after church. Very serious, my father announced how proud he was of us. Proud of how smart we were. Proud of how good we were. I was extremely embarrassed, but I remember the heady feelings it gave me.

My mother spoke frequently of the Biblical parable of the talents. It is woven into the nature of the world, she explained, that blessings are distributed differently. Some people – like Chickie – are born with few blessings and many burdens. Others, like me, are born with sharp minds and

many other blessings. God expects each person to make the best use of whatever talents he has been given. Each of us lives with that obligation – to make the most of his talents. My blessings being great, my obligations to God and to others were great.

I accepted this wisdom, just as I accepted everything my mother said. Whereas my father would lose his temper and rule the house by might, my mother was patient and merciful. One year she had decorated her Christmas tree with marshmallows in long strands of twisted cellophane and scores of little gingerbread men with candy eyes. Both marshmallows and gingerbread men were sectioned off with red ribbons holding them in place. By Christmas, many of the marshmallows and gingerbread men had mysteriously disappeared. My mother never asked us where they had gone.

On another occasion, Chris spilled a bottle of indelible ink on the carpet in my father's den – the one in front of the color television set. In a rage, Dad ordered Chris to his bedroom and began to lash him with the alligator belt. As I watched from the bedroom doorway, my mother pleaded with my father to stop; Chris, only three years old, was screaming with every lash; Dad kept saying he was going to keep on whipping him until he stopped crying. I stood in the doorway, feeling Chris's pain, thinking how foolish my father was, how good my mother.

*

*

*

I was not as strong or as fast as most boys and, having gotten used to domination by David, certainly not as aggressive. At school, I was the butt of teasing. Joey Ehret wore his brown hair up in big waves like Elvis Presley. Robert Reck wore his black hair greased back, hoodlum style. Chip Cathcart's was shaved close to his head. None of them understood that "flat top" haircuts like mine were all the rage in Texas. They made fun of my hair, playfully swiping a hand across the top of my head while calling, "*Slap your naked head!*" It began to bother me, but I couldn't get them to stop, so I just laughed at it, hoping it would go away. They must have sensed my fear and decided to take advantage of it; the slapping of my "naked head" became harder and more frequent. They would do it in succession, each taking several swipes, in turn. Chip developed a certain style for the slap and the words, and the others then mimicked his style until the precise form of doing it became ritualized. The first word of the incantation, "*Slap,*" was hollered out loud, timed to coincide with the sound of the hand as it slapped the head; there would be a pause, and then the other three words "yo'..." and "naked..." and "head," would follow slowly,

softly, with a kind of self-satisfied lilt to them, as the slapper smiled and gave me the eye. It was always done in precisely the same tone and rhythm, as if these fellows were in competition for the perfect recitation: “*Slap... yo’.... naked.... head....*”

One Sunday, when Chickie was at home for a visit, my father assigned me to walk to church with him. We were approaching the bridge over the creek, when I saw Joey Ehret and Robert Reck coming down the road, approaching the bridge from the opposite direction. My first thought was of having my head slapped; but my concern quickly turned to anxiety about how they might react to Chickie. On the narrow bridge, if we didn’t stray out into the middle of the road, we would pass each other within an arm’s length. They would surely hear Chickie talk, even if he only said a garbled “Hello” to them. What would I do? Could I afford to have Joey and Robert, already prone to tease me, see me with *Chickie*?

I turned to Chickie and instructed him: “Chickie, it’s against the law to talk on this bridge.”

“Huh?” he asked, puzzled, hobbling along in his stilted gait that seemed sure to attract attention.

“Shssh!” I scolded him. “Don’t say anything!”

Chickie didn’t say a word. We passed my classmates without incident – without even a head slap. Chickie was great that way. Except for the time he wouldn’t drink the paint, he always did exactly what I told him to do.

A very vivid memory: one afternoon, I climbed the stairs that led from our back yard up to the kitchen door. As I stood on the landing about to open the door, a large black bird flew down and landed on my white hair. Its talons gripped my head. It wasn’t just sitting there, I thought – it was trying to lift me up, or at least to crack my skull and ravage my brain. I screamed out, but no one answered the door. An eternity passed before the bird gave up whatever it’s object had been, and flapped away.

On Sundays, the nuns at Holy Trinity made us sit so tight and still that when we rose from the pews on their cue, I got light headed. I began to faint regularly, and when I did, I would have to be carried out of the church. Before long, fainting had become a standard part of church attendance, and I was allowed to stand at the back of the church so as not to cause a commotion. From there, standing with the late arrivals (who were often criticized from the pulpit) I could breathe fresh air from the doors when they opened, and could make a quick escape if I felt faint.

One day at school we were called upon to stand up and say the pledge of allegiance. I did so, respectful of the red bars and white stripes, but once

again, I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I jumped quickly back to my feet and put my hand back over my heart. As I looked around and realized that the pledge had already ended, my teacher yelled at me to stop fooling around and sit down. Always obedient in school, I did.

The frequency of my fainting concerned my parents. I fainted at church, and I fainted at the doctor's office. I fainted whenever I saw needles or blood. My mother took me to a specialist, who sat me in something resembling a dentist's chair, stuck electrodes on my head, and wired me up for an EEG. I felt like Frankenstein's monster. But as hard as they tried to determine the cause of my fainting, they found no clue.

My sister Corinne was not so fortunate as me. She was a sweet, round-faced seven-year old who had a tiny frame and looked no more than four or five. She had shown a talent for mimicry, duplicating the vocabulary, tone of voice and speech patterns of adults, older children, and characters she saw on television. But she'd been born with dyslexia and a learning disability. She was a contradiction – a child who seemed on the surface far older and more sophisticated than her baby face suggested, yet having difficulty learning to read and write.

It tore her up inside.

After Corinne repeated kindergarten and still wasn't ready for first grade, she began a series of expensive special programs. She saw one psychiatrist who theorized she had skipped a necessary stage of development – the crawling stage. According to him, Corinne's learning disability might be overcome if she could retrace her crawling years. At his direction, Corinne would spend hours tediously crawling back and forth across the living room carpet, one limb at a time, in an effort to rewire her brain. I saw no improvement.

Generally, as her older brother, I wanted nothing to do with her. I did, however, enjoy getting down and crawling along on the floor behind her, mimicking the sister who often mimicked me.

*

*

*

About this time, I discovered a connection between dreams and reality.

I had just woken up, frightened and upset, from that old monster dream, the one in which ape-like creatures were arriving by the dozens, overtaking our house, taking my family captive one by one. It was one of the many dreams from which, when I tried to run, I found myself unable to move at all, my legs bound in my sheets. I thought to myself, what could I do to escape from such a dream, the next time it happened?

It occurred to me that, if I could only remember to open and shut my eyes rapidly, this eyelid activity might wake me up. I focused intensely on the rapid opening and closing of my eyes – how could someone sleep, if they were doing that? – I practiced the motion, forcefully, repeatedly. I burned that strategy into my brain as best I could.

Sure enough, when the dream repeated some weeks later – when the monsters arrived and began to take captives – I found myself remembering the plan. I hurled myself out the back door of my house, where I would not need to move my legs, but could simply roll down the hill unhindered. One of the monsters caught me, but I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again, and shut them again, fluttering the lids as fast as I could – and found myself awake, and free.

I had chanced upon a powerful discovery. Delighted with my ingenuity, I used this trick repeatedly over the next few months, always with success. Soon, the nightmares went away. I never had to worry about the monster attack again! The monsters had apparently given up, deciding it made more sense to take over someone else's dreams.

T/HE SECRET ROOM

A large family gathering was planned for Thanksgiving Day. Bill Rogers, my father's high school buddy who had married my mother's sister, would be coming to dinner, with all his children. With seventeen people in her house for the day, of multiple generations and at least two religious persuasions, my mother needed the calming influence of her cigarettes.

My father sat at the head of the table, of course. But there was an awkward moment when it came time to bless the food. Which form of grace would be said – Catholic or Presbyterian? Hungry as we were, two long graces were said.

When we'd finished eating, we descended to our grand recreational basement, leaving the adults upstairs for their coffee and cigarettes. I couldn't wait to show my cousins the "secret room" above the plumbing closet.

The plumbing closet was a confined space just large enough for a child. It housed the main water and gas pipes for the home, with valves that could interrupt the flow of water and gas to the boiler in the next room. To an adult's unknowing eye, the pipes made the plumbing closet impassible. But the closet had no ceiling. Upon opening the short door, squeezing inside, reaching up and hoisting himself through the hole where the closet's ceiling should have been, a child found himself in the corner of a large, empty space.

Since the room was pitch black, one needed a flashlight to see. David and I had used one to inspect the area: the room was perhaps eight by fourteen feet of dirt floor, cluttered with cardboard, old paint cans, and

small pieces of wood. The ceiling was only about three or four feet off this dirt floor. There were no windows. The walls were bare concrete block.

The lack of flooring or insulation caused the room to be mildewed and damp. In our first exploration, the flashlight had revealed numerous spider webs stretched between ceiling and floor, and several large slugs crawling across the concrete walls, leaving trails of slime to record their paths. But these features, which would have made the room unbearable to an adult of normal tolerance, were precisely what made the room perfect for us. This was a room where adults would never come – indeed, *could not* come, due to the tiny entrance through the plumbing closet. It was ours alone, a room where we were free to do anything we pleased!

So on that Thanksgiving day, having already pushed most of the floor debris into the corners, or flattened it, and having mounted a few of the paint cans and blocks of wood in sturdier positions – so a child could sit on them and keep better track of whether a spider or slug was nearing his knee or thigh – and having furnished the room with a few candles and a box of matches to improve the lighting – I invited my cousins in to see for themselves the wonders of our secret room. One by one, each of us bent down, wedged himself into the plumbing closet, lifted his hands, and hoisted himself into the dark room. There were all five of the Rogers: Robin and Logan and Loren and Peter and little Billy. There was me, and there was Chickie, and there was my little brother Chris. Eight of us gathered in the black empty space.

Inside, we lit a candle, whispering, giggling, then lit another. Robin, who was twelve, produced a cigarette and lit it, taking a puff, talking about blowing smoke rings. She passed it to Logan, who also took a puff and tried to blow a smoke ring. He passed it to me. I took a drag, inhaling deeply and coughing wildly, immediately dizzy and sick. I gave the cigarette back to Logan, who puffed again and gave it back to Robin.

Then we heard Corinne calling to us from the basement outside the plumbing closet, knocking on the closet door.

“What are you doing in there?” she asked. “Who’s in there?”

Corinne had not known of the “secret room,” and I was not interested in sharing its existence with her.

“Go away,” I said. “Close the door. And whatever you do, don’t open it again.”

“But what’s going on?” she began to whine.

“Go away, I said! Don’t open that door!”

We listened. We could hear Corinne shut the door completely. We could hear the latch on the outside of the door drop into place. Corinne sulked away, obedient.

We need more light,” said Logan. “Let’s start a fire.”

He gathered a few pieces of cardboard and lit one. Loren and Peter gave him pieces of wood to add. Within a minute, Logan had a flame large enough we could see each other in its light. But then, almost immediately, the fire moved from the little pile Logan had assembled and was crawling across the floor. Robin said “Logan, put it out!” but as Logan shoveled dirt with his hands, he also threw on more cardboard and wood, and as children began to scramble away from the fire, their knees and feet dislodged the rubbish on the floor, providing air and fuel.

“Corinne!” I screamed as loud as I could. “Come open the door!”

I could not hear her. Panic began to overcome us as we pushed toward the corner over the plumbing closet. But the door to the closet was now latched from the outside, and couldn’t be opened from within. The secret room had become a concrete oven. Would Corinne, so recently told to leave, still be nearby? So recently told *not* to open the closet door, would she do so now, on command?

“Corinne! Open the door!”

The flames of the fire were up to the ceiling when I heard Corinne’s voice at last, still asking us, “What are you doing in there?”

The plumbing closet was only large enough to hold one child’s body at a time. Children pushed and children complained about pushing.

“Get off me!”

“Stop that!”

“Move! Let us out!”

And I heard Corinne, repeating while no one answered her, “What are you doing in there?”

The flames filled one end of the secret room from wall to wall, and within seconds, the flames were filling the middle of the room as well. We were all coughing. Robin, the oldest, was negotiating with Corinne across the latched closet door. Suddenly, I heard a shout of relief and saw a slim shaft of light as the door apparently opened.

Chickie’s Down Syndrome rendered his speech unintelligible, his coordination poor, and his movement slow – but it had not deprived him of his instinct for self-preservation. As slowly as one of the slugs on the wall, he maneuvered himself into the plumbing closet ahead of me. I looked back to see who was still in the room. I could see only Chris, age three, with the

fire now right behind him. I dropped into the plumbing closet, pushing Chickie out through the pipes with my feet, pulling Chris out of the flames and into the closet above my head.

Chris still in my hands, I turned to see my father coming down the basement stairs.

“What the hell have you kids done now?!” he was screaming. Corinne had already told the adults about the fire, and could be heard in the distance now, asking “What the hell have those kids done now?” One of the adults had already called the fire department, using that clicking, rotating wheel of the dial telephone, seven times.

“Is everyone out of there?” my father demanded.

“Is everyone out of there?” Corinne wanted to know too.

“Yes,” I said.

My father ordered us upstairs for a head count. Corinne could be heard, scurrying about: “Oh, boy, are you guys going to be in trouble....”

Upstairs, the adults were more panicked than the children had been. Everyone was simultaneously counting. Five, six, seven, Where’s Billy? ... Three, four.... Was that David or Joey? ... Six, seven eight,..... Mary Anna, did you find Loren?

Then came the men in black and orange overcoats, dragging a black rubber hose through our front door to the back of the house, around a corner by the kitchen and half way down the basement stairs. One of them said, “It’s not long enough... It’s too far... Where is the fire again?” Nancy was upstairs telling the adults, “Put that silver away! Right now, heah me, put that silver away! De firemen’ll rob us! I know they will... Watch ‘em good, now...” and then I heard one fireman say “Get those drapes down!” and another man in orange and black started tearing the drapes off the big bay window in the living room in front of the house, and I heard my mother scream, “My God! Look – the neighbors!”

Now we could see a crowd of people out on our front lawn, looking directly into the living room and the dining room where the pecan pie and the coffee and my parents’ china still lay in a mess on the holiday table, and then I heard a fireman ask, “You mean the fire is right next to the gas boiler!?” and after some quick words between the fire crew and my father, I heard, “Everyone outside!” and my mother saying “But I’ve got to clean up – look, the neighbors are watching!”

We all went outside. Once the counting was done, it was easy to see that no one had been killed. We gathered on the lawn among the neighbors, light snow falling around us all. We watched sadly as the firemen took

sledge hammers and pick axes to the “secret room,” breaking a hole directly into the concrete oven (which was, after all, only the inside of our front porch). Men in orange and black put a big black hose into the hole in the concrete, dousing the flames. Our neighbors whispered behind our backs and asked our parents if everything was all right. The Catholics and Presbyterians wondered which side of the family was responsible.

An hour or so later, the firemen gone, the neighbors gone, the Rogers cousins gone, my father said, “David. Joey. Go into your rooms and take off your pants. And your underpants, too!”

“Why?!!” David asked. “I didn’t do it. I was in my room the whole time. I was doing my homework!”

It was true: David didn’t even know we had been in the secret room.

My father’s response was born of parental wisdom and, I suspect, an excess of holiday spirits. Or maybe it was his understanding of original sin.

“If you had known they were there, you’d have been right there with them! Into your room, and take off your pants!”

Back in our room, David did as instructed – he stripped naked. I took a chance and left my underwear on. Sure enough, by the time Dad had fetched his alligator belt he’d forgotten the details of his orders. He kept telling us how bad we had been and how thankful we should be to be alive. David got his bare bottom ripped up pretty well; I got hurt much less on account of my extra padding. I think David held it against me that I’d gotten away with wearing underwear – even more than he resented Dad for the whipping itself.

I remember playing in the snow that winter, in our front yard. We made tunnels and igloos in the deep snow. We built white snowmen with long carrot noses. For some reason the big hole in our front porch couldn’t be repaired until springtime, so a piece of plywood covered the hole, with loose concrete blocks supporting it. I was tempted to remove the plywood, to climb through the hole in the concrete and explore the charred room. Before the fire, we hadn’t realized that our “secret room” was in fact our front porch; now that there was a new entrance to our house, I was intrigued by the new perspective. But our parents’ orders were clear – never were we to enter the secret room again.

Looking at the plywood patch on the front porch, clearly visible from the road by everyone who drove past our house, it was clear, anyway, that the “secret room” would never be secret again. And with that, much of its allure was lost.

THE BIG HOUSE

In the fall of 1960, David and I began to attend the Whitby School in Stamford, Connecticut. David and I took the train to get there: each morning, our father would board the train in one direction – toward New York City – and we would board one in the opposite direction, toward Stamford.

Our teacher at Whitby was a swarthy Polish man with a round face and sparkling eyes who touched us with big, fleshy hands that had hair growing out of the knuckles. He was not there to teach us to be creative, he said, for we were already creative by nature. His job was only to help us make this discovery about ourselves, and to nurture that creativity. His name was Paul Czaja, and he would be my mentor for the next four years.

He had us roll up pieces of paper like telescopes and spend ten minutes looking through them, just anywhere, inspecting – “just to look at the world through a different perspective.” He cut photographs out of Life Magazine and asked us to write poems about them. He loved words, and when we saw his love for words, we quickly agreed to keep a dictionary always at our sides, and to look up every new word we encountered, as he did.

He gave us a book by a man named Trachtenberg. During a long term in prison, Trachtenberg had devised a system for doing math problems in his head. We learned the Trachtenberg system and dazzled our parents with our abilities.

In April, we heard the Russians had shot a man into space in a rocket. America was ashamed at this evidence of Russian superiority. On May 5, we listened intensely to the news from Cape Canaveral as Alan Shepard was launched into space. His rocket went up a hundred miles before it fell back into the Atlantic Ocean. He hadn’t orbited the earth, but at least America had a man in space.

We spent the summer waterskiing on Long Island Sound in a thirteen-foot Boston Whaler, sometimes dropping our bathing suits to our ankles, once or twice having so much fun we ran out of gas and had to row the boat back to shore. In August, the newspapers showed pictures of a wall the communists were building to keep people from leaving East Berlin, complete with barbed wire and guard towers.

At Whitby, I fell in love with Susan Skakel. I didn't dare speak to her, of course; I only pined for her from afar. Delighted just to be in the same room with her, I longed for those moments when I thought that – possibly – she had looked at me, or had noticed something I had done.

In my dreams, I would be flying overhead, the envy of everyone who couldn't fly. I would spot Susan on the ground and fly down to the ground near her. As I got close, I would realize we were both naked. Ecstasy but a moment away, all I had to do was embrace her and tell her I loved her and bliss would be mine. But there, on the edge of heaven, I would be unable to move. I would strain my legs to walk, but could go nowhere. I would wake up to find my legs tangled in the bedcovers again.

*

*

*

My father had gotten a new job as Vice President of Marketing at the Allied Chemical Corporation. It had been a big step up for him, and he had begun to work even longer hours. In the spring of 1962, he bought a magnificent Tudor house, seven thousand square feet built on two acres on a little island between Long Island Sound and a small lake in Greenhaven. A single, private road crossed a little bridge and serviced the ten houses on the island. Our house was four stories of solid brown beams with spaces of white stucco in between.

The entrance hall had a stone floor. On the right, a balcony overlooked a two-story living room. Ahead was a wood-paneled library. To the left was a dining room, a butler's pantry, a kitchen, a breakfast room, and two bedrooms and a bath – “the servants' quarters.” In the kitchen was a mechanical intercom with remote connections throughout the house, so the owner and family could summon servants from the kitchen to whatever room they were in. When a person pressed a button on the receptacle in any room in the house, a buzzer sounded in the kitchen, and a little white card dropped into a metal viewing box – with the name of whichever room had signaled, inscribed on the card.

On the second floor were eight more rooms, a porch that overlooked the back yard, and a laundry chute into which one could place clothes or

other items, limited only by a young boy's imagination. Things dropped would fall past the first floor and into a pile of laundry in the basement.

In the middle of the second-floor hallway, a narrow door opened onto yet another stairway, which led steeply up to the third floor. David and I were delighted to learn that the whole third floor – a hallway, a bathroom, and two adjoining bedrooms – was to be ours! A “tower” fit for princes!

In the weeks before we moved into the new house, we sometimes lit firecrackers; one of us dropped them out of our third floor window while the other stood below, fighting back with a hose. Other times, we took off our clothes and ran through the house naked.

In September, I accompanied my parents as they took David to the Canterbury School, a boys' prep school in Connecticut. Families wandered among gray stone dormitories, middle-aged men in business suits, wives in heels, often a daughter in a Sunday dress, sometimes a younger brother with a white shirt hanging out, but always at least one young boy in a blue blazer with gold buttons and khaki slacks following tentatively, waiting to be left to fend for himself at school. We were one of those families, and we left David there with the other lost boys.

Now I had the third floor of our big house all to myself.

In my tower, on the big cabinet television set, I watched the news. Freedom marches met by angry mobs. Throwing of rocks. Susan Skakel's uncle, Bobby Kennedy, sending in armed federal marshals to restore order. On October 22, I watched an emergency broadcast. Aerial surveillance had confirmed the presence of Russian nuclear missiles on Cuba. The missiles had been recently deployed, and they were aimed directly at the United States. The President demanded the immediate removal of the missiles from the island. He also announced that if there were any attacks from Cuba against the United States, he would regard the attacks as sponsored by Russia and would order retaliatory nuclear attacks against the Russians.

For a week, Russian and American ships faced off in the waters around Cuba. Like the rest of the nation, I wondered if nuclear war was about to start. Finally, the President appeared on television again, announcing that Khrushchev had agreed to remove the missiles.

My mother kept reminding me of the parable of the talents. I imagined myself in the shoes of the President, with the fate of the world depending on him. I saw him as the bravest of all soldiers.

My father took me to see *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which Gregory Peck defends a Negro who faces a bogus charge of raping a white woman. I read the book, *Black Like Me*, written by Ralph Ellison, a white man who'd

injected pigments into his skin and traveled south, experiencing episodes of bigotry to better empathize with the Negro's plight. Meanwhile, Susan Skakel's brother, George, invited me to spend Halloween night at their house.

I had heard the Skakel house was even bigger than ours, and it was. A labyrinth of hallways and stairways, as I explored its vast expanse of hallways and stairs, I kept a constant eye out for Susan. But the house was simply too big. I couldn't find her in it.

That night, George and I went out "trick or treating," but my thoughts were all on Susan. The next morning I got a glimpse of her, still in her nightgown as she jumped on her father's bed – laughing, blond braids flying in the cool morning sunlight – it would become the stuff of my dreams for months to come. But, of course, I was too shy to speak to her.

Then George's father showed us the Avanti sports car he had brought home with him. Six prototypes existed so far, and the car in front of us was one of them. Did we want to ride to church with him? Of course we did. Several of us piled in together, and my heart jumped when Susan sat in my lap. Her touch so exhilarated me I hardly cared about the martini Mr. Skakel drank on the drive to church at a hundred miles an hour on Winding Lane.

In December, 1962, all the Carvin family came to our new house. Pop Pop entertained us all with his stories, and at his request, Nancy described the old slave plantation in Pineville, Georgia where she was born. She talked of learning to make corn bread and sweet rolls. She sang "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" into a new tape recorder someone got as a present.

At Mr. Czaja's suggestion, I read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.

THE MONKEY'S CAGE

One day in March, 1963, a Railway Express truck pulled up at our house. The driver delivered a wooden crate, wrapped very loosely in ripped brown paper. I tore the brown wrapping a little and found a furry creature inside. *Could it be?* My heart pounded as I tore open the remaining paper. *Yes!* After years of watching *Cheetah* and *King Kong*, after years of reading *Curious George*, I had a monkey of my own! Except for his long tail, he was no larger than a squirrel. I passed my fingers between the wood slats of the crate to touch him. He lurched back inside the crate and bared his sharp teeth at me, hissing.

The crate was barely large enough for him to spread out in, and not nearly large enough for his tail. It was filled with feces. He peed into the newspaper that lined its bottom. The whole thing reeked of dried urine and feces.

Nancy was staying with us, as our parents were away. She wondered aloud “how long the poor creature been stuck up in that mizbl box, comin’ all the way from who knows where....” She cautioned that if I opened the crate immediately, the monkey would likely escape. I would need a permanent home for him, she said, before I could let him out. So I sat and studied him from the outside, unable to touch him, and thought about a name. Mr. Czaja had taught me that my own name, Joseph, is *Giuseppe* in Italian, and has the nickname *Pepe*. I decided to call him *Pepino*, or “Little Joey.”

I searched the house for something with which to construct a home larger than the shipping crate. I found nothing. I resigned myself to watching Pepino sit inside his wooden cage, hissing whenever I tried to touch him. I pressed pieces of banana into the crate, but he ignored them.

Within a few days, my parents returned home from Florida, explaining they had shipped Pepino by train from a roadside stand in Miami. My mother convinced the milkman to leave a few broken milk crates for me, so

I could build a larger cage. I clawed the boards of the crates apart and nailed them back together into a somewhat larger box. The new structure finished, I brought the crate with Pepino still inside into the basement and loosened one of the thin boards at one end with a hammer.

The board loosened, Pepino thrust himself against it and popped out like a Jack-in-the-Box. I jumped back. Pepino hissed and bared his teeth at me, then ran up a stack of firewood in the corner and disappeared behind the boilers.

Once that unexpected instant had passed, my excitement turned to concern. How could I get him back? The basement of this house was larger by far than the basement in Mamaroneck. There was a central room with our Ping-Pong table, two gas-fired boilers, a washer and dryer, and several stacks of quartered logs for the house's seven fireplaces. On the south side were a bathroom, a laundry area, and a large walk-in food pantry with shelves from ceiling to floor. Down a hallway toward the north side there were two more rooms and a changing area and a shower, with a door that led out toward the beach. There was no ceiling – the joists between the basement and the ground floor were open, forming long channels between the twelve-inch boards where a monkey could hide forever.

I searched, but could find him nowhere. Concern turned to worry, and worry to despair. Then I spotted him in the empty spaces between the joists. But he bared his teeth and hissed when I approached, and ran back into the deep ceiling channels.

Pepino hid in these spaces for weeks. I would spot him only occasionally. I left bananas out for him, but he never ate any of them. Several times, I took a large laundry bag into the basement with me, intent on trapping him in it. But any time I came even close to him, he would hiss and scare me off so he could escape again.

*

*

*

Meanwhile, my Carvin grandparents back from Florida, Nancy was recalled to the Jersey Shore. To take her place, my parents hired a new live-in housekeeper, a dark-skinned woman named Lee, whom my mother called a “mulatto.” Lee quickly won my heart by expressing delight in Pepino.

“Why, I used to have monkeys myself,” she exclaimed. “I can tell you everything you’ll ever need to know about monkeys. What have you been feeding that poor thing? Bananas? Oh my goodness! Give him some lettuce, and some carrots, and some hamburger...”

“That’s a squirrel monkey, I believe. He’s not from Africa, he’s from South America...”

“I had spider monkeys. In fact, I have a monkey cage in the attic of my house. My monkeys were bigger than Pepino, and the cage I have is very large. It would be wonderful for Pepino! I’ll have to bring it back with me the next time I go home”

One day, when I got home from school, I was delighted to learn that Lee had caught Pepino in the laundry bag. He had bitten her, she said, but it was nothing serious. She had put him into the second servant’s room off the kitchen -- the one right next to Lee’s own room, in fact – and had urged my mother to let him stay there.

“He needs the light from the window,” she had said. “In the basement, he’ll get no light; he’ll die of rickets. Not only that, he needs the room to move – he can’t be cramped up in a little wooden box again. He should stay in the room next to me at least until I can bring my old cage.”

To my delight, my mother agreed. Pepino would have his own room, right next to Lee’s! We removed the furniture from the room and covered the floor of it with newspapers.

Now, I could visit him easily. *Pepino’s* room. Whenever I entered, Pepino would be on the far side of the room, away from the door, so there was no fear of his getting out. His favorite spot was on the curtain rod above the window. Sometimes he would pace back and forth for as long as I was willing to watch. Occasionally, he would sit still, scratching or grooming himself. From the messes he left around the room, I knew that he utilized all of it when I wasn’t around. But whenever I was in the room, he would sit on the curtain rod out of my reach. As I watched him, he would sometimes have a bowel movement, letting his feces drop past the window to the floor, using his finger to loosen the final hanging matter. He’d flip his finger down toward the floor, shaking the mess off it.

I could sense that Pepino didn’t want me to come close and I respected his wishes. But one day, my Uncle Joe – my father’s brother – came to the house and went in to see Pepino. Noticing my timidity, he said he would get the monkey down from the window. He stood on a stepladder and as he reached out, a hissing Pepino struck like a rattlesnake, biting Uncle Joe’s finger, drawing blood. My uncle gave up trying to get him down.

I spoke to Pepino gently for hours. I didn’t mind the smell of urine and feces coming from the newspapers on the floor. Eventually, he seemed a little calmer in my presence. Bit by bit, I was able to get closer to him. At

long last, he took a piece of apple from my hand without hissing at me. Soon, he was taking carrots and pieces of lettuce and hamburger.

Soon I could stroke Pepino's furry back briefly without him nipping at me. Lee bought a cat collar and a leather leash for him, which she presented to me as a gift, stressing that I'd have to be sure it was tight. Sensitive, perhaps, from experience with my father's alligator belt, I asked Lee if the leash or collar would hurt my little namesake. Pepino would make sure they didn't, Lee assured me. And he would much prefer to be outside on a leash than confined to his room indoors, she said. With the collar in hand, I began to stroke Pepino more and more, waiting until I could slide the collar around his neck. That done, I'd be able to take him safely outside; I wished I could get him to understand as much.

One day in late April, my mother informed me that Lee had been fired. I asked why. I was told only that she had been impertinent – and that she would never hire a “mulatto” again.

After more gentle stroking, I was able to coil the collar around Pepino's neck. I cinched it up snugly, as Lee had suggested. I waited a couple of days while he got used to it. Then I attached the leather leash and led him outside. He seemed to enjoy the fresh air, discovering acorns and pinecones and dandelions, examining each like a curious child. So we walked down to the little beach on the Sound. Pepino jumped sprightly onto the sand. I sat on the seat of a swing, holding the leash, as several children, *oo*-ing and *ah*-ing, came over to see Pepino up close.

When a big dog from nowhere lunged at Pepino, he was out of his collar and climbing a tree. I called out to him, but he was already free, going higher and faster in the spaces between the branches. Within a minute, I had no idea where he was.

I walked around the neighborhood for hours, looking up into the treetops, calling out to him, but as the sky grew dark, I realized he might as well have been back in the jungle as across the street from my house. He was just a monkey, but he knew he had a better life in the trees than in the servants' quarters of a Tudor home.

I went up to my own room and sulked. Late that night I cried myself to sleep. The collar and the leash had failed me. My dreams of having a true friend, one who would be everything for me that Cheetah was to Tarzan, had come to a sudden end.

The next morning, I resolved to capture him. I found a cardboard box, a banana, and a stick. I put the banana on the ground, peeling it back so that Pepino could smell it and see how good it looked, white and firm. I propped

the cardboard box up on the end of the stick, above the banana, hoping that if Pepino tried to get the banana, he'd trip the stick and the cardboard box would fall and catch him.

Trying to remain out of sight, I checked the box regularly. But Pepino showed no interest at all in my trap.

The next day, I was walking down Shore Road, looking up into the treetops, when I caught a glimpse of Pepino jumping from one branch to another. Looking up into the sun, I tried to follow him through the leaves, but I couldn't. We were on a little island, accessible by a single road over a bridge through the marshes. There were plenty of trees on the island, but none around it. It seemed our island's isolation was keeping Pepino close by. But as much as I looked, I could not spot him again.

That night, there was a heavy rain. The next day, I noticed that the cardboard box had not only fallen, but was so ruined by the rain it wouldn't support itself on the stick. The banana was brown and soggy. The trap was a silly idea, I realized. I resigned myself to the fact that Pepino would never return.

The next day, I answered our doorbell to find six year old Danny Walden standing on our front porch with the dilapidated cardboard box in his arms. Sitting inside the box, making no effort to escape, was Pepino!

"What happened?!" I asked with glee, accepting the box and its adventurous passenger. "How in the world did you catch him?"

"The box was just sitting on the ground," said Danny. "Pepino was just sitting in it, waiting."

My joy at having Pepino back was compounded by my conviction that he had *intentionally* come back – that he saw me as his friend, his food supplier, his protector. I quickly prepared his old room and brought him a plate full of lettuce and fruit to reward him for his good judgment. He showed no interest in the food. I stroked his back and his head, up and down; he seemed to enjoy my touch.

For the next few days, Pepino didn't move very much, and I sat with him for hours, stroking him, believing that a few days of freedom in the tree tops, having to find his own food and his own shelter from the rain, had not been the paradise Pepino might have imagined. Then one day he was down on his side, unable to sit up. The next day his joints were stiff and his body was trembling. I wrapped him in a blanket and my mother drove us to the veterinarian, where we left him. The next day, the vet reported that Pepino was dead.

I cried again. I asked about getting Pepino's body back for burial, but

the vet said I could not, that he had performed an autopsy, and he was sending Pepino's brain to Albany for examination. The day after that, the news came back from Albany – Pepino had died of rabies.

I'd seen dogs with rabies – Atticus Finch had shot one in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*.

"But I thought rabies made animals crazy," I protested.

The vet asserted that just as rabies could make a tame animal wild, it could make a wild animal tame. But in either case, he said, death from rabies is a horrible thing. Irritability is followed by terror. A difficulty in breathing and swallowing leads to random contractions of the diaphragm and throat, causing the victim to feel he's being strangled. Within days, death always follows.

It was terrifying to learn of the fate that might await Lee and my Uncle Joe, both of whom had been bitten by Pepino. Then I learned how contagious rabies is. A drop of Pepino's saliva getting in a minor cut, or even a hangnail, could have infected any of us. How much contact had I had with him? I had been feeding him, I had been petting him, I had been cleaning up his feces. I, too, might have been infected.

The rabies virus is dormant for three weeks or more before it begins to show symptoms; once symptoms appear, it's too late. The rabies antidote requires a series of sixteen injections during the dormant period. I had to get rabies shots myself, beginning immediately, or I might not escape death by strangulation.

My parents called Lee's number to alert her to the emergency, but there was no answer. A friend said she had left town and didn't know where she had gone. So while the police began a manhunt for Lee, I went to the doctor for shots.

My fear of blood and needles had always caused me to faint at the sight of them. Just being in a doctor's office made me anxious and dizzy. If I fainted from a standing position I could hurt myself, so it was decided I'd better take the shots lying down. I rolled over onto my stomach, expecting injections in my buttocks, only to be told that the series of sixteen shots would be delivered with an extra large needle into my stomach, while I lay on my back. For two weeks, I had daily injections and nightly dreams about needles and witches and monsters. I used the reliable "eye-flutter" often.

Fortunately, the State police found Lee, and the regimen of shots for me and Lee and my Uncle Joe was successful all around. In the end, the episode of Pepino ended tolerably well. All of us save Pepino himself had escaped with our lives.

THE BATHROOM DOOR

As the end of the school year approached, I heard that Susan Skakel would not be returning to Whitby in the fall. I longed for the nerve to tell Susan how I felt about her.

The last day of the school year I was playing outfield in a softball game. The ball was slugged far over my head. As I ran back to retrieve it, I saw Susan (who was playing field hockey in the adjoining field) pick up the ball to throw it to me. I shouted, "No!" She apologized meekly and put the ball down.

As I picked up the ball and hurled it to the infield, I wondered at my stupidity. After two years of pining for her, dreaming about her blond body nearly every night, the only thing I had *ever* said to her was "No!" – and I had done that angrily. Why hadn't I said "Thank you?" Why hadn't I had the nerve at least to smile at her, send her some kind of message?

But that wasn't the worst of it. At the end of the day, Susan's older sister Kik came up to me.

"You know something, Joey?"

"What?" I said.

"Susan's in love with you."

What fortune! I had told no one how I felt about Susan, and yet, having survived death by strangulation, I now had Susan's sister bringing a message of love! There could be no risk, now, in going to Susan and telling her I felt the same about her. And if I couldn't muster the nerve to do that, all I had to do was tell her sister how I felt about her.

"Yeah? Well, I don't like her," I said.

That was it. My total lack of nerve was well apparent.

Kik left.

I was left to my misery.

*

*

*

Sydney Wragge, the fashion tycoon, lived across the lake behind our house, and my brother David had designs on his eldest daughter, Ellen. One day that summer, David asked me if I would go out on the Boston Whaler with Ellen and him. I knew what that meant. He had talked of the boat as a perfect place for making out. But now he was talking about water skiing, reciting the fact that we had to have three people to ski – one to ski, one to drive, and one to watch the skier. There was no disputing the three-person rule, but I wasn't buying it. David wanted Ellen on that boat for only one reason. And Ellen also knew what was on David's mind, because she was insisting that I come along.

Whatever the reason, I wasn't going to have any of it.

"Yes, *you are*," David insisted.

"No, I am not."

That was the extent of our conversation before he came after me, intent on prevailing with physical power, capturing me for forced labor. So I ran.

He chased me up the stairs to the second floor, and then to the third floor tower, where I managed to get into the bathroom and slam the wooden door with just enough time to turn the old skeleton key in the keyhole, locking David out and me in. I looked in the mirror, where I'd lately seen pimples emerge. I'd been experimenting with ways to block their escape, to squeeze them out, or to cover them up. Of course, nothing had worked. The more I'd fought to clean up the pimples on my face, the more I'd broken out. Whatever it was in the whiteheads, it seemed intent on coming out.

Meanwhile, David seemed intent on coming in. He demanded I open the door. I refused. He banged on the door, arguing I should go on the boat with Ellen and him. When arguing failed, he threatened, his threats backed up with increasing pounding of the door, first with his fists, then with kicking feet.

The noise made me laugh at him, but my laughing only raised his ire. The bottom panel of the wooden door split at his kick, and another kick sent the point of his shoe into a crack in the wood. A splinter popped loose on my side and dropped to the floor. Now he was going to get into trouble, I said. He replied that it was I who was in trouble, and he kept kicking, the splinters falling onto the floor. When I could see his full shoe at each successive kick, I turned and looked at the window. It led out to a flat section of the roof, but there was no way I could get onto the roof without him being able to follow, and I knew the roof was no place for a wrestling match. I spotted the biggest, heaviest object in the bathroom – a green, wicker hamper full of dirty clothes – and rejected it as a possible weapon.

A minute later, after more kicking and rattling, the hole in the door was nearly two feet wide. I could see David's hands removing splinters, and (briefly) his angry eyes in the hole, looking in at me, anxious to inflict pain.

"I'm coming in there and I'm going to beat the crap out of you. Then we're going to go out on that boat!" he said.

I looked back at the green wicker clothes hamper. I lifted it over my head.

"If you come in, I'm going to smash you over the head with this clothes hamper," I said.

"Go ahead and try." My threat wasn't slowing him down.

"I mean it!" I said.

"I won't even feel it," he said. "It's only made of straw."

He was right. "But it has a wooden bottom, and wooden feet."

He stuck his head and one shoulder through the hole in the door. I looked at the wooden feet. If I made certain to bring the hamper down on his head just as hard as I could – and made certain that its wooden bottom was the point of contact – I could probably knock him out.

But if I tried to do that, I might really hurt him.

I put the hamper down. Soon he was all the way through the door, and I was on the bathroom floor protecting myself as best as I could from his headlock, his knuckle noogies, and the grinding of his fist into my ears and nose. I knew I could not escape until he had satisfied himself.

*

*

*

I dreamed I was on the back patio of our old house in Mamaroneck. David was picking on me. Unable to fight him off, I fell back on my wits. I told him that if I wanted to, I could make him disappear.

"Baloney," he said.

"Yes, I'm sure," I said. "This is just my dream. If I bat my eyes fast, we'll both disappear, and I'll wake up. But if I do it, you won't realize I've done it."

"Forget it," he said. "You're crazy."

And so I opened and shut my eyes rapidly, violently, and David and the dream disappeared.

*

*

*

I spent the summer after graduation from Whitby in Texas with my cousin Logan. We flew to Wee Ranch reminiscing about cowboy boots, dear skulls, and firecrackers on the 4th of July. But much had changed in six

years. Now Logan was 15; I was nearly 14. On the plane to San Antonio, he talked about his girlfriend in Connecticut, and how much he missed her already. Did I have a girlfriend? No, I didn't. Logan was disappointed.

After being met by Mimi and Danny at the airport, we stopped at a gas station. While Danny paid for the gas, Logan pointed out the condom machine in the dingy rest room and challenged me to buy one. No one would know if I did, he said. Didn't I care about such things? Didn't I want to be ready? I bought a box and stuffed it into my jeans pocket, where I was conscious of it the whole trip to Wee Ranch.

On arriving at Yawl's, my first order of business was to open the box to find out what I had bought. There were three latex condoms inside, individually wrapped. I opened one inner package and removed a rolled white ring, a collar that seemed ill suited for its purpose. Unsure of myself, I returned everything to the box and hid it among my clothes.

Logan and I ran to the tree house in search of George, the Mexican. We found the tree house empty. George had quit in anger, we were told, when Danny had insisted on keeping his weekly wages for safekeeping. It had been for George's own good, Danny said; if he'd let George have his wages, he'd have spend it all on drunken binges. But George had not understood that, Danny said; he had wanted his money in his own pocket.

On Sunday, when Mimi and Danny took Logan to church at the First Presbyterian Church of Kerrville, they dropped me off first at the Catholic Church, where the mass was said in Spanish. I sat alone amid families of dark-skinned people, the men and boys in short sleeve shirts with open collars, the women and girls in white or yellow cotton dresses. Everyone smiled and spoke to each other with familiarity. Women had their breasts out nursing babies. No one ever smiled or spoke to me. I could hear no one at all speak English. I understood nothing.

Danny, meanwhile, was on a mission to teach us his work ethic. Logan and I were to make twenty-five cents per hour and Danny would keep our money too, giving it to our parents at summer's end. He handed us paintbrushes and cans of white paint, and pointed us toward the wooden post-and-rail fence that ran around the pastures. Day after day, Logan and I stood in the Texas sun, the sheep keeping their distance as we painted their fence white. Knee deep in stickers and weeds, we slapped paint around the posts, over and under the dry and splintery rails, into the cracks and crevices where the rails and posts joined. Occasionally we painted grasshoppers who tried to hide inside the joints.

To protect ourselves from the scorpions that scurried across our bedroom floor at night, we made sure our bedcovers didn't touch the ground. Each morning, we were roused before dawn by the sound of Danny's tractor, chugging and sputtering up the road from the main house. Trying to get a few last moments of sleep, we'd keep our eyes shut as he turned off the tractor engine and shout into our open window, "*Wake up! The Indians are coming! The Indians are coming!*" We'd be walking with the tractor toward the garage and the paint cans within five minutes. Danny believed in working for at least an hour before breakfast.

At breakfast, Mimi would read a psalm and one other Bible verse, and then we'd eat while Mimi commented on the day's headlines. Then Logan went into town to attend summer school.

Danny had me work other jobs, most of which involved moving large rocks from one place to another. He'd have me dig up the rocks in one area so he could plant vegetables. Then I'd load the same rocks into a wheelbarrow and haul them over to another area, which needed a stone wall built. Then I'd build the wall. Then, when the wall had been built, I'd haul the stones that were left to the trailer, and load them onto the back of the trailer, so Danny could take them somewhere else. Always, no matter how many rocks I moved, there were other rocks waiting their turn.

"Sure it's hot," Danny would tell me. "But you know what they say – idle hands do the work of the devil. Hard work is good for you! It'll make a man of you!"

When Logan got back from school, I'd stop pushing rocks and we'd eat lunch. Back at the house, we'd pray again, listen to Paul Harvey's commentaries, and take a long break, as the midday sun was simply too hot for work.

Mimi and Danny wanted midday to be a time for rest. But for Logan and me, midday was ranch exploration time. We drove Danny's Jeep across the ranch, finding vultures picking carcasses clean. Sometimes we shot snakes or squirrels or jack rabbits with Danny's .22, or went skinny-dipping in the swimming hole.

In the late afternoons, when the heat became tolerable, we painted the fence again. Danny would check on our progress from time to time, cupping cigarettes in his palm, trying to hide them from us. We noticed him sometimes pulling a pint bottle of whiskey from his pocket, knowing that if Mimi learned he was smoking or drinking, she would scold him badly. We stopped work about six, washed up, and always said grace before dinner. In the evenings, after dinner, we played dominoes with Mimi.

One night after dominoes, Logan convinced me to sneak out of Yawl's after dark and accompany him to Camp Kickapoo – a girl's camp next to Wee Ranch. There was no moon that night, and as we set out in the direction of the camp, we found ourselves in a marsh with our boots sticking in mud and the bellowing of bullfrogs all around us. We reached the camp just as the girls were readying for bed. With the lights inside the cabins on, we could see the girls remove their clothes, every button and hook illuminated. White bras and panties stood out against tanned bodies, the soft cotton absorbing warmth and reflecting light. Like a soldier, Logan stole all the way up to a window, peering in; I hung back, hidden in the darkness. Even after the lights were out, we could see shimmering white pajamas in the cabins.

On the way back to Yawl's, Logan spoke excitedly about the girls and how very, very much he missed his girlfriend.

At the end of the summer, David went back to Canterbury, my parents traveled to Europe together, and I found our house empty. In my third floor tower, at the top of the narrow stairs, I was able to walk around freely, clothed or not. Behind the bathroom door, I looked at my face in the mirror, scrubbing at the pimples I found, squeezing, watching the white come out.

Preparing for a bath one night, I opened the box of condoms I'd brought back from Texas and I tried one on, rolling the white collar all the way down, feeling myself harden.

After watching in awe and excitement for several minutes, I rolled the condom off and climbed into the old ceramic tub with claw feet. Before long, I felt pounding and chills between my legs. A dam gave way. A river shot into space. A pool of tiny white monkeys landed trembling on my ribs.

THE THOMPSON CAGE

TIn September of 1964, I left my Greenhaven tower and set out for Phillips Exeter Academy, the premier boys' boarding school in the world. Bill, my parent's hired driver, drove me from Greenhaven to Exeter in my parents' white station wagon. I was surprised how rural the drive was from New York. At one point, I could see miles ahead, over an enormous valley – millions of leaves, orange and gold, waved at me from every slope across the valley. For five hours, the view from the car was welcoming.

The Academy is larger than Canterbury. The basic structure –scores of tall buildings with red brick walls draped in green ivy – is embellished with scattered clapboard houses and white-posted porches and dormer windows. The campus is beautiful from the streets.

Inside, it is far bleaker.

My room was on the fourth floor of Cilley Hall, toward the end of a long olive green hallway. Bill helped me bring my luggage up the stairs and quickly left. In other rooms, parents dallied and talked with their boys. I went into my room. The door closed behind me.

In front of the window there was an iron radiator. On the cracked green linoleum floor, there were six items of furniture: a metal spring bed frame, a dresser, a heavy wooden desk (riddled with initials and dates from decades past), a straight-backed desk chair, a second chair, which had a plastic cushion for comfort, and one brown metal waste basket.

No couch. No television. No radio. No record player. Nothing on the walls except olive-green paint. No pictures. No books. No magazines.

On the bed frame was a thin, stained mattress.

Lying on the mattress were two folded sheets and one woolen blanket.

On top of the desk was a lamp with a faded yellow shade.

In the closet were two small white towels, very thin.

I unpacked my luggage. Three jackets to hang in the closet. Shirts and slacks and socks to put in the dresser. A wind-up alarm clock to place on the desk. A bar of soap and a toothbrush to set on the dresser top.

Unpacking complete, I sat on the edge of the bed.

Nothing to read.

No pack of cards for solitaire.

I walked down the hall to explore the bathroom. Families in other rooms hung pictures, stowed tins of sweets, and talked about sports, classes and girlfriends. I determined that the fourth floor bathroom contained two shower stalls, two toilet stalls, two urinals, and three sinks. I stood at the urinal to pass the time.

That evening there was a dormitory meeting. Sixty boys crowded together in the common room and listened to our dormitory head explain basic rules and routines. The official literature identified me and the other ninth-graders as “Juniors” in a system which led from Junior to “Lower Middle” to “Upper Middle” to Senior. I learned at the meeting, however, that we 9th graders would not be known as “Juniors” but as “preps.” I learned later that evening that “preps” was a term of derision.

The next morning, in the bathroom, I learned that most of the older boys – and even some of my fellow “preps” – had already started to shave. James and Clip were two boys who (like me) had not. The shaving boys had voices deeper than ours; they had coarse black hair in their armpits and groins. The hairy-armpit boys had an air of confidence about them – laughing with each other in deep voices, poking at each other, snapping towels.

I dressed in the required outfit – slacks (no jeans), long sleeve shirt, jacket and tie. Breakfast was served in a dining room in Dunbar Hall. Then a bell began to toll, signaling five minutes until Chapel. I followed a stream of boys headed toward the tolling bell. Chapel was held in the Academy Building – a large, ivied brick building. It stood on a spreading lawn bordered by a white post-and-rail fence. A white cupola stood on its roof, in which the bell tolled and summoned us. We crossed the street and walked up the paved path to the front of the building. Steps led to two huge front doors. On the lintel above the doors an inscription was carved in Latin:

Huc venite pueri, ut viri sitis.

Come here, boys, that you might become men.

Inside, we climbed more marble steps, worn from thousands of

footsteps and thousands of days of boys climbing to the auditorium on the second floor. We were assigned seats alphabetically on hard wooden benches. I sat in the middle of the first row, between Al Carney and Joe Chmelynski. As the benches filled, random clapping began among the seniors in the back of the room. Soon the clapping became rhythmic; the benches pounded in unison. A line of faculty filed onto the stage, drawing an increase in the volume of applause. The Dean approached the podium, the faculty sat down, the applause stopped, and the Dean began a welcoming address that referenced excellence and tradition at every turn. The school year had begun.

I soon realized that my fellows were the children and grandchildren of the world's elite. I found myself among Eisenhowers, Achesons, Galbraiths, Katzenbachs, and Coors. A few days into the year, one of the hairy armpit boys came in to my room and asked if I played bridge, since he and some buddies needed a fourth. They had turned over a steamer trunk as a makeshift card table. For three weeks, I became a "regular" at the card table. Then one day one of the armpit boys told a joke in which the punch line was something about a girl's "cherry." They all laughed, and I laughed too, though I didn't have any idea what a "cherry" was. Just then, James walked into the room. The armpit boy told the joke again and James laughed too.

"What are you laughing at?" they asked him. James froze. "I'll bet you don't even know what a cherry is."

He turned red. "No," he admitted, and they ridiculed him, laughing at him after he was gone.

Then they noticed me.

"Bet Carvin doesn't know, either."

"What's a cherry, Carvin?"

"I know," I lied. I knew from the joke it must have something to do with a girl's genitalia.

"What, then?" they demanded.

"A vagina," I said.

They hooted and jeered. Unlike James, who could simply walk away, I was holding a hand of cards at the bridge table. I had nowhere I could go. I had to suffer their jeers for the next several hands.

I was never invited to the bridge table again.

Even the peach fuzz boys competed with each other for status. In their eyes, even being seen with an armpit boy was a victory; and if you spent too much time with the other peach fuzz boys, you risked being avoided even

by them. Inside my room, there was nothing to do but to read and study. For hours, I would walk the halls on all four floors, looking for someone who might be willing to have company.

Once October arrived, the weather in New Hampshire was predictable: gray skies, a constant drizzle, gusts of wind in which wet maple leaves swirled, and lawns that turned from thick green to muddy brown as winter approached.

On Sundays, we were required to attend church. The other six days of the week, the day began with four flights of stairs down and a walk to Dunbar Dining Hall for breakfast; then four flights up to my room for a few minutes of last minute study. Then the bell would summon us back down the stairs, a swirl of boys descending. Then a brisk walk or run through groups of dormitories, to 8 a.m. Chapel at the Academy Building.

This was followed by two hours of class in a quadrangle of brick buildings on the other side of the Academy building. Classes were small – twelve or fifteen boys and the instructor faced each other around one large, oval table. In that intimate environment, it was impossible to avoid disclosure of what you knew, or what you didn't. This meant no pretenses and nowhere to hide.

Then we'd walk back to the dormitory and up the stairs for an hour of homework for the next class; then down the stairs, across the lawns, two more classes in the Quad. At 1 p.m. we crossed the lawns again for lunch in Dunbar Dining Hall, then up to our rooms to drop off our books, then down the stairs again to the gymnasium locker room.

In the locker room, among rows of lockers that reeked of unwashed uniforms, bare bodies everywhere showed off hair or muscle or both.

Intramural sports were required for everyone, year round, six days a week. I signed up to play football and was issued a pair of cleats from the equipment room. Reporting to the playing fields in a cold drizzle, I was assigned to be a receiver. I tried to run as fast as I could, but helmets, shoulder pads and cleats seemed to make that natural activity unnatural on the soft ground that sank beneath my feet. Chuck, from Texas, was assigned to be our quarterback. From the first day, he called me a "spazz" – a term of derision I had learned from Robert Reck and Joey Ehret as they "slapped my naked head." As the season passed, Chuck never threw the ball to me, even in practice.

On the last day of a humiliating season, I was walking back to the gym when an armpit boy came up and told me my cleats looked at least two sizes too large. And while everyone else's spikes were short rubber knobs, my

cleats had long metal spikes on them – terrible for running. They were linemen’s cleats, he said – how had I gotten them? I felt them sink deep into the ground as I walked, and I felt myself sink with them.

After football, there were showers in the locker room, then back up the Cilley Hall stairs to study for a half-hour or so before descending to the lawns and classes again at 5:30. Then, at last, release into the darkness of the Quadrangle at 6:30 p.m., and a cold night walk back across campus to dinner in the Dunbar Dining Hall. And finally, about 7:00, back to the dormitory for the night.

There was a television in the basement of Cilley Hall, and sixty boys competed for its use between 7 and 8 o’clock, when the television had to go off. From 8 until mandatory lights out at 10:30, we studied alone in our rooms. Even on Sunday afternoons, which were officially free time, we tried to catch up on homework in order to survive the next week’s classes.

There were only two categories of armpit boys: those who bragged about how they had lost their virginity, and those who bragged about the intensity of their desire to do so. The time came for a dance arranged with a girls’ boarding school. A week before the dance, a list of girls’ names and their heights was circulated in the dormitory. The seniors selected their “dates” from the list first, and the middle classes selected next, in turn, with the “preps” getting whatever was left. In most cases, the selection was made based on height and the sound of the girl’s name. This “blind draw” meant there were jokes about getting stuck with a fat or ugly girl. And since most boys wanted a girl shorter than themselves, the group left for preps included a disproportionate number of taller girls.

Of course, all the armpit boys speculated about the girls’ sexual willingness.

I avoided participation in the process altogether, including the dance itself. Saturday evening, at dance time, the dorm was nearly deserted except for James and Clip and me. After several hours, the armpit boys came back with their tales of conquest:

“Did you make out?”

“Sure. I was sucking her tongue for half the night.”

“That’s nothin’. Listen to this...”

The talk went on for days.

Fall turned to winter. As each dance came and went without me, my status as a peach fuzz boy became clearer. As a result, my life became harder. Walking on paths around campus, passing other boys, my eyes were fixed on my feet.

In February, President Johnson ordered U.S. troops to fight in South Vietnam. From that point forward, the discussions in the dining halls were split between the war for girls and the war in South Vietnam. The arm pit boys were certain that the war was terrible and that Barry Goldwater, whom I admired, was an imbecile for supporting it. Outnumbered and unable to compete with their unified deep voices, I usually kept my views about the war to myself.

The winter sports program for “preps” was a twelve week rotation: learning the basics of six sports – basketball, hockey, swimming, squash, indoor track, and wrestling – spending two weeks with each. Designed to separate the powerful from the clumsy and the weak, it had been nicknamed “Prep Spazz,” and was so called even by the faculty. I dreaded the two weeks I’d have to spend on the hockey rink – I’d never been able to stand up on skates. And I’d never played basketball since the one we’d gotten for Christmas deflated and got us whipped. But most of all, I dreaded the wrestling mats, imagining my nose in the armpits of the other boys.

The time for wrestling came. The wrestling room was in a big structure called the Thompson Cage. It was kept very well heated, to guard against pulled muscles, and it reeked of the perspiration of hundreds of teenage boys. I found myself scheduled to wrestle Chuck, my nemesis from the football field. I could see in his eyes the same cockiness and disdain I’d seen in the eyes of Joey, Robert and Chip, the boys from Mamaroneck who had “slapped my naked head.”

So I listened to the coaching carefully. Back in the dormitory I practiced moves while the armpit boys played bridge across the hall. When the time came for my match with Chuck, I drew on my experience with my brother David, contorted my body in imitation of Chickie, and turned Chuck on his back, nearly pinning him twice. I won the match handily. For a brief day or two, I felt like a man.

T/HE DUMMY

As the nightly news reported body counts from the war, I discovered that on the sports fields, and in the dining halls and dormitories, everything boiled down to being one-up on our peers. Who was in the know, and who was not?

Who shaved, and who did not? Who was on the make, and who not?

On this, the more visible battlefield, boys held up two fingers, awarding points for an arrow of sarcasm that found its mark in someone vulnerable.

There was a boy named John who lived downstairs. John was rare among the armpit boys because he didn't mind associating with peach fuzz boys. John had a deep voice, a slight southern drawl, and though he was only fourteen, his fingers were yellow from cigarette smoking. John could shuffle a deck of cards with one hand and could consistently beat anyone else cutting for high cards. One Saturday night in John's room I was fascinated to hear a high, squeaky voice coming from a little box on his desk. The voice was saying, *"help! I'm caught in a box! Help! I'm caught in a box!"*

Fascinated, I learned the voice was John's own falsetto. He had recorded the message on magnetic tape and was playing it in a continuous six-inch loop on a miniature tape recorder inside the box. Hardly a technological marvel by today's standards, in 1965, tape recorders were unusual in the hands of fourteen-year-olds. I found the feat delightful. I remarked how easy it would be to play a practical joke with such a set-up. Seeing that I was impressed, John said, "That's nothing" and opened another box, showing me a strange black device inside – a miniature transmitter.

John connected the transmitter to his tape recorder, and soon I was

hearing *"Help! I'm caught in a box!"* coming out of his clock radio. I learned that he could set the transmitter to any frequency, over-riding a signal from a radio station. I tried to imagine all the things one could do with such a set up. But as much potential as this had, the utility of the transmitter was limited by its tiny power – capable of broadcasting only a few feet away. John and I agreed that the lack of transmitting power was a shame – what good was it to transmit a signal only a few feet?

The next afternoon, John made a discovery. He had attached a wire from the transmitter to the black iron radiator pipe in his room. By so doing, he had converted the dormitory's entire plumbing system – all the interconnected radiator pipes on all four floors – into an antenna system. Now, he could transmit a signal simultaneously to every room in the building – or so he claimed.

I was skeptical. To prove it to me, John suggested I go across the hall to Gordie's room, where Gordie was listening to a Bruins hockey game on his radio. Meanwhile, John had connected the transmitter to his phonograph turntable and had cued the needle to *"The Creeper,"* a twangy electric guitar piece by the Ventures. Once I'd had a chance to get into Gordie's room, John would broadcast *"The Creeper"* on the same frequency as the Bruins game. I knocked on Gordie's door, went in and made small talk about the game. Suddenly the broadcast was replaced by *"The Creeper,"* as John had predicted.

Gordie got frustrated trying to adjust his radio. Losing his game had made him angry.

"What is this?" he wondered out loud, fiddling with his dial, shaking and smacking the radio. "What's happened to the game?"

"The Creeper" ended, and John's voice followed it "on the air."

"Thank you, thank you," John was saying, in a deep, "radio personality" voice that overshadowed his usual drawl. *"That was one of my favorite tunes. I do hope you liked it. And now, for those of you who might have been listening to the Bruins game, I have a special treat. I know you will enjoy it..."*

"The Creeper" began all over again. Gordie fussed with the knob on his radio some more, angrier now, insistent: "What the heck has happened to the game?!"

The experiment had been a success. Gordie had not recognized John's voice, and we had a good laugh at Gordie's expense. This left open a question we could not ignore: what more might we do with this joke? Should we tell Gordie what we had done? Or should we do something more

outrageous? We had a very good beginning, but where could we go from here?

That night, John and I wrote out a script for three sisters – “Faith,” “Hope,” and “Mack.” We enlisted help from high-voiced Clip, who would read the part of Faith. I would read the part of Hope, also in my highest pitched voice. And John would read the part of the third sister – Mack – in his deep, gravelly voice, with his strongest Tennessee drawl. We pre-recorded our lines and the next time a Bruins game was on, we beamed it into Gordie’s radio. All three of us gathered in Gordie’s room to watch as he fussed. He didn’t recognize any of our voices.

As we broadcast nonsense every Sunday afternoon, station content turned sexual. We named ourselves “WROD – Radio Rod.” As the snow deepened outside, Faith, Hope and Mack experimented with growing awareness of their bodies. We chuckled as Gordie began to wonder how a station could get away with such obscenity.

When the hockey season ended, we turned to intruding on the Red Sox. As Gordie got tired of missing his games, we grew tired of our program content. John intentionally dragged the needle across the record, making “The Creeper” less monotonous but even more irritating. Our stories got lewder, our announcements crazier, our voices less disguised, as we waited for the day when Gordie would realize we’d been putting him on for months.

But he didn’t. No matter how many times John repeated “The Creeper,” Gordie simply would not accuse us.

We recorded a show containing a Name that Song contest, announcing a five hundred dollar prize for the lucky person who could identify the mystery song. The mystery song, of course, was “The Creeper.”

“Ooh, ooh, that’s the song they always play!” Gordie said. ”What’s it called? My God, they play it all the time, but I can’t remember the name of it!” We were delighted at Gordie’s excitement.

John brought his Ventures LP into Gordie’s room and let Gordie identify the song from the record jacket. John suggested that Gordie see if he could win the \$500, then offered to mail Gordie’s entry for him; Gordie agreed. John didn’t mail Gordie’s entry, of course. Rather, he composed a reply from WROD, enclosed it in an envelope addressed to Gordie, and had the postmaster at Northfield mail it back.

A few days later, Gordie ran into John’s room excited, the letter postmarked Northfield in his hand. He was a winner! He had correctly identified the mystery song! There was only one glitch – there had been two

winning entries – one Gordie’s, the other an entry by Mrs. Thelma “Haviahaddenuv” of Northfield. To break the tie, WROD was going to have a drawing the following Saturday night at 9 p.m.

Saturday night, we gathered in Gordie’s room and listened attentively to the “broadcast.” The two names – Gordie, from Exeter, and Mrs. Thelma Haviahaddenuv, from Northfield – had been placed into a hat. The announcer was, at this moment, drawing one of the names – “*and – it – is – Mrs. Thelma Haviahaddenuv, of Northfield! Our Lucky Winner of the \$500 prize!*”

Gordie threw his arms into the air and yelled.

“That’s the last time I listen to that stupid station,” Gordie announced. “It was probably fixed. That “Haviahavianuts” is probably connected to the station or something.”

The next day we forced our way into Gordie’s room and, over his protest, tuned his radio to WROD.

“*Thanks for tuning in to WROD,*” John began on the pre-recorded tape. “*You know, some people are really gullible.*”

“*Well, maybe not gullible,*” Clip said. “*Maybe just stupid.*”

“*Yeah,*” I said. “*Really stupid.*”

We listened to ourselves talking about WROD and asking, “*You tell us, our listening audience – can a station this bad really exist?*” We paused.

“*How,*” we asked, “*can a station get away with broadcasting this crap? Could it be that this station is just a figment of your imagination?*”

“*You –out there in radio land – have you ever thought about our call letters? Could it be that this station is really just a figment of our collective r-o-d-s?*”

“*Yeah. We really suck on rods!*”

“*And so does our audience! Especially all you kids from Exeter!*”

“*And especially you, Gordie!*”

“*You suck, Gordie!*”

“*Ha ha ha!*”

Gordie turned and looked at us, his mouth open at first. Then he slowly closed it, setting his jaw. His wide eyes narrowed to an accusatory stare. His head nodded up and down, knowingly.

“You did this,” he said.

Finally...

“You guys -- I can’t believe you did this!”

I grinned and hoped that Gordie appreciated our sense of humor.

“You – You – ”

We braced ourselves for his anger. How many Carl Yastremski home runs had Gordie missed?

“You guys – How did you get them to do it? You called them! You called that station and got them to say my name on the air! I can’t believe you would do that!”

*

*

*

I spent the summer of 1965 doing clean-up work at a day camp. One Saturday, looking around our house in Greenhaven for something to do, I got the idea to build a dummy. I stuffed towels and old sweaters and white sheets into a pair of blue jeans and a shirt. I ran a rope through the arms and legs, tied a pair of old sneakers to the feet, and crafted a head out of a brown paper bag stuffed with a furled white sheet. I knotted the rope around the stuffing to imitate joints at the elbows and the knees, and I made sure I had plenty of rope left to hang the dummy. I secured him to the rope with multiple knots, careful that this rope would be more secure than Pepino’s leash had been.

I dragged him onto the flat section of roof outside my bathroom window. Since our basement was above the ground at the back of the house, I was four stories high. Throwing the dummy over the edge, I heard him land with a thud. Lying on my stomach and looking down, I could see him below, distorted like a clump of old laundry, but still together. When I lifted the rope a few feet he regained a little of his shape. Then I wiggled the rope in an effort to get him to dance, or at least appear to be walking. But the control apparatus for my life-sized marionette – a single cotton rope – was too simple. The dummy would only swing back and forth, or lean and drag across the ground – his feet twisted – or leave the ground altogether, or drop to the ground in a clump.

I went downstairs and found Chickie, persuading him to stand outside the back door. Then I got on the roof again and dropped the dummy next to him, hoping to get a reaction. But Chickie wasn’t impressed. He wandered back inside.

So I hauled in the rope and, dummy under my arm, I scaled the shingled incline that led to a point directly above Corinne’s window. There, I was at the apex. On one side I could see the lake and on the other, Long Island Sound. Fighting off vertigo, I struggled to maintain my traction as I started to swing the dummy back and forth on his rope, careful he didn’t pull me down with him.

Gradually, I was able to get him to swing away from the window

enough that, on his return, he banged into Corinne's window. And sure enough, I discovered I had attracted an audience.

"Joe – quit it! Get that stupid thing out of here!"

I laughed at my success.

*

*

*

In the autumn I returned to Exeter, now a member of Exeter's Lower Middle class – a "Lower" for short. I attended a reading by James Dickey, the author, a recital by Carlos Montoya, the guitarist, and a lecture by a professor who wrote equations on a blackboard, attempting (unsuccessfully, in my case) to explain how Einstein had derived his theory of relativity. I signed up for a class where a large machine was wired to a computer at nearby Dartmouth University. Someone at Dartmouth had recently invented a new computer programming language called BASIC, and Exeter had established a connection to it. There was no computer monitor, of course; the terminal was simply a large machine with a keyboard on top. After entering a few simple instructions, lights and little chugging noises accompanied the printer as it began to type by itself, like a player piano.

Many of my peers found the Exeter classroom intimidating, but for me it was freer than the dormitory or the dining hall. In Biology class, we studied genetics by breeding fruit flies in mason jars. For my semester project I dissected frogs and attached their severed legs to an electrode and a lever. Running electricity through the leg muscles, I etched the movement of their spiked contractions onto a revolving drum wrapped in smoked paper.

In English class, we wrote short "themes." My English teacher was "Dirty Al" Vrooman, who had earned his nickname because, as he held papers in his hand, his habit was to bend all his fingers except the middle one. Dirty Al scrutinized our writing for grammar, for style, for clarity and precision of thought. Dirty Al did not treat me poorly. I wrote stories about the house in Greenhaven, about Pop Pop, about Nancy – pounding them out on my manual typewriter from my dormitory room. And in the occasional praise I received from Dirty Al, I began to harden myself against the laughing of the armpit boys.

*

*

*

We spent winter and spring breaks at Pop Pop's villas in Florida. We swam in the ocean, got stung by Portuguese Men O' War, and got sunburned on the beach. On one trip, we found two girls in one of the

neighboring villas. My brother David paid immediate attention to the blonde and beautiful Nancy, while I formed a secret crush on her younger sister, Kris.

One evening, Kris reported that Chickie was chasing the girls and trying to kiss them.

“What can you do to stop him?” she asked.

I followed her until we came upon Chickie. Sure enough, he was trying to kiss Nancy. I took Chickie by the hand and walked him – almost dragged him – back to Pop Pop’s villa. As I told him he had to stay inside, he struggled and complained, saying “I wan’ kiss huh; I wan’ marry huh,” and when I said no, he asked me, “Why, Doey? Why?”

Another afternoon, Kris asked me what it was like to eat fresh coconut. I shimmied up to the top of a coconut palm and tried to dislodge one for her. I wasn’t able to knock down the nut, but at least I had made it all the way to the top of the tree. I flushed with pride when she said I had climbed like a monkey, but I couldn’t work up the nerve to say more to her.

The Wragge family had a winter home in Boca Raton, and their girls held a party there for the teenagers. As we got dressed to go, putting socks and slacks over our sunburned bodies, I fretted at the prospect of dancing. At the Wragge’s house, the Beatles and the Dave Clark Five blared from speakers on the patio. As other teenagers looked each other over, I sized up a large tree that hung over the patio. It was a perfect climbing tree. As couples paired up for dancing, I climbed it, finding myself with a view like the one Pepino must have had, looking down on the tops of heads.

I expected someone to notice me – perhaps, even, that someone else would find the tree interesting and would join me – but no one did. So now, in the tree alone, above the heads of the others, I was faced with deciding what to do. I could either descend and deal with the awkwardness of explaining where I had been, or I could remain in the tree until someone noticed me. This seemed a better plan. After a few minutes, Carla Wragge came out of the house asking “Has anyone seen Joey?” This was what I had waited for. I started to answer, but someone else from below spoke first, and my opportunity was lost.

The dancing below continued – I watched the action through the spaces between the branches and listened to every word spoken, but no one ever looked up. Now what was I supposed to do? I’d been in the tree so long now, what would I tell people if I were seen climbing down? So I waited and watched the twisting and turning, trying to understand how to move, trying to understand what it was that people enjoyed about dancing. It

wasn't until the last dance was over and the patio was empty that I climbed back down. Everyone had gone except for David and the Wragge girls. They demanded to know where I'd been.

I had no choice but to tell them. For years afterward, they laughed at me – the smart boy who was so dumb he spent a whole party by himself, up in a tree.

THE KISS

When I returned to Exeter the next year, sixteen years old and a member of the “Upper” class, I studied the poet Virgil:

*Of armaments I sing, and of that man who first from the shores
of Troy
Came to Italy, battered by the winds of fate...*

Under the yellow lampshade on my desk, translating the Aeneid from Latin, I became enamored of the hero Aeneas and formed a new vision of what it is to be a man: a stoic hero, away from home, devoted to his duty and to those who depend on him.

Traveling with Aeneas and his crew across the Aegean, I descended with him to the River Styx, where the newly dead wait to be ferried across to the Underworld. I learned there that our bodies are like the leaves of trees, which fall to the earth and die, but our souls are like birds, which depart in winter only to return in the spring.

As the New Hampshire wind once again brought leaves down from trees and the drizzling rain brought cold and then turned to snow, I got a letter from home with news my father had quit Allied Chemical. We were selling the house in wintry New York and moving to Florida. When school let out for the Christmas break, I flew south to Palm Beach – a tropical island of vast wealth and princes, where the moist heat makes the foliage grow fast and the humidity hangs in the air like a shroud. As the taxi drove across the bridge and up A1A along the ocean, I marveled at the palatial homes behind sculpted hedges.

My father never thought small. While at Allied Chemical, he had arranged an enormous marketing coup for his company – the relocation of the company’s headquarters to the Times Tower in Times Square, where the

ball was dropped each New Year's Eve. Now, Dad and two partners had bought the Palm Beach Pier. It had once extended into the Ocean from the end of Worth Avenue, but since it was destroyed by the hurricane of 1923, only a short length remained above water. The rest lay in ruins on the ocean floor. It had become a haven for drug sales and homosexual encounters. My father planned to rebuild it and put an underwater restaurant at the end of it.

I spent the holiday lying on the beach and lounging by our pool, enjoying the sun. When I returned to the "real" northern world of ice and snow, the school minister organized a carload of students for a trip to the Danvers State Mental Hospital in Massachusetts. I decided to join his expedition.

The Hospital was a series of large brick buildings like those of the Exeter campus. The patients were arranged on floors according to their conditions. On the first floor, the patients lay in bed, unresponsive to our presence. On the third and fourth floors were the violent and criminally insane, off limits to us. On the second floor, we found patients with whom we were able to interact. We were to talk with the patients, but whatever we did, we were not to humor their delusions.

Some of them approached us with toothless smiles and extended hands. Some simply smiled, listened and occasionally nodded their heads. Some of them talked to us, telling us they had gone to the bathroom, or that their ears had been cut off, or that they were going to be released the next day. Others asked if we were Robert, or if we knew where the dog had died, or if we could tell them why Molly didn't come to see them anymore.

I had a series of short conversations with various patients, finding none of them able to sustain a conversation for long. One of my friends, Neal Delmonico, found a man who claimed he had hidden a large amount of cash in a toilet tank on the third floor. He wanted Neal to get it for him.

Neal not only agreed to get the money, but also arranged to return the following week in a helicopter, land it on the lawn outside, and take the old man away to spend the loot.

*

*

*

Eventually I found the courage to sign up for a dance. When the time came, we stood in the Art Gallery, boys crowded together at one end of the room, girls herded to the other. As names were called out, couples went to the center of the room and met each other. Each time a girl stepped forward from the crowd, the boys would voice their approval with "Yeah!" and "Alright!" or their rude disapproval with groans and even laughter. It was

cruel, of course, but boys don't much care about cruelty.

Then I beheld her. She was a pretty girl, and she received moderate approval from the crowd. As we met in the middle of the room, I was overcome by the smell of her clothes: was it mothballs? Perfume? Hair spray? It reminded me of grandmothers and attics. It was the smell of the house next door, in Scarsdale, where the mother made me dress her daughter. Up close, I could see make-up on her face, covering pimples nearly as plentiful as my own.

We first shared dinner in the dining hall. The conversation went more easily than I had feared it might. I began to hope the evening might not be so terrible after all. But would I be able to make small talk all night? With a girl?

Dinner over, we walked to the dance. The Art Gallery was mostly dark; the music was loud. That wasn't too bad, since it meant I wouldn't have to keep talking, but it also meant I would have to dance. I asked her; she said yes. Soon I was weaving and bobbing awkwardly, wondering how ridiculous I must look, hoping that in the dark no one would notice.

At the first slow dance, I was again overpowered by the smell of a grandmother's attic. We stepped on each other's feet and I apologized, not once but repeatedly. I explained I wasn't a dancer; neither was she, she said. I wondered if she was on the verge of stopping and telling me to forget it, that the last foot stomp had been one too many. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

It was Ed Gorham cutting in. I stepped aside, dutifully.

"Thank you, Anne," I said.

They danced off into the darkness, leaving me alone. I looked around to see if there were other girls, pretty girls, hoping for a chance to dance with me – of course there weren't. What was I to do? Cut in on someone else? Out of the question. I began to dread the thought of having nothing to do but walk around and be noticed, all alone. I would have to wait for the song to end, and then try to get back with Anne.

But when the song ended, the next one started right after it, and Ed and Anne were dancing again. Then a third dance, and a fourth. I wandered around, trying to avoid being noticed. Finally, on the verge of panic, I intruded on what I already knew. I approached Ed and Anne and I tapped Ed on the shoulder.

Nothing. I tapped again harder.

Nothing.

I didn't know what to do. Was I to grab him, physically stop him, shake

him into giving her up? What choice did I have? How much further might I fall if I spent the rest of the evening alone in a corner? It was the same feeling I'd had when I climbed the tree at the Wragge's house. I couldn't let that happen again. I grabbed him hard by the shoulder, and he turned around.

"She wants to dance with me," he said. And then, to her: "Don't you?"

"Well," she said. "I guess I'm *his* date..."

Did she mean me?

Ed said, "But you want to dance with me, don't you?"

Anne shied away from the direct answer, but then said, "I think I should dance with *him*."

She did mean me! Ed walked away, beaten. As Anne and I danced some more, she explained that she had been trying to get away from Ed since their first dance. She said he had been putting his hands all over her, and wouldn't stop. She had been wondering what had happened to me, and had begun to think I didn't like her. (Thank god, I thought. This was too good to be true.) She said that if anyone else tried to cut in, she hoped I would not let them. Was that alright? Would I be willing to do that?

Incredible, indeed. I quickly agreed. We danced for the rest of the night, me stepping on her feet again and again. When the announcement came that the dance was over, we went out to the bus. We stood side by side and tried to kiss. Each of us wore glasses, and they tangled and slipped off our noses. But we did, in fact, kiss. And when the bus had left, I walked back to Cilley Hall feeling splendid and tall.

I wanted to brag to the armpit boys. But if I tried to brag about it, they would laugh and ridicule me. Bragging about a mere kiss? They would mock me. I had arrived, but I'd have to be proud alone, at least for the time being.

At year's end, as I left Exeter and took a plane to Florida for the summer, I looked forward to my return in the fall. If I played my cards right, I thought, I might finally be one of the armpit boys.

D

ESCENT INTO HELL

Chickie's spoken language was limited to simple words. He articulated his desire to eat by saying "Mo' please" or extending his hand forward and asking, "May I?" Mostly, he used gestures.

If he was happy, he would extend his hand for a handshake and smile. He often lifted his elbows and spread his fingers apart, his wrists twisting as if to stretch his muscles. Another sign of contentment was sitting or standing in one place for a while, looking around in various directions, his gaze moving smoothly from one focus to another, making crossed-eye contact with those around him. If someone he knew smiled or spoke to him, he would look them in the face and smile back.

When he was not happy, he would get up and move suddenly from location to location. He would make no eye contact, and when he moved his gaze from one thing to another, he would do so in sudden jerks, his mouth stretching open diagonally, his face and neck twisting to look behind him for no apparent reason.

I spent the summer nights of 1967 doing janitorial work at my father's office. During the day, Chickie and I lay on the beach and swam in the ocean together.

One day I got a movie camera and made a movie with him. He was slow, but very compliant to my direction. I put him in a black hat and wig, a black "hippie" beard, and a huge pair of glasses with spiral kaleidoscope eyes. I filmed him at the beach, in front of the Kennedy compound, and at our swimming pool, sliding down the slide, stopping the camera when he was half-way down, starting it again in the same position after he'd gone out of sight, creating the effect of his disappearance into thin air.

My father didn't care for my movie. In the style of Palm Beach, he had started to wear pink and yellow jackets. He asked me what I was learning in

school, and when I answered that I was studying symbolism, etymology, and iambic pentameter, he showed no sign of further interest.

We went to get our hair cut one day on Worth Avenue. In the barbershop, I was shocked to learn he got a manicure every time he got his hair cut.

One day my mother told me my father was depressed because he thought I didn't love him. I didn't know what to say.

"Do you love him? Surely you do. If you love him, go to him, tell him you love him."

Did I love my father? *Love is such an ill-defined word. What does it really mean? How am I to know whether I love my father?* While I didn't know what love meant, I did know I didn't understand his interests. I cared nothing for pink jackets and manicures – but did that mean I didn't love my father? If it did, then did my father's lack of interest in symbolism mean that he didn't love me? Why should it be up to me to find *him* interesting? Why up to me to approach *him*?

In fact, I hated the barbershop on Worth Avenue. If I approached my father and told him I loved him, would I be saying that I loved *it*?

For several days, my mother's pressure on me mounted. But if I had learned anything, it was to never compromise what I stood for. I refused to tell him I loved him.

*

*

*

In September I returned to Exeter, a Senior at last. In a sculpture class, I turned a piece of limestone into a sleeping cat. I made a wire frame man from coat hangers, twisting the metal lines around the empty spaces to create a three-dimensional being. I mounted him on another piece of limestone and called him Prometheus, prone and bound for the vultures.

But while I sometimes pondered the fine arts, and sometimes government, and sometimes even biology, I was most interested in creative writing.

Discussion in my writing class centered on the artist's need to immerse himself in his point of view – to "become" his fictional character. We read William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*, in which Williams tells stories of historical figures from the first person point of view.

When we were assigned to write such a piece, Leonardo Da Vinci came to mind. I did some quick research on his life and was surprised to read that DaVinci was rumored to be a homosexual. When he died, he left all his possessions to Francesco Melzi, a young man thought to be his lover.

I'd never thought that any man could really "love" another. I decided this idea would be the subject of my effort. I wrote:

In the year 1519, Leonardo da Vinci died after a long illness. Among other things, he bequeathed the entirety of his possessions to Francesco Melzi, a young friend of many years. Here is his letter to Melzi:

As I write this last expression of my life, lying here on my death bed, waiting sadly for the end, I find myself obsessed with early memories, former acquaintances living and dead who have had some particular influence on my life. Yet none of them stands out as dear as you, Francesco, who for so many years have lent a helping hand to a slowly dying man.

How long has it been since that first evening in Milan? How long that you have been my companion, through so many trials, and in your thoughtfulness brought me that extra breath of life that has kept me going so long past my time? Ten years? Twenty? Would I have lived as long without the almost daily comfort of your kindnesses?

Now, while lying almost lifeless on my back, it seems futile to tell you, for what will surely be the last time, how great a debt I owe you! How unfitting it seems to have to say what I'm about to say – to have to give what I'm about to give – when for so long I could have given so much more! – my life itself, while it remained for me to give! I've lost that now, or will have soon, and I must now bequeath to you a small and trivial sum. To you I leave all.

Ah, but no! To think I almost sealed this note without remembering! For me, especially here and now upon my death bed, to have so nearly forgotten such a parting gift – Ah, they're so right! The mind is feeble, now. Still well-meaning, to be sure, but feeble none the less... Heh – moreso, I dare say, than is the body, if there be chance of that!

But please, don't let me go on, prattling like a woman – why, then you mightn't ever hear my words, for my condition! My money you may throw away or save or burn, for all I care; I trust in your good sense. Yet heed an old man's words – keep them tucked beneath your shirt, I pray...

First, and most importantly, as we have said so many times before – yet not enough, I fear – at least make sure to be cautious

with your women. No; more than cautious. As you well know, and I don't hesitate to stress, I have lived a chaste life. The act of procreation, as far as I can judge – and anything, besides, that has any relation to it – is so disgusting that human beings would soon die out if it were not a custom, and if there were no pretty faces and sensuous dispositions.

True enough, since early times, which I scarce now remember, I have been called shy, I have been called reticent, and all such things are true; I never could enjoy the womanly sex. I was afraid; I was alone. External loveliness could only show itself in art. And yet, is this so strange? Consider, I pray, the brothels that line the streets of Milan. Does one look and appreciate? Does one respect the lovely forms one sees? Certainly not! He steals into the house, ashamed! He buys a woman and uses her body to satisfy an urge, in minutes out again upon the streets, whistling vulgarly. And did he find beauty, where he's coming from? Did he find love? Drunk with lust, he found nothing but the grotesque animal inside his own loins. This animal, this urge, though you will hear different, remains the same whether loosed in a brothel or a stately bed chamber, whether paid for outright or received from a fellow hungry beast. The urges and grotesqueries of both loins are the same; both lusts are equal in sin. He tells himself often the body is beautiful, yet he has never really seen it.

You, Francesco – have you seen it?

Yes, yes, you always seem to agree, but have you been looking at the real woman of a painting, of a statue – say, of the Virgin with the Child at her breast? Is that beautiful, for you, because the Son of God is feeding at the breast of a virgin mother? Or is it beautiful because of lust, because of passion, because a thousand grotesque loins are locked together nightly in Milan alone? The only woman in endless time to live apart from sin is a virgin mother! Do you, Francesco, do you really –

Ahh. I must ask pardon for an aging, feeble man. What time has done to my poor soul, that I should wile away my dying days insulting such a friend! Lord, I beg you forgive me! Why, good friend, I should be praising you, thanking you, beseeching you to find for me some solace in my waning hours. You cannot know all that I have suffered these last few days. A dream – a recollection from my earliest youth – keeps torturing my every sleeping hour. I

try to think of happiness – of you, Francesco – kind words, smiles, strong hands to hold a rotting man up off the floor. This dream – this ever present dream – I feel afraid of it, if only for its constancy, yet I know not what it means, and hardly why it haunts me so, it seems so childish. And yet, still – how it persists! I want to think of you, yet I think of the dream!

I was still in the cradle. A large bird – a vulture – came down from the sky to me, opened my mouth with his tail and struck me many times against my lips. Francesco, am I mad? Feeble, to be sure, and dying too, but oh, God, I pray not mad! Your hand, Francesco – give me your hand! Francesco! Please, your hand!

My roommate was smart, athletic and respected by others. We threw a lacrosse ball together on Sunday afternoons and spent time talking in our rooms at night. He kept a picture of his girlfriend on his dresser. He talked about her, but never boastfully, and he never once described any act of intimacy that involved her. His smile and his laugh were boyish. The pitch of his voice was higher than average. He had a smooth, childish face. After a month or so, I realized I was becoming attracted to him.

I had written about Leonardo da Vinci's homosexuality, and tried to put myself inside his mind – could I have made it real, just by writing about it?

At first, I assumed the feeling would go away. When it didn't, my pain steadily increased. I wondered what was wrong with me. Yes, I knew, I had always been shy with girls. Every experience I'd ever had with them had ended painfully. But I had always liked them. I had dreamed about them, had I not? I had eyed them in magazines! I had pined for them! Robin, Susan, Kris, and others in between – had I not pined for all of them?

Now my roommate tested all my assumptions. I found myself preoccupied with him in the same way I'd been preoccupied with my crushes on girls. Never touching their flesh, I imagined the touch of it. My affections and my daydreams became my private hell. There was no one with whom I could share my anguish.

I tried to escape from my thoughts: briefly, here and there, studies or sports would provide that escape, but rarely for more than an hour at a time. I yearned for thoughts interesting enough to distract me from the "default" thoughts I hated. I bought a little brass statue of Buddha sitting in the lotus position, and I set it on my dresser. His lap had been excavated into a little dish where I burned incense.

I tried to draw – anything to occupy my mind. Hours, days, nights,

weekends would pass in our suite, only a silent wall separating us. Before the days of *nintendos* and *gameboys*, there were no televisions or other electrical appliances permitted, except for radios and record players, and they could not be played at night or during most of the day. As winter approached, the window in my room was closed and the only sound was the radiator's hiss. Only the pages of textbooks competed for attention. Prisoner to an attraction that would lead nowhere, my thoughts tormented me. Everything was a question; nothing was an answer, except the one answer that explained it all – I was different from what I was supposed to be, and filled with self-contempt.

How easy life would be, if we could simply rid ourselves of unpleasant thoughts by wanting to be free of them! If we could simply bat our eyes! But the emotions don't listen to the brain. In my hell, I reflected on the tormented life of the inmates at the Danvers asylum. As the winter grew cold and I was shut within my private hell, I wrote a poem:

Inside
a candle tossed
prickling yellow
light all around
which tried to get
through the darkness
as rain beat
on my roof.

The bottle in my hand was
hard and glassy
nearly spent
and tears ran down its side,
too late to make amends.
Outside
while a barking dog flickered
and bells tickled
me from a tin speaker,
a door closed
far away.

The walls of the asylum
are bright with
Lincolns and Kennedys

and crucifixions
and in the hollow
of one tree
to which He
is nailed
lies a bottle
and baby please
don't walk away
I need you.

Someone has written on a wall
may God grant us sensibility
to accept those things
we cannot change,

But now even that man is dead.

With distaste for myself exploding, the idea of competing to sell myself to a college was repulsive. I'd have felt as comfortable putting on a pink jacket and telling jokes on the Ed Sullivan Show. So as my classmates swapped stories and strategies for admission – being the president of this club, getting a recommendation from that professor – I was all bound up in self torment.

When Harvard sent admissions staff to Exeter for interviews, I imagined the interviewer's job was to assess me, not that it was my job to impress him. I went to my interview with no anticipation of what I might be asked, and no thoughts as to how I might answer. When he asked about my ambitions, I said I wanted to be a writer, but when he asked what I wanted to write about, I didn't know. When he asked about my outside interests, I said I really didn't have any, I was pretty much absorbed in my studies.

What was I going to say, anyway – that I was interested in my roommate?

*

*

*

One afternoon I was visiting Harold Miller, a new Upper on the fourth floor of Cilley Hall. His room was just like mine – a bare room, with the same green walls, the same desk, the same thin mattress on his bed – even a radiator that hissed just like mine. But Harold was a black boy from the big city -- Chicago or Detroit, as I recall – and at Exeter on a full scholarship. Somehow we got onto the subject of race relations. Harold said, "A rich

white boy like you has no idea what a black like me feels.” I told him I understood what enormous differences there were between us, but I didn’t think empathy with someone of a different background was ever an all-or-nothing proposition.

“You have no idea what the differences are between us,” he said.

I said, “Hold on, you surely don’t mean that literally. I don’t know what it’s like to be my roommate, who’s white,” I said, “but I have some idea. I don’t know what it’s like to be a girl, but because we share being human, I have more idea what it’s like to be a girl than I have, say, of what it’s like to be a dog or a cat.”

“Being black is entirely different. You have no idea how a black person feels,” he repeated matter-of-factly. “No idea at all.”

“And being a girl isn’t entirely different?” I asked. “Don’t you have some idea of what it’s like to be a girl?”

“Nothing is the same as being black,” he said. “You just don’t get it, do you?”

“Harold, listen to me. All I’m saying is that no one can know exactly what it’s like to be someone else, but we all share being human, and this gives us some idea of what it’s like to be someone else. I at least know something about being a human. If I injected skin pigments into my skin, and traveled south, and was spat on and called a “nigger” like Ralph Ellison was, I’d come closer to understanding what it is to be black, wouldn’t I?”

With this, Harold got up off his bed and stood face to face with me, pointing his finger at me and repeating, loudly, “You don’t have any idea whatsoever about being black. Ralph Ellison was a joke, an insult to black people. He had no idea what it’s like to be black either. Neither you, nor any other white person, can ever know anything about the way black people are.”

Other boys came into the room and said enough is enough, it’s time to stop the discussion, no need to keep at it, and so on. What was the problem, I asked? We were just having a discussion.

“You two were arguing,” they said. “Weren’t you arguing with him?”

Well, I said, I clearly thought he was wrong. Emotionally, I could see why he might feel the way he did, but if he thought about it logically, he would surely see the conceptual point I was trying to make...

I saw no possibility of knowing the wholeness of another being. And I saw that all beings have at least some experience in common. So for me, to take a single trait or experience, or any subset of traits or experiences, and

to identify them as absolutely unapproachable to the understanding of others, would be to say that no one can know anything about anyone else. That was something I just could not accept. I knew, in my conversation with Harold, that I'd rather build bridges than walls.

*

*

*

The Exeter-Andover football game was approaching, and school was full of talk about how the Big Red (us) would chew up the Big Bad Blue (them). The whole school would turn out dressed in red. I acquired a bottle of vodka from an armpit boy who'd gone to Boston for the weekend, and in town, I bought a quart of red house paint and a tube of red lipstick. After everyone else had left for the game, I painted my whole body with the paint, my whole face and head with the lipstick. I drank as much of the vodka as I could stand. Then, wearing only a pair of red gym shorts, I ran down the four flights of stairs and into the New Hampshire snow.

I ran across the street and through the woods past the tennis courts, my bare red feet plunging into snowdrifts with every step. I ran across the baseball fields and the soccer fields to the Exeter River, then crossed the bridge and ran toward the football stadium. I was exhausted, but I kept running to keep the blood pumping in my feet, and to keep my thoughts and inhibitions from getting in the way. I was intent on being unique and being noticed, a red, visible somebody in disguise, a substitute for the me that could not be acknowledged.

As it happens, I arrived in the stadium just as the half time ceremony was beginning, the Andover band marching down the striped field. Into the midst of tubas and flutes and big bass drums I ran, weaving in and out, shouting "*Go Red!*" as loud as I could. My feet freezing, I circled back, left the stadium where I had entered it, and ran back through the snow to the dormitory. Every time I stopped to catch my breath, my feet ached from the cold and I started to run again.

When it was over, as I stood in the bathroom in the dorm, scraping to remove red paint that wouldn't come off, a few curious people came by and shook their heads disapprovingly. Other than that, the episode got no attention; no congratulations; no reviews. No one learned about the vodka. I had tried, with all might, to escape my self, but I had failed. I was still me.

A few days later, I got a letter from Anne Gross. She had been at the game, somewhere up in the stands, and she had recognized me running red across the field. She asked how I was doing.

I replied without any particular purpose, mentioning that with my

family now in Florida, I was unable to fly home for Thanksgiving.

Another letter from Anne: she had family in Exeter, and would be in town for Thanksgiving. Would I like to join her family for Thanksgiving dinner? The long weekend would be lonely. I should accept the invitation. Never mind that I had given this relationship no thought whatsoever; I should foster it. Might something come of it? Something powerful enough, perhaps, to supersede my interest in my roommate? I did not want to accept her invitation... I should accept her invitation...

In the end, I did. And for my class in creative writing, I wrote a story about it:

Butch opened the door for us. Brad went in first and I followed, anticipating the moment when I would see Her face again. A group of Academy students, I among them, had been invited to Her grandmother's house for Thanksgiving dinner. I had a hunch it would be in traditional New England style. I let the screen door close behind me, and I wondered how old it was compared to the rest of the house.

"Hello, Joe," a voice greeted me.

I looked up and it was She; but now she was talking to Brad, her cousin, so I stood just inside of the door, anxiously waiting for a break in their conversation. She had on a brown and green shift. Turkey in the grass.

"Hi there, Anne," I broke in. But I had said it too feebly, and was retreating even before I had finished. She stopped, looked over to me, paused for a while before smiling, and said, "How've you been?"

I wondered.

A woman in a bright yellow dress came over and began to talk to Brad. Anne took a half step toward me and said, "Joe, why don't you come in and meet the family?" and I did.

It had been Anne's mother in the bright yellow dress. She had a cocktail in her hand and her hair was swept back around her handsome head. She greeted me warmly, her handshake strong.

Anne's father popped up from behind a sofa and caught me blank-eyed with his flash bulb Polaroid. "Just sixty seconds," he sang, "and this little machine will have recaptured that momentous moment when you entered upon the threshold of the House of Fisk!" He advanced for the crucial handshake. When he tightened

his already strong grip, I feigned a little pain, and he released me with a broad grin on his face. "Glad to meet you." And glad to meet you, sir.

He ran back into the kitchen, re-entered with a tray full of empty glasses and a water pitcher, placed them on a table before me, and filled the glasses from the pitcher.

"Take a glass," he said, and I did, raising it to my lips.

"No, no, no!" he shouted, motioning for me not to drink. "Don't drink it, whatever you do. Just hold it there."

I looked at him in uneasy curiosity.

"Just hold it there," he repeated again and again. I gave in, deciding I had to do what he said, but I was convinced that someone somewhere knew something I didn't. And then the water turned black.

There were laughs, congratulations on a trick well played, and more laughs. I tried to talk to Anne.

A younger sister, about nine, cowered from the kitchen where she had been helping the cook with dinner: a shy "Hi" and an embarrassed retreat, nearly breaking into a run at the kitchen door.

Amanda, about six, with golden hair and perfectly babyish face, dropped from upstairs, more or less by way of the staircase, and propped herself up on the arm of a chair in the middle of the room. Balancing, she gasped as she slipped, caught her dress, and smiled. The baby, the doll, the clown, the cute one. I tried to talk to Anne.

Butch was fourteen and Wink was nineteen – Anne's brothers – but that was the only difference. They were practically twins, and when one whistled, the other whistled too. They talked, they argued, they baited each other, but they always ended up laughing.

Mrs. Fisk was probably close to eighty, but she prattled on with her wit, her grandmotherly love, her sagacious advice and her good humor. She kept the whole room in the middle of New England – where, of course, it had always belonged. Meanwhile, I couldn't keep from glancing at Anne.

And then there was Mrs. Carter. She too was close to eighty and seemed always to be dozing off, but would always wake up with cynical alertness and say, "Oh dear me! I must have been dozing off. Guess I must be getting a little too old, mustn't I, dears? What's that you say? Oh, I'm sorry, pardon me, you're all

just too quick for me. Too quick and too witty, you know.” When I’d entered the room, she’d been seated at a card table, apparently very involved with a game she’d been playing. After Amanda (the golden six-year old) had made her appearance, she sat down next to Mrs. Carter and lifted up a pile of cards to her chin.

“Okay, ready again,” said Amanda.

“Good, good,” chirped Mrs. Carter. “I just hope to heaven that I am not the old maid this time.”

“But you’re already an old maid,” said Amanda innocently. “If you were the old maid again, you’d be two old maids.” Everyone was, at first, afraid to laugh, all watching each other, but as soon as Mrs. Carter had said, “Oh, child, you’re so, so right!” everyone laughed and Mrs. Carter reigned as Old Maid for a few sweet seconds. But then Mrs. Fisk assumed her hostessship, announced that dinner was about to begin, and we all approached the dining room table. Before each place, amid the usual assortment of construction-paper turkeys, Pilgrims and Indians, was a paper plate on which had been placed five parched kernels of corn.

“It’s an old tradition...” began Mrs. Fisk, but my seat was next to Anne’s, and now we could talk.

The story ended with the implication that my real focus was to be on Anne. But notice: I wrote about everything other than Anne. What I could not describe, in the story, was my utter ambivalence toward Anne.

We had exchanged a kiss at the dance, giving me something to show for my going. But did I like her? She had been very nice to me. So – in hindsight – yes, I liked her. But at the time, I didn’t even think about liking her. I was still wrapped in insecurity. I accepted Anne’s invitation for only one reason: I would have to spend time with girls if I were ever to become an armpit boy, much less a man. Daily I felt the pressure of armpit boys who might ask why I didn’t do more than kiss her. And daily I felt the hell of my other attraction. I’d have to find happiness elsewhere if I was ever going to be at peace. But logic made no impact on my heart. So I wrote the story in order to exaggerate my interest in talking to Anne. I was “dressing up” in the trappings of desire – not because it was real, but because I was ashamed.

*

*

*

One weekend we were required to vacate Cilley Hall -- the dormitory was going to be used to house girls for the Fall Dance. Upon my return, I found a note on my desk that said "Thanks! Great room! Look in your Buddha." In the little incense dish in my Buddha's lap, I found a few buds of a sweet smelling green weed. I wrapped it in a baggy and put it away in a dresser drawer.

In December, in Palm Beach, I spent my days on the beach thinking of Him. One night I assembled a joint from the green weed I'd been given. Standing in the warm ocean air, looking from the beach up to the stars, I found myself smoking it, trying to forget.

It had no effect.

Back in Exeter, the nightly condensation on my window turned to snow and ice. Every night, as I shifted my weight in the wooden chair at my desk, translating Greek or reading the latest letter from Anne, the radiator under the window hissed at me cynically. Every time I heard a chair move or a book close in the other room of our suite, I struggled to refocus on my work, or even on the radiator's steam. et, always, I found myself thinking of Him.

In late January, the North Vietnamese began a massive invasion of South Vietnam. College students were protesting against the draft. Young men talked about whether they would go when called, or would flee to Canada. Some said that burning one's draft card was the more honorable thing to do. On April 4, Martin Luther King was assassinated. The whole world was in shock. For me, it all seemed rather far away.

I got a letter from Anne inviting me to her senior prom. Yearning to make peace with my roommate somehow -- to get feelings and fears and explanations out in the light of day -- I didn't know how I might accomplish this, but I knew that time was running out. I couldn't miss an opportunity by being away at Anne's prom. I declined her invitation.

At breakfast on June 6, I learned that Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated.

I milled about campus, sullen, imagining what life would be like after graduation. Would I say something to Him, before we went our separate ways? I thought ceaselessly about what I should say. I had become convinced that being a man meant adhering to one's duty. I wanted to fulfill my duty, but I had no idea what my duty was, or to whom it was owed.

S/SPACE ODYSSEY

In the end, I did nothing.

On graduation day, finding it awkward to be seen with my parents, I walked twenty feet ahead of them. When the moment came, the ceremony over, I rose from my folding chair on the lawn and found that everyone I knew had their backs to me, heading in different directions.

It was my plan to spend the summer traveling around Europe with George Hager, an acquaintance from Cilley Hall. We arrived in Luxembourg and took a train to Paris, where we found a cheap hotel. We toured Notre Dame and the Louvre. One night, the radio declared that students in the Sorbonne district were rioting in protest of the War. The authorities were asking people to stay away.

“Let’s go!” said George.

I had no interest in protesting the war.

“That’s beside the point!” said George. “There’s action there! We might be involved in a piece of history! We might even find some girls!”

George and I found lines of French policemen with nightsticks confronting student mobs on the streets. George was excited.

“There’s action here,” he said. “This is real.”

With George heading toward the center of the crowd, I went back to the hotel.

A few days later we took the train to Marseilles where, on a street corner, I bought a large cube of blond hashish. I was delighted to find each shaved morsel enough to get me very high. On the train back to Paris, George spotted two girls together and asked me to join him as he tried to score. I declined, preferring the company of my writing tablet. When we arrived in Paris, George announced that we were going to go our separate ways.

I took the train to Barcelona. On the way there, tunneling through the Pyrenee Mountains, as the rhythm of the chattering on the tracks rattled me, I wrote a poem:

In the train in the tunnel
Brackling bit backwardly
On the riveted tongue
Of the mouth whose great swollen throat
Sucks you deeper with the night,
As the last eye of daylight
Speeds farther farther
Away until its tiny god
Has vanished in the whole great blackness
Of the inner mountain,
Which now you see now
Without light of day without
God, you have come alone
A long way –

But seconds snatch death away
Rip hair-pulling bandages
From your eyes, and the mountain
Is there ten-twenty-thirty-
Eight thousand telephone poles
Away, clattering with voices
Instants claim you cannot hear,
Instants claim you,
Deaf to the chattering track.

In Barcelona, I smoked hashish and watched a bullfight. Then I took the train north to Amsterdam, where I bought a Dutch service jacket and knapsack in an army surplus store. It occurred to me that the crossing of international borders by train was boring. Curious to see whether borders far out in the country were guarded by “check points,” I decided to walk through the Dutch countryside and cross the border to Belgium on foot. After a second day’s walk my feet were sore, so I boarded the train again.

To my disappointment, I was sleeping when the train crossed the border into Belgium. So I spent the next night in Brussels. In my hotel room, I looked at my maps, trying to decide which would likely be the last

train stops in Belgium, and which would be the first towns I might come across when I walked into France. There, across the French border, I came across a little town with a familiar name – “Carvin.”

I’d never known anything of my grandfather’s ancestry, except that he’d claimed to be Irish. Now I wondered, might my grandfather have been French, or Belgian? In any case, the town of Carvin had to be my next destination.

I still wanted to cross an international border, however. So on the train the next day, I asked the conductor in my limited French about the last stop before the border to France.

“Ou est-ce que vous voudriez aller?” he asked. (Where did I want to go?)

“Je veux descendre au dernier arret avant la frontiere.” I want to get off at the last stop before the border.

The conductor looked at me curiously and gave me the name of the town. When I got off, I found myself the only traveler in a tiny station where the morning sun streamed through silent windows and nothing else moved. Then, an official appeared from behind a door and looked through my knapsack, failing to open the little tin of film in which I had hidden my hashish. He found no other contraband there.

“Ou est la frontiere?” I asked. *Where is the border?*

The man frowned and pointed down a road which led between fields of yellow grain. Sunshine filtered through the pollen in the air, showering the fields with light and illuminating the road ahead. I decided my little tin of hashish might be safer in my jacket pocket, so I transferred it there, and began to walk.

An hour later, in the middle of the countryside, I was wondering if I’d made a mistake – wondering how much longer I’d have to walk to reach the border – when an old, once-black jalopy rambled up the road, churning rubble and dust behind it. On its door was stenciled the word “Gendarmerie.” *Police*. Four men in blue uniforms were packed inside it; two more rode on the running rails. As it pulled to a stop next to me, all six uniforms jumped out and approached me.

“Bonjour,” I said. *“Ou est la frontiere?” Good day; where is the border?*

Uninterested in small talk, they started to go through my knapsack.

“Nous sommes en France?” I asked. *We’re in France?*

Without answering, they put my knapsack in their car, instructed me to stay where I was, and drove away, leaving me in a cloud of dust. I

continued walking in the same direction, following them, my little tin of hashish still in the pocket of my jacket.

Half an hour later they drove up again and stopped their jalopy in the road next to me. They handed me my knapsack through the window of their car, without explanation. When I asked again if we were in France, one of them replied as they drove off that we were, indeed, in France. I kept walking.

Several miles later, I entered a little town where I found a train to Carvin. I found that the town of my ancestors bore a striking resemblance to the set of a Hollywood western, a ghost town from centuries ago. The streets were so quiet I might have heard the sunlight move through the dust in the air. I asked at the station where I might find a hotel. There was only one hotel, I was told – the Bellevue – across the street. I walked in the door and asked at the desk for a room.

“La date, aujourd’hui, ici. Votre nom ici,” said the manager, pointing to blank lines on the registration form and returning to his paperwork. *Today’s date, here. Your name here.*

It was Saturday, August 3rd. I completed the form, including my name. When the manager looked, he scolded me.

“Non, non, non,” he said, *“Carvin, c’est le nom de la ville.”* Carvin is the name of the town. *“Mettez votre nom ici.”* Put your name here...

I had to show him my passport.

Once he saw it, his disdain turned to interest. He announced my presence – and my name – to the men who sat smoking cigarettes at the wooden tables on the porch. One of them – a young man with a bushy mustache who said he worked for the newspaper in Lille – asked to see my passport himself. He wanted to know why I had come to the town, and I told him it was due to the name.

“Vous cherchez vos ancêtres?” You’re looking for your ancestors?

“Yes,” I said.

The library would be open on Monday, he said.

But I would be gone by Monday, I said. I would be leaving tomorrow – after church.

It was the right decision. *“Vous êtes... catholique?”* he asked.

Yes, I confirmed – I was indeed a Catholic.

“O, magnifique!” he cried. Within minutes, he and the Mayor were driving me out of town to the coal mines, which had long since shut down, and were offering to find a crew who could open them up for me. They didn’t seem to mind when I declined the offer to open the mines, but they

were disappointed when I told them not to bother opening the town's little library for me.

The next morning, the church bell could be heard all over town. Every man, woman and child was headed toward it, so I had no need for directions. In the packed church, I listened to the mass in Latin and in French, and I heard the priest offer a prayer for the young Catholic boy from America who had crossed the wide ocean in search of the land of his fathers.

It seemed a rather large to-do over a creature so insignificant as me.

I took a train to Calais and a ferry across the English Channel. At Folkestone I got off the ferry and entered an English immigration checkpoint, where a surly official asked me to show him my passport and the currency I was bringing into the country. I laid the passport and my travelers checks on top of the counter and he took them. A minute later, he returned the passport, but not the traveler's checks.

I protested. He insisted he hadn't taken my checks, and instructed me to move on. I still protested, saying he had definitely taken my checks. He called a blue-clad customs officer, and told the customs officer I was trying to fabricate a theft, a fraud to obtain replacements for checks I still had and planned to spend elsewhere. The customs officer went through my knapsack, and then ordered me to turn my jacket pockets inside out.

In my left jacket pocket was my little tin of hashish. A smuggler of contraband drugs, I now had a customs officer demanding to see my pockets turned inside out. So I refused, insisting again that the immigration official at the counter had taken my travelers checks; I no longer had them. Again, the customs official demanded that I turn my pockets inside out.

At an obvious impasse, I made a sudden change of tactic. I said perhaps I was mistaken, perhaps someone else had taken the travelers checks. The official immediately smiled and waved me through.

On August 20, I saw in a French newspaper that Russian tanks had rolled into Czechoslovakia. On August 24th, back in Luxembourg, I finished the last of my hashish before boarding a flight back to the states.

*

*

*

I found David at Pop Pop's concrete palace in Ventnor, where he had spent the summer at the beach, looking for girls. I found Nancy and Pop Pop's cook, Ida, still in my grandfather's service after fifty years, exactly as I remembered them. They served dinner in the formal dining room, Pop Pop at the head of the long black table. After dinner, in the library, we watched

news of the Democratic Convention, at which the Chicago police beat crowds of student protesters with nightsticks.

The next day David drove us to school in his Kharman Ghia. As we arrived on the University of Pennsylvania campus – an urban campus in West Philadelphia, where the wind blows trash across the streets, and where winos and panhandlers abound – David told me how he'd been knocked out on the sidewalk one day, hit over the head with a baseball bat, his wallet taken by a street gang.

As I had at Exeter, I found schoolwork interesting. In Biology class, we dissected large white rats while they were still alive. First, we put them out temporarily with ether. Then, with syringes, we injected a longer-lasting anesthetic into their bellies – enough to keep them out, but not enough to kill them.

With the rats on their backs on the dissecting table, still breathing, we took scalpels in hand and slit their bellies from navel to throat, peeling back the skin and muscle, revealing their rib cages. We carved out the intestines and the stomachs. The little hearts continued beating and the lungs continued expanding and contracting with each new breath of air, despite the absence of the lower organs. Then with scissors we snipped the sternums and folded back the rib cages. The lungs collapsed as soon as we made these cuts, so the lungs stopped inflating and pumping air – but the hearts continued to beat.

Class discussion, at that point, centered around that most difficult of questions – were the rats alive at this point, or dead? The rats were no longer breathing, but when breathing stopped, was death immediate? Our anesthetics had rendered them “unconscious,” but had they been dreaming? And with lungs stopped, were their dreams now stopping too? We watched the hearts in the chest cavities pumping blood to the brain and concluded that the rats, though dazed and thinking little, were probably still “alive.”

We then prepared dishes of saline solution, snipped the arteries leading to the hearts and, with small forceps, transferred the beating hearts into the dishes. For several minutes the hearts kept beating even outside their bodies until, one by one, they stopped.

*

*

*

I was assigned to a third floor room in the freshman dormitory named “Mask and Wig” (after Penn’s drama troupe of the same name). There, and everywhere else on campus, it seemed, everybody was getting high. I’d been smoking hashish for several months now. I would light up my pipe,

inhale the sweet smoke, and wait to be floated into a sensuous state of sights and sounds – listening to music, drawing in pen and ink, or writing poetry.

People were saying that being “high” was nothing compared to the full-blown hallucinations and “out-of-body experiences” you could have with psychedelic drugs. One afternoon I joined a group of guys who were planning to see the new movie, Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. Before the movie, capsules of mescaline were passed around. We set out on the streets of Philadelphia for the walk to the theatre. It was cold October, but still daylight, and I looked at the buildings, the cars, the traffic lights, the people we passed, trying to see something unusual. Everything remained normal.

Inside the theatre, we waited for the movie to begin. The lights went down, the theatre became dark and silent. On screen, it was pre-dawn and still dark. The only sound was a quiet heartbeat. One by one, dim shapes began to move. The shapes became prehistoric apes, and then the apes had faces. The faces seemed human, whispering to each other, rumbling, plotting the hunt, then chatting and screeching as the score erupted in pounding, thrilling rhythms and the theatre was filled with a large tribe of hairy, prehistoric humanoids, grunting and conspiring to satisfy their needs. At the climax, the humanoid monkeys looked up at the starry night sky, and I looked with them. In the farthest reaches of space, weightless in a spaceship, we found clean-shaven men and women in white suits walking upside down, and an evil computer named HAL that asserted its superiority over us.

When the movie ended we walked out of the theatre into a dark and cold city where night had fallen and the world had become surreal. I tried hard to keep up with the other guys while my mind flashed from the white whiskers on an old man’s face to a couple talking in a stair stoop, from a wino sleeping under some newspapers to furls of gray smoke drifting in front of a florescent red light in the window of a saloon. Each of these images became a moving picture as vibrant and as large as the movie screen at the theatre, and one replaced another like the pages of a book being thumbed and fluttered quickly. Back in my room, with time having lost its meaning, I drew startling pictures and wrote poetry until dawn.

*

*

*

In November, David and his roommates hosted a big party. I arrived at their town house and had several quick beers. Music was playing loud downstairs where a crowd was beginning to form and people were

beginning to dance. Someone had spread several mattresses on the floor, and couples were beginning to sit on the mattresses to drink. I was upstairs, thumbing through record albums, when I heard someone offer me a tablet of LSD. I took it, washing it down with a gulp of beer. Then someone asked if I had heard the Iron Butterfly doing "*Onna Godda Davida*," and urged me to listen to it. I listened to the whole album.

Hearing a commotion downstairs, I went down a few steps, looking over the railing to see what it was. The area downstairs was a living sea, swimming with bodies, wall to wall. Someone had vomited on one of the mattresses on the floor, and voices from the crowd could be distinguished against the electric guitars, volunteering suggestions about what to do.

"Someone get a wet towel," I heard.

"No, take the mattress outside."

"No, no – we need the mattress in here. Just turn it over."

"Stand back," I heard, and watched as the area around the offending mattress was cleared. Several young men lifted the mattress up, turned it upside down, and set it back down in place. Some voices protested in disgust, others raved at the brilliance of the solution, but the sea of bodies closed again where it had parted and the mayhem continued.

I considered joining the party downstairs but I recognized no one, and everyone seemed cozy and engaged. I was about to go back upstairs when a bright flashlight outside caught my attention. Its light bore into the living room throng, singling out a face here and there, quickly getting the attention of everyone in the room. It was the police.

"We've had complaints from the neighbors," they said. "The music is too loud. Turn it down."

I heard random grumbling and cursing. A light in the kitchen went on, and a few bodies turned quickly to conceal one thing or another. The volume of the music went down. The flashlight turned away and the cops left. A minute later, I heard someone call out, "They're gone now. Turn the music back up!" and the music got loud again.

Fifteen minutes later, the cops were back. The music was shut off. In the relative quiet, I heard deep voices outside asking whose townhouse this was. David and one of his roommates went outside. I heard the deep voices say that if the music didn't stay turned down, someone was going to be arrested.

"To hell with that," I heard from inside. "We've got rights." More deep voices, and then calls of "Fascist pigs!" and a deep-voiced "Who said that?" followed by anonymous grumbling and cursing. The arrest warning was

repeated, and the cops left again.

This time, the call to turn the volume back up was swift, but challenged.

“No, they’re serious, man – the pigs are serious!” was one challenge.

But there was also, “This is a free country, man! Those god-damned pigs are the ones who want us to go to Vietnam. They started the war, man. Why should we do what they tell us? Turn the volume up all the way this time!”

This debate was destined to be decided by whoever was closest to the stereo. As it turned out, the volume went up, even louder than before, and from the general clamor, defiance was clearly the popular choice. The music blared and the revelry reached new heights.

A few minutes later, the flashlights were back.

“Who’s in charge here?” I heard. “Whose place is this?”

David went out front in an effort to salvage the situation, and I descended the steps to see what was happening. From around me, there were more hoots and jeers of “Dirty fascist pigs!” and “Idiot cops!” Deep voices traded barbs with anonymous shouts and taunting, and finally, I heard “Okay. That’s it. Everyone here is under arrest. You’re all coming down to the station.”

As cops came into the house and ushered people outside, I began to feel the LSD I’d taken. The crowd of revelers had been an anonymous, amorphous sea of people. In contrast, each cop was a unique presence, a lighthouse with his own flashlight. Like a ship in a stormy harbor, I eyed the lighthouses and avoided the rocky shoals. But here, the lighthouses were all moving. Cops took groups of students outside the townhouse. Cops went upstairs and came down with more people. People milled around downstairs, and went upstairs, saying things like “I need to get my coat,” then went upstairs to hide.

I heard one cop tell another, “Search the basement,” and a minute later, the cop who’d gone down the basement stairs came up again, with a young man in one hand and a young woman in another.

“Is that everyone out of the basement?” the first cop asked. “Yes,” I heard.

I navigated across the room, keenly aware of every cop, keenly aware that each was focusing on somebody or something other than myself – and when I was certain no one was looking, I ducked into the basement doorway, shut it gently behind me, and stole silently down the wooden stairs.

The basement was windowless and – without lights – was totally dark. At the bottom of the stairway, I felt my way along the railing, deciding the best hiding place would be under the stairs themselves. I was delighted to feel a table underneath the stairway with a blanket draped over it. I crawled under it and crouched, tucking my legs and arms into as small and tight a ball as I could, my back to the wall, my knees under my chin, my arms around my shins. I shut my eyes, then opened them, not this time plotting a means of waking up from a monstrous nightmare, but testing to see if the air around me was really as dark as it seemed. Except for the feel of my lashes and lids, there was no difference in shade between the blackness of eyes open and the blackness of eyes closed. Then I shut my eyes tight. The insides of my lids, squeezed, produced a kaleidoscope of reds and oranges and greens, shooting like lightning flashes across the blackness. I opened my lids, and the blackness was pure and stark – no colors at all. I heard footsteps – not shoes, but hard-heeled boots – crossing the kitchen floor above my head; and I heard my own heart thumping.

The kitchen door – above my head and to the left – was opened, releasing a shaft of light down the stairway. Turning my head slightly to the right, daring not to move or make a sound, I could see through the basement stairs – they had no risers. If someone on the other side were to crouch to my level, he'd be able to see me plainly. Turning my head quietly back to face forward, I took comfort that there was, indeed, a blanket directly in front of my eyes, hanging from the table top above my head, shielding me from the front. I heard a single boot hit the first step at the top of the stairs, and then silence. I heard the pulse of blood in the veins between my ears. I wondered whether my heart – a bass drum by comparison – was audible to the man at the top.

Two boot heels then struck, alternating, step by step, and to my right I could see one black boot land on a step, inches from my right ear, then the back of a blue pant leg and the back of a knee, and now there were two blue thighs at my eye level, at the foot of the stairs, which quickly disappeared behind the blanket in front of me. Now the room was lit by the shaft of light from upstairs, but I could see only the dark wool hanging inches in front of my face.

The footsteps stopped. I imagined the lighthouse beam searching every bank and cove of the harbor, and I heard a deep voice:

“Playing hide and seek, eh?”

Was he speaking to me?

“You, under the table.”

I saw now that my blanket didn't reach all the way to the floor. My shoes were projecting from under it. I got out, was led upstairs, was walked outside, and was led to a trio of paddy wagons parked at the curb, their lights flashing.

"Open up," said the cop who'd found me. "I found one more."

"There's no more room."

"He can ride in the squad car with us."

It was November and very cold. I had on only a T-shirt. I was hustled into the back seat of a police cruiser, shivering, alone, and scared. Two officers got into the front seat and began talking to each other as we pulled away from the curb. My heart raced; my chin trembled in the cold; I was being arrested! And my mind, crippled with hallucinations, was going to be little help in dealing with things. Fortunately, as the heater in the car began to warm me up again, my devastating shame subsided just a little. I became engrossed in the idea that I was now a part of one of the lighthouses. We made our way through the streets, our flashing lights spinning out in every direction, striking store fronts and back alleys, catching faces like dazed cattle, sparring with the white headlights of oncoming cars, doing intergalactic battle with the changing oranges, reds and greens of traffic lights at the intersections. It was colorful, fast and fascinating. Then I realized the officers were talking about me. College kids. Spoiled. Need to be taught a lesson. My attention turned inward again and once more I felt very afraid and ashamed. I began to sweat, realizing I was having difficulty separating reality from hallucination. I began to shiver again and I felt a powerful urge to urinate building inside my bladder.

We pulled up outside a police station. I was led inside, where about sixty students from the townhouse were assembled in the center of a very large room, two or three officers patrolling their perimeter. I was led to join them, instructed to stay put, and told to wait my turn to be fingerprinted and booked. I looked at others in the crowd but recognized none of them. Their faces swelled and changed shapes as they said things to each other I could no longer understand. The fullness of my bladder filled my brain with images of capillaries and soft tissue bursting. My mind made quick, unconnected visits to windows and desks at the edges of the room, where officers in blue did paperwork and talked on phones, but I could not understand their conversations. I noticed that the size of the crowd seemed smaller, and I realized that, one by one, we were being ushered through a door into another room, ahead of us. A tall young man, about twenty-five, spoke to some officers; I heard someone say he was a Penn law student,

negotiating for us. Back at the town house, I had been keenly aware of each officer's exact location. Now, I was not able to focus on more than one detail of the universe at a time. I looked around and saw an officer go through a door to the street, behind us. I refused to think about my bladder, and with no reason to focus on anything else, I summoned all my powers of concentration and focused them on the exit door to the street. Single-mindedly I walked directly toward it. I waited for someone to cry out Halt! but no one did. I passed through the door and out to the street and the cold November night.

Overhead, streetlights and men in leather caps and fire escapes and tall buildings and lights behind window shades all tumbled into my mind's eye, and I could make sense of none of them. I had no idea where I was. I wanted to walk somewhere, to distance myself from the station, where policemen would be running out momentarily to arrest me for escaping. But as I searched the sky for street signs, everything seemed to change, blending and melting before I could see what it was. I began to walk, having no idea where I was going, glancing up in search of meaning from time to time, finding nothing.

Then I heard a voice from a passing car.

"Hey, isn't that Carvin's brother?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, man, get in!"

The car door opened, and I got in. I didn't know who I was with, but they apparently knew me. Some time later they dropped me off at Mask and Wig, and finding myself alone in the bathroom, I experienced an orchestral, whole-body urination, feeling urine course through the spaces of my body into and out of my bladder. The cracked grout in the bathroom tile opened and closed like plates of our planet during an earthquake. I fully believed that I had urinated all over myself, and soaked my trousers – I could feel my blue jeans, and they were soaked and smelled of urine -- and then I decided that I had imagined it, and my jeans were dry. Back in my room, alone, I began to take stock of my self. In the dark, listening to my heart beat and watching the face of a clock on my desk, I tried without success to keep up with the passage of time.

I called David's townhouse. There was no answer. Some infinite, unknowable number of heartbeats later, I tried again. Still no answer. A procession of thoughts about space and stars and light and flesh proceeded, outside of and apart from time, and then my phone rang. It was David. He and his roommate, Bruce, were at Race Street Station, in the "drunk tank,"

with winos all around them vomiting and urinating in the cells. Bruce was terribly sick and vomiting everywhere, David said. He wasn't sick himself, he said, but every time Bruce or one of the winos vomited, he couldn't help but vomit too.

"Joe, you have to come bail us out!"

Returning to the police station in my condition seemed to me like returning to the jaws of laughing death itself. I wasn't sure I could, and I told him so. But he said he could only make that one call and he couldn't stand it any longer – I had to come bail him out, as quickly as possible. I could use his car.

"The bail is ten dollars for each of us," he said, "and I only have five. Take the "M" bus back to the townhouse. The door is open. The keys to my car are on the table next to my bed. There's twenty dollars in my wallet, I think. If not, get twenty from Bruce's room, or anywhere else you can, and come get us – now!"

"Where's Race Street?" I needed to know.

"Just go from our place up to Broad and go north," he said. "When you get to Race Street, turn right, and you'll get here."

I was in no condition to go back downtown, and I was in no condition to drive David's car. The warmth and safety of my room seemed the only place for my ever-deepening hallucinations. But as surely as if David were ordering me down from the top bunk to scratch his back again, I had no choice but to obey.

I went out and stood on the street corner. Several buses pulled up, covered with liquor and tobacco ads, splashing the sidewalks with brown slush from the street. None of them seemed to have letters. I still could not comprehend the passage of time. I nearly gave up my wait, but then a bus clearly labeled the "M" bus approached, and I got on. I somehow managed to keep track of streets well enough to get off near David's townhouse, and now in more familiar territory, I was able to find it. The door was still open, as he had predicted. The keys to the Karman Ghia were on the table by his bedside, and the car itself was parked on the street.

I hadn't driven a stick shift since the day I drove the Jeep in Texas – and now I was challenged by a psychedelic escapade in full swing. I managed to start the car, to get it out onto Broad Street, and to stop at a red light, facing the tall white illuminated tower of Independence Hall, where the Liberty Bell is on display. As I waited, a police cruiser pulled up next to me. I avoided eye contact, but was certain the officer knew exactly what I was doing. He was reading my mind. Listening to my engine as we waited

for the light to turn green, I thought it was idling too fast. Fearful it might attract attention, I switched into neutral, but the engine only idled faster. The traffic light turned green, and I moved the stick forward into gear, but the car wouldn't move. I pulled the knob back into neutral, and then pushed it back into gear again, but still the car wouldn't move. Frantically, I tried to get the car to move, but it did not, and while I fumbled frantically, the light turned red again.

The police cruiser had moved forward at the green light, of course, but noticing that I had not, it had moved ahead slowly. It was now stopped at the light a block ahead of me, waiting. I kept struggling with the gearshift, and suddenly, when the light again turned green, I was moving forward – though I had no idea what I had done to get the car into gear.

The lights were synchronized and the police cruiser moved forward too – slowly, waiting for me to catch up. I decided not to risk putting the car into neutral again – I would adjust my speed to catch all the lights green. Estimating the light changes, I let the car move slowly from one intersection to the next. The police cruiser slowed down until it was next to me. Even if I'd dared to make eye contact I wouldn't have been able to, as all my attention was focused on the timing needed to avoid hitting another red light. Finally, the police cruiser turned off Broad Street, and I began splitting my concentration between the traffic lights and the street signs, remembering to look at each one as I passed, watching for Race Street, where I knew I had to turn right. All the while, I had to fight distraction by the moon, which dripped down and absorbed the tops of buildings with its milky light.

Continuing this way, painstakingly slowly, I drove on and on. I began to have a vague sense of the gradual passage of time.

The skyscrapers of downtown Philadelphia gave way to the brownstones of North Philly, and now the sky grew lighter, signaling daybreak. The sun's rise afforded me my first bridge into the comprehension of time since swallowing the LSD the night before. The brownstones had somewhere turned to brick and to white wood siding and trees in parks. I saw a sign that said Jenkintown, which I knew was suburbia, many miles to the north of Philadelphia. In my inability to sense the passage of time, I had obviously passed Race Street long ago. As I turned around, I discovered the source of the problem with shifting – the gears did not engage until the hand pressure was removed from the shifting stick. In my unmitigated anxiety, I had been trying to force the car into gear, thereby preventing the gear from engaging.

Many miles later, back in the City, I discovered that Race Street is only a few blocks past Independence Hall. I arrived at the station to find David pacing back and forth on the sidewalk outside the station, furious, asking me “Where the Hell have you been?” and “What in God’s name took you so long?” and telling me that bail had been reduced when the morning shift had arrived. Bail was now only five dollars each. He had paid his own already.

“Just give me the money and let me get Bruce out of here. You wouldn’t believe that drunk tank, man – There’s so much piss and vomit, you can’t avoid standing in pools of it.”

Standing there, shivering in the cold, his palm extended for the money, he repeated, “So, what took you so long?”

It wasn’t till then that I remembered: I’d forgotten to bring the money.

T/HE MAGIC CIRCLE

My incompetence had disgraced me. For the three-minute drive back to his townhouse, David didn't need to berate me. I knew how badly I'd let him down. He got the money from his room and drove back to post bail for his roommate himself, suggesting that I go back to the freshman dorms.

Back in my room, I tried to escape the images that danced in my head. But flashlights and blue uniforms and urinating winos rained in my mind. I couldn't get to sleep until noon. When I awoke again, my thoughts more stable, I set about trying to find a more honorable course for the rest of my life.

There was a housekeeper who daily cleaned the bathrooms for the boys of Mask and Wig. Each day, prior to entering the bathroom on our hall, she would crack open the door and call into it – "Halloo –is there any one here? I'm a comin' in..."

With her in mind, I decided to build another dummy, assembling him again out of bed sheets and old clothes, paying special attention this time to the legs and feet. When the dummy was completed, I took him into one of the bathroom stalls and seated him on the toilet. I checked to be sure that, when viewed from outside the stall, his booted legs looked real. Then I waited in my room for the housekeeper to arrive. Soon she did, and I went out in the hall to watch the show.

As was her custom, she cracked the door to the boys' bathroom and called into it, "Halloo –is there any one here? I'm a comin' in..." I listened as she entered the bathroom whistling and went about her work.

"Oh, me goodness!" I heard next, as she'd surely looked under the panels of the stall and seen the dummy's legs and boots. "I didn't know ye

were in there. I'm so sorry. I'll be back in just a bit..."

I ducked behind a corner as she came out. Several minutes later, she went into the bathroom again: "Just checkin back. Still there? I'm sorry..."

Then, on her next trip, "Are ye alright in thar? Is everything okay?"

Of course, like Brer Rabbit's tar baby, my dummy didn't answer.

"Surely there's somethin' wrong..." she fretted, half to herself, half to the dummy.

Then, addressing the toilet stall more loudly, as if hoping someone else would overhear her plight, "Young fella. I say. Young mon -- can I get ya some help? Do ya need some assistance in there?"

She came out of the bathroom and I scurried to hide behind a door.

"Helloo, there," she called out in the hallway, knocking on the doors of several rooms. "There's a young fella's been sittin' on the john for half an hour, now, and he ain't sayin' nothin... I'm thinkin' he's not well. Helloo -- is there anyone around?"

When she found no one around to help her, she returned to the bathroom.

"Jeesus," she said. I heard her rap on the door of the stall.

"I'm opening the door, now..."

"I'm a comin' in, now..."

I waited for that instant of discovery when my own imagination would flower in the housekeeper's mind. When it finally came, I got everything I'd hoped for.

"*Eeeiayeee!* What's this? It's just a sack of clothes, it is! By god, who would do such a thing? A god-damned sack of clothes!"

In my own way, I had breathed life into her. I had conceived an idea in my imagination, and I had planted it in her.

I waited until she was gone before I dared retrieve the dummy. Then, encouraged by my success, I conceived a new plan.

First, I would get the other freshmen of Mask and Wig used to the dummy. They could see him, they could touch him, they could kick him for that matter, in order to know well that he was just a dummy of sheets and old clothes. Then, when all were familiar with him, when all knew well, from personal experience, that he was nothing but a sack of clothes, I would make a switch: crawling into the dummy's clothes myself, I would lie somewhere, motionless, and when someone walked by, I would suddenly come to life!

For several days, I left him in various places in Mask and Wig: sitting in a chair in the common room, propped up on a broom around a corner,

sitting on the landing at the top of the stairs – until it seemed all the residents of the dorm were well accustomed to his presence. Then I disemboweled him and climbed into the clothes myself.

I could see in the mirror that I looked too natural, so I stuffed a few towels and other items in odd places in the sleeves and hips and torso to make myself as awkward as I could. Then I went down to the foot of the stairs and lay down, assuming the most crumpled, laundry bag position I could.

I waited, motionless, for my next prey. In a few minutes our residence advisor, Bill Oliver, came in from outside.

“What the hell are you doin’ now, Carvin? Are you drunk? Pick yourself up and take a cold shower.”

Without pausing, he stepped over me and went up the stairs.

*

*

*

In the Spring, I enrolled in a creative writing class taught by the novelist John Widemann. For the semester’s work, we’d be required to write a novel. This seemed a daunting task, but I approached the challenge with determination.

I first conceived the following premise: A humble rustic wakes up one morning in the mountains, with no immediate recollection of who he is or how he got there. Walking down the mountain toward the village, he meets various characters. Through their eyes, the reader is increasingly exposed to evidence that the rustic is the *creator* of all the other characters – indeed, of the entire world that they inhabit. The other characters ask the rustic why they exist, and what they should do. He has no answers.

I put a title page on it and began to write, but I had no idea how the novel would end. I just had a mood, a feeling. I didn’t know how to plot a course from beginning to middle, or ensure that when the climax is reached, a proper ending emerges. So I started writing something else. I imagined myself in a bathroom stall in a cold train station. I described the details of a spider in his web, in the corner of the ceiling. My brother David was outside, and he was calling me to come with him to Palm Beach. Then a change of scene: an expensive restaurant in Palm Beach, an outdoor table on a warm night. My father sat at the head of the table. I felt out of place.

Each scene I wrote was well described. But again, I wrote without forethought, describing images and scenes however they came. At the end of the year, I turned in about forty pages of such scenes, calling them, “The Magic Circle.” As I did so, I learned that others had turned in completed

novels, hundreds of pages long. For the first time in years, I found myself wondering whether I had a novel in me after all.

David and I drove back to Palm Beach. My father had bought a new house on Eden Road, a brick house surrounded with tall hedges. I sat on the porch at night, ground lights illuminating the palm trees and hibiscus from underneath, feeling the warm wind blowing through, hearing the ocean breaking on the beach, smoking marijuana.

My mother prodded me to look for a job, so I went to the State Employment Service in West Palm Beach. The lady at the counter saw my Palm Beach address and asked why I was there. "Can't your father get you a job?" I told her I didn't want to work for my father. As if to test me, she asked if I would take a job that started work at 2 or 3 in the morning. I told her I would.

I was hired as a milkman for McArthur Dairy. My first night, starting at 2 a.m., I met my teacher, a milkman named Scotty. Donning a white uniform, I watched wooden milk crates roll from the refrigerated warehouse down a noisy gangplank into the hot night, coming to rest on the loading dock, condensation quickly forming on the glass bottles. I loaded the crates into the back of the truck, stacking them where I was told. Then, in the icehouse, I shoveled shaved white ice into the back of the truck, over the milk. Our cargo covered and cold, Scotty and I set out for Boca Raton.

As we drove through the night on State Road 441 – no buildings in those days, just long miles of two-lane road cutting through the saw grass – I began my education with Scotty. For the sake of speed and efficiency, there were no seats in the cab – the truck was driven from a standing position. In addition, there were no doors on either side of the cab – just open sides. This was so the milkman could reach behind him for a customer's order between stops and, glass bottles already in hand, jump out of the cab and hit the ground running as soon as the truck came to a stop. The summer air was warm, the night sky filled with stars. We made our rounds, putting milk on doorsteps until late in the morning.

After we delivered our orders, Scotty taught me to drive the truck. To drive while standing up required a reprogramming of all one's body parts. For the feet, there was a clutch pedal on the left, a brake pedal in the middle, and an accelerator on the right, as in any other vehicle. But as I quickly learned, these pedals were all farther off the floor than in a car. Moreover, moving the feet from one of these pedals to another while standing up required defying the laws of gravity. Absent buttocks on a seat, the driver's weight was centered on one or more of the pedals. This force, if

left unchecked, would lead to disaster: Putting one's full body weight on the clutch would mean never being in gear. Putting one's full body weight on the accelerator would mean "flooring it." Putting one's full body weight on the brake would mean a very rude and sudden stop. And, as Scotty was quick to point out, we had more than milk in the truck. If we lurched to a start or jammed on the brakes too suddenly, there would be cartons of eggs and cottage cheese and glass bottles of orange juice in the crash, not just milk and ice.

The trick was to put the weight of one's chest on top of the broad, horizontal steering wheel. By transferring body weight to the chest and steering wheel, it was easier to work one's feet. The wheel easily supported this weight, and this solved the foot problem satisfactorily – at least as long as the truck was going straight forward. When it was time to turn the truck, the wheel turned like a roulette wheel – a torso resting on the wheel would spin, causing the driver's feet to come off the pedals altogether and head toward the windshield and around again.

This meant that elbows and forearms had to be nimble, left and right arms alternately supporting the chest while hands worked the wheel like hands on a pommel horse, the wheel turning and the feet moving from pedal to pedal. The fact that it was possible to drive the truck at all was a testament to the industrial age, another example of *homo habilis* having mastered the world of machines.

Scotty went on vacation. I spent the early morning hours jumping in and out of the cab of my truck, running up sidewalks and stairs, providing milk and cream to the people of the Florida Gold Coast. I was home by noon, and after spending the afternoon lying in the hot sand on the beach, and rolling in the salty ocean surf, I was usually in bed by 7 p.m., up again by 2.

One evening I stayed up late to watch a crude live television picture transmitted from outer space. It was Neal Armstrong getting out of his landing module, taking man's first step onto the surface of the moon.

*

*

*

In the fall of 1969, I moved into the Sigma Nu fraternity house. Once an elegant mansion, the chapter house at Penn had ten-foot ceilings and a fireplace in every room. Now, it was in disrepair.

Weekdays at Sigma Nu were mostly for study and television. But Saturday nights were for parties. The beer kegs were opened; the waist-high trashcans were filled with fruit punch and grain alcohol; the band began to

play; the girls arrived. A stream of people from all over the city came in the front door and down the cellar stairs to the band and the alcohol. Upstairs in the bedrooms, private parties rolled.

On December 1, we stopped partying to gather around the television set: the first lottery for the military draft was being televised. We watched as three hundred sixty five little balls rolled around together in a wire tumbler. Of all the balls in the tumbler, only one had our birthday on it, and we knew that the random action of those balls carried our futures within them. An official drew the first number from the tumbler, and then another, and another. All the numbers were printed in the newspaper the following day. Many students who had never bought a newspaper bought their first one that day. Across the nation, young men born on certain dates began to make travel plans for Canada or Vietnam. Lucky as always, my number was delightfully safe – somewhere up in the 300's. David's ball, on the other hand, was well below 200. He began to make new decisions about the course of his life.

One evening, I took a tablet of purple LSD. Three friends and I decided we'd been stuck in the city for too long, so we went outside and started walking. We decided we'd walk until we couldn't see a building in any direction. At noon the next day, we found ourselves on a hillside in the town of Media. We could see no buildings. A sign told us we were 26 miles from the city.

Another night, I dropped acid and lay down on my back on the subway tracks in the Street. Starting with the distant tension of trains nearly imperceptible against my spine, I felt the pavement ascend through gradations of vibration and sound until I had to stand up and move aside to make way for the metal that barreled toward me, clacking fast and close. A wall of fast-moving air slammed me out of the way.

Another night I went to Irvine Auditorium and listened to Harvard Professor Timothy Leary lecture about the power of hallucinogenic drugs and free love. The next month, he was arrested and sentenced to prison.

At the end of the school year, we drove south to Palm Beach, where I worked at McArthur Dairy again. Nightly I rode around south Florida before others were awake. I rode through the saw grass and scrub pines, passing raccoons, armadillos and deer, no house or home in sight. I rode through small towns, passing stores with white stucco walls, delivering quarts of milk to wooden houses on concrete blocks. And I rode through ocean front towns of royal palms and towering manicured hedges, delivering eggs and ice cream to the back doors of mansions.

Groundskeepers, butlers, chauffeurs and cooks, whom I had earlier known only as “servants,” accepted me as one of their own.

It was generally a good idea to carry extra milk into a house. (In case a customer wanted an extra quart, you didn’t have to go back to the truck to get it.) One day, while delivering milk to the Fanjuls (the owners of United States Sugar), their cook told me she didn’t need any milk at all, leaving me with two quart bottles, one in each hand, to take back to the truck. I walked outside to find I hadn’t set the emergency brake, and my truck had started to roll down the incline of the driveway. The gradual incline was about to turn sharply into a steep one. I raced after the rolling truck, a bottle in each hand. At the foot of the hill was a Rolls Royce parked across the street. My truck and I were both gaining speed toward it when I caught up to the truck. Taking advantage of the absence of doors, I jumped into the truck, my forearms and chest landing on the steering wheel like a pummel horse, my right foot landing firmly but gently on the brake. The truck came to a stop just inches from the Rolls. I still held two cold and sweating glass bottles of milk, one in each hand.

I hadn’t realized there was an audience, but now I heard clapping and repeated shouts of “*Lechero! Lechero! Bravo! Lechero!*” The Spanish-speaking Fanjul staff was lined up outside the kitchen door, applauding me. The cheers elated me. I felt I could jump from a galloping horse onto a runaway train. I concluded that *Lechero* must mean more than “milkman.” I translated it as: “wild and daring milk truck rider under the stars.”

*

*

*

At summer’s end, I had got a dog, who I named Hookah. He was a small mongrel, black with floppy ears and hair like a Labrador, but with the build of a dachshund. I returned to Philadelphia with him and moved into an apartment on Chestnut Street with my friend from Mask and Wig, John Haweeli. I found a green upholstered rocking chair at the Salvation Army for ten dollars, dragged it down the sidewalk and placed it in my room. Then I bought three grams of hashish and a little copper pipe. Now I was ready. I sat in my green rocker all autumn, smoking my pipe, reading my assignments, drawing in black with my pen and ink.

One night, Hookah got into my hashish. John and I laughed, watching him act drunk and disoriented, clearly experiencing the effects of the drugs.

Another cold autumn night I let Hookah out the back door of the apartment, where there was a little fenced-in yard. When I went to let him back in, I discovered he was missing. John and I went out, calling for him.

Then we walked up and down the streets for several blocks, calling “Hookah,” people staring at us, wondering what we were saying or whom we were calling. My desperation grew as minutes turned to hours, with Hookah nowhere to be found. Throughout the search, I kept thinking I could hear him (ever so faintly) whimpering somewhere, cold and hurt, anxious to be found and comforted. I marveled at the power of my imagination, sure that my desire to hear him was creating these sounds in my mind. After two hours of searching and calling, I returned to the apartment and went to bed, sad in my certainty that a dog could not survive a night alone in the turbulent city.

The next morning, John went into the back yard and came back with Hookah in his arms. With a clear head, John had heard Hookah’s whimpering on the roof. The dog had climbed the fire escape, where he’d been whimpering all night, afraid to come down from the heights.

INVITATION

As snow fell on Penn's ivied spires, I became engrossed in Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*. She had written the novel when she was nineteen – younger than I was now. Her subjects were the mind of the ambitious creator, Doctor Frankenstein, and his sense of responsibility for the monster he had created. The novel ends with the doctor chasing his creation across arctic ice, hoping to track him down and kill him.

In Palm Beach for the winter break, I found a book at the library on how to make a marionette. I fashioned a molded head to look like Boris Karloff's portrayal of Frankenstein's monster, with pegs coming out of the temples. I made a torso of fabric and wood, and then limbs jointed at the elbows and knees. I assembled all the pieces together and hung the result from a series of strings, all attached to a cross to be held in the puppeteer's hand. I walked the little marionette around my parents' house on Eden Road, making Chickie smile.

One morning I learned that Hookah had followed Chickie down to the beach. I ran after them, only to hear a car screech on Ocean Boulevard. I ran up to find that Chickie had made it safely across the road, but Hookah had not. I came upon him in his last moments, his lungs collapsing, his eyes glazing over. He died in my hands.

I pondered my responsibility for him, and I wondered what it meant "to be made in the image of God."

Returning to Philadelphia alone, I enrolled in a course called "Philosophical Theology" taught by a Catholic theologian, Doctor James Ross. The key question, for me, remained the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge with human free will. In facing this dilemma, I simply couldn't accept their coexistence. I now asked: What kind of God would

have created a world *without* free will?

Remembering Mr. Czaja's statement that children are creative by nature, I decided that Man is like God in one aspect more essential than any other: Creatorship. In endowing mankind with free will, God made us capable of making our own decisions – of creating a part of reality. We actually decide the very next moments of our lives, at least, and so too all else that might be affected by our choices. And so, we become responsible for their consequences.

I had thrown together white sheets and old clothes and stuffed them together to form dummies. I had hung these dummies from roofs with ropes, and I had sat them on toilet seats. I had made my own marionette. All the creatures I had made were dumb, without the capacity to move of their own volition – slaves to the limitations of my own design. I had not – indeed, I could not – endow them with the ability to initiate actions on their own. They were doomed to a reactive existence, hanging at the end of the rope or string in my hands.

But Shelley's Doctor Frankenstein had created a rational animal. And God had created Man "in his own image," creating another "creator," as it were — a race not bound by ropes or strings, not limited to acting in this moment precisely as determined by the immediate past moment, not limited to doing precisely what a foreknowing God knew they would do. Could I find "worthy of worship" a god who had tethered me to puppet strings, who kept me on his leash, preventing me from ever veering from the course he had decided for me? God had created man in what Sartre called "nothingness," an empty space between facts and events, a space in which true creativity can occur, undetermined by any external cause. This was a God whose love was so great he had given me a part of his divine nature, his essential Creatorship.

Then it occurred to me: this gift of creatorship is the very thing that makes our choices morally consequential. Mere creatures cannot be responsible for their actions, but creators always are.

*

*

*

I wrote a paper for Dr. Ross's class on the concept of miracles as an additional intervention, by an all-powerful Creator, in an otherwise self-sustaining world. He applauded the paper. Meanwhile, he challenged his class to find flaws in his new proof for the existence of God. After laborious study, I pointed out that he'd used the word "possible" in two distinct ways, and once this point was discovered, his proof became circular. He

applauded my insight.

As the year drew to an end, I was accepted into graduate school for English at the University of Michigan. I began making plans to attend, to further my studies of English, to go on to become a teacher. Then Doctor Ross asked me to visit him in his office. I had a keen sense of logic and analysis, he said, and an obvious interest in philosophy. Had I ever thought of a career in philosophy?

I was startled. I had never thought of a career in philosophy – it seemed to be the fate of everyone to be a philosopher in some sense of the word, as determined by what we choose to think about – didn't it? What, indeed, did a career in philosophy mean? Flattered, I wavered, saying I might consider it, but I already had plans to do graduate work in English.

"May I urge you to reconsider?" he said. "You are a natural philosopher. I can't tell you how strongly I feel you should consider philosophy as a career."

I had never had anyone urge me to become a teacher or a writer. I asked him to let me think it over, and I returned to my room on Chestnut Street, where his words resounded in my brain. I wondered if my decision to go to graduate school might be a mistake. But I knew, now, that the decision was mine alone to make. I knew that my decision would have consequences for the rest of my life. I knew that I, and I alone, was responsible for my choice: Teacher? Writer? Philosopher?

Then the telephone rang in my room. I picked up the receiver. It was my father. Since my first year at Exeter, seven years before, my father had never once before called me at school, for any reason. I couldn't imagine why he was calling now.

"Joe, I have bought another business, a seat belt business – and we're working on finding other companies to buy. Joe, I tell you, with the plans I have, with all the opportunities that exist, I really need someone with your talents in business with me. I am asking you not to go to graduate school. Please, come to work for me."

C/ONSEQUENCES

A career in business was the last thing I would have chosen for myself. But I could tell a positive answer would mean a lot to Dad.

“Just try it for a year,” he had said. “If you don’t like it, you can always go back to school.”

As I struggled to make the decision, I thought about my siblings. Chickie had Down Syndrome. David was soon to be sent overseas. Corinne’s learning disability would keep her from ever going into business with Dad. Jimmy and Chris were still only thirteen and fifteen. I was the oldest available son. Dad had even said he “*needed*” me!

I could have gone to Michigan to study English. I could have become a philosopher. But during summer afternoons I had read Mario Puzo’s novel, “The Godfather,” and had been intrigued by its themes of family loyalty and service. They had echoed the piety of Aeneas toward his father. Dad would be disappointed if I said no to him. With his health problems, he wouldn’t be around forever. Someday, I thought, I might take his place at the head of a family empire – I might be the Godfather himself. I mulled it over, and I agreed.

*

*

*

But Dad wouldn’t close on the new business until September. While the rest of the Quaker Class of ’71 was collecting their diplomas, I rented a cabin with some friends in the mountains of Western Pennsylvania. On the very cold first morning, I had to use the outhouse, which sat on a hillside. After I had done my business, I dropped the soiled toilet paper between my legs. But before I could grab more paper, the dropped wad flew up between

my legs – into the air – and fell to the ground in front of me. None of the education my father had given me could explain this anti-gravitational phenomenon. I had learned, after all, that apples fall *down*.

I carefully picked up the wad and dropped it between my legs once again. This time, I made sure I saw it fall into the pit below me. But sure enough, a second time – as soon as I'd turned my head toward the roll for more – the first piece flew up between my legs, right past my face, and landed on the floor at my feet. A third time, and then a fourth, this same oddity occurred, as if some troll in the cistern wanted to play catch.

I sat with my chin in my hand, thinking, determined to separate scientific possibility from elfin myth. There was a drain hole leading out of the pit, downhill of the toilet. I theorized the cold wind that swept up the hill might be entering the drain hole and blowing out whatever I dropped in. Alternatively, I theorized that the cistern was so full of bacteria it had become a compost heap, hot from the degradation of organic matter, and was sending the wad up like a bird soaring in an updraft of warmer air.

Using all the elements of my education, I pondered the possibilities of cause and effect.

*

*

*

From Pennsylvania I went to southern Connecticut to spend the summer with my cousin Logan. Logan and I and two other guys rented a house in Stamford. Logan had started a house-painting company, and he set out to teach me the trade. But after watching me hug rooftops in fear, he assigned me to permanent ground duty.

One night we went to the beach, where a small brunette in braids hung around, singing Steven Stills' *"Love the One You're With."*

Another night, a girl named Penny told Logan she liked me; Logan began predicting I'd be losing my virginity any day. The idea of it swelled my head. But then, when I asked Penny out, she declined.

One night I borrowed Logan's VW bug and took out Cindy, a tall blond with a pageboy haircut. We went to dinner and then to a bar for drinks. We made casual, easy conversation about shared interests. We even danced together. We made plans to see each other more often. At the end of the night, we made out a little at our apartment and then I took her home.

I went to sleep that night knowing that the rest of my summer would be wonderful. The next day, Logan pressed me, repeatedly, wanting to know, "Did you get a little? Huh, Joe? Did you go all the way? Was she big? Was her thing big, Joe?"

Several times I told him it was none of his business, but finally, to appease him, in response to “Was it big?” I said, “Yeah, Logan. It was big.”

The next time I called Cindy she refused to speak to me. Logan had told his friend what I had said; his friend had told Cindy’s friend; and whatever was eventually said to Cindy, she had concluded I was a cad.

Every action has consequences. I pondered the impact of cause and effect.

*

*

*

The weekend I arrived in Florida, Chickie came to Palm Beach from the Sunland Center in Miami, where he now lived. For the first time I could remember, when it was time for him to leave he was adamant about not wanting to go back to “school.”

“I wan’ tay w’ you, Doey.”

I had to drag Chickie to the car and force him into it as he beat his fists against my chest and pleaded not to be taken away. It was unsettling to see him, normally so compliant, exhibit such force of will. I debated whether I should be forcing myself on him. But I could see no other alternative.

My father, on the verge of taking me into his employ, brought me to the ’99 Club with him. The ’99 Club was a card club housed over the Taboo Lounge, and my father was its President. Nervously, I listened to the old men in brightly colored jackets talk of businesses, of golf, and of gambling. They even offered me a cigar.

Then we played cards for a tenth of the normal stakes. Though I won several hands, within an hour I had lost sixty dollars. When we were done, my father took me aside and told me how proud he was to have me coming to work for him.

On September 10, 1971, I reported to Joe Satterfield, plant manager of the seat belt plant in Hialeah. He was a tall, soft-spoken man with a thin, Lincoln-like face. From Tennessee, he had been in the textile business all his life. He showed me around the plant, explaining in detail how everything worked. The noise was deafening – about 110 decibels -- like standing on an airport runway while a big jet takes off. To explain the operation, Satterfield had to cup his mouth to my ear and shout.

Trucks delivered white nylon yarn to the plant on steel spools called “beams,” each about six feet long and packed with a thousand pounds of yarn. The Weave Room contained twenty-four powered looms. Behind each one were fourteen of the large steel beams of yarn, as each loom wove fourteen seat belts at one time. Altogether, over one hundred eighty-eight *thousand* ends of the white yarn – each one twisted like strands of DNA for

strength – were guided up and down in broad sheets around stainless steel shafts to a series of thin steel heddles hanging in each loom. Looking up at the thousands of white strands travelling overhead was like looking at the paths of the stars in the galaxy, in time lapse photography. I felt personally insignificant.

For each belt, two hundred eighty steel heddles acted together, half of them lifting their yarn up, half of them forcing their yarn down, opening alternate “sheds” in the warp. Through these sheds, a wooden shuttle traveled back and forth, a plastic bobbin inside. After each pass of the shuttle, the heddles switched positions, a quarter of them coming up, a quarter going down, so the shuttle returned through a different shed each time.

On each loom, a large piece of ash – used to make baseball bats because it absorbs impact shock so well – pounded the fourteen wooden shuttles back and forth through the alternating sheds of belts. Each pass of the shuttles through the sheds was one “pick,” and each shuttle made several picks per second. While three hundred and thirty-six wooden shuttles drove the woof through the warp, a hundred thousand heddles lifted and depressed the sheets of yarn, all synchronized. To be heard over the pounding, workers had to shout at each other from inches away.

In the Dye Room, the woven white belts first passed through a vat of hot dye, from there to steam ovens, from there to a warm wash tank to remove excess dye, and from there, to hot dryers. Gas-fired boilers piping in steam and steel roller bearings stretching for tension brought industry to the age-old craft of coloring fabric.

The plant had been running twenty-four hours a day in three shifts, five and often six days a week. About sixty people worked each shift, each worker essential to some aspect of the operation, each dependent on the others for the operation to succeed.

Dad had named the business “Charley Company” after himself. His office, however, was sixty miles away, in Palm Beach, and many of the employees of Charley Company had not yet seen “Charley.” As Joe Satterfield showed me the Dye Room, a woman came up and gestured toward me, inquiring, “Charlito?” (Little Charley?). Satterfield nodded, *yes*, and the woman went back to her friends, gesturing and nodding, all of them looking at me. I realized that for all these people, their lives tied up in the operations of this factory, I was my father’s deputy. I was filled with a sense of responsibility. The operation not only made seat belts to save lives, it put food on the table for nearly two hundred families. I had to turn away

so Joe Satterfield wouldn't see me wipe a tear from my eye.

In the weeks that followed, working various jobs in the factory, I began to meet people: Charlie Hill, an old man from South Carolina who ran the Dye Room and whose fingers were wrinkled and permanently yellow from dipping them in boiling chemicals and dyestuffs; Luis Bello, a young Venezuelan who began teaching me the basics of street Spanish; Malcolm Currie, who had returned from Vietnam with a wooden leg, a memento of shrapnel from a grenade. Malcolm talked of his arrival back in the states – expecting to be greeted with thanks for his sacrifice, he had gotten off the plane only to be spat on by protestors against the war.

There was Johnnie Mae Watts, the union shop steward, a black woman who made clear from the outset she did not trust me or my father or any of the managers.

And there was Veronica Carter, attractive, about 25, who invited me to join her friends bowling or square dancing some time.

I said I'd like to. Shortly thereafter Joe Satterfield fired her.

Apparently, Satterfield had let everyone in the plant know that no one, male or female, would be attempting to socialize with the owner's son.

Another action. Another consequence.

*

*

*

Murray Gerstein, the union's business agent, was a feisty white-haired fellow who was demanding an increase in starting pay in a new labor contract, of seventy-five cents per hour – from \$1.95 to \$2.70. I sat at the negotiating table and watched the arguments. I attended a caucus in which my father discussed his own position – he had borrowed a lot of money to buy the company, he said, and the company needed to turn a profit if it was going to pay off the debt and survive.

At the end of the discussion, my father instructed that we needed to do everything possible to limit the increase to five cents per hour each of the three contract years. If it became necessary to avoid a strike, he said, he would probably agree to an increase as high as ten cents, but our strategy would be to negotiate hard for five.

The next day John, the Personnel Manager, told me proudly that he had gotten a deal with Murray Gerstein. He had negotiated the deal in private in the men's room, "the way real labor negotiations are conducted," he said. He had gotten Gerstein to agree to ten cents per hour.

When my father found out about John's unauthorized "deal," he fired him too.

*

*

*

I now had a salary of \$150 a week and the use of a company car, but my face was still covered with pimples. Then, after three weeks living in Fort Lauderdale, I noticed Diane. She was a blond goddess with a perfect complexion and golden hair reaching down to her waist, and she lived alone at the end of the hall. I saw her playing volleyball one day in a white bikini. Her skin was as smooth and her curves perfect. We began to have brief, friendly chats in the hallway or the elevator, and I began to wonder how I might invite her out. Then one evening Diane knocked on my door and invited me to go to Orlando with her for the weekend.

Excuse me? My paper for Mr. Ross's class had theorized that miracles could happen, but I hadn't really expected one to occur at my own doorstep.

"Would you be interested in going to Orlando for the weekend?"

"With whom?"

"With me, and with some other people I know."

To be sure I was interested. I wanted to know where we were going, and what we were going to do.

"That's a secret," she said.

Well. Miracles are mysterious by definition, I thought. I agreed to meet her in the parking lot at 5 a.m. on Saturday morning.

When the time came, I went down with my overnight bag and found several snazzy cars in the parking lot, one of them a pink Cadillac jeweled with chrome. There were eight or ten people gathered and I wondered whether Diane had invited them all. We were greeted by a black man in a bright blue sports jacket – the driver of the pink Cadillac – who introduced himself as Hugo. He had a gold chain around his neck, a gold watch, a gold bracelet with diamond studs, bright pink pants, shiny black shoes, and a pink handkerchief tucked neatly in his jacket pocket. He greeted us all warmly, saying any friend of Diane's was a friend of his.

"Do you realize you are about to experience the greatest weekend of your lives?" he asked.

I replied with hesitation and suspicion. We got into one of several waiting cars and were driven to a shopping center parking lot, where several other men dressed like Hugo were assembling small groups into larger ones. Then several buses pulled into the lot and Hugo shepherded Diane's group with several others, telling us we'd be taking the bus to Orlando together.

On board our bus, I tried to sit by Diane, but she sat in the front with Hugo. Then, as we pulled out of the parking lot, Hugo stood in the aisle and spoke to us.

“Does anyone here want to get rich?” he asked.

A few shouts and laughs were heard from scattered seats.

He began to talk to individuals. He began to tell jokes. Soon, he was teaching songs to the busload of strangers, and had everyone singing together. Hugo explained that he had once been poor but now he had more money than he knew what to do with. And it was all because of Glenn Turner’s program, “*Dare to Be Great*.” Like us, Hugo had once boarded a bus for Orlando, wondering what he’d gotten himself into. Like us, he had once been skeptical. But that was when he drove a beat up clunker. Now he drove a pink Cadillac with plenty of chrome.

The drive to Orlando took several hours. During it, we heard how Glen Turner was born poor but had made millions simply because he refused to accept his lot in life. He believed in himself. The only thing it takes to be rich, we were told, is this: you simply have to *dare* to be great.

In Orlando, we went on a tour of “Koscot Enterprises,” the “factory” where Glen Turner’s line of cosmetics was manufactured. The building was very large. But we saw no forklifts or production lines. We saw no time clocks, no lines of workers, no maintenance shops, no shipping area or loading docks. We were led by a tour guide up and down narrow hallways, past doors with gold plates on them, with fancy titles like “Chief of European Operations” and “International Director of New Products.” It was like a Hollywood set – all storefronts, no guts to the buildings behind.

In the afternoon, the program was explained. For just three hundred dollars we could purchase a series of *Dare to Be Great* motivational tapes, which would tell us more about self-confidence and how to make millions by “daring to be great.” For five hundred dollars, we would get not only the tapes, but the right to sell the tapes to others. For each \$300 set of tapes we sold, we would collect \$100. And for each \$500 distributorship we sold, we would collect \$200. If we wanted to be rich like Hugo, all we had to do was come up with \$500, and soon we’d be collecting hundreds from those others we got to join.

I knew the problem with this – I had learned it the weekend I spent doubling grains of rice on the squares of Mr. Czaja’s checkerboard – repeated multiplications quickly produce enormous numbers. There were no electronic pocket calculators in those days, so I couldn’t do the math exactly, but I knew that if enough people signed up for the initial participants to be successful, it would only take a few more layers of this pyramid before the entire adult population of the world had been exhausted. At that point, far more people would be left holding the bag than had

profited.

I figured roughly that by the time the population of the world had been exhausted, billions of dollars would have changed hands. On the plus side, several thousand people would have made a few thousand dollars each. But the rest of the adult world – a billion or so people – would be out their \$500 (as if that many people even had it to begin with). And where would most of their money have gone? To Glen Turner himself, who would have pocketed a hundred billion dollars or so.

In short, I had found myself in a huge scam – and the poor and ignorant, as usual, were its targets.

Saturday night we were assembled in an enormous auditorium with about two thousand other recruits. On stage were several of Glen Turner's closest aides and several suitcases full of money. There were more songs about money from people who'd been poor until they "dared to be great."

After dinner, broadcasting through loud speakers all around the auditorium, the speaker at the podium invited everyone to stand. He then asked everyone who had already decided to pay their \$500 to their bus leader that night, to please sit down. About a fifth of the crowd did so. He then asked those who didn't have the money with them, but who had decided to invest their five hundred dollars as soon as they could get home and get to the bank, to sit down; about half the remaining crowd did so. He then asked who was going to try to get the \$500 by borrowing or selling their TV or whatever, and would invest it if they could get the money, and he asked them to sit down. More did so.

He eyed those of us who remained standing – about two hundred of us. He told a couple more stories about the desire to be great, and about having the guts to do something about it. My feet and back began to tire from standing so long, and Diane and others were whispering about those of us who were still standing. The speaker on stage then addressed himself to us.

"Let's suppose someone else would pay your fee," he said. "If someone else paid your \$500 – so that it cost you absolutely nothing to join -- how many of you would take the tapes and seek to recruit others?"

All but forty of us sat down. The speaker's tone turned critical as he talked about the skeptics who were still standing. He compared skepticism to fear, saying that those who remained standing were -- simply -- afraid. We didn't have the guts to take risks, he said. The rest of the audience – those seated – weren't afflicted with fear like those still standing.

"Meanwhile," he continued, "let's suppose the fear could be removed. Suppose" he said, "that somehow – don't worry how – just assume, for the

sake of argument, that the fear could be removed – suppose you had an absolute guarantee that the Dare to Be Great system would make you rich. If someone else were to pay for you, and you had an absolute guarantee that Dare to Be Great would make you rich, would you join? If you would join in such circumstances, then please sit down.”

With that, all but a handful of people sat down. I looked around the room. Everyone in the auditorium was watching me and the others left standing. Several people at our table asked what was wrong with me.

The answer, I realized, was that only a few people in the room understood that the scheme being touted was a scam. Two thousand people were being led like sheep to give money to strangers who were ripping them off. And with that understanding came personal responsibility. My knowledge required me to stand.

“Suppose,” said the speaker, “you were *guaranteed* that not only will *Dare to Be Great* make you rich, but it is moral, legal, and legitimate.” With that hypothetical, the last handful of holdouts sat down, with the single exception of me. I had made my decision to stand. The speaker at the podium, with the full force of the microphone and loudspeakers behind him, asked me what my problem was.

“This is a pyramid scheme,” I said, as loud as I could. “You are taking advantage of people; you’re robbing them, and you know it.” But the loudspeakers drowned out my answers with ridicule. With the spotlight no longer on me, Hugo asked me to sit down. I sat, and I looked for Diane. She was seated at the other end of the table, her head down, shamed and embarrassed.

Sunday, on the bus back home, Diane refused to look at me. I sat next to a young black woman, a single mother. We started chatting, sharing pleasantries. Then she asked me to explain why I felt the program was wrong. As I started to do so, Hugo and Diane came down the aisle and broke up our conversation, inviting the young woman to join them in the front of the bus, leaving me to ride alone the rest of the way back to Lauderdale.

In the weeks that followed, Diane didn’t talk to me anymore.

Another action. Another consequence.

*

*

*

One night in late February, I called Dave Schick’s house in Margate, asking whether he’d be home for the spring holidays. His kid sister Karen answered the phone. Swallowing a mouthful of beer to work up the nerve, I

asked if she'd like to go out sometime. She said yes, she was available. We decided to have dinner and see a movie.

I picked Karen up at her house. She wore a long-sleeved, orange and brown body suit, boots and a skirt. Her hair was a lustrous brown that hung to the small of her back, and her face was round and mousy. In the car, our first conversation was about her brother, then her parents, then the rest of her family. Karen had gotten straight A's in high school, but had decided not to go to college. (She cared more about family than career.) She loved to sew, and had recently left work at a fabric shop in the mall to go to work for a seamstress, a middle-aged woman who worked out of her own home.

After dinner, we went to see "*The Hot Rock*" starring Robert Redford. We talked only a little during the movie. I remembered my brother's stories about "making out" during movies, but it seemed unnatural to me. Even putting my arm around Karen seemed forced – after all, I didn't know her. What would be the point? I could not pretend affection. Wouldn't it, then, be only an effort to begin physical intimacy, in the absence of affection? This, too, seemed stupid and unnatural. Embracing, kissing, fondling just didn't make sense. I decided to compromise by taking her hand in mine. Even that was awkward in the theatre seats, and after a few minutes, concerned that my palm was clammy and sweating, I had no desire to continue it. At the first excuse, I disengaged my hand from hers.

When the movie was over we encountered a couple Karen knew. Trying to make introductions, she forgot my name and turned red. On the drive home, she apologized profusely. It hadn't bothered me, I told her; don't worry about it. Meanwhile, her apologies made me feel as if I mattered to her.

The drive back to Karen's house took us past my apartment. Should I stop? Should I ask her up? It felt like the wrong thing to suggest. But was I not *obligated* to ask?

"Want to stop by my apartment for a while?" I asked. "It's right here..."

"No, thanks."

My good feelings crumbled; I had been rejected yet again. She probably thought I was a creep. It took no time for me to decide once again that I was jinxed. The gods had decreed that I would never succeed with girls.

But a moment later, Karen added, "Not on our first date."

First date? That implied there would be others. I was elated. I *would* see her again. The future exploded into endless possibilities. This time, this person, I *would* kiss good night! At Karen's house, I got out of the car and

walked her to the door. She turned and said she had enjoyed the evening. I told her that I had too. I kissed her, my tongue darting between her lips for a second. I said good night again, and I turned and left, not wanting to tempt fate, afraid that some further event might close the doors that had been opened.

Later, Karen would point out that I hadn't tried to kiss her during the movie; that I hadn't put my arm around her; that I even took my hand away from hers; that she'd insulted me by forgetting my name, which she felt sure had offended me, and then she'd turned down my suggestion to stop at my apartment. She had concluded that she would never hear from me again – until I kissed her.

In that quick kiss, all that we had ever been up to that moment came together. In that quick kiss, all that we might ever do thereafter was set free.

In the weeks that followed, Karen and I spent evenings in my apartment, rubbing noses, whispering words of tenderness, saying whatever came to our minds. In a world of decisions and consequences, she made me comfortable. In her arms, I had no decisions to make and there were no consequences to my actions. I found myself wondering what this feeling of tranquility meant. Was I falling in love with her? I asked myself the question, but I had no answer. What did the words mean, anyway? I was not infatuated with her, as I had always been with girls before. So how could this be love?

More and more frequently, I found Karen in my apartment when I got home from work. Before long, I began to find dinner cooked for me. One evening in June, we arrived at my apartment together and found an invitation to a wedding in my mailbox.

Without any forethought, intending only to make conversation about the invitation I had just opened, I asked, "What will you say when I ask you to marry me?"

I was startled at what I'd heard myself say. I hadn't planned to ask this question, or anything remotely like it. Then came Karen's answer.

"I don't know," she said.

Whether foolish or not to ask the question in the first place, now I was concerned about her troublesome response. What did it mean? Did it mean she wasn't sure she liked me? I had to dig deeper.

"What do you mean you don't know?" I asked.

"Well, it depends," she said.

"What do you mean, it depends?" I asked. "Depends on what?"

"Well, for example, it depends on when you ask me."

Now, I was intent on understanding just what she was saying. “What if I were to ask you now?” I said.

“I would say yes,” she said.

I looked deep into Karen’s eyes, and we embraced as we had never embraced before. At the same time, I was puzzled. I hadn’t, in fact, asked her to marry me – I had not planned to do so, and even if I had made a decision to do so, I couldn’t have counted on myself for the courage to implement that decision. Moreover, Karen had not, in fact, accepted my non-proposal. She had simply informed me that if I were to ask, she would accept. The conversation had been entirely hypothetical.

For the next several days, I waited to see what would happen. A glance here or there, a word or phrase scattered randomly over our next meetings, began to suggest that Karen was not treating it hypothetically. And I, too, found it easy to treat it as real. It was delightful to talk about a wedding, a family, a life together. At work, it made me feel more mature to refer to my “fiancee” than to my “girlfriend.”

Rather than making a decision, I found myself accepting events as they occurred.

Though we would have preferred to get married outdoors, my father pointed out how much it would please the Carvin grandparents if we were married in a Catholic church. So we contacted Saint Edward’s in Palm Beach. Karen made all the dresses for her bridesmaids, and made her own wedding dress as well, a white dress decorated with off-white mushrooms.

I had an ingrown toenail removed by a podiatrist, and I fainted in his office. After he’d revived me, I asked if I could have an extra ampule of smelling salts, explaining that with my history of fainting in church, I might faint at my wedding ceremony. He gave me two extra ampules.

At the end of August, Karen’s father baked a big cake and decorated it with sugar mushrooms to match the wedding dress. On September fourteenth, in the south Florida sun, I loaded furniture from my fourth floor apartment onto a U-Haul truck, refreshing myself with several bottles of beer. From there, I drove the truck to Karen’s house, where I loaded her sewing machine and several more pieces of furniture, pausing for another bottle of beer. From there, I drove to our new apartment in Oakland Park and unloaded all the furniture, downing several more bottles of beer.

After a quick shower, I drove to Palm Beach for the wedding rehearsal, followed by a rehearsal dinner. Grandparents, uncles, cousins and close friends made toasts to Karen and me. I had several whiskey sours and glasses of champagne. About ten-thirty the younger guys left dinner and

drove to my apartment in Lauderhill for a “bachelor party” where we broke out cards, poker chips, more beer, and marijuana. About 4 a.m., as the card game ended, I decided I could either try to sleep for a couple of hours (unlikely) or I could start drinking coffee in order to be awake for the ceremony. I chose the latter course.

At dawn, John Haweeli and I got in my car and drove back to Palm Beach. All clammy and sweaty now from excess caffeine, I paced back and forth on my father’s back porch at Eden Road. John said he thought I needed a glass of scotch to calm me down and went to get one. My mother said I needed something to relax me and handed me a tranquilizer. I swallowed it, washing it down with the glass of scotch John brought.

At 10 a.m. on September 15th, barely able to stand, my head floating and dizzy, I watched Karen’s father bring her up the aisle of St. Edward’s. She was beautiful. But as the priest conducted the ceremony, the entire church, with its high stained glass windows and elaborate altar, moved visibly.

We were placing rings on each others’ fingers.

“I, Joseph, take you, Karen, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

I reached in my tuxedo pocket and removed the ampules of smelling salts.

“I, Karen, take you, Joseph, to be my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

Only the priest and Karen could see me waving the pungent salts beneath my nose as we recited our vows.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I lifted Karen’s veil and kissed her as my wife for the first time, my arms around her in an embrace that conveniently served to support my frame and avoid a fall from the altar steps.

FAMILY BUSINESS

My father was about to turn fifty years old – bald and having heart problems, but sitting on top of the world. The American car companies were producing 10 million cars each year, and the annual market for seat belts was about 120 million yards. Our share of that market was about 25 million yards. With the plant running twenty-four hours a day, we projected a profit of 6 ½ cents per yard, or 1.6 million dollars a year – paying off what my father had borrowed to buy the company, and making very good money after that.

Three weeks after our wedding, I heard on the radio that “OPEC” – the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries – had voted to embargo the sale of oil to the west. This news seemed far less important than news of the end of the War in Vietnam. I had no idea that such a vote, taken on the other side of the world, could have any impact on my life.

But deep within this piece of news was the first link in a chain reaction that would change my life.

Within a few weeks, there was a shortage of gasoline across America. Lines at the filling station became the rule. Many stations had no gas at all, and when a station was selling, word got out fast, making for long lines. People filled spare portable containers and put them in the trunks and back seats of their cars. The people waiting in line hoped there would be gas left by the time they made it to the pump. People read books and magazines while they waited. Because I had an hour’s drive from Fort Lauderdale to Hialeah, I spent a lot of time in such lines.

Americans resented high prices and long lines at the pump. Politicians and journalists argued about America’s dependence on foreign oil. Environmentalists, who’d been complaining about pollution for some time,

yelled “I told you so” about all the gas emissions from big, gas-guzzling cars polluting the atmosphere. Cars had to be made smaller, to use less gas. Practically overnight, no one wanted the big Buicks and Oldsmobiles coming out of Detroit. Japanese names like Toyota and Honda, practically unknown before 1973, were suddenly household words. Within a year, production of American automobiles dropped from over 10 million cars to just 4 million cars.

As a result, Charley Company would run only one shift of production, rather than three. That meant laying off over a hundred people. I had become the plant’s Personnel Manager, and it fell to me to make the announcement. As with all such announcements, it had to reach the whole workforce.

“A todos los empleados.” (To all employees.)

Necesitamos cerrar la factoria. (We must close the plant.)

I looked in the eyes of men and women who had worked for years in this business, before my father had bought it. Most of them earned only a hundred dollars a week; the skilled workers who fixed the looms and other machinery made only twice that. Now, I was telling them they were out of their jobs.

“Who will be laid off?” they asked.

We would go by seniority, according to the union contract.

“Will we get any severance pay?”

No, we could not afford to pay them severance pay.

“How long will the layoff last?”

I did not know. The first shift would probably be back to work soon.

“Will you call us back if you need us?”

Of course we would, and we made sure that all telephone numbers were up to date. But the folks on the graveyard shift should look for other work in the meantime, I suggested. “It might be a while before we can start up the third shift again.”

“How long will our insurance last?” they asked.

In most cases, only until the end of the month.

When the day shift ended, the twisters and the looms were turned off. The engines that had screamed at 110 decibels were now quiet. I walked through the racks in the weave room and listened to the silence. The huge sheets of white warp yarn that crisscrossed overhead, from steel beams around rollers and guides to their designated looms, were motionless, like enormous sprawling cobwebs. When a current of air took a paper cup and rolled it on the concrete floor, the turning of its empty drum could be heard

throughout the room.

Charley Company was in trouble. The technology that had given the world nylon stockings and yarns was based on oil, and the oil shortage quickly drove up the price of our yarn, our biggest cost. We found ourselves spending 20 cents to make a yard of belt. Meanwhile, desperate for business, our competitors began to cut prices. Soon we could only sell a yard for 19.

As his business struggled, my father had increasing problems with his father, borrowing more money from the senior Charley, risking the enmity of his brother and sister, who feared that the loans would never be repaid. Pop Pop, meanwhile, was wheelchair bound and fighting cancer. My father talked him into admitting himself to his nursing home in Fort Lauderdale.

My father's struggles extended not only to Pop Pop, his father, but to Chickie, his eldest son. Chickie had been living at the Sunland Training Center in Miami, and Sunland had recently been scandalized on television: underfunded operations, underpaid help, feces and urine left on the floors of the residences with no one bothering to pick it up, employees beating and mistreating the residents. It was no wonder that Chickie had fought me to avoid going back to Sunland. I felt guilty remembering how I had forced him into the car as he beat against my chest.

My parents removed Chickie from Sunland. Now he stayed at the house on Eden Road with them while they looked for some other way to provide for him.

Alone in the house most of the day while Dad tried to save his business, Chickie was constantly trying to escape. Day after day, and most often in the middle of the night, Chickie would slip out of the house on Eden Road and be found hours later, miles away, wandering,. My mother had spoken to him, scolded him, threatened and punished him, all to no avail. Now, she had taken to locking him into his room at night to keep him from going out. A battle of wills had taken shape as Chickie found new ways to escape and my mother found new ways to restrain him. The result: Chickie had to be watched, twenty-four hours a day.

Karen and I offered to pick him up for a weekend with us. If we spent a weekend with him, perhaps we could find a solution to the problem. We brought Chickie home to our apartment, where we shared a pleasant dinner. When it was time for bed, I helped him remove his underwear and take a shower and put on his pajamas. Karen and I said goodnight to him and put him in his bed. Less than two minutes after I'd left the room, he was opening the door to it and coming out into the living room.

I explained that it was time for bed; that Karen and I were also going to bed; that we all *had* to go to bed, to get the rest we needed to face another day. Chickie understood me. He knew that I wanted him to go to bed, and he knew that I knew he didn't want to. He didn't look me in the eye, and he dropped his head, gazing at the floor. If there was a reason he had for wanting to stay up, I didn't know what it was. He did not try to explain himself to me. He simply stood in the doorway of the room, and when I asked him to get back in bed, he would not.

With a mixture of gentle coaxing and physically taking him by the shoulders, I managed to get him into his bed, but once again, as soon as I left the room, he was up and opening the door. I thought maybe it was the amount of light, so I tried adding light, and then I tried keeping the room dark, and every shade in between, but each time, Chickie got up and tried to get out. Eventually, since the door could not be locked from the outside, I tied a rope to the handle and tied the other end to the handle on the bathroom door. This contraption served only two purposes: it delayed Chickie's next exit by about thirty seconds, and it made clear to him the lengths I was willing to go to keep him locked up.

Once, that night, he not only made it out of the room but out of the apartment as well. I'd hoped the dogs would bark and let us know if Chickie got out after we were asleep, but they were apparently happy when Chickie let them out too. Fortunately, I caught Chickie and the dogs outside our apartment door before they were loose on the streets of Fort Lauderdale.

Eventually, I gave up hope of getting a good night's sleep myself and slept on the floor next to Chickie's bed. He stayed awake all night, sitting up in his bed, rocking back and forth.

The next day we brought Chickie back to my parents' house and reported we'd found no solution.

* * *

I had invited Neal Delmonico, my Exeter friend, to our wedding. In response, Neal had sent a letter of regrets, explaining he'd become a devotee of Krishna and if he were to attend our wedding, his chanting and banging of tambourines would likely offend us.

But in May of 1974, I found myself walking up the steps of a brownstone building on Henry Street in Brooklyn. A brass plaque outside the door read ISKCON – the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. A man with a shaved head and saffron robe answered the door. Following his instructions, I entered the building and took off my

shoes, adding them to others piled inside. A minute later, another man with a shaved head and saffron robe greeted me. It was Neal.

Neal had small, squinting eyes that moved quickly in the middle of a round face; his shaved head and pony tail accentuated the roundness of his head. I greeted him by name, but he immediately informed me he'd adopted a new Hindu name, *Nitai das Brahmachary*, and no longer used "Neal." He led me into the "temple" – a room with an ornate altar, strewn with jewels and colorful objects, dominated by statues of the Hindu gods Vishnu and Krishna. He described how the Krishna movement supported itself: the "devotees" went out every morning to chant *Hare Krishna* to the world, returning at the end of the day with money they laid at the altar.

The room was beginning to fill with devotees, all robed and hairless. Since the Krishna women's house was across the street, the group in the temple was entirely male. It was like a toga party at marine boot camp, except the recruits laid their money at the altar just as Neal had described. From a big punch bowl, Neal ladled me a cup of rice porridge in goats' milk and began to explain the hierarchy of the Hindu gods.

When the evening ceremony began, all the devotees bowed their heads, chanting to the statues on the altar. After twenty minutes of prayer, they began to dance and chant and bang their tambourines.

After the service, Neal asked if I had left my shoes in the pile by the door. I told him I had. He called one of the other devotees and asked him to bring up all the shoes from the basement. I sorted through fifty pair until I found my own. Neal advised me to keep them with me from now on – anyone might take my shoes if they were left in the communal pile.

As I visited with him in his room, he talked with delight about the beauty of Krishna Consciousness. Western religions were commercial, and Catholicism, the religion in which we had both been raised, was the most commercial of all. Western religions produced sexual guilt, he said, while Krishna Consciousness avoided it by keeping the devotee away from sex. Physical attraction and promiscuity were unholy, he said. In fact, there was no social contact allowed between male and female at all: the life of a Krishna devotee was dedicated to the service of Lord Krishna.

While the other male devotees slept in a room upstairs, Neal had a room to himself because he was soon to be married to a woman devotee from across the street. He did not know the woman, but Krishna leaders had arranged the marriage and Neal was willing to act as prescribed. Once married, he and his bride would share the room together for one night and

then again once each month until she became pregnant. At all other times, she would remain across the street with the other women.

When the 10 p.m. bell sounded, I said goodnight to Neal and walked upstairs with about thirty other men. Pulling off their robes, they heaped them in a communal pile. Naked, one of them placed the robes in a rolling hamper and took them down to the basement for overnight washing. As Neal had suggested, I kept my underwear on and carried my shoes and clothes under my arm into the common sleeping room. The thirty naked head-shaven men stood in the room together, nearly indistinguishable from each other, and prayed. When chimes signaled the hour for sleep, the light was turned out. All of us lay on the floor, side by side, without sheets or mattresses of any kind, and slept until 4 a.m., when chimes sounded again, signaling it was time to get up for morning prayers. The light was turned on again. Everyone began chanting *Hare Krishna*. I gathered my clothes and left.

A couple of years later, in an airport bookshop, I bought a book about the Hare Krishna temple in Brooklyn. It featured my friend, *Nitai das Brahmachary*, who was described as one of the leaders of the temple. It also claimed that, not long after my stay there, the FBI had raided the temple and found a sizable counterfeiting operation in the basement.

*

*

*

Shortly after my return to Florida, I learned that Karen was expecting. Somehow, not conscious of the gravity of our actions at the moment it happened, we had conceived a new life.

We were, of course, delighted by the prospect of parenthood. But there would now be three mouths to feed. As I thought about my father's proposition – "Just try it for a year" – it became obvious I was in the family business for good.

Somewhat to my surprise, my father suggested I consider going to law school. Not to practice law, he quickly added – lawyers, he believed, were the bane of a businessman's existence. But if he could have a lawyer work with him – a lawyer that understood the practicalities of the business world – we could be a powerful combination. He even volunteered to pay my tuition.

I was intrigued by the role of Tom Hagen, the *consiglieri* to the Godfather, in Mario Puzo's novel. The role of "trusted counselor" appealed to me, but with a child on the way, I still needed an income, so I had to continue working. The law school at the University of Miami had a night

program that was only a twenty-minute drive from Charley Company. It seemed to fit my needs. So Karen and I found a house in Miami.

It was a green concrete-block house, with green wallpaper and drapes inside, and a lawn of St. Augustine grass and a thick evergreen hedge out front. An airy bottlebrush tree blossomed red in the front yard. In the daytime, Karen sewed in our bedroom and grew orchids out back. On the weekends we began cooking together. We signed up for natural childbirth classes, where we practiced breathing together. We bought a playpen, a crib and a changing table. We prepared one of the bedrooms in our house, painting a giraffe and a full length Brer Bear, floor to ceiling, on the wall overlooking the crib.

On Sunday, Dec 15, Karen went into labor, and I drove her to the hospital. After a few hours, as Karen struggled at the painful wonders of her body, I donned a gray gown and prepared to attend the delivery. But when I put on the surgical mask, my breath came up from behind it, escaping from its top edge and filling the space behind the lower rim of my glasses, fogging the lenses so I could hardly see. In this state of impaired vision I stood at the head of the delivery table, my hand holding Karen's as she breathed and sweated, her legs spread in the stirrups, her cervix and her bones preparing themselves to offer up a child.

The doctor had a mirror positioned over the foot of the table so that I could stay at the head of the table – out of his way – and still see the delivery.

“Can you see?” he asked, adjusting the angle of the mirror for me.

I couldn't – my heavy breathing had completely fogged my glasses.

“No,” I replied, taking the glasses off, wiping them on my gown.

“How's this?” he asked, adjusting the mirror again.

I got the glasses back on, but they immediately fogged up again. I could not see well through the fogged glasses and mirror, but now at least I could see a fleshy background with a dark patch in the center -- so I told the doctor he had the mirror right. By now, he was telling Karen to push. Soon he was saying the baby was crowning. Now he was saying the baby had quite a head of hair. I strained through the fogged glasses to see the hair, but as I wiped them off and my vision cleared, I could still see no sign of a baby.

When the doctor said “Okay, the head is out,” I began to think something was definitely wrong – I could see no head at all, nor doctors' hands, nor anything but the same dark patch against a fleshy background – and then the doctor said “Okay, now, one more push!”

Suddenly, I could see a great rush of fluid in the mirror – a waterfall, almost.

The doctor called out “It’s a girl!” but I’d seen only a waterfall.

Gradually, I pieced the puzzle together: I had not been looking at the birth of my child at all. The mirror had tilted too far. I had been looking at a trashcan from the top. The doctor had positioned it at the foot of the bed to catch the birth waters and placenta. The can was lined with a pink plastic liner. Its center was dark where the plastic folded down to the bottom of the can.

Meanwhile, the doctor was holding up a round little girl who, at nine pounds and fourteen ounces, was a bundle of pink flesh, and the realization grabbed me: she was my daughter, my offspring, my flesh and blood. She was already starting to cry. She was my responsibility.

We named her Kathryn Elizabeth – meaning “pure” and “consecrated to God.” Her first night at home she slept in the bed with us, Karen nursing her most of the night but getting little sleep. The second night she cried until Karen brought her to bed with us. The third day, we decided to change our strategy. We resolved to leave her in her crib when she cried; Karen would only nurse her on the planned schedule and for the planned amount of time. That third night, Kathryn cried all night long; she did so on the fourth night as well. But on the fifth night she tired of crying, and slept reasonably well. On the sixth night, she did even better. By the second week, Katie was sleeping through the night.

This success proved to us that the key to child rearing was to be strict. Within weeks, I had developed Katie’s plan of education. I dreamed that, some day, she would graduate from Exeter, as I had done. I was going to provide her every benefit, every tool, every opportunity to learn. One of the first things I did was to notice the way her little fingers moved, grasping, clutching, getting exercise, but in clear need of a more systematic approach to manipulation. I took a rubber band and wrapped it around her thumb and fingers, planning to teach her dexterity by challenging her to get her fingers free from the rubber band.

*

*

*

Early in my career at Charley Company, I had interviewed a Haitian applicant and hired her on the graveyard shift, though she spoke no English or Spanish. Production supervisors complained that Haitians could not speak intelligibly, never bathed, were ignorant, and made terrible employees. They pleaded with me to hire no more of them.

In the mean time, however, word got out. Within days, friends and relatives of the woman I had hired began to apply. I hired a Haitian man named Theophilis who spoke good English and told me of the hundreds of Haitians coming to Miami, desperate to work and willing to work hard. With his help, we hired a few other Haitians who spoke English – and before long, I had supervisors raving about how hard the Haitians worked. Once the night shift had a few bilingual Haitians, we hired others, regardless of their English ability, and they worked well.

One day I was approached by a young African-American named Sarah. I had hired Sarah for the weave room and she had done well there, but she was frequently getting into spats with her supervisor. He had warned me that she was trouble.

“She’s a militant,” he had said. “She’ll be suing us for discrimination some day soon. She’s always bordering on insubordination, but she seems to know exactly where the line is, and she never quite seems to cross it,” he had said. “But someday she will, and when I can nail her for it, I will.”

Sarah wanted to know why all the mechanics were men. “You know, there’s a lot of discrimination here,” she told me. “This place is prejudiced against blacks. I’ve seen prejudice here. I’ve been discriminated against from the day I got here. Because I’m black, and because I’m a woman.”

I asked her how she’d been discriminated against. She said not to mind. I assured her we didn’t want any discrimination.

“But would you hire a woman as a mechanic?” she asked.

I thought about it.

“The mechanics make nearly twice as much as the weavers,” she pointed out.

I told her we certainly would hire a woman mechanic, if one had the experience and know how.

“Would you hire a woman, and teach her?” she asked.

I studied her, sure now that she had herself in mind. Sarah was about 90 pounds, a tiny woman I judged to be about twenty-two years old. She saw me looking her over.

“How old do you think I am?” she asked.

“I’d guess early twenties,” I said.

Sarah didn’t laugh.

“You think I’m young because I’m small,” she said. “Do you realize I’m a grandmother?”

I insisted she couldn’t be.

“I am,” she said. “And let me tell you somethin’ else. I’m smart. I could learn to be a mechanic real quick, if you would have them teach me.”

I spoke to the maintenance supervisor about it, and he couldn’t believe I would consider it. He spoke of her reputation for being a troublemaker. He spoke of her admitted lack of knowledge or experience. He spoke of her size.

“But she really wants it,” I said. “What can it hurt to give her a try? If she doesn’t make it, we’ve at least shown we were willing to give her the chance.”

The next week, all eyes in the plant were on Sarah as she reported to the maintenance department and began her training as a mechanic.

Two weeks later, her supervisor said she was having trouble, but he would continue to work with her. After four weeks, he said she was actually doing pretty well. After six weeks, he said she was really sharp; in fact, he said, she was fixing some of the equipment better and faster than some of his men.

Sarah worked as a mechanic for about a year, and then one day she came to me and said she wanted to return to the Weave Room. When I asked her why, she wouldn’t say. But she thanked me for giving her the chance. And every time our paths crossed, she smiled and said hello. I never again got a report that she was a troublemaker. And she never sued us. Several times, the maintenance supervisor asked me if I thought I could talk Sarah into coming back to work in his department. I tried, but for reasons I still do not understand, I never succeeded.

*

*

*

Selling seat belts below cost, we were generating no profits and running shorter of cash all the time. I was responsible for calculating, printing, and signing the weekly paychecks and standing by to release them once our commercial bank had wired money to cover them. Some weeks this worked; others, it didn’t. I’d be told the transfer had been delayed, and I’d have a line of angry people at my door upset about not getting paid. The next week, told the money had been wired, I’d release the checks only to have an even angrier line of people at my door upset that the bank was refusing to cash their checks.

Kiting checks became a way of life. One week out of three, our payroll would bounce, including my own check. And when a person’s paycheck is returned, a chain reaction begins, with checks for car payments, mortgage payments, and insurance coverage all bouncing too. Beginning in 1975, and

nearly every payday for the next several years, employees and their families would blame me for the harm I was causing in their lives.

My father had cut his own salary in half. My protestations that my own paycheck – and even my father’s – had bounced, were obvious lies, they said. Clearly, my father and I were pocketing the profits and leaving nothing for anyone else, they said. We offered to show them our books; we would only doctor them, they said.

As we struggled to keep yarn in supply and the payroll account in the black, I felt responsibility for Charley and Malcolm and Sarah and all their families; they depended on Charley Company’s success. So I struggled with contract negotiations, with meeting payroll, with making good on bad checks, with reimbursing people for the charges they incurred when their own checks bounced, struggling in the face of blame.

My father sold his interests in the nursing home and the erosion control business, putting the money into Charley Company to keep it afloat, hoping for better times. Wheezing with emphysema, wincing with the pain of diverticulitis, he also began checking himself into the hospital from time to time for cardiac care, complaining of chest pain. He said his arteries were blocked and that he needed heart bypass surgery, but was too weak to undergo it.

I began to keep the kind of hours that he – and his father before him – had kept. In September, when law school started, I’d get off work at five and drive to campus, where classes started at six. When classes were over at ten, I would come home, eat the dinner Karen had left for me, and study the law, trying to digest and memorize the principles by which our society is governed.

“An executory contract is a mutual promise supported by consideration.”

“A life estate is less than fee simple.”

“There are intentional and unintentional torts.”

“Negligence is the unintentional breach of a duty of care.”

Most of my studying had to wait for the weekends, but weekends were also needed for tending to the leaks in the roof, the plumbing that was backing up, the chinch bugs destroying the lawn, or the hole that the mouse had eaten in the kitchen door. Now and then, I tried to find time for Katie, who had my blond hair and Karen’s mousy face.

By the end of my first year at law school, Karen was pregnant again. We repeated our stint in natural childbirth classes. Early in the morning on February 1, 1977, Karen woke me up to announce that her water had

broken, and we needed to go to the hospital again.

It was dark outside as we left our house. When the nursing staff called the obstetrician twice, both times he said to call him back later when things were further along. As Karen was wheeled into the delivery room with the new baby crowning, the obstetrician was just arriving. The new baby's head had fully emerged and the umbilical cord was wrapped around its neck. He told Karen not to push, the baby could not come out.

As minutes passed, the cord still tight around the baby's neck, the doctor's instructions to the nurses became sharper and his voice took a definite edge. He tried positioning the baby and relieving pressure on the cord, but with no success. With Karen struggling, he finally cut the cord where it was wrapped around the neck. Only then, after another long contraction, did a baby girl emerge.

As doctor and nurses sucked fluid from around the baby's nose and mouth with a large pipette, she didn't begin to cry. Her skin began to turn slightly blue.

"Aren't you supposed to spank her?" I asked.

"No. They only do that in the movies," he replied, and continued to suck mucous from the baby's nose and mouth. "Everything's fine."

But the baby didn't cry, and as the baby got deeper blue, the doctor's instructions to the nurses got more tense. Eventually, the baby was dark purple. I was ready to cry myself, but just as I opened my mouth, the doctor reached out and whacked the baby on her bottom, spanking her hard, just like they do in the movies.

She let out a quick cry and started to breathe.

"Well, I guess the movies aren't all wrong," said the doctor. Soon the baby was pink and chubby. The nurses reported she was 9 pounds and 4 ounces. We named her Jennifer Corinne.

With Karen and little Jenny still at the hospital, I read to Katie from Mother Goose and Uncle Remus (my favorite was about the briar patch and the tar baby). I read to Katie "The House That Jack Built," and to my delight, she had soon memorized it.

A couple of days later, as Karen came through the front door with Jennifer in her arms, Katie ran up to her, intending to leap into those same arms. But on seeing them occupied, she came to a sudden stop. Immediately studious, she watched carefully as Karen came in, sat down on the couch, and began to nurse the new arrival.

Cautiously, Katie approached mother and child, her eyes never leaving the point of contact between baby's mouth and mother's breast. She

climbed onto the couch and sat down next to Karen, leaning toward the suckling, getting a close-up view. Then, her eyes still fixed, her little hands reached down to the bottom of her own shirt, pulling it up, exposing her own chest. Only then did her eyes leave Karen's nipples, as she stole a look at her own, then back again, comparing herself to her mother.

*

*

*

For two more years, I worked during the day, went to law school at night, and studied on weekends. By the time I graduated, seven years had passed since I'd agreed to join my father in business. Thanks to my father, I was getting a law degree that had cost me nothing. But the prospect of being in charge of a family enterprise -- a little "empire" of businesses that included real estate, nursing homes, tennis complexes, erosion control companies, the seat belt business and more -- had eluded me. My father had sold all his other investments and had taken out a second mortgage on his house to keep Charley Company going. He now had nothing but his company stock -- and if Charley Company failed, he would be penniless. The payroll wasn't possible to meet. The "empire" was hanging on as if by a single strand of twisted white yarn.

I had entered law school with no intention of practicing law. I now had a family of four to feed, and now that law school was over, I wondered: should I look for a job as a lawyer after all?

A labor law firm in Tampa offered me a job at \$270 a week, and I decided for the sake of my wife and my two little girls, I had to take it.

We put our house up for sale. Karen's father helped us buy a car -- an old Plymouth Fury, big enough for all of us. Karen and the children would stay behind to maintain the house until it was sold. On September 10, 1978, I waved goodbye to Karen and pulled out of the driveway, leaving behind my house, my children, my parents, my siblings, my father's business, and seven years of imagining myself the "godfather" someday. Two hundred miles of road lay ahead. I was headed for a city I didn't know and a career I had never predicted.

As I left my life behind, I turned off the air conditioning and rolled the windows down.



NEW HOUSE

I had learned in law school that “rights and responsibilities” go hand in hand – that they are, in fact, simply two ways of saying the same thing. To give Person “X” a right to something is the same as giving Person “Y” a responsibility for it. To give a woman a right to a child support payment is the same as making her ex-husband responsible for its payment. To give a shop-owner a right to be free from robberies is the same as making thieves responsible for not committing them. To recognize a person’s right to safety on the highways is the same as recognizing the responsibility of others to build safe cars and to drive safely.

Ultimately, we can’t create more rights without creating more responsibilities. The law is all about when, and under what circumstances, one party should be recognized as having a “right,” at the expense of another, who has the “responsibility” for protecting that right.

Such is the theory of the law.

At age 13, still smarting from rabies shots in the stomach, I had been named as a defendant in a lawsuit, brought by my parents’ housekeeper, Lee, who my mother had fired for reasons I’d never been told. At age 13, I’d stood accused of negligence for keeping a dangerous monkey in the house, for forcing Lee to care for it, for exposing her to its life-threatening bite. Lee had a right to be free from such exposure; I had a responsibility to protect her.

As a part of the system for sorting out such rights and responsibilities, my mother had driven me to a dusty, upstairs office in an old building in White Plains, where lawyers in rumpled gray suits had taken my deposition and joked about the *second* Great Monkey Trial.

That had been my first introduction to the practice of law. The first few days on my new job in Tampa, I was given another.

Since I hadn't yet received the results of the Bar exam, I was not yet admitted to the actual practice of law – and so not yet licensed to offer legal advice. In fact, I was not to say anything that might be *mistaken* for legal advice, until I was formally sworn in.

My first morning in the office, arriving early, I found none of the other lawyers were yet there. I checked out the setting where I would spend the next years of my life: my office was hidden behind rows of legal books that crowded the hall. My office had walls of concrete block; no windows. It was furnished with a desk, a telephone, a dictating machine, and a bookcase full of more law books. I imagined the hearing rooms and judge's chambers where I would ply my new trade. As I contemplated my surroundings and my future, a secretary ran into my office, saying that the County Administrator from Pinellas County was on the phone and needed immediate advice.

"Well, I can't talk to him," I said. "I'm not a lawyer yet."

"Pinellas County is one of our most important clients!" she said. "And he's angry as heck that no one is here – he's demanding to talk to somebody – I think you'd better talk to him!"

I picked up the phone and learned that a picket line had gone up outside the County Administration Building. The County's employees were refusing to cross the picket line. County business was at a halt.

"What should I do?" the Administrator asked.

"I'm afraid I can't help you –" I began.

"What??"

"I'm not a lawyer yet..."

"You went to law school, didn't you?"

"Yes, but –"

"It's illegal for public employees to strike, isn't it?"

"Well, generally, yes, but..."

"So – what should I do?"

"I really can't tell you. Let me look for –"

"Goddamnit – with all the money we pay your firm every year – are you telling me you can't help me?!"

As the conversation continued, I struggled to think what I could say to appease the man. But I could think of nothing. He vented all his spleen at me, and after finally hanging up the phone, I sat wondering how much trouble I might be in already. Then the door opened and the firm's lawyers

were all coming in, laughing at the test they had arranged for me. It had all been a practical joke, they said – but I knew it had been a test as well.

I learned quickly that in the real world of the law, you had to be on your toes – others always lay in wait, ready to pounce on your mistakes. If “X”’s lawyers could establish that “X” had a certain right, that “Y” had an obligation to respect that right, and that “Y” had failed in that obligation, “X” could get money from “Y.” It was a process known as “the adversarial process,” and for good reason – it was a system of conniving and scheming in support of grabbing and taking and holding on.

“I have a right to that.”

“But it’s mine.”

“You have a responsibility to me, and you failed in that responsibility.”

“But I have a right to do what I did. I worked hard for that money, and you have no right to take it from me.”

In law school, we had focused on noble, honorable justice. In the real practice of law, we were in the middle of every ugly and vicious argument that existed between people. And in this angry, indignant world where everyone felt wronged already, we lawyers were no one’s friend. It was like stepping into the middle of a brawl to break it up and getting attacked yourself. Of course, we lawyers weren’t being paid to break up brawls, but to win them.

Every client expected total commitment and full attention. Senior lawyers assigned me work, unconcerned about assignments from others. Every judge seemed intent on forcing settlement by the sheer inconvenience of arbitrary rulings, short notices, changes of schedule, and sanctions for missteps. More than anything else, there was always an opposing lawyer trying to make you slip up, to rub your face in your mistakes, to rattle your confidence, to act so antagonistically you might resolve a case just to escape continued mistreatment. In this environment, no one had “forgiveness” in his heart. Being wrong, even one time, could mean a malpractice suit, or the loss of a client, or at the very least, the loss of the case. And the senior lawyers made one thing very clear to me – we did *not* lose cases.

As my mind became a battlefield over claimed rights and responsibilities, every individual was a reincarnation of Harold Miller, insisting that no one could possibly understand their unique burden, mistreatment, or bad luck. Every individual complained about being victimized. Every group of employees believed and insisted they were the most underpaid, the most stressed, the least fairly treated.

It was a world exploding with anger.

Karen's world was all about children. One day, she greeted me with an article from *Family Circle* that explored a different competition between X's and Y's -- how the natural differences between sperm cells can be used to manipulate their race to the egg -- how helping out certain of them can hinder the others, dramatically increasing the odds of having a child of the desired gender.

As I knew from biology classes, about half the sperm carry the Y chromosome, which will produce a boy child; the other half carry the X chromosome, which will produce a girl child. The Y sperm are lighter and speedier than the X sperm, but more fragile, usually dying within 24 hours.

Could understanding such things help us intervene to create a boy, by choice? I read on with fascination. The trick is to create conditions that favor the Y's or the X's, depending on the desired outcome. Since the Y sperm are more fragile, favorable conditions could ensure that more of them survived. And by timing intercourse to coincide with ovulation, we could make the speedier Y's more likely to reach the egg first. In effect, by making choices as to the temperature, the acidity, and the timing of the race, we could increase the odds of victory for the hare over the tortoise, or vice versa. We could alter the outcome of the competition.

On Saturday night, May 19, 1979, I took out an old yellow notebook I'd used in law school, and a ball point pen, and I wrote the following:

I spent a good number of hours today at home with Karen and the girls. This evening, I sat in a lawn chair on the back porch and snapped pictures of them.

Today, Karen revealed that her mind was solidly made up to have another child. Of course, we have discussed it before. But today, she knew, and when she told me -- the way she told me -- I knew too. So, today is the first day in the being of child number three. Yet unborn, even yet unconceived, this child set out today in his path toward life.

I decided to record the events of conception and pregnancy in the journal. Every few days, I recorded my thoughts. On June 6th, I wrote:

Children! When I got home from work today, Karen had the girls' "baby books" out -- we flipped through them with great appetite. Then Katie walked into our bedroom where I was changing out of my jacket and tie and asked if she could change

her clothes.

I told Katie how lucky I was to have such a pretty daughter.

She answered, "Well, I'm just pretty because you named me Katie."

I wondered: Is there, in such a comment, any real recognition of our role in creating her?

As if to dispel such a silly thought on my part, Katie quickly added: "And because I have pretty hair."

The decision to have another child is an expression of love – the love Karen and I have for each other, and the love we have for Katie and Jenny. To make a third child is a reaffirmation of our marriage and a reaffirmation of our present daughters' very existences. So to you, Karen and Katie and Jennifer, this journal is also written.

August 26th:

We have faithfully abstained from love-making for some time now – a task easier said than done – in preparation for the big day.

Ovulation is signaled by a significant temperature drop. The idea behind Karen's daily temperature-taking -- now in its fourth month -- is to "catch" ovulation and capitalize on it immediately. The chart of Karen's daily temperatures has, so far, contained so many peaks and valleys that discerning the day of ovulation began to appear impossible. Now, for the last week, Karen's temperature has been steady. We hope it will remain so until ovulation, making a large drop easy to catch.

A friend says all these procedures might make conception "mechanical," taking out the spontaneity and beauty of creating new life. It seems to me the opposite is true. Making love frequently in order to conceive means you'll never have the feeling, while making love, that "this is it!" The moment of creation will forever be anonymous; knowing that, the partners will never be able to look each other in the eye and say, "Halleluiah! A new life is beginning today!" Focused as we've been in preparation for that special, unrepeatable, irreplaceable instant in time when creation occurs should bring us an ecstasy like no other.

Indeed, conceiving Daniel was to be the ultimate expression of choice. In contrast to the almost accidental conceptions of Kathryn and Jennifer, creating Daniel would initiate a future string of events and creations, all set in motion by the sheer power of our wills. How joyous we should be, at the moment of exercising such power!

On September 3rd, Karen informed me her temperature had dropped that morning. She was ovulating! So I drank strong coffee, and half an hour later, after Karen had prepared the way with an alkaline douche, we made love.

When we were done, we didn't need words -- our eyes spoke and said, "Halleluiah! A new life is beginning today!"

*

*

*

On October 10th, I made another entry in my journal:

The baby is five weeks old...

Tonight, with Karen out at a church meeting, I took the opportunity to show the girls photographs from Leonard Nilson's "*A Child is Born.*" They were fascinated by the fetuses. I described how part of the baby comes from the father and part from the mother. Katie looked curiously at my beer belly, asking if the baby was in me. I explained that the part from me was already in mama's stomach. Of course, she asked how it got there.

When I answered that it "swam" there, the look on Katie's face was delightful! Of course, she had to have the last word, so she asked if it had swam out of my leg. That was enough for me; I turned the page to another picture.

On January 17th:

It's late. Karen and your sisters have long been asleep.

Tonight, I finally felt you kicking.

I had forgotten how exciting it is to put my hand on your mother's belly -- like placing my thumb gently against a taut fishing line, depressing just a little, waiting for a fish to strike. When suddenly it does, and the pole bends, anticipation explodes into action! energy! life!

I know quite well you are not sleeping. You are goggle-eyed with energy and impatience. When my heavy hand rests (as gently as it knows how) upon your blanket of flesh, kick it! throw it off!

We tuck your sisters in bed snugly every night – but every morning they’ve kicked off their covers and lie in the morning at who-knows-what angle. Has a hand come down upon them in the night, as well?

I got up one Saturday morning and asked Karen what she felt like doing for the day.

“Nothing much.”

It was often Karen’s answer. Karen preferred the familiar comforts of her African violets, her sewing machine and her kitchen, to adventures into the unknown.

But our apartment had only two bedrooms – one for Karen and me, one for the girls. “We need a house to raise our children in,” I said. “We’re going to need another bedroom soon. Would you like to go look for a house?”

But Karen hadn’t enjoyed our search for a house in Miami.

“No, thanks. I’d love to have a house, but next time we buy a house, you’re picking it. When you find one, let me know and I’ll tell you whether I like it.”

Mortgage interest rates had risen to 13%, which I could not afford. But some friends told me there was one bank – First Federal Savings and Loan of Winter Haven – that still allowed assumptions of old mortgages without hiking the interest rate to current levels.

Telling Karen I would take care of the house hunting, I stopped into a real estate office and was greeted by an elderly lady with wire-rimmed spectacles. I asked if I could see a house where the mortgage was held with First Federal Savings and Loan of Winter Haven.

“Well, how large a house do you want?” she asked helpfully.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I just need a house with First Federal of Winter Haven.”

At my insistence, we eventually found a home in her multiple-listing book with an 8% assumable mortgage. She insisted on showing me two other homes that afternoon – but as far as I was concerned, they were never in contention. My target house – an ugly thing with barn-like walls and a flat roof – was the only one whose mortgage rate I could afford. With interest and insurance, the monthly payments would still be less than four hundred dollars.

The agent and I were greeted at the house by a woman in a tank top, smoking a cigarette, her hair in curlers, a baby in her arms. She showed us

the living room. It looked fine to me. She showed us the kitchen, and the family room, and three bedrooms. They looked fine to me too. She apologized that she couldn't show us the master bathroom. "My husband," she said, "is taking a shower."

I didn't mind. I went home and told Karen I had found a house. The next day we went back – Karen and I and the real estate agent. The immediate view upon entering the front door was through a window that looked out into a little atrium. In the atrium was a fountain of running water and a banana tree. Karen immediately said, "I love it!" She also liked the living room, and the kitchen, and the family room, and the bedrooms. Once again, the woman of the house said, she couldn't show us the master bathroom. Again, she said, her husband was occupied in it.

Outside, we discussed the house. Karen *loved* the entrance, she said, with the window, and the fountain, and the banana tree. She asked me how I liked it.

"I love that interest rate," I said, keeping to myself my strong views about how ugly the house was.

We decided to bid on the house. We were concerned, of course, about the fact we had not seen the master bathroom. But we asked ourselves – worst case – how bad could it be? We could always be sure it was all right when we did our final walk-through, the night before closing. So Sunday night, we presented an offer. In less than 48 hours we had a contract on the house. To Karen's delight, it had a pretty atrium. To my delight, it had an affordable mortgage. To the sellers' delight, it had a master bathroom we had not seen.

On February 28th, our packing complete, we visited the new house for our final inspection and walk-through. Once again, the master bathroom was occupied. This time, the man of the house stood in the kitchen, cleaning catfish from a bucket on the counter.

"I'm sorry," he said, "But my wife is taking a bath. You're welcome to wait, but I don't know how long she'll be. Do you want to wait?"

I knew that something had to be wrong with the bathroom. We waited for half an hour, and the woman still hadn't come out. It was late, our two little girls were tired and whining, and so we gave up. The next day we closed on the house.

We learned at the closing that the sellers were several months behind in their mortgage payments. We took possession of the keys and drove out to our new house, master bathroom still unseen.

In the kitchen, we found the catfish bucket still on the countertop. The sink was full of fish scales, dried now to the surface of the sink. The house had been closed up for the day, and in the midday heat, competing with the smell of cleaned fish, we noticed the strong stench of cat urine coming from the carpet on the floor.

In a flowerpot we found the stubby roach of an old marijuana cigarette and a letter written by the woman of the house, addressed to her lover but never mailed. In a shoe box in the kitchen pantry were notices from First Federal of Winter Haven about the overdue mortgage. There was a notice from a car dealership notifying the man he was being released from his job. There was a notice of cancellation of insurance on his car. And there were past due notices from Visa, Master Card, American Express, Burdine's, Sears, and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Of course, we also discovered the secret of the master bathroom. Both the toilet and the bathtub remained full of water – dark brown and algae-filled. It was clear that neither the tub nor the toilet had been drained in months. Together, they had been nursery to many generations of catfish. Clearly, we had a lot of work ahead of us.

DANIEL

We replaced the family room carpet by piecing together thirteen scraps from used carpet we found in the warehouse at the office. A few days later, during a heavy rain, Karen and I noticed that the roof leaked. On March 20, I wrote in my journal again, addressing the child in Karen's womb:

I can't fall asleep....

Karen's flesh is stretched so tight that the outline of your limbs is almost visible, your awkward angles pressed into every inch. And your kicks? No sudden reflexes, those, or mere spasms! Rather, now, they are usually s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-s. Constant confinement and constraint must be unbearable for you. You don't kick now – you twist, turn, trying (it seems) to find a good foothold to gain leverage, to “straight-arm” your escape.

I'd like you to read Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* some day. Victor, who creates the monster, bears the responsibility for his creation. With each word we speak and each decision we make, we too “create” lives. God gave us his ability to create life – and along with it, the responsibility for what we create. This is the core of wisdom, and we mature in proportion to our understanding of it. Whether you, too, see fit to create a living breath in another, remember that you are a creator nonetheless. God has given you the power and responsibility to create your own life, if no other.

A journal entry on May 5th described Karen's waking in the middle of the night having contractions. A May 12th entry reported the doctor's assertion that she was two centimeters dilated. Then:

Preparations are complete. Crib, dressing table, high chair, the

works -- out of the warehouse, dusted and cleaned...

Several months ago, I wrote about the purposefulness of our endeavor. Going about the conception as methodically as we did, we couldn't help but be impressed by our parental responsibility and control.

Now, we are helpless -- waiting for God and our child to make up their minds. They keep their secret, just the two of them, so that labor will come on like a sudden hurricane on a calm day. Every night as we turn out the lights we wonder if this will be the night we stumble out of bed in the darkness and rouse the children....

While we waited, I taught Katie how to ride her bike without training wheels, running along beside it, holding the seat at first, then holding the back of her shirt.

*

*

*

I had named Pepino after myself -- should I do likewise with a human child? The Carvins had named their boys after their fathers and their forefathers. We had Charles and Charles Jr. and Charles III. We had Joseph James and Joseph William and Joseph Edward and Joseph Edward II. A boy child -- if that's what we were about to have -- could either be named after me, or not. The choice was ours.

I came to grips with my egoism, confessing to myself how badly I wanted to do it. It was a way of perpetuating my own existence, of obtaining immortality.

My father, meanwhile, was in the hospital again, talking about needing a triple bypass for his failing heart. And by this time, I took news of my father's ills with skepticism. I had tired of his complaints about his health and his requests for sympathy. I had told my brothers I thought he was a hypochondriac.

My decision became clear: I could not impose my name on my son. I could never control a child the way I'd controlled the union of sperm and egg. There was no belt or leash I could use to make that happen, any more than my father had been able to make me a salesman in a pink jacket. The decision about the name became easy. Whatever we named him, his name would be a reminder to both of us that his life would be shaped by his will, not mine.

A journal entry at 8 a.m. on May 26th. "Nothing over the weekend, but today could be the day... Karen is packing her bag..."

Then a record of the times between contractions: “9:19, 9:26, 9:37, 9:45, 9:52...”

I called work to tell them I wouldn’t be in. At 11 a.m., Karen fixed scrambled eggs. Only after breakfast did she let me grab a deck of cards and pack the car. We arrived at St. Joseph’s at noon.

As usual, Karen refused any anesthetics or painkillers. My journal entry at 12:35:

At the hospital now. Karen is all “admitted” and I’m waiting to be let into the labor room.... We’re still undecided about a name. Karen has mentioned Georgia Christine, but I refuse to discuss girls’ names at all. We’ve apparently got it narrowed down to two, with Karen leaning toward Daniel and me toward Timothy.

We played gin rummy to keep occupied. A final journal entry at 2:35 p.m.:

They’ve taken her into the Delivery Room...

Then I put down my journal to watch the childbirth, which came about 3 o’clock. I was delighted to hear the Doctor say, “It’s a boy!”

Our decision had been realized! The Y’s had prevailed!

At the same time, I was dismayed to hear the doctor say, “My God!”

“What?!?” Karen asked.

The doctor cut the umbilical cord and handed the baby to a nurse. The baby didn’t look blue to me – so I wondered what might be wrong. I caught a quick glance, and I could see that his eyes were closed – just slits, actually, shut tight between big cheeks. Could there be a problem with his eyes? I thought of my brother Chickie.

“He’s a big one,” the doctor said. “Let’s get him weighed.”

When the nurse returned from the scales and announced that Daniel weighed 12 pounds and 7 ounces, the doctor said it was the largest baby he had ever delivered.

Looking into our son’s face, I realized why his eyes had been shut – his cheeks were so chubby there had been no room for him to open them. The slits were hardly more than inverted folds between his cheeks and his forehead. Our child, it appeared, might be a sumo wrestler, but he showed no signs of Mongolism.

The nurse asked me what his name was going to be.

“Daniel,” I said. Daniel. The courageous youth who’d survived a night in the lion’s den.

The last entry in the journal, written ten days later:

There is far too much now: the story about how the nurses in Obstetrics had to send upstairs to Pediatrics for diapers large enough to fit you! The story about how your Uncle Chris had been pretending to the whole family that every phone call was the news of your arrival so that no one believed him when the news finally came...

With every encounter, you have already touched the life of another, and with every such touch, there is another story to be told. It has come too fast. I cannot remember all the laughs we have already had, all the joys you have already provided us in your first ten days of life.

Ah! Life is in sharing with others. When the child who has nudged his mother from deep inside, or relaxed under the touch of his father, finally breaks out in all glory, crying, kicking, sucking, eyeing, hearing all sounds, knowing his sisters and his sisters' friends, then does the joy of creation begin to spread to others. Then do the spirits of those others we love touch the child, lift him up, and fill his spirit with their own.

So this simple journal can be simple no more. It cannot follow you now, nor keep pace with your growth. It has drawn a pale picture of you as the creation of your father. Now it must be set aside, as you begin to create yourself.

T/HE ROOF

For Christmas, 1981, I gave Katie a book of fanciful stories called *“Curious Tales”* by Milos Macourek. On the inside cover, I wrote, “Katie – Imagination is one of God’s greatest gifts to us – with this book, you can let your imagination run wild!”

In the spring, I taught Jenny how to ride her bike the same way I had taught Katie – running along beside the bike, holding the seat, then holding the back of her shirt as I ran.

At night, I read stories to the girls in bed and told them I loved them “bigger than the sky.”

But my efforts at fatherhood struggled against the forces of litigation. To these forces, as an advocate for the rights of “X” or “Y,” I was fastened and bound.

I brought suit against the American Postal Workers Union on behalf of some supervisors at the General Mail Facility in Miami. The officers of the Local Union had distributed hundreds of flyers titled “Meet Your Postal Leaders.” The flyers named my clients, attributing to each a particular characteristic – alcoholism, racism, homosexuality, infidelity, impotence, etc. – with enough detail to make the accusations sound plausible. As a result of the flyers, my clients had been teased, ridiculed and harassed, humiliated on a daily basis with all the cruelty of the armpit boys.

The secretary of the Local Union admitted under oath that she’d typed the flyer at the request of the Union officers, and had been ordered by the Union President to turn over the typewriter ball she had used. (It was never seen again.) Then, shortly after her testimony, she was promptly fired by the union and called a liar.

My clients had the right to work and live without such abuse, I argued. The Union had the responsibility to refrain from such personal attacks. As

we litigated, I witnessed real suffering on the part of my clients, not only as a result of the flyer itself, but as a result of the legal process – the Unions’ lawyers investigating the personal lives of my clients even further, to explore whether any of the allegations might be true. It seemed at times the litigation caused more harm than the flyer itself.

By the time I got home from work, I was tired and irritable, becoming more and more the person I was being made to be. I picked apart what people said, searching for weaknesses, tracking down faults, seeking to expose them. As months and years passed, I continued to practice law. Devoted to determining blame, I saw blame everywhere I turned.

*

*

*

On Sundays, Karen took the children to church. After church, the congregation began to get together for brunches and afternoon picnics. Then, Karen began to attend Wednesday night church meetings. And when the telephone rang on weekday evenings, it was usually somebody asking for Karen to participate in a “prayer chain.” Church activities spread like vines into my world.

It wasn’t the speaking in tongues, the raising of hands in praise, the beating on tambourines, that alienated me. Rather, I felt the emphasis on prayer had gone overboard. Prayer chain requests, laying on of hands, praying at social gatherings, were continual. And many of these prayers were for a child to perform well on a test in school, or for a child to be over her cold or flu. I didn’t feel comfortable standing in a group of men praying for the devil to be cast out of a child with a cough.

One day I talked to Katie about the beginning of the world. I spoke to her about the universe, about God’s creation of the world in the “big bang,” and about evolution. She expressed surprise that I believed in evolution, telling me God created the world in seven days, because the Bible said so. She informed me that she knew, from Sunday School, that evolution was “a lie told by the devil.”

I mentioned this to one of the lawyers I worked with.

“And you’re not pulling your girls out of that church?”

He could not understand that while I didn’t agree with Karen’s beliefs, I could respect her efforts to teach them to our children.

“It’s your right, as the man of the family.”

There was that word, “right,” again. In his view, I had abandoned the fight between X’s and Y’s.

“You are the head of the family, aren’t you?”

Being the head of the family led me not to think in terms of rights, but of responsibilities.

So while I removed myself from Karen's church, I didn't attempt to interfere with her beliefs or her efforts to instill them in our children.

*

*

*

My peers in the law were traveling to Europe, snow-skiing, buying motorboats, scuba gear, expensive cars, living at golf courses and country clubs. I knew I didn't want such things myself. But my peer group left me feeling my hard work gave me some kind of *right* to personal gratification of my own. I wondered where I was supposed to find pleasure in life.

I wanted to go out to dinner, to go to jazz concerts, to go camping with Karen. But Karen didn't care for camping. And besides, the children were too little, Karen was tired from having three children at her heels all day, and it was never easy to find a baby-sitter.

I often came home at night to look for a spot where I could be alone, to draw, or to write, or to listen to music. But there was no such place in the house. The children were misbehaving and Karen was asking me to discipline them. Or, the children were being good and begging for my attention, and I could not turn them down.

I couldn't listen to my stereo at all – while the children were awake it would conflict with their homework or their television; after they went to bed it would keep them awake.

Early in our marriage, Karen and I had often repeated our vows to each other.

"I, Joseph, take you, Karen, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."

But we shared these words less often now, and when we did, I wondered what it meant to "love," hoping that I did in fact love her, hoping that I always would. Increasingly, I became frightened that I might not. I wondered whether we would have any common interests once the children were gone. Karen began talking about having more children. I began to think about other women.

Each prior childbirth had added age to Karen's face; each had added flesh to her middle. I knew I had become bald and was gaining weight, like my father. From all I could tell, I was increasingly unattractive to Karen. Unable to speak it out loud, I dared only ask myself: Could our marriage survive another child?

I had come to realize that children have real consequences for finances, for physical space, for time, and for the body. And so I listened to Karen's desire for more children, worried that a fourth child would bring more work, more weariness, more signs of age to the woman I wanted to be my friend.

In the fall of 1983, saying she had forgotten to take her pills, Karen announced that she was pregnant again. There would soon be six of us.

Sometimes it seemed the only way for me to climb the walls to personal and financial freedom was to work more hours.

*

*

*

One evening, Karen and I were trying to watch television. Daniel was still up but whining in a tired way that suggested his bedtime was near.

"Behave yourself," I said, sternly enough to get his attention. He looked at me, a little frightened, and stopped whining. But a few minutes later, he was whining again.

"Daniel, behave!" I repeated, a little more sharply this time. Again, he stopped, but again, within a few minutes, he had started whining again.

A third time, much louder, with real irritation, and with deliberate pauses between the words, intended to frighten him: "Daniel! -- I said -- *behave!*"

His lips formed a little "o" and his little chin quivered as he trembled before my bellowing orders.

"I'm *haive*," he said. "I'm *haive*."

*

*

*

By the end of April, Karen was seven months pregnant. She talked about her swollen feet, her aching back, her weight gain. Immersed in worry that a fifth or a sixth child would simply be too much, I considered taking things into my own hands by getting a vasectomy. Though I wasn't absolutely certain of myself, I knew that Karen's full-term discomfort provided a window that wouldn't last forever. If I didn't do it now, she might not want me to in a year. I told Karen I wanted to get one.

To my surprise, she agreed.

Only four years after exulting in the miracle of conception, I was thinking of ending forever my role in it!

I procrastinated. Should Doctor Frankenstein really seek to kill his monster?

But as I watched Karen massage her feet and rub her lower back, I

made my decision. I called the doctor.

A few weeks later, I lay on a white table, myself now the creature whose body parts were in question. I watched the doctor, scalpel and needle-nosed pliers in hand, dismantle me.

My right side took him three or four minutes, but my left side gave him trouble. He began to mumble curses as the *vas* on the left kept slipping back, protesting its execution, seeking a reprieve. He finally dug into me with the pliers so hard I cried out. But he had got a good hold of the *vas*. He pulled it up to where he could get at it to cut, and notwithstanding the local anesthetic, I came up off the table, crying out.

"Sorry about that," he said. "At least I got it this time."

*

*

*

One night when I got home from work, Karen was sitting in the family room reading. There were no children in sight; the house seemed strangely quiet. I opened a beer and sat down on the couch across from her. She looked up at me from her reading. I heard her say, "*Hit yourself over your right eye.*"

I pondered the instruction. Though she sometimes spoke softly enough that I failed to hear her, I was sure I'd heard this right. Perhaps there was a mosquito on my forehead. So – to be sure I got it – I slapped the palm of my hand against my forehead, above my right eye, as swift and hard as I could.

I had forgotten my glasses. The palm of my hand hit the corner of the wire frames and the slap sent my glasses flying across the room. I looked at my hand for signs of mosquito or blood and found none. Then I realized that Karen was laughing uncontrollably.

"What's so funny?" I asked. My forehead, I realized, now hurt from slamming my glasses.

She tried to tell me but couldn't regain enough self-control to do so. Before I could help myself, I was laughing with her. My laughter just made her laugh harder, and soon, I too was laughing so hard I couldn't ask what we were laughing about.

Later, she was able to tell me: she'd noticed a redness on my eyebrow and was asking me a question, the beginning of which I had not heard:

"*Did you hit yourself over your right eye?*"

I think my willingness to inflict harm on myself at Karen's command was a good sign.

On June 20, 1984, Karen began contractions. Women's Hospital had arranged a room to look like a bedroom, using it for both labor and delivery. It was a pleasant setting for the birth of a child. We watched *International Velvet* on television until just minutes before the birth. Our fourth child – all ten pounds, twelve ounces of her – came into this world naturally, like her siblings, without anesthesia or painkillers. We named her *Tessa*, from the Greek word meaning *Fourth*.

Then the rains came, and the leaks in our ceiling grew intolerable. Three times since buying the house I had paid roofers to fix the leaks. Three times, they had done no good. Three times, I had called them to make good on their guarantees, only to find they'd gone out of business. I took a week's vacation for the July Fourth holiday. I went to a building supply house and bought several rolls of a thick, rubbery roofing material. I bought a blowtorch and some propane gas.

Carrying fifteen hundred-pound rolls of roofing material up the ladder in the hot July sun, I felt like Sisyphus, condemned to push a bolder up the mountainside only to have it slip from his grasp at the peak, and have to push it up once more. On the flat roof, I turned on the torch, melting a layer of the thick new material onto one section of the old roof, then another.

After several days of this labor in the sweltering heat, I was about half done. Our friends the Carpenters came over one night. As we drank beers and talked, Tessa asleep in her crib, a storm blew up. Water dripped steadily from the ceilings. Suddenly, the drips became flowing streams. I ran into the back yard and saw that the wind had gotten under the newly laid section of roofing, ripped a whole piece of plywood off the trusses, and folded it back on top of the old roof. The rain was falling directly onto the gypsum board of our ceiling. David Carpenter and I worked in the pouring rain and darkness, folding the new section back in place, then carrying barbell weights up the ladder, laying them on top of the plywood to hold it down for the night. We were able to stop the streaming leaks, reducing them to strong drips for the rest of the night.

The next day's sun began to dry the plywood. I laid more rubber roofing, using the propane torch to melt the seams of each section into the seams of the next, careful to leave no holes where water could leak through. By the end of my vacation I was exhausted, but the work was done. When the next rains came, there were no more leaks.

Danny would have been proud.

T/HE MOUNTAIN

Running around the swimming pool at my parents' house on Eden Road, I'd torn a ligament in my foot; so Karen had packed our mini-van while I watched from my crutches. Then, as we finally got underway, Karen driving, me in the passenger's seat, I had tried to keep Tessa's diarrhea under control, changing her diapers in my lap several times.

It was a rainy night when we reached the mountains. As we climbed the road in search of our cabin, six of us and a week's luggage on board, our 4-cylinder vehicle strained. Then the paved road disappeared into a steep path of mud and gravel. On either side of the path, two long parallel pieces of concrete, barely visible in our headlights, provided what little traction there was. The rain had washed away the earth between these concrete ribbons, leaving a "pit" between them which seemed deep enough to catch a wheel, snag the van, damage an axle, or even cause a heavily loaded vehicle to tumble off the road and down the mountainside. So Karen drove carefully, trying to keep two tires on each ribbon.

The front tires spit gravel from the ribbons to the undersides of the van as we slipped repeatedly, hoping for traction. We reached a possible left-hand turn – a turn both leftward and upward on an even steeper incline – and stopped to double-check our directions.

We did this, of course, in defiance of the laws of momentum. For once we had stopped, we were faced with the impossible task of moving again. Karen got out and surveyed the area with a flashlight. We now had to start from a full stop *while* making a sharp left and *while* turning up an even steeper incline. Karen got back in the driver's seat and after a moment of silent prayer, hit the accelerator hard. But -- tires spinning, scattering gravel

-- we actually went backwards down the ribbons, thankfully not slipping off into the "pit" between them.

Karen stopped. Opening the door and stepping out with a flashlight myself, I realized that a steep mountain presents problems for a man on crutches. As Karen tried again, I watched more wet gravel spit out in the flashlight's beam, and now smoke as well. I could smell rubber burning. Every time Karen let off the brake and stepped on the accelerator, she lost ground. Frustrated, she asked me to drive.

So I instructed Karen and the children to get out of the van and we unloaded the luggage onto the roadside. With Karen and the girls in the pouring night rain, and with Tessa still in her car-seat in the back, wailing now at the top of her lungs, I got in the driver's seat and stepped on the accelerator. We slid backwards on the ribbons two feet, five feet, ten feet, fifteen – spinning and spitting -- then at last charged back to the turn, hurtling left up the final hill, Karen and the girls cheering from the darkness behind us.

We parked the van. Karen and the children carried the luggage (and me) up a set of steep stone steps to reach our cabin.

The inside was quaint, comfortable, and dry – a "loft" for sleeping upstairs, a wood-burning stove in the living room, and a back porch with a view across the treetops. We had planned to drive back down the mountain to eat dinner, but between us and food lay the darkness, the rain and the "pit." We decided to spend the night in the cabin, skipping dinner – never mind our hunger.

Discovering a cupboard of jig saw puzzles and children's games, we sat on the living room floor and played Parcheesi. In the middle of the game, a tick began crawling across the game board. Jenny didn't know what a tick was.

"It's a bug that sucks your blood," said Kate.

"It bites you, and buries its head inside you," I added, trying to crush the tick on the game board with my fingernail, but watching it continue on its path.

"Can't you kill it?" asked Jenny.

"Maybe he can," said Karen. "But ticks are very hard to kill."

"Its body fills up with your blood until it's all big and bloated," Kate continued.

"Once it starts to suck your blood, it won't let go," I said. And then, losing sight of the tick: "Darn it – where did he go now?"

Only then did I realize the depth of Jenny's fear.

“I’m scared,” she cried. “I want to leave!”

We’d already said too much, now, to convince her ticks are harmless. As Jenny continued screaming and demanding to be taken home, Karen tried another ploy:

“One interesting thing about ticks,” she said, “is that they always stay on the floor. They never get up on tables and chairs.”

“Not even for a second?” Jenny asked, her sobbing stopped, her eyes full of hope.

Karen’s wisdom paid off. Jenny found a way to move around the cabin – in and out of every room, including the bathroom – by moving from the top of one piece of furniture to the next.

The next morning, we were all very hungry. The “pit” still lay in our path, but we felt better about it in the sunlight. We drove carefully down the concrete ribbons and then into town to get groceries.

There was no television in the cabin. We made two jig saw puzzles and played Chutes and Ladders and Parcheesi, in which I kept getting close to the finish line only to be knocked back home again.

Tuesday morning we woke to find there was no running water in the cabin. The girls found the lack of a flushable toilet intolerable. Karen walked down the road to the cistern and pump in an effort to identify the problem, but was unsuccessful, except for meeting Mr. Osborn, who told her he couldn’t believe we’d driven up that road in the pouring rain at night. The road had been destroyed by the severe winter, he said. A cement mixer would be arriving the next day to re-pour the road. And once the new concrete was poured, it should not be driven on until Friday.

So we’d be stranded on the mountaintop for three days.

We couldn’t survive three days without water. So while the older children agreed to keep an eye on Tessa, Karen and I ventured down the mountainside to the pump. Karen looked at the wildflowers at first, then wondered why I was hurtling downhill in forward lunges.

To me, it was an unexpected lesson in geometry. The point at which I set the crutches on the ground was the center of a circle. The crutches were the radius of that circle. My armpits, resting on the tops of the crutches, traced the circumference of the circle. Because of the downhill mountain slope, each arc I traveled ended lower than the center of the circle.

It was as if I were the hand of a clock, starting at ten, passing twelve, free-falling from there down to five, again and again.

We found the pump in a deep ditch beside the road. Sliding down wet leaves into it, Karen and I discovered the problem. A concrete cistern

collected fresh mountain water from an underground spring. The pump was operating successfully, pumping water out of the cistern. But the hose which led from the pump to the cabin was disconnected. The pump had been spewing water from the cistern around the ditch. The hose had to be stretched hard to get it back in place. I tried to brace myself for leverage, but my right foot with its torn ligament twisted and slipped against the muddy walls of the embankment, causing me great pain. Turning around, bracing with my left foot, I eventually got the hose back on the pump, though just barely.

Karen and I climbed back to the cabin. I found, of course, that the geometry of the circle now worked the opposite way. Setting the crutch tips on the ground at the center of the circle, I had to move from five o'clock back up to ten o'clock. This was impossible, of course, unless the circles were very small. I made my way up the mountain road in tiny baby steps, like an inchworm.

Back in the cabin, we waited for the water to come back on. Dishes had piled in the sink. We'd been unable to brush our teeth. Now, we could only wait for my repair work to pay off.

Karen and Katie made woodcrafts. We put crackers and cheese on the porch railing for a friendly squirrel. We watched hummingbirds sip red sugar water from a feeder. The children played happily with each other, and even volunteered for chores. But the water didn't come back on. We went to bed feeling the harmony that comes from facing a common enemy -- just a little dirtier than usual.

Wednesday morning Karen returned from the pump to report that the hose had come off again. This time, she had been able to reconnect it herself. We spent the afternoon painting T-shirts on the back porch, waiting once again for the water to come back on.

Some dead leaves were hanging over a tree branch outside the kitchen window, making a silhouette that looked to me like a clambering turtle. I got the children to agree.

"Mountain turtles can climb trees, you know," I informed them.

They challenged me. Was it alive?

"I'm not sure," I said. "But don't go out -- you might scare it away. Let's watch it through the window," I suggested. "If it's alive, it'll probably climb down in a while. If it's dead, I wonder what killed it? Look at that -- I think it was shot by a hunter's arrow."

We watched the mountain turtle in the tree for most of the evening. Karen managed to pull a tick off the back of Daniel's neck without Daniel

or Jenny knowing it. She picked another one out of Tessa's hair, and a third off the back of her own neck. But we kept quiet about the ticks, and Jenny didn't ask about them anymore. Mostly we waited for the water.

Thursday, as the sun grew hotter, we began to feel how dirty we were. We decided to hike to the creek for a swim, a mile and a quarter down the mountain. With an ace bandage, a sock, and a sneaker tied tight, I found I could walk downhill with the crutches fairly well. All six of us set out together – a group of gypsies, bound by a simple, common purpose – and made it easily down to the creek. We splashed about in the shallow water, feeling delightfully clean. We came back up the mountain road single file, me on crutches, five-year-old Daniel with his walking stick, Katie and Jen with canteen and water bottle, Karen with Tessa packed in a sling behind her back. By the time we reached the cabin about five o'clock, we were hot and dirty again from the climb – and we still had no water.

So each of us searched the house for containers. Armed with buckets, canteens, Pepsi-bottles and milk jugs, we went down the road to the little spring that fed the cistern. We filled our containers from the spring. While the others went ahead to the cabin, I stopped at the pump. Though the ground around it was mossy and slick, I got enough leverage to slide the concrete slab off its top. There appeared to be plenty of water inside, but it was brown and opaque. I put my hand in it. Only two or three inches beneath the surface, I hit sandy muck -- an important discovery. It seemed the pump had been trying hard to pump muck instead of water. I scooped muck out of the cistern for about an hour, along with a village of wriggling salamanders. When I was done, there was only a couple of inches of water in the cistern, and it didn't reach as high as the outlet to the pump. Now, the pump would just blow air.

It was dark. I hobbled up to the cabin and washed off the mud in the tub of old bath water we'd been using to rinse dishes. I poured two hands of clean water from a canteen over my body.

Karen made a chicken dinner. Afterward, we roasted peanuts and played Trivial Pursuit on the back porch, against a chorus of chattering crickets.

In our trips up and down the mountainside, I had thought of Sisyphus again. But unlike the lonely Sisyphus, our family was together. There had been not a single argument between the children all week. They had never hesitated to do what was asked of them. They had frequently volunteered to help out. We were dirty and we were sore, but we were very happy.

THE STICK

One weekend back in 1981, struggling to expand my living space, I had begun to build a room among the trusses in our attic. With Karen and the children at church on Sunday mornings, I had moved the wall between Daniel's room and the hall closet to make room for a stairway. I had cut a hole in the ceiling. I had installed temporary folding stairs, and on weekends and holidays ever since, I had climbed the stairs into the hot truss work, building my new room, insulating it as best I could.

For ten years, we spent winter and spring Saturdays at the softball park with our girls; blue skies and rolling white clouds made one day stand out against the stress of my weekly labors. On Sundays I worked in the attic.

I taught Daniel how to ride a bike. As I had with his sisters before him, I ran along beside him, holding the collar of his shirt, trying to protect him without supporting him, letting him get the feel of balancing himself. As I ran beside the bike, my lungs struggled in the wind, harder now than in earlier times.

When the walls of my attic expansion were finished, when the built-in desk and bunk bed were complete, I added a set of permanent stairs and installed a ceiling fan. Finally, I bought a little aluminum window. I cut a hole in the wall of the new room the size of an apple, and watched the daylight stream in. I enlarged the hole, flooding the room with light; I inserted the window. That evening, Katie moved into the new room. It had taken me seven years to complete.

I had come, as my father and mother had wanted, to feel the weight of responsibility, sensing the value of the thing like a bronze statue that had a voice, calling me ever closer to it.

*

*

*

My brother Jimmy had nearly gotten fired from his job at the Postal Service for distributing right-to-life materials at abortion clinics. My brother David and his wife were officers in a Right-to-Life organization in Miami. Karen's church had been involved in abortion protests and picketing.

I struggled with this question of "rights" and "responsibilities." Is an

unborn fetus a legal “person” with the “right” to life? Does the mother have the responsibility to respect that “right”? Or, if her “right to privacy” is recognized while the fetus has no “right” to balance against it, then what is it that changes after childbirth, when parents are charged with legal “responsibilities” for their children, and children can even sue them for violating their “rights”? As a lawyer, I struggled with the relative roles of the states, and of the federal government, in deciding such questions about the biological X’s and Y’s.

Tiring of such legal arguments, I was becoming more interested in the personal dilemmas faced by the mother and father of an unwanted child. Like Doctor Frankenstein, having created his monster and now regretting that act, the parent is conflicted with love, and with the realization that all acts, and all decisions – both those already made, and those still to be made – have real and serious consequences for self and for others.

I conceived of an idea for a novel that would address the responsibility of parenthood and creatorship, demonstrating the inescapability of responsibility. It would be a modernized treatment of the mythical sorceress Medea, who kills her children in an act of desperate revenge. At home on Sunday mornings, once my attic was complete, I began to write this story.

*

*

*

My father, meanwhile, had finally gone bankrupt in 1982. When the accounts had closed, months of payroll taxes were still due -- about \$300,000. The IRS had been hounding him, adding interest and penalties regularly, watching his tax debt grow. While he fended them off, he sat in his bedroom on Eden Road in his pajamas, making calls to his bookie, occasionally donning his old pink jacket and venturing out for a card game at the 99 Club. He bet on sports and he bought lottery tickets, trying for a lucky break.

His once beautiful house was falling apart around him. The lawn service unpaid, the grass was turning to weeds. The draperies in the front bay window were torn. The pool was cracked and leaking. Once I stopped by their house to help my mother fix loose tiles in the bathroom. I found the garage full of hundreds of Dad’s old jackets hung on portable racks. Custom made for forty years, they came in a variety of colors and sizes. They were to be sold to one of Dad’s friends for six hundred dollars.

I tried on a few, but the arms were too short.

Dad told me the Town of Palm Beach owed him money dating from the underwater restaurant he had planned to build on the Pier. He’d been

writing the Town for years, asking for his money back. I met with him, listened to his rambling, wheezing descriptions of old business deals, and in his behalf, I sued the Town and got him some more money.

On Sunday mornings at my keyboard, trying to write my novel of Medea, I found that legal cases still crowded my mind. I could not freely imagine, freely create, or freely write, when my mind was bound up in the need to attend to my family, or in the twisted cords of labor litigation. Thoughts about cases stood hard against me, my fingers wrapped around them, my cheeks pressed against their cold steel. No matter how I tried, I could not create Medea. After 180 pages of staggered intellectual musing, she was still lifeless – nothing but ink on a page. I put the pages away in a drawer, and succumbed to the practice of law.

*

*

*

I represented a company that had fired a truck driver for reckless driving. In fact, it was the second time they'd fired him for reckless driving. The first time, the union had called the NAACP; the NAACP had threatened to picket if the driver (an African American) wasn't reinstated. The company had hired him back.

Months later, two motorists had called independently on the same day to report that the driver had run them off the road. So the company had fired him a second time.

Just before I took the driver's deposition, I read in the newspaper that he'd been arrested in his own car – after his release by my client – for smashing in a motorist's windshield with a baseball bat.

In his deposition, I asked if he had smashed the windshield.

"Yes," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"The guy deserved it," he said.

"How so?" I asked.

"The way he was speeding up and slowing down as I tried to pass him."

"You and the other motorist pulled over to the side of the road?"

"No. He stopped at a traffic light. I got out of my car and caught up to him."

"And you broke his windshield with a baseball bat?"

"No. It wasn't a baseball bat. It was a stick."

"Oh, I see. How big a stick?"

"Just a stick."

"Well, was it a two-by-four?"

"It was just a stick."

"Was it a tree branch? A twig? How big around was it?"

"It was just a stick."

"Where did you get the stick? Did you just happen to find it on the side of the road?"

"No. It was in the trunk of my car."

"Ah, I see. Well then -- why was it in the trunk of your car?"

"I had put it there."

"Why had you put it there?"

"In case I needed it."

"Needed it for what?"

"To defend myself."

"I see. So it was just a stick, but it was a stick big enough to defend yourself with, and big enough to break a windshield?"

"I already told you. It was just a stick."

"Well, let's see if I've got this right -- you were mad at this motorist, so when he came to a stop light, you got out of your car, you took this "stick" out of the trunk of your car, and you smashed his windshield with it?"

"I didn't "smash" the windshield. I just hit it."

"But when you hit the windshield, the windshield broke, is that right?"

"Yes."

"What was it this motorist did that made you so mad?"

"He was slowing me down. I couldn't help it, you know -- I was in a hurry."

"You were in a hurry?"

"Yeah, man. You'd be in a hurry too, if your wife was going to the hospital."

"Your wife was in the car with you?"

"That's right. Listen here. She was having a baby."

"She was going into labor?"

"That's right. He wouldn't let me pass. I was in a hurry. I mean, the man was messin' with me while I was trying to get my wife to the hospital. Know what I mean? I didn't have any choice."

"So you stopped, and took this stick out of the trunk of your car, and broke the man's windshield?"

"That's right."

As I questioned this fellow, his lawyer complained that my questions were all irrelevant, that I was only asking them to harass his client.

The law thrives best when everyone is a victim.

THE COURTHOUSE STEPS

Paula Hobbie was an assistant manager at a mall jewelry store normally staffed with only two or three people. But on Friday nights and the weekends before Christmas, Valentine's, and Mother's Day, the store did more business than it did the entire rest of the year. Everyone was scheduled to work at the peak times.

Not surprisingly, these were also the least favored times, when employees would often call in sick. Managers had to be there in case non-managers failed to show up.

This was presenting no problems until Hobbie, upon joining the Seventh Day Adventist Church, adopted the belief that it's sinful to work between sundown Friday and sundown Saturday. Thereafter, she staunchly refused to work those times, even on the high-sales holidays. The Company released her.

Hobbie filed a discrimination charge with the EEOC, arguing that it was her legal "right" to honor her Sabbath. The company hired me, and we insisted on its "right" to have its managers at work when the work needed to be done. But we lost; the EEOC found merit in Hobbie's claim of discrimination.

Meanwhile, Hobbie's claim for unemployment benefits was denied by the State of Florida, and Hobbie appealed. I knew of a case on point -- Sherbert vs. Verner -- decided by the United States Supreme Court itself. Based on that case, Florida's decision to deny Hobbie's unemployment claim was clearly wrong. I told Lawton & Company there was no point paying me to argue against her appeal, because we could not win.

Much to my surprise, we did. My client was happy – it had won the case without even paying me to write a brief.

Then Hobbie filed papers asking that the case be heard by the United States Supreme Court.

Each year, thousands of unhappy litigants ask the Supreme Court to consider their cases, but only a handful succeed -- usually only when the Court considers the matter one of great public importance. Briefs were due on the question of whether the case was important enough for the Court to consider. I told Lawton & Company not to worry – I doubted the Court would consider a few unemployment checks of great public importance. Once again, I advised, there was no point paying me to brief the matter.

By this time I should have learned. As if the boulder of Sisyphus were rolling up the mountain of its own volition, the Supreme Court agreed to consider the case. Oral arguments were scheduled for December 11, 1988 in Washington.

For me, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. Most lawyers only *dream* of arguing a case before our highest court. It was the ultimate forum for the battle between the X's and the Y's, where rights were declared and responsibilities assigned as surely as God in heaven on judgment day. Now, I would be walking up those marble steps, into those hallowed chambers, to argue my own case – I would *be there!*

To represent a client before the Supreme Court, I first had to be admitted as a member of the Bar of the Supreme Court; I filed my application and paid my admission fee. Then I learned it would cost over ten thousand dollars in printing costs to file a brief. I could always volunteer my time, but how could I pay for the printing costs? Or, how could I convince Lawton & Company to pay for them, in this case I'd insisted they could not win, this case of no great importance?

Not surprisingly, Lawton and Company decided we would let the State of Florida do the arguing on our side. So in the case of *Paula Hobbie vs. the State of Florida and Lawton & Company*, I filed papers with the Court indicating I would not file a brief in the Company's behalf.

I got a phone call from my cousin, Michael, who had the formidable title of "Deputy Assistant U.S. Attorney General for Civil Rights." He had seen my name on the court papers, and when he learned that I would be attending the argument, he invited me to visit him in Washington.

"We'll go to the courthouse together," he said. "I insist. We can get a Justice Department limousine; we can go past Secret Service and through the VIP back door; we'll have reserved, front-row seats. Maybe I can even

introduce you to Chief Justice Rehnquist...”

Meet personally with the Chief Justice? Michael’s words went to my head. My excitement grew. My grandfather and father had dropped the names of Winston Churchill and Harry Truman like they were the best of friends – now I might get a personal introduction to the Chief Justice of the United States. A few days before the big day I watched a show on public television about the notorious formality of proceedings before the Supreme Court. I noticed one segment, shot in the Court’s exclusive private cloakroom, about how the lawyers all wore a certain style of tailored, three-piece suit, of a certain fabric and a certain cut, “de rigueur” among the prestigious few who argued cases to this court. I realized I was not one of the initiated. Karen told me that at the least, if I were going to the Supreme Court, I really ought to buy myself a new pair of shoes.

I could see her point – my shoes were the same ones I’d worn every day for several years, and they were dull and dirty, as I’d never bothered to shine them. My father had been a debonair dresser who used his bright pink jackets and snappy accessories to be known wherever he went. This trip to Washington planted a new self-image in my consciousness – one in which I stood in the formal cloakroom I’d seen on television. The Justices of the Supreme Court would be able to see, from the fabric and the cut of my suit, and from my new shoes, that I was a success in my field, a man not to be taken lightly. It was as if my father’s instincts had suddenly come alive within me – I understood, for the first time, why he dressed the way he did; my clothes would display me like a gilded frame.

The night before my flight I drove to the mall after work, feeling sure there would be a shoe store in the mall. Finding a Florsheim store, I walked in and perused the selection on the racks. Twice a salesman asked if I’d like to be helped, and twice I declined, looking up and down for a pair of shoes I thought I might like.

Eventually I settled on one pair in particular – black, with no laces – taking it off the shelf, rolling it in my hands, examining the sole and the stitching, wondering if it was formal enough, wondering if it would wear well, wondering if it would be comfortable – wondering, most of all, what it would say about me. The salesman approached me for the third time.

“Are you sure I can’t help you?” he asked.

“Well, maybe you can,” I said. “I’m thinking about this pair. What do you think? Does this shoe wear well? Is it comfortable?”

The salesman gave me a long and puzzled look.

“Are you serious?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because the shoe you’re looking at is the same shoe you have on right now,” he said, condescendingly. “And from the looks of things, I’d say you’ve been wearing them for a long time.”

He was right. I bought them – again – content that they were the best I could do.

The next day, I flew to Washington and made my way to Michael’s apartment. Michael drove us to the Justice Department, where he had a desk in the very office once used by J. Edgar Hoover. Just as he’d promised, a chauffeur-driven limousine picked us up and drove us to the Supreme Court building, where armed guards let us into the private parking garage below the building. Michael’s badge got us aboard the basement elevator that led directly into the cloakroom I’d seen on television. From the cloakroom, a door opened out into the courtroom. We passed through it and found ourselves a few feet from the Justices’ bench, looking out at a courthouse packed with tourists, all looking at us.

As Michael had promised, we sat in the front row, reserved for the Attorney General and other Justice Department Officials. The federal marshal announced that Court would convene in five minutes. I chatted with a gray-haired man in a three-piece suit to my left. Then the marshal approached the front row and asked me to produce my reserved seat pass. Of course I didn’t have one.

Michael pled my case, but was unable to dissuade the marshal from whisking me past the tourists and out the door of the Courtroom. There, another marshal ushered me out the front door of the building itself, into the cold outside air. I protested that I was the lawyer representing Lawton & Company – that the case about to be heard by the Court was *my* case -- but to no avail. The marshal insisted that without a special pass, I could only come in as a tourist. I found myself standing on the famous white steps beneath the colonnade, looking up at the grandiose facade, marveling at the change a few short moments could bring.

A line of blue and gold cub scouts stretched up from the street below, waiting to be let into the courthouse. I walked down the steps to the street and stood in the back of the line. Everyone was having to go through a security check. I had no overcoat, and a cold December wind blew into my ears. Like Sisyphus, I looked up from the bottom of the mountain.

Then I heard a guard announce that the courtroom was full. I could no longer stand the humiliation. I got out of line and climbed the steps to the entrance, passing scores of cub scouts, going straight to the head of the line.

"Please, sir," I said. "I'm a lawyer. The case being heard inside is *my case*. Is there nothing I can do to get inside?"

"No," came the answer. "The Court is full."

"But it's my case," I said. "Here, look – I even have copies of the briefs with me –"

Then, a kindly looking guard asked if I were a "member of the Court".

"Why yes," I said. "They're arguing my case in there, right now –"

"Come here," he said. "Let's see your I.D. All the members of the Court are listed on my computer."

I showed him my driver's license, but I wasn't on his computer.

"But I have to be," I said. "I am a member of the Court. I have my receipt back in my office..."

"When were you admitted?" he asked.

"Just last week," I said.

He gave me a look not unlike the one the shoe salesman had given me two nights earlier. In the two-hundred-year history of the Court, I doubt a lawyer with a case being argued inside had ever before found himself outside, pleading on the courthouse steps to be let in without a pass. As I gave my detailed explanation of how I came to be there, he kept insisting he couldn't let me in without authority. I begged him to set a new precedent.

Finally, my pleading prevailed.

"Oh, what the heck," he said. "You couldn't be making this up. This computer's only updated once a month. I'll let you in."

He opened another door to the courtroom and ushered me to an empty seat in the back of the lawyers' section, just as the justices were filing in, black robed, full of pomp and dignity.

The Court ruled in favor of Hobbie, as I'd predicted all along. My client, Lawton & Co., had lost, but with its loss, my advice to them had been vindicated. They could be thankful: justice had cost them nothing. And I could be thankful as well: though I hadn't yet matched my father's wardrobe, I did have a new pair of shoes. And unlike my father, I was one of the few lawyers in America who had scaled the legal heights. I'd had a case argued before the Supreme Court of the United States of America. And what's more, in the cold December wind, I had won my argument with the marshals, leaving the cub scouts on the courthouse steps.

BINTU OF THE MAGIBUTI

My precedent-setting argument at the Supreme Court provided only a brief escape from labor law. Daily life was far more ugly, and as ugliness became routine, I longed to be elsewhere.

I pled, for the fourth time, for a window in my office, and on one delightful day, a man came around with a sledge hammer and a concrete saw and knocked a hole in the concrete block by my desk, creating (at last) a view into the parking lot, where a dumpster was always full of trash. Still, if I looked up, I could see the sky. It gave me hope that the future could bring better days.

In the spring of 1989, my brother Chris and I started sending each other e-mail. Beginning with word play, our correspondence grew to sport over longer phrases, and then to full-blown paragraphs and story lines. Chris and I conceived of creating a family story, involving others in the word games we played. Begun with a paragraph by one of us, it could be mailed to other family members, each adding a paragraph until the story was complete.

In fact, we were planning a family vacation on St. George Island off the Florida panhandle. When we gathered together on the island in July, we could all read the final story we'd created together. Intrigued by the possibilities, we agreed that Chris would write the first paragraph. After the story had been circulated throughout the family, it would be returned to me to complete.

Chris began with the following:

From deep within the jungle Bintu emerged, chief of the Magibuti. Four days he had hunted in the rain forests around the village. Over his lean black muscular shoulders he carried an elk he had slain the night before. Two days before that he had killed a monkey, but this he dragged behind him, as any novice warrior could hunt and kill a monkey. In fact, he had slain the monkey only in case he was unlucky in his pursuit to find other prey, for to return empty-handed would mean disgrace, and Bintu, as the chief, could not risk disgrace in the eyes of his people.

He was the only son of the only son and the father of three daughters. His woman, Kiki, was nearing delivery of another child, which all in the village hoped would be a boy.

Bintu walked proudly into the village with his game. He passed by his mother's hut, dropped the monkey there, and without breaking stride continued toward the main hut of the village, his elk held high.

Chris mailed this beginning to other households, and at each one, more in the life of Bintu was written.

When the story finally came to me, it showed all the signs of authorship by many minds, none of them headed in quite the same direction. It was all I could do to bring the story lines together for a sensible ending. Then I pasted the paragraphs together in a notebook, added my ending, and from a copy of the old photography exhibit, "Family of Man," I cut out photographs of African tribesmen and pasted them in to illustrate the story.

My book and photographs of Bintu packed, we went to Saint George Island, where we stayed at a house near a white beach. We shared the book with all, retelling pieces of it, discussing who had written what, and how our individual personalities were reflected by what we had chosen to write. With each comment and conversation about the story, Bintu and his tribe took root in our shared experience. We had created a family legend.

After a few days, deciding to bring the legend to life, I got some black makeup. While the rest of the family was gathering for dinner at another house on the beach, I spread it over my face and body. I strapped two green hand towels around a jock strap and put this "loin cloth" on my loins. Around my neck I strung a brown beaded necklace and a pair of large boar's tusks, and from the fireplace, I borrowed a bronze stoking iron to serve as a spear. When the sun's setting began to hinder visibility, I left the house. In the scrub palmetto bushes and sea oats outdoors, I grabbed a

palmetto branch for camouflage. Bronze spear in my right hand, camouflage in my left, I set out barefoot up the beach – Bintu, Chief of the Magibuti.

I could see in the dusk that the children were out on the boardwalk that led from the house across the scrub to the sand. Darting from bush to bush, nearer to the boardwalk all the time, I tried my best to act the part of the stealthy chief.

I got as close to the children as I could get, preparing to pounce upon them. Then I heard a scream coming from the house.

“Get in here, children! Quick! David, call 911!”

It was David’s wife, Ginger. She had read in that morning’s paper that a couple of arrested voodoo practitioners had escaped in Apalachicola only the day before, and several dead chickens had been found nearby. Now, strolling casually at dusk, taking in the salty air and an expansive view of the Gulf’s rolling breakers, she had seen me – obviously one of the escapees – sneaking up on her children, about to pounce on them. She had dug her long nails into David’s back as she screamed. Her fear had been transmitted as quickly as chemicals crossing a synapse. He ran inside and called 911; children ran into the house; my parents tried to calm them down, unaware themselves of the cause of the commotion, everyone talking at once about the escaped wild man out on the beach.

It took longer to explain to the local police that the call had been a mistake. And when I dove into the Gulf surf to wash off the black make-up, the salt must have etched it permanently into my skin, because even with bleach and a stiff brush, it took me hours to rub it out.

But despite all my pain, I had delighted in creating the moment. I had brought the legend of Bintu to life, and I hoped the children would remember it forever.

DILUVIUS

On February 14, 1990, I got a telephone call from my father, reporting that my sister Corinne had seen Jesus calling her to heaven. She had swallowed a bottle full of pills and had been admitted to the psychiatric unit at Lake Hospital in Lake Worth, delusional. He said he just thought I should know, and he asked for my prayers for her.

Corinne spent a month in the hospital, a couple of hundred miles away from me, while the family waited and wondered. Then she was released, diagnosed with bipolar manic-depression.

I knew how fortunate I was. I remembered the parable of the talents. Knowing how much I could do that neither my father nor Chickie nor Corinne could do, I wrapped myself up in the practice of law. Every day, I maneuvered among people and their indignations, their strategies for revenge, their efforts to "see justice done" in their behalf, to be sure there was a steady income for my immediate family and the larger Carvin clan.

But when another opportunity for imagination and escape presented itself, I seized upon it.

Mom and Dad and my brothers and their families were planning to vacation again on St. George Island in July. During a visit to Macon, Chris and I conceived the idea of a treasure hunt to entertain the children. As we created details, a fantasy came alive in our minds, to be played out by the members of the extended family.

Wouldn't it be fun, we thought, to bury some treasure on the island, leaving clues for the kids to find it? Then we decided to combine the treasure hunt with the concept of the group composing a story, as we had done with "Bintu." We decided that I would write a basic story, circulating it to everyone in advance of the vacation. It would be a fantastic story that would take place in some strange world, in some other solar system. There would be the same number of characters in the story as there would be

Carvins on vacation together. Indeed, I would create the characters as little "parodies" of our real personalities. The story would follow these characters' lives up to a point in time when they have some reason to come together at the same place and the same time – for the treasure hunt. A month or so prior to the gathering, we would send each family a copy of the story, enclosing an invitation to each person, asking that he or she come to St. George prepared to participate in a "real time" continuation of the story. We could put real money in the treasure chest, to ensure the kids would go after it. We could make the clues tie in to the story. We could encourage family members to be creative, to develop their own props, their own costumes, etc. Real theatre!

How would the story end? Chris asked.

The story would end based on whatever the characters decided to do, I said. Whatever would happen would happen.

The more time I spent thinking of the story and the characters involved, the more real they became to me. Because there were three families with children, who would be staying in three separate houses on the island, the characters could be divided into three "teams," to assist in planning and solving clues. Each "team" could be a group of space travelers arriving from their home planet to look for the "treasure" on the island of Saint George.

On the drive home from Macon, we had passed signs for Walt Disney World, and the first "threesome" that popped into my head were Donald Duck's nephews. And so the story I conceived and sent out with the invitations began...

In the Solar System of the Diluvian sun, there were three planets – Huon, Duon, and Luon. These three planets shared a single moon, which (strangely) orbited in a kind of weaving pattern, first around one planet, then around the second, and then the third. This erratic moon was an island moon, called Saint George.

The planets were ruled by three brothers:

- Horatio ruled Huon, the planet of hills.
- Dalminio ruled Duon, the planet of deserts and dunes.
- Lavidio ruled Luon, the planet of lakes.

The three brothers were jealous of each other, and suspicious that each had secret ambitions to take control of the solar system

when the good Queen Clymenestra (their mother) passed away.

When Queen Clymenestra died, not only was her immense fortune in jewels reported missing – so was the Queen's maidservant, Georgine. The solar system was abuzz with speculation that the maidservant had made off with the fortunes of the empire. Where had she gone? And where were the jewels? Had one of the brothers been behind the death of their mother?

Then the body of Georgine washed ashore on the beach on the island moon of St George. Speculation was rampant that, if Georgine had fled to St George, the treasure was likely to be found there. The brothers accused each other of murdering the Queen, their mother, and murdering Georgine as well. Horatio, Lavidio and Dalminio each dispatched a search party to St. George, in hopes of solving the mystery of Georgine's murder, finding the true killer, and finding the treasure.

Each of the families was to be one of these search parties, seeking the treasure in the name of Huon, Duon, or Luon. I bought a gold treasure chest at the five-and-dime, filled it with money and jewels, and made plans to bury it on the island.

I painted faces on foam rubber heads, and set them up on dummies in military dress in my back yard. I took photographs of them – Horatio, Lavidio and Dalminio, in the flesh!

I assembled as many strange props as I could, to bring real objects into the fantasy. For example, I found a set of African mammal tableware -- a set of knives, forks and spoons, the handles of which were made of the feet of gazelles. These were truly fantastic items, and I wove them into the story...

Before the days of the good Queen Clymenestra, the solar system around the Diluvian sun had been ruled by the evil Lord Dragnax. In a display of raw power and intimidation of the common people of Diluvius, the cruel Lord Dragnax had rounded up the last remaining herd of nearly extinct "woolly boheboths." After calling the inhabitants of the capital city into the central plaza, Lord Dragnax ordered his soldiers to unsheath their swords and cut off the feet of the boheboths, forcing the citizens to watch them die.

The tableware made from gazelles' feet would fit well as the product of Diluvian boheboths' feet. By the time we got to St. George, the whole

Carvin clan would have read the story of the poor wooly boheboths slain on the orders of Dragnax. The story would come alive at dinner one night, when the food would be served with the boheboth-feet tableware.

I knew that David would want to spend most of the vacation taking the kids out in his boat – so I scripted his role as “Captain Nabob,” the seafaring guide who had been hired to help one of the groups find the treasure of Clymenestra. I took a block of wood and painted a map of the island on it, with a white porpoise swimming in the waters offshore and a clue to the treasure’s location. Then I cut it into interlocking pieces with my jigsaw, making a puzzle that would only reveal the clue when fully assembled.

Karen had made clear that her interest in “Diluvius” was weak. She wanted to spend her vacation painting T-shirts and doing other crafts. So along with the story, I sent everyone an equal supply of Diluvian money. And I cast Karen as “Auntie Jones,” the owner of a craft shop plying the tourist trade on the island moon of Saint George. Finally, I gave her the wooden puzzle I’d made, as one extra item to offer for sale in her store.

I assigned to my ailing, nearly immobile father – who said more and more that his only joy in life was the time he had with his grandchildren -- a role as a wise monk, a “prophet” – and fed him clues to ensure that his grandchildren would have reason to visit him.

I assigned myself the role of "Jofus Dufus," reporter for the moon’s newspaper, the Daily Diluvian, and for "DDT" (Daily Diluvian Television). Playing such a part I could be nosy about what others were doing, allowing me to chronicle whatever might happen. I brought my computer to print the daily newspaper, and I brought my video camera to capture the breaking news live.

On July 1st, we drove to St. George, bringing along friends of Kate and Jenny. I scouted the island and found a suitable place to bury the treasure in the middle of slash pines, cactus and scrub palmetto bushes. I planted a series of written clues in various places around the island. I took a fifty dollar bill and added it to the fake coins and jewels that otherwise filled the little treasure chest. Pacing off a number of steps to an inconspicuous spot in the brush, I buried the treasure about six inches deep in the ground. In the bushes nearby, I left the decapitated, painted heads of Horatio, Dalminio, and Lavidio – killed in a fight over the buried treasure.

The second week, the other families arrived – Chris and Jan and family, David and Ginger and family, my mother and father, Jim and Lisa (on their honeymoon), and Corinne, still recuperating from her hospital

stay. The first afternoon of that week, dark clouds blew overhead. It rained. Jan and I arranged to film an autopsy. On a pair of tables placed end-to-end, I laid out a life-sized dummy of pillows and rags under a sheet, and I crowned the corpse at one end with the final foam rubber head, painted as the maidservant Georgine. In the pillows and rags of her body I left soft plastic containers of red paint that would explode like blood when struck.

Jan had written a Coroner's autopsy song to a medley of show tunes from "My Fair Lady." I videotaped Jan, dressed in a white lab coat, standing over the sheet-draped dummy with carving knives in hand, singing the lyrics she had written:

I got a stiff to cut this mornin.'
Business is good, I'm feelin' fine.
Bloated cadaver,
Organic matter,
It makes me tingle every time...

Jan's songs were not the only musical creations. Jim and Lisa, cast as "Bardle and Jane," wrote several to perform at their interplanetary café, including the doleful "*Boheboth's Lament*," which bemoaned the slaughter of the wooly boheboths by the cruel Lord Dragnax.

The next few days were among the most hectic of my life, as I raced about managing the "living theater" we had concocted. Chris as "Barnie Bailey" selling maps and drinks from his bar at the Cypress Point Inn; my mother as "Tilde the Gypsy," telling fortunes and holding a seance, which I helped prepare by rigging invisible fishing line to lift objects from the table in the dark. The children from Huon, Duon and Luon running to my father for clues, chasing them down, anxious to find the "real" treasure. Every morning, I got up early and typed out the Daily Diluvian on my computer, announcing the planned events of the day and reporting on the search for treasure as it had unfolded the day before.

On the final day, in a mad scramble of competitive greed in which everyone dug and clawed at the dirt at once, the children found the treasure. Daniel beat the younger children away easily and was the first to get his hands on the fifty-dollar bill. Daily Diluvian Television was there.

THE RIVER

Events like Diluvius are memorable now only because they lie in such contrast to the rest of life. Every night I got home from work exhausted and went to bed. On weekends, I struggled to find time for myself, to do whatever it is that a free man might choose to do. But it wasn't clear how I wanted to spend my time.

I taught Tessa how to ride a two-wheeler. As I did so, running alongside her bike, holding the back of her shirt, I knew that this would be the last time I did so. And a good thing, too – my lungs burning, I barely made it down the street.

Each Sunday morning, when Karen took the children to church, I was faced with the same decision. One Sunday morning in September, I sat down at my computer and wrote the following letter to my children:

Dear Kati, Jenny, Daniel and Tessa:

I've heard a strange story, and I thought I should tell someone else about it.

It's about a boy named Bill. One day, Bill was going through a box of old things at his grandfather's house when he found a magnifying glass. He dusted it off, and was amazed to see how he could make all sorts of little things look bigger. He used it to watch an ant crawl across the counter top; under the glass, the ant looked like a monster from the movies. He used it to look at the petals of a white flower; with the glass, he saw that the petals had little hairs on them, like the furry ears of a white mouse. Bill took his magnifying glass with him everywhere – to school, to his friend's house, to the park – even to church, where he got a scolding for using it during prayers.

One day, Bill discovered that he could use the magnifying glass for something other than just making little things look big. If he held it in just the right place, when the sun was out, he could

focus the light from the sun all in one place, and start a fire! He was delighted to do this, showing off for his friends. He would aim his magnifying glass at a leaf on the ground and burn a hole right through the middle of the leaf.

Then, he thought he'd see what HE looked like under the magnifying glass. He held the magnifying glass a few inches from his chest. Then he stuck his neck out far, bent over, and tried to look back at himself. But before he saw anything, the sunlight struck the magnifying glass in just the right position. Suddenly, one little spot on his chest was burning. It drew up a blister that hurt for three days.

After a while, Bill got tired of his magnifying glass. He put it away in an old box, just like the one at his grandfather's house. Many years passed and Bill grew up. He had a good job, a good wife, and two children. He had all kinds of friends and great plans for the future. Then one Sunday afternoon at the beach, Bill's daughter came up to him as he was coming out of the water. She pointed at his chest.

"Look!" she said.

Bill looked down at his chest. There in the middle of it was a small hole, about the size of a golf ball. A crowd gathered around him. Everyone stared, pointing at the little hole in Bill's chest. At first, Bill loved this attention. But soon, everyone else went back to their swimming and Bill, alone on his blanket, sat thinking about this hole in his chest.

It was as if someone had come along in the night with an ice cream scooper, and just scooped a piece right out of him. *What had they taken?* Bill wondered. *What was missing?* He looked down at himself, and tried to remember what he had learned in school about the insides of his body. What did other people have, in that spot? What should be there, where he had only a hole? He couldn't remember.

The next day, Bill went back to work. He had his shirt on, so no one could see the hole, and he didn't tell anyone about it. He tried to work, but he kept thinking about the hole.

As soon as he got off work, he went home and took his shirt off. He wasn't sure, but it seemed like the hole had gotten as big as a baseball! Bill went in and showed it to his wife, and she agreed, it *did* look bigger. They agreed that, first thing the next day, Bill

better go to the doctor.

"Hmnnnn..." said the doctor, looking down over the tops of his glasses.

"Hmnnnn..."

The doctor brought in another doctor. These two doctors brought in a third doctor. But none of the doctors could explain the hole. And the next day, the hole was as big as a grapefruit.

Even though he felt healthy, and the doctors could find nothing else wrong with him, Bill knew there was something he was "supposed" to have, but didn't. He wanted to have something there, like other people did – though he didn't know what. The more Bill looked, the more he worried about whatever he was missing. And day after day, the hole got bigger. When it got as big as a basketball, it broke through to the other side, out his back. Now, people could look clear through Bill, front to back or back to front.

They flew him to New York, to Paris, to Vienna, and doctors all over the world studied the hole in Bill. Still, the doctors could find nothing wrong. Soon, Bill was back home.

"Just forget about it," Bill's wife said.

But how could he forget about it? The night he got home from Vienna, he stayed awake all night, worrying about it, lifting his head and looking down at himself, the hole so big he could see the bed sheets he was lying on, where his chest ought to have been. When he got up in the morning and looked in the mirror, he looked like a big Cheerio with arms and legs.

All Bill wanted to do was to look at the hole. He went back to bed. He stopped going to work. Day after day, Bill lay there feeling sad about all the things that other people had, that he didn't.

One day, Bill's son was playing in the attic and found an old box. In the box, little Billy found the magnifying glass that had belonged to his great grandfather. He took it out of the box, and looked through it, and saw that it made everything look bigger. He looked at a spider spinning a web on the rafters. He could see the spider's mouth, and its eyes, and the little hairs on its legs. He watched the spider for a long time.

Then he remembered how sad his father had been lately, and thought maybe he could cheer him up. Billy ran to his father's

room to show him the wonderful magnifying glass and all it could do.

"Father, father!" he shouted. "Look what I've found!"

Bill was lying in bed, the hole in him so big he was hardly more than a head on the pillow, connected to his hands and his feet by strips of skin not much thicker than string. Young Billy held up the glass in front of his father's face, so his father could look through it. And in the magnifying glass, the older man saw his son and smiled.

"My, how you've grown!" he said.

And with that, Bill forgot all about the hole in his chest, and leapt out of bed. No one ever mentioned the hole again, and as far as anyone knows, Bill didn't either.

Love,

Dad.

Sometimes, the choice on Sunday mornings was to pull weeds from the lawn. Sometimes, rarely, it was to take photographs, or to draw. Now and then, I played the guitar. Always, the two hours I had to do whatever I chose was somehow unexpected – as if the pressures of the rest of life had so absorbed my attention that I never thought ahead to the choices freedom allowed.

One Sunday morning in January of 1991, I decided to assemble my earliest memories on my computer. I began with an outline: Date of birth. Date of graduation. Teachers I had each year. Places I'd lived. I began then to fill in the gaps in the appropriate years, careful to keep each memory in its proper place. Before long, the outline was absorbing my attention – and it did so, for numerous Sundays to come.

Was it to prepare myself to settle family arguments about what had happened when? Was it in a misguided effort to dwell within my past, or within my Self? Or was I beginning to miss the power of Confession? Here's what I wrote at the time:

JANUARY 20, 1991

Why do we remember the particular things we do? Is it not because they had an impact on us? Because of the power of the emotions associated with them? If the events we now remember had *not* had an impact on us, would we remember them at all?

If I can assemble my life's memories, I can assemble a chronicle of the shaping emotions that caused me to become who I

am. They reveal us, like the bones of a dinosaur. I will never find all the bones, but the more I find, the more I will be able to rebuild the pelvis, the rib cage, the whole skeleton, and see the structure and support of my current self, my current flesh.

As I reconstruct this aging beast, I will include some of the earliest bones of my life: my childhood dreams. In our dreams, we explore the nooks and crannies of that which is not, in order to sense the shape of that which is. We do it from the outside of ourselves looking in, like some escaped soul peering back into a test tube. In all this dreaming we are exploring all the oddball possibilities of life...

We race about with divining rods, examining the Earth. Deeper into Life, ever deeper we explore. We dig deep into our souls, as we shape the clay of who and whom we are from the outside, our own SCULPTORS and SCULPTRESSES, fashioning ourselves.

So as the weeks passed, I entered names, dates, sentences, into an outline of my childhood and adolescence. I also started to collect stories about the origins of words, thinking I might turn it into a book someday.

On April 1, driving home from school, Kate rear-ended another car. The driver told the police officer he was fine and went home. Moments later, his mother called, screaming that he had been hurt, saying she was about to take him to the hospital. On May 22, Kate rear-ended another car. This time, the two occupants of the other car claimed injury immediately. All three occupants of the other cars were unemployed. All three had prior claims against others for back injuries. Knowing all too well about the world of blame, I waited for notice of legal claims against us.

MAY 26, 1991

Work extends into the evening, is in my head as I put my head on the pillow, and strives to live on thereafter. I dream of partners, judges, courtrooms, and clients' offices. I dream endlessly of writing, of dictating, of editing, of persuading. Of rules and cases and words.

I make a discovery – it is that I cannot read from text in a dream. I have dreams in which someone shows me a newspaper headline and comments on it. If they tell me what it is, and if it is only one word, I can understand the headline. But if they say *"Look, here, read what this newspaper says!"* then I will learn

nothing from the text. I will see nothing at all on the page.

I've realized this is because reading is a passive exercise. I read in order to receive words and thoughts intended by some other mind, the mind of the author who wrote the words I now try to experience. But in dream, there is no one else whose mind you can visit in such a way. The only thing that is in the dream comes from you, from your own mind. So in dreaming, there can be no reading.

My job involves constant reading. So when I dream about work, I dream about reading. As a child, when I tried to run from monsters, my legs were held tight in my sheets. As an adult, my work will not let go of me, and so it takes over my dreams, but since work is all reading and dreams tolerate no reading, the dreams are broken, disturbing and always frustrating.

The characters from my work life are there – the clients, the judges, the plaintiffs' lawyers, arrogant, antagonistic and often obnoxious. They ask for my opinion about the text of a brief, and they hand it to me to read, and I cannot read, so they become upset with me. They become the monsters of my dreams, and in the pressure of winning and losing, my dreams tell me I am getting nowhere.

In one case, my client was a Bakery. The Bakery had discharged an employee for testing positive (for the second time) on a drug test. Through his union, the employee (I'll call him Roger) was challenging the chain of custody, claiming that the testing laboratory must have switched urine samples, because – having taken no drugs (he insisted) his own urine could not possibly have contained cocaine.

It was up to us to prove that the lab's procedures were flawless, that the chain of custody by which the urine had flowed

from Roger's body

to a little cup,

to a plastic pouch,

to a delivery truck

to the laboratory,

to a registration room,

to an initial screening machine, and

to a gas-chromatography/mass-spectrometry machine

had been so carefully labeled and closely watched there could be no

possible confusion as to the central question: whether the test tube of urine in the laboratory, determined to have cocaine in it, was the same as the urine that had flowed from Roger's body several days before.

Our lab's procedures were the best in the business. There was no doubt in my mind, with all the elaborate steps taken to preserve the chain of custody, that the lab had done its job well. But a problem existed with the employee – I'll call him Steve – who picked up the urine samples and brought them to the lab. I had learned that Steve, after properly handling Roger's urine, had thereafter gotten fired by the lab. That would be problem enough, since Steve might not make a helpful witness, given his separation. But it was especially troublesome because of the reason for Steve's firing: he'd been caught, intentionally swapping urine samples!

I labored over how to deal with this problem. Assuming I could locate Steve, would I call him as a witness? Could I possibly prove the chain of custody without him? And if I was able to use him, would I ask him, on the witness stand, to describe how he had lost his job? Or would I risk leaving that for the other side to discover, reveal it with the kind of emphatic flourish that in television drama comes right before the commercial break?

After laboring with this dilemma for weeks, I discovered from the client, and from the lab, and from the complete absence of any corroborating evidence, that Steve was still employed by the lab. He had never been fired, whether for switching drug samples or for any other reason. The only corroboration for the story of Steve's demise lay in the notes on my legal pad at work, which detailed my efforts to plot a course around the problem. But the problem had arisen only in a dream I had invented, a fantasy of my own creation, in which the world of work had stolen like a vine into the world of my dreams and out again.

*

*

*

In September, I wrote in my journal:

I have bought an old fiberglass kayak, an Izarra Phoenix. I have gone out on the Hillsborough River in the early mornings, and have seen ibis, heron, egret, lumpkin, owl, kingfisher, turtle, spider, squirrel, deer...

Today, as I paddled down the river, using my paddle only to steer, moving only slightly faster than the current itself, I realized that the dark object in the water off the tip of my bow – which had been moving down-river as I had been – was the head of a large

alligator. The bow of my fourteen-foot craft was riding on the water's surface, just inches above his shoulders. My own buttocks, I realized, were just inches above his tail. I stopped paddling, so as not to bump his head with my bow, only to realize that the current carried us both along, together, and that momentum impressed my bow against his stern.

*

*

*

That September and October, the news was full of Clarence Thomas, accused of sexual harassment by a former staffer, Anita Hill. According to Hill, Thomas had asked her out to dinner, told crude stories, referred to himself as "Long Dong Silver," and commented crudely about finding a pubic hair on a soda can. On October 15, Thomas was confirmed by the Senate. A few days later, we were invited to a Halloween costume party.

I got out the black make-up I had used for Bintu, spread it over my face and neck, and worked it into my hair, making my gray hair black. Taking a large piece of black fabric from Karen's collection, I wrapped it over my shoulders like a judge's robes. I filled an old brief case with Playboy magazines. I took several socks and stuffed them into another sock, creating a long and large contraption to hang between my legs, inside the front of my trousers, from my belt buckle. I got a piece of black thread from Karen's sewing table and I tied it to the flip top of an empty Coca-Cola can.

There were a couple hundred people at the party. One by one I approached the women, pulling them aside slyly, out of the hearing of others. I told them I was Long Dong Silver. I asked them if they wanted to step outside and have a good time. I asked for their hands, and when they hesitated, I took their hands in mine and made sure they felt the rolled-up socks hanging from the buckle inside my trousers. When they "eeked" and screamed and accused me of harassment, I stood up straight and protested, indignant and outraged. I repeated this routine one-on-one. Intermittently, I pulled the men aside and complained about the pubic hair they could see on my soda can.

I was awarded first prize.

*

*

*

We had Thanksgiving dinner at the Sailfish Club, where my ailing father, dragging an oxygen tank behind him, donned a royal blue jacket and sat at the head of the grandchildren's table, preferring their company to that of the adults.

After dinner, Chris's wife Jan commented how burned out I was acting. Can't you see it? she asked.

I could, and I told her so. I had grown to hate the practice of law, I admitted. In fact, I had tried several times to raise the problem with Karen, telling her how stressed I felt, asking her how she'd feel if I quit my career and did something else.

"But what else would you do?" she had asked. "How could you ever make the money you make as a lawyer? How would we live?"

I had not had any answers for Karen, and Karen had not had any for me. So I had done nothing. I told Jan how I couldn't get out of the practice of law and maintain my income. I still had four children to put through college, I said. I had family responsibilities, and I could not let them down.

Jan urged me to take control of my life, saying that if I left the law to preserve my mental health, no one could say I had let my family down. I wondered: did I have the courage to make such a choice about my life? Or would my sense of responsibility bind me to things that already were?

On January 2, I answered my front door to be served with a lawsuit, filed by the first of the fellows Katie had rear-ended. The next week, I announced to my partners I had decided to leave the firm.

*

*

*

In February I spent a week with John Haweeli in Yellowstone. When we woke at 6 a.m., it was twenty degrees below zero but by midday it was nearly fifty above. I spent the week discovering shades of white – the white of the fog that rolled in each morning; the white of clear snow on the ground; the white of the clouds overhead, and the white of the ice on frozen lakes; the white of the steam rising up from the park's boiling springs, and the white of the fumaroles. Amidst these shades of white roamed bison and elk, free ranging coyotes and soaring bald eagles. We photographed them all amidst the geysers. We drove the few cleared roads, we hiked the trails, we went snow-shoeing in the woods. In the white wilderness, I tried to determine what to do with my life.

The first Saturday after my return, I met with Chris and David in Lake City. We drank a bottle of single malt scotch and discussed whether we should go into business together. Then, I was offered a job as Human Resources Counsel for Publix Super Markets. I accepted the offer, and made plans to start work on the first of May.

T/HE GODFATHER

Owned by its employees, Publix had been listed among the “top ten” in the book by Moscovitz and Levering, *100 Best Companies to Work for in America*. While I had to accept a cut in pay, the folks at Publix assured me that working there would be stress-free. I would finally be able to escape the contentious world of the law.

But the very month I started at my new company, Evan Kemp of the EEOC filed a “Commissioner’s Charge” against it, alleging it was engaged in a pattern of discrimination at its stores. I was the point person to respond and defend.

We were the largest employer in Florida. At one point, I estimated that one of twelve people in the state had worked at Publix at one point or another – the majority of them either part-time front service clerks (“bagboys”) or part-time cashiers. The investigation focused on the fact that nearly all cashiers were female and nearly all front service clerks were male. Furthermore, it was the jobs on the stock crew, unloading trucks in the middle of the night and stocking the shelves, that led into management, and these jobs were held by men too.

The EEOC alleged that we had discriminated against the women by “channeling” them into the cashier jobs that did not lead to management. We defended, producing tens of thousands of employment applications which reflected women routinely applying for jobs as cashiers, men routinely applying for jobs as front service clerks and stockers. We insisted that the patterns observed were the result of individuals making their own free choices. The EEOC contended that Publix bore responsibility, had failed in that responsibility, and so was guilty of discrimination.

Meanwhile, another deputy sheriff knocked on my door at home: the

two occupants of the second car Kate had rear-ended were suing us. It appeared that litigation and the law, like monsters in nightmares, had come into my house, tied me up, and would never let me go.

On business in South Florida, I visited Chickie at the group home where he lived. The head of the home showed me Chickie's room, explaining that he was not keeping his clothes in order, not making his bed, and rarely doing what he was told. She and the other men had to dress him every morning, and then had to undress him every evening. Worst of all, Chickie had been refusing to take his bowel movements on the toilet. He would sit on the seat for hours, doing nothing. Then he would get up, flush the toilet, and claim he was through -- only to have his movement in his pants or his pajamas just five minutes later. At other times, she said, he would have his bowel movement on the bathroom floor, right next to the toilet. Chickie knew better, she said; she couldn't understand his insistence on asserting himself.

I took him out to lunch at McDonald's, where flesh-colored sauce from a Big Mac oozed out of Chickie's mouth as he chewed. But he was clearly oblivious to his personal hygiene. When I talked to him about it, he just smiled. I wiped his face repeatedly, and when I did, he apologized, saying in his gravelly mumble,

"Oh. I sahwee, Doey."

Soon thereafter I learned that the Association of Retarded Citizens ("ARC"), that operated Chickie's group home, was demanding over a thousand dollars in back payments for Chickie's care. On further inquiry into this demand, I learned of the arrangements my father had made for Chickie.

In his wealthier days, Dad had bought the house that was now the group home so that Chickie and six other men with Downs Syndrome would have a place to live. Not wanting the home to fall into the hands of his creditors, Dad had sold the home to the ARC, giving the ARC an interest-free mortgage. In return for their payments to him of \$150 each month, Dad had agreed to pay them \$250 per month for Chickie. The agreement guaranteed Chickie's care for life; in return, upon Chickie's death, the mortgage loan would be forgiven and the group home would belong to the ARC outright.

For several months, Chickie's "incidentals" account depleted, the ARC had not been buying Chickie new clothes or taking him on its weekly bowling trips with the other men. My father had no solution, and turned to me for help. I wrote to the trustee of a trust my mother's parents had set up

for their grandchildren. I laid out the specifics of Chickie's situation, and was eventually able to persuade the trust to make payments to the ARC for Chickie's care. These payments allowed Chickie a return to his meager existence. And monthly mortgage payments from ARC to my father resumed, giving him a small income.

*

*

*

Immersed in an ongoing battle with the EEOC, immersed in accusation and defense, contention and strife, my journal lay silent. I gave up on my book about the origins of words. My brain was overwhelmed by arguments over choice and blame.

In May, 1994, I learned that my sister Corinne had applied to get social security disability benefits, but needed help. Long distance, I spoke to Corinne about the extent of her ability to care for herself. She needed help balancing a checkbook. She hadn't been able to keep a job. As I tried to explore those simple places in life where she struggled, she became edgy and defensive. At the end of July, as I prepared papers to send to Social Security in her behalf, I got a call from my father. Corinne had gone off her medication and was refusing to see her psychiatrist. He had been trying unsuccessfully to get her psychiatric help, but she was insisting only God could help her.

I called her, and she explained that she hated the medication, it made her tired and fat. She didn't want to take it any more, and she knew that the psychiatrist would simply put her back on it. She trusted only in God. On August 2, she was admitted to the 45th Street Mental Health Center in Riviera Beach -- incoherent, rambling, once again delusional.

Karen and I drove two hundred miles to visit her. Like the patients at Danvers, she had the blank, empty look of the "undead" in old sci-fi movies -- a slow walk, shuffling feet, a mouth that can't decide whether it's smiling or grimacing, a look that's focused on an empty space in the air, a foot in front of the eyes. She spoke of Jesus; she claimed her parents had mistreated her. She introduced us to drooling, unshaven patients -- her very good friends, she said.

I smiled at her. "I love you, Corinne. How are you?"

"Have you seen the bed where I sleep? I was up all night again."

"Oh, that's not so good. Can't you sleep well?"

"They've lost my toothbrush. They say I'll be home by Friday if I'm good."

"Really? That's good. Are you sure?"

“We get to go outside in the mornings.”

After a month in the hospital, Corinne was released. I drove back to south Florida and helped her pack her belongings. Despite medication, she was still disoriented. She’d start to look for something, then get distracted talking to me and start to look for something else. She talked incessantly. Back at our house, she tried to cook, but left water boiling on the stove.

*

*

*

When Publix opened its first stores in the Atlanta area, I got a call from Joe DiFlumera of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. DiFlumera wanted to introduce me to his boss, Dave Berry, Executive Vice President and Director of Organizing.

Accepting their invitation to lunch, I listened to Berry describe the Atlanta market as one of “the union’s” markets. Although union representation is, by law, a matter of choice, for employees to decide for themselves, Berry cordially, professionally, threatened me with a campaign of adverse publicity and lawsuits against Publix if we could not work out an arrangement to “give the union” our Atlanta stores.

As the weeks passed, the practice of law crowded around my desk, following me when I rose and went out the door, following me as I drove home at night. Was the entire world a competition between X’s and Y’s, consumed in a struggle to secure as many “rights” as possible, and to shirk responsibilities?

After having Corinne at our house for a month, I got her admitted into a group home in St. Petersburg. One afternoon in October, she telephoned. She was excited and happy, having just accepted a job, she said. This good news was followed by her report that she had an idea for an invention. My excitement over her new job turned to concern as she described her plans to make millions of dollars on her invention. The real story was becoming clear. The next day, Corinne was admitted to Saint Anthony’s Hospital in St. Petersburg suffering, once again, from mania and delusions.

We visited her once again. As before, she seemed lost and disoriented. She had not been able to find a job, and with no income, she was building up debt, unable to pay for her group residence in St. Petersburg. Her claim for social security benefits denied, I filed an appeal on her behalf.

But all was not bleak. At the beginning of April, Daniel had been admitted to Phillips Exeter. Lawsuits and afflictions could not be a burden to me on the day I learned of his acceptance. On that day, I was on the mountaintop. No matter what transpired in the coming years, I could get

through it, knowing how proud I would feel on the day of Daniel's graduation.

*

*

*

My father had been holed up in his bedroom, wearing only his pajamas, since 1976. Nicotine patches on one arm and nitroglycerin patches on the other, he had spent his days on the telephone to his broker and his bookie, ingesting crab claws, Haagen-Daaz ice cream, French sorbet, Oreo cookies, bottles of Yoo-Hoo, gourmet soups, milkshakes, and (of course) several tablets and capsules of medicine each hour. He had been talking about dying since 1943. I'd accused him more than once of giving up, and it hurt him that I offered him no sympathy.

At the end of June, I made the four-hour drive south to visit my parents. My brother David was there at the same time. Dad had been lying in the bed in his apartment for weeks, sleeping fitfully, groaning, calling out to Mom for constant help. His hair was thin and needed cutting. Together, David and I helped him out of bed, sat him up in a chair, shaved him and cut his hair. The thin gray strands on the top of his head wouldn't register in the electric shears; we cut his hair with a small pair of scissors, holding the hair taut and cutting straight across it to keep it from folding between the metal blades. Holding his head to the side, touching his scalp, clipping the hairs around his ears, was like bathing a baby. He submitted wholly to our care, not a word uttered to control us, to mold us, to have us follow him, or to teach us. I returned to my home in Tampa, knowing from this change in attitude that his end could not be far.

In late July, Dad was admitted to the Hospice. Chris drove from Macon to visit him. When he observed Dad's condition, he concluded Dad would last only a few days, and urged the family to pay one more visit.

As I contemplated whether to make another drive South to see my father again, the legal world I had entered (at Dad's suggestion and with his financial support) made known that it did not want to give me up. Publix was served with a class action lawsuit, alleging the same pattern and practice of gender discrimination I'd been defending against the EEOC. The suit – which would be my responsibility to handle – involved a class of more than 50,000 female employees of Publix – “the largest discrimination class action in history,” the media reported. At a televised press conference, the EEOC announced it would be seeking to join the class action against Publix. The media, doing its “research,” determined that Publix could be liable for up to \$300,000 for *each* member of the class, and offered up

mind-boggling headlines to the effect that the suit was for tens of billions of dollars. The practice of law closed in around me, more powerful than ever.

One has twenty days to reply to a lawsuit, or one's defenses are forfeited. I had only a few days to assemble a team of lawyers to respond, so they could get to work learning the facts and preparing our answer. While I scrambled, Chris called again. Dad had only a few days left, he insisted. I had to come back for one more visit.

That night, walking outside my house, I thought about all my father had done for me. I thought about how strict he had been. About how difficult it had been to kiss him or to tell him I loved him. I had accused him many times of not doing what he could for his own health. It began to rain, but I kept on walking and remembering. And I cried.

The next day, I managed to get my family into our car and drive south once again. Dad was in a hospital bed, wheezing, unable to speak more than a couple of words before resting and wheezing some more.

The family gathered around him. Corinne was there with a hearing-impaired boyfriend she had met at her church. Chris had brought some of Dad's favorite foods and was feeding crabmeat and lobster to him with a spoon. As everyone else sat on his bedside, expressing their love in their own ways, I waited my turn. For years, I had been scoffing at Dad's claims of impending death. I had accused him of being a martyr just wanting attention. I had told him he was a classic case of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," that when he really did become terminally ill, no one would believe him. I had told him often I was tired of his constant talk of death, and how, if he simply chose to, he could change his diet, start exercising, and recover his health. So now, as it grew time to end the visit, and as I finally got a moment alone with him, I wondered what I would say.

I sat close. He held out his hand to me, and I put my hand in his. I didn't remember holding hands with my father ever before, even as a child.

We sat silently for a moment. Then I said, "Dad, I want to tell you something important. I want you to know that I cried for you."

He squeezed my hand, and it made me start crying again. He knew what I meant. I was not only saying I loved him, but that I knew he was dying, at last admitting the truth of his long-standing prediction. He nodded, content, but said nothing, too weak to waste his words.

Then I told him what I thought would matter to him most. I told him not to worry – that whatever happened, I would take care of Chickie and Corinne.

"I promise," I said.

“Thanks,” he said.

A moment later, as I was about to leave, a nurse came in and asked him how he was doing. His answer was the last thing I ever heard him say.

“I feel wonderful,” he said. “I have never felt better.”

*

*

*

Back at work, I raced through a series of sixteen- and eighteen-hour days getting a team of three law firms organized to respond to the class action. By the end of the week, in the middle of the turmoil, I got the call I expected – Dad had passed away in the middle of the night.

So, once again, I gathered my family in our car and drove south. We registered at a motel and we picked Chickie up from the group home. Karen got a room with our girls, while Daniel and Chickie and I shared a room together. I visited with family and guests from out of town. The morning of the funeral services I got out of the shower to find that Chickie, in a demonstration of independence and resourcefulness, had begun to dress himself. He was sitting on his bed, putting his good slacks and his dress shirt on.

How glad this made me feel! I approached him to see if I could be of any help, and as I did so, I looked down and realized he was sitting in excrement. I got him to stand up and take off all his clothes, finding he had feces inside his undershorts. I took the clothes and washed them out in the sink. I was reminded how it was when I first changed Katie’s diapers – so delicately and carefully at first, trying not to touch the stuff. It doesn’t take long to discard such foolish precautions; a person can always wash up later.

So I took off Chickie’s clothes and all my own clothes and I got into the shower with him, peeling excrement off his body where it had become enmeshed in his body hairs. I used my bare fingers. As I did, I thought about my brother’s lot in life. That extra chromosome, insistent on going to the dance, had forced itself on him at the moment of his conception, and here, fifty years later, it still held him captive. Unable to care for himself, he depended on me to wipe feces from the backs of his legs.

What would he say to me, if he could really talk? Would he thank me for my attentions, my willingness to get into the shower and soil my hands for him? Or would he express long-held envy and resentment, blaming me for forcing him into a car to go back to Sunland, for locking him in his room, for the indignity I inflicted on him when I, his younger brother, dared to instruct him like a child?

Out of the shower and scrubbed clean, I got Chickie into a new pair of

undershorts and a new pair of slacks. He nearly sat down on the soiled bed again, but I caught him before he did. When I finally got him out of the motel room and into the car, together with the rest of my family, the directions to the memorial mass, and the money to donate to the church, I thought what a vast pool of spaces and chains of causation had brought us together and, with my father's passing, delivered us to a future without him.

I felt as if the world was threatening to come undone – as if, but for the grasp I was barely able to keep on Chickie and Corinne and my family and my job, gravity itself was about to abandon its hold on things, the X's and Y's of the universe flung in every direction, into the farthest reaches of outer space.

I drove to Saint Paul of the Cross, determined to care for my brother and sister as I'd promised my father I would. Under the cypress rafters of the church, I delivered a eulogy, telling the world all that my father had meant to me. I wrote a check to the church. I greeted strangers and made small talk with them. And when it was over, getting into the car with Karen and my children and Chickie, I realized that, in a way, I had become the godfather after all.

T/HE PFD

When my father's bones had been returned to ash, when Chickie had been returned to the ARC group home, I was left to be consumed in the class litigation effort. There were meetings and conference calls several times a day.

At one meeting, I counted twenty-six lawyers in attendance. Many nights, standing at the fax machine at ten o'clock, I was unable to send my own outgoing fax because of the stream of faxes coming in from others. Drowning in questions to answer, papers to read, strategies to approve, I fought to keep my head above water.

At night on the way home from work, I dictated in the car. Usually it was work that I needed my secretary to act upon the following day. Occasionally, in an effort to buoy my spirits, I dictated poetry.

As a child, I found that the way to escape monsters in dreams was to bat my eyelids furiously. As an adult, I have often found that the way to escape is to write a story or a poem – if only I can summon the energy to do so. So I sometimes dictate poetry while I drive, using the same black metal dictator I use for work. When I arrive home, I play the tape back and type it up at my computer. In order to have the best chance of remembering to bring the dictator inside, rather than giving it to my secretary the next day, concentration is essential.

Upon pulling into the garage tonight, I noticed that the car ashtray was full of pink Kleenex, from a cold I had several weeks ago. Upon removing the wads of Kleenex from the ashtray to dispose of them, I noticed a large accumulation of fingernails in the bottom of the ashtray – once attached to the ends of my fingers, bitten off in recent months. Deciding to empty the ashtray of them, too, I unlatched the ashtray itself, intending to dump the fingernails into the trash along with the Kleenex.

I got out of the car with three items in my hands:

- (1) black metal pocket dictator with poetry on tape inside it,
- (2) black metal ashtray full of fingernails, and
- (3) several wads of pink Kleenex held together in a fist.

I managed to remove the large plastic lid from the trashcan in the garage and dispose of my trash. I returned the lid and walked to the door to come inside.

When I lifted my hand to the button that closes the garage door, I noticed my hand was still full of the pink Kleenex wads that I'd intended to put in the trash. Something had obviously gone wrong. An inventory of the contents of my other hand quickly revealed that I had emptied out the fingernails well enough, but I had also dropped the pocket dictator into the trash can, instead of the Kleenex.

I returned to the trashcan and made the proper exchange, lifting my pocket dictator (poetry intact) out of table scraps and other wet matter. I contemplated the total lack of similarity (in color, weight, texture and shape) between pink Kleenex wads and a black metal dictator. Yet, I had confused the two.

What is the gulf, I wondered, that separates the part of the brain engaged in conscious thought, from that which drives the motor system?

I went to the door a second time to come inside, but upon reaching up to open the door, I noticed that the ashtray was still in my hand. Why was I about to go inside with the car ashtray? I turned back to the car in order to return the emptied ashtray to the dashboard. I opened the car door, sat in the driver's seat, and performed my task. Then I got out and, for the third time, started to come inside.

This time, I got through the door to home (ah! home sweet home!) successfully. In the den I sat down to wipe dry my pocket dictator and type up my poetry -- really focused, I assure you -- only to discover that the black metal object in my hand was not the dictator after all, but (still) the ashtray.

I had discovered (choose one) that:

1. the dropping of the dictator into the trash can had been a symbolic act suggesting where I thought my poetry really belonged;
2. my overriding subconscious desire is less to

memorialize my poetry than to preserve my fingernails; or

3. in light of various insurance policies which name her beneficiary, Karen should be questioned closely regarding her motives for leaving me alone for a week.

SEPTEMBER 15, 1995:

As heavy a load as our new class action places on my shoulders, I can always find strength in the success of my children. My only son, Daniel, has started school at Exeter. He's been assigned the same dormitory where I spent four years. In his room with the drab green walls, we unpacked his trunk together. I showed him the inscription over the entrance to the Academy Building, and I translated from the latin:

'Come here, boys, that you might become men.'

I imagine myself on the lawn outside the Academy Building, watching him receive his diploma three years from now. I am swelling with pride.

FRIDAY

Dear Mom and Dad:

I miss you very much. Now I know how Kate felt when she was here. My teachers are nice but my classes are very hard. I don't really know what to write, I've never been very good at writing letters. I WANT TO GO HOME ! This is a nice place but I miss you so much. I don't think I can make it to Thanksgiving without killing myself...

TUESDAY

Dear Mom and Dad,

I suppose I shouldn't be writing this letter to you because I will be sending it at the same time as I wrote my last one. This place is so stressful, I can't take the stress and homesickness, and besides I'm not good enough for my math class... Please come visit me, say in mid- to late October. I'm begging you. I haven't done anything that made me happy since I got here...

WEDNESDAY

Dear Mom and Dad,

I can't stand being here any longer. Why did I come here? I am not cut out for this place. I am going through hell here, hope to see you on the other side... Why couldn't you have been cruel, evil parents so I could be glad to be rid of you? This place makes me moody. Sometimes I'm unhappy, and then all of a sudden I become very unhappy. Goodbye.

THURSDAY

Dear Mom and Dad,

I no longer need to complain about the work here, I can handle that. But the homesickness is only getting worse. I expect letters more often. I have only gotten four. I am no longer asking you to visit, I am telling you. If you don't I'll murder you all at Thanksgiving... I cannot wait until Sunday when I get to talk to you. Okay let's see November 21 is 51 days! I cannot wait that long, I will probably commit suicide.

One morning at work, I got a call from home. Daniel had just called Karen from the basement of Cilley Hall, refusing to go to any more classes, refusing even to leave the phone booth until someone came and put him on a flight home.

Daniel's insistence on the pain of homesickness meant that if I insisted he stay, he might have created some way to accomplish his departure, leaving Exeter in a long wooden box, if need be. Across the great distance between us, my will had no means by which to assert itself over his, no method to know how desperate he really was.

By the end of September, Daniel had flown home and started school at a day school in Tampa where he was the only person in his class. Once more, I had the view of Sisyphus from the bottom of the mountain.

*

*

*

I strapped my kayak to the roof of my car and drove north to the Suwanee River. Arriving in White Springs Saturday at midafternoon, I pitched my tent and took my kayak down to the riverbank under the bridge.

The Suwanee is at least thirty or forty yards across at White Springs, with no canopy of trees to provide shade, so the paddling would be sunny and hot. I'd chosen this put-in because it was down river from the

whitewater shoals. Even for small rapids, if I was going to hurtle down them, I first wanted to scout them out, so the paddling to the shoals would be strenuous, upriver.

I paddled for three hours, past abandoned boat docks, past fishing line caught on the limbs of trees, in hopes of seeing the shoals around each successive bend. As the afternoon sun began to descend, I heard thunderclouds in the distance and wondered if I should turn around. Seeing no clouds, I kept paddling.

But once Florida thunder is heard, the wind and the storm are swift in arriving. When I saw lightning ahead, and when I heard thunder crack a few seconds behind it, I turned around. Back down the river I paddled, much faster than my progress upstream – still, I could not outrun the storm. When the thunder pounded the back of my neck, the wind rustled through the trees around me, and the hard rain began to pelt my shoulders, I pulled my kayak over and clambered onto the bank.

By now it was late afternoon; I wouldn't find the shoals today. So I found a little gulley in which to hide my kayak, and I walked away from the river until I reached a road. The walk in the pouring rain to my campsite in the park was about two miles.

Sunday morning's dawn was clear. Fearing that afternoon storms might once again interfere with my plans, I wasted no time in breaking camp, loading the tent into my car, and walking the two miles back to where I'd left the kayak overnight.

I found it as I'd left it, hoisted it into the river and climbed inside. As I had the day before, I paddled upstream, seeing the same trees, the same bends in the river, the same occasional abandoned dock or fishing line caught on a limb. This time, I paddled for four or five hours until at last I heard the trickling sound of whitewater in the distance. I was hungry and tired from all the paddling, but the sound of my destination excited me.

When I finally reached the shoals, a broad expanse of large rocks made hundreds of little wakes in the water coming at me.

Unlike a canoe, a kayak sits on top of the water, making it not only easier to turn, but also easier to paddle upstream. The shoals were full of fast water, but also full of eddies, where the water swirled around in circles downstream of rocks. I reasoned that, like tacking a sail boat into the wind, the trick to ascending shoals is to cross the current from eddy to eddy, paddling hard across the current when necessary, then pausing to rest in the next eddy. I found the ascent of these shoals a challenge perfectly suited to my condition and skill. It was all I could do to attain successive eddies, but

their spacing allowed me to make steady progress, and soon, weary from having criss-crossed the current again and again, I was above the shoals.

Gloating, I surveyed the course from my new vantage point up river. The water was fast enough that once I got caught in the downstream flow, I would rush like a toboggan on snow. With a strong thrust of my paddle, I plunged my craft into the current and gleefully raced down the shoals, avoiding rocks in every direction, bouncing and tossing and using my paddle to keep my bow pointed forward.

Seconds later, at the bottom of the shoals, I found myself confronted by a man on a skiff in a tan uniform. Through a little megaphone he told me to pull over to the side of the river. Following his command, I learned he was a wildlife officer.

“Don’t you know you’re required to have a PFD on board?” he asked.

“A what?”

“A Personal Flotation Device.”

“No, sir, I didn’t know. ”

“You could get killed on these here shoals without one. Don’t you realize you could roll over and hit your head on a rock? It could knock you unconscious and you could drown.”

“No, sir. I didn’t.” Then, for my future understanding, I asked, “Am I required to be wearing the PFD?”

“Nope. Just got to have it on board.”

This got me thinking.

“Well, sir, I don’t mean to be flip, but then I really don’t see that it would help me much. If my boat turned over and I hit my head on a rock, like you say, I don’t see how I’d be able to put that PFD on, being unconscious and all.”

He didn’t answer. Just kept writing the ticket. But years of legal wrangling impelled me down the course I had taken.

“Am I allowed to go swimming in this river?” I asked.

“Yep. ”

“If I go swimming, do I need a PFD? ”

The officer stopped writing and looked up at me, from the tops of his eyes. He paused long before he answered.

“Nope,” he said.

“So I’m legal, if I go swimming in the shoals,” I said. “But if I’m in the kayak without a PFD, I’m breaking the law, because I might go swimming in the shoals – right?”

“That’s right,” he said. “You’ve got it. It’s for your own good.” He kept on writing.

“Just wanted to be sure I understood,” I said. “So I guess the bottom line is this: if I have a kayak, but no PFD, then I can go swimming, and I can pull my kayak behind me into the shoals, on the end of a rope, and that’s okay. And I can swim in the middle of the worst rapids out here, pulling my kayak behind me, and that’s still okay. But if I climb out of the dangerous rapids, and into the boat, then I’ve broken the law. ”

He furled his eyebrows at me.

“Right,” he said. “Like I said, it’s for your own good.”

He handed me a ticket for seventy five dollars. Worse, he told me I couldn’t get back in my kayak and paddle downstream. I had to walk the eight miles back to the bridge in my wet swimsuit. The whole eight miles, I meditated on the ticket in my hand, a symbol of how much my government cared about my safety.

I meditated too on the sum of the weekend’s travels: on Saturday, a hundred miles in the car to get to the river, a three hour paddle against the current, and a two mile walk back to camp; and on Sunday, a two mile walk back to the kayak, a four hour paddle against the current, and an eight mile walk back to the car. I’d been Sisyphus again, to be sure.

But the thing of it was: Those few glorious seconds I’d come barreling down the shoals had made my struggle up them all worth while. I had found the only whitewater river in Florida, and I had conquered it. If only for a moment, I had done what I wanted to do.

THE COFFIN

Late in the evening on June 12th, I arrived at the airport in Sante Fe, New Mexico. When I checked in at the ticket counter, there was a message waiting for me to call my brother Jim immediately. I went to the pay phone wondering who had been killed, and how. Had it been Karen or one of my children? If so, it wouldn't likely be Jim calling. So I imagined it was more likely David, Chris, or my mother. As I dialed the phone I was beginning to grieve, expecting bad news, trying to steel myself for it. When I reached Jim, my fears were confirmed. That morning, Chickie had died of a heart attack.

Less than a year ago, I had promised my father I would take care of him. What a fabulous job I had done.

I cried on the plane, feeling guilty I'd done so little for Chickie in his life. I likely didn't have the knowledge or power to overcome Chickie's condition, but I certainly could have made him happier despite it. I felt guilt at all the things I had done *to* him, guilty about all the ways I had thought myself *better* than him. Most of all, I felt guilt because I was relieved to learn that it was Chickie who had died, rather than anyone else.

At home, I sought comfort in the Gospel of Luke, where I read "Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you."

As much as I loved him, I felt in my heart that he, more than any of us, might have hoped for this final release from himself. All the parts of his body – his extra chromosome, his challenged brain, his crossed eyes, his troubled vocal cords, had trapped him for nearly fifty years. Now he was free of it all.

I had never touched a corpse before. Saying my respects before the funeral, I kissed his forehead. It was like ice. I realized how clearly the cold mass was not Chickie, but a vessel he had departed.

Thinking of his garbled voice, his inability to distinguish pitch, his singing voice that sounded to me like the moan of a wildebeest (though I've never heard a wildebeest moan, and can only imagine that sound) I wrote:

*Sing to me, Chickie, oh sing, sing, sing
Sing from your heart, and sing with your soul.*

JUNE 26, 1996

Driving home from work on the Interstate this evening, I dictated:

I am angry, so I decide to contemplate anger.

Is anger something the body feels when ego is shattered? Is it something the body feels when frustrated by an inability to get things done?

Do we manufacture anger for some hidden psychological reason? Psychologists might say "anger" is important to the "fight or flight" syndrome. If you shove a finger at me, pointing it in my face, anger may arouse my animal instincts, in preparation for a fight. But what is happening in the mind of a man who simply feels angry at the world in general? What about the woman who goes into the parking lot to get back into her car, and finds that someone anonymous soul has dented her fender? Does she get angry in order to prepare for a fight?

What about the anger I feel at myself after I have done something I wish I hadn't done? Is that anger at all? If it is, with whom shall I fight?

I don't understand anger. Especially I don't understand the anger of not knowing why. Of just feeling ornery -- like putting myself in someone else's face and giving them a hard time. Does this come from a self-pitying, comfortable warmth of feeling like we are being taken advantage of? Do we want to stand up for our own pride by hurting or demeaning others?

If Michelangelo and DaVinci spent hours doing sketches of the body in different positions, should the writer spend hours describing moods? Good writers study people. They are observant. I am not. I spend too much time thinking of logical problems and possible solutions to them. I don't look at people and their emotions. Maybe that is why I am angry.

No. I will tell you why I am angry. I am angry because of my loneliness.

I am angry at Jan Ledman for not showing up Thursday night. I am angry at David Carpenter because he is now a father spending time with his children, and no longer has time for me. I remember how angry I was at my brother David when he left me and went off to Canterbury. I am angry at the people at Publix because I feel like I am the only one with an understanding of what we are facing, and what needs to be done, and with the time or the energy or the skills to do anything about it, and I cannot do it all, and that makes me feel lonely.

I am angry at Karen because she does not communicate with me. I make love to her so that I won't be angry at her.

My brothers have their own families and their own jobs and live in their own towns. My mother has her bridge and her tennis and a city in which she wants to live – and when she comes to visit, we argue about silly things because she is getting old, and because I grew up and I wouldn't let her mother me any more.

What of a man who is angry because his daughter is raped, or his son is senselessly murdered in a terrorist act, or in a hit and run accident by a drunk, or in a drive-by shooting? Are not these angers about the facelessness of the assailant, and therefore, anger about loneliness and alienation?

I ought to be able to take these thoughts and turn them into a poem of some kind. The moods and the emotions need images. Is there one image or is there many? I don't know.

I don't care for the image of the woman in the parking lot. As for the others, they are clichés. Do I have characters in this poem, all of whom are angry? Perhaps so. Perhaps there is a group of people who meet, and they are all angry at each other, for different reasons. Perhaps part of the technique of the poem or the story is the contrast between their being in a group and the fact they are lonely.

Several people, maybe a dozen, sitting – maybe not sitting – maybe some of them sitting and some of them pacing, as people handle their anger differently – some of them pacing, some seated, hunched over, absorbed within themselves. What kind of gathering would this be? Would it be a wedding reception? A funeral? More likely, it is people standing in line. People standing in line tend to get angry.

What about the anger of standing in line, anger at the person who is moving too slowly. Does that have anything to do with loneliness? Perhaps it is because the boredom of time comes from not talking to the people around you. You are so close, yet so isolated from them.

The people in the poem are people on a bus or plane or train that has gotten stalled somewhere. That might be it.

There is a main character on a bus. Maybe the first line is something like, “It is 7:22 a.m. John sits down in the third row back, angry that traffic is terrible, the bus is all locked up in it, and he will be late to work. He peers out the smog-stained window of the bus. He sees a line of people waiting for the ticket office to open. He sees in that line of waiting people the face of a person who appears to be angry. This person is pacing and fidgeting, apparently having to go somewhere, angry that the ticket window has not yet opened.”

Perhaps next the bus moves, just a little, and John has hope, but then gets angry again when he realizes the traffic jam has not loosened, but just inched forward, tightening up. He is looking out the window at some children waiting for their school bus, and they are scratching and clawing at each other.

Time passes. The traffic crawls. The bus goes forward. Out the window, John sees a bum who is angry at a passersby for not giving him change.

At each window stop, there is a group of people, and at least one person in the group is mad at someone else.

Now John realizes that there is a couple on the bus in the seat in front of him. He realizes this because he suddenly becomes aware there is tension between them. He realizes they’ve been bickering at each other, and both are now upset. John’s attention is drawn back and forth. He looks out the window at first because he doesn’t care to look at the bickering in the seat in front of him. He looks out the smog-stained window to find something else and at first he sees something that seems reasonably pleasant but then he finds some anger in the scene so he turns his head back inside the bus and finds the couple bickering. Back to the window, he finds anger again. Back to the couple...

At the end of the poem, he stops looking out the window and looks at the couple in front of him and the couple is gone – he didn’t realize that while the bus was stopped and he was looking out the window, the couple had left. As the bus pulls away, he looks out the window and sees the couple standing on the street corner embracing. John wants the bus to stop, to let him off, to watch the couple longer. But now the bus is pulling away, the embrace but a memory.

That might capture anger pretty well.

In October of 1996, immersed in negotiations to resolve the class action lawsuit against Publix, struggling against torrents of work, I was gone for days at a time, criss-crossing from problem to problem, maneuvering from respite to respite. In this maelstrom, I learned of a Halloween event planned by some neighbors who lived on our street.

Bernie, our neighbor, was planning a scavenger hunt. He had a collection of Halloween props he'd collected over the years – a bat, a skeleton, an eyeball, several rubber hands and feet. He was planning to hide these “body parts” in the Lords’ back yard and organize the children into teams to find them. He was also planning to tell a scary story about the ghost of Captain Nathaniel Hunter.

With Bernie’s help, I devised my plan. When I got home from work on the nights preceding Halloween, I went not to the microwave to eat my dinner, but to the garage, where I built a life-sized plywood coffin, putting hinges on one side and a hasp and keyed padlock on the other.

Inside it, I laid to rest a life-sized human dummy clothed in white long-johns. On its head was an “old man” mask – bald on top, long white hair hanging in back, long white mustache and eyebrows in front. The dummy laid inside, I locked the padlock. I placed the coffin on a little yellow children’s wagon, so it could be pulled, hearse-like, down the street.

As darkness fell on Halloween night, I took a large shovel in one hand, the wagon handle in the other, and started down the street toward the Lords’ house, towing the coffin behind me, stating the key points for my story.

“I’ve got to find a suitable place to bury the Cap’n,” I muttered. “Does anyone know a place? The Cap’n made me swear, before he died, that I’d find a place he could rest in peace. I’ve been looking for such a place my whole life. Does anyone know a place I can rest the Cap’n in peace, and finally be released from my vow?”

The sight of a coffin is enough to attract children on a Halloween night. As children approached, curious about the coffin and who “the Cap’n” might be, I added a question to my mutterings: “Psst! Has anyone seen Igor?”

“Who’s Igor?” a child would ask. The lure had flashed; the fish had taken the bait.

“You don’t know Igor? Igor is that awful man who collects body parts. Every time I go to bury the poor Cap’n, Igor tries to steal a leg or an arm from him! I can’t bury the poor Cap’n with Igor around. I’ve got to find a

place where Igor can't find him, where the Cap'n can be whole, and rest in peace!"

Bernie, meanwhile, had his own wagon, in which he had collected his skulls and eyeballs and arms and legs for the scavenger hunt. He was hunched over in his Igor costume – all six-foot-four of him – and pulling his wagon of body parts around the Lords' house, muttering to the children who approached him that he was on a continuing search for more spare parts.

It didn't take long for the children hearing Bernie's story to talk to the children hearing my story, and for excitement to spread among them like a flame from dry twig to dry twig. Bernie confirmed to some that his name was, indeed, "Igor." Others tried to get me close to Igor, to get my confirmation that he was the "Igor" I had encountered before. Of course, I reacted to such efforts with abhorrence.

"Go find Igor? What, are you crazy, child?" Then, "You say there's someone named Igor in these parts? That he's got a wagon full of body parts? *Aieeeah!* That would be him, mate, I'd stake my life on it! Where did you say he is? The Cap'n and me, we need to be going the other way!"

With "Igor" and his wagonload of body parts in the Lords' back yard, I pulled the Cap'n's coffin into the center of the Lords' driveway, amidst thirty or so neighborhood children. Karen helped me set it down on the ground.

"Is there anything inside?"

"Why, of course. The Cap'n's inside. Every last foot and finger of him still intact -- and he'll stay that way, if I can find a place to bury him, before that madman Igor gets him...."

"Can we see? Huh? Can we?"

I looked around, cautiously, to be sure Igor was not around.

"I can open it up, sure – but if Igor comes back, we've got to lock him up quick! I've spent too many years looking for the Cap'n's final restin' place to let that madman get him now!"

So I took the key to the padlock and, looking nervously over my shoulder, I opened the lock, then opened the lid a few inches, permitting the children a quick glimpse of the shadowy interior, of "the Cap'n" decked out in his white long-johns and his flowing white hair. But Igor's appearance brought warning cries.

"There he is!" the children screamed. "Igor is coming!"

I shut the lid of the coffin quickly, locked the padlock, and lifted my shovel in the air, brandishing it at the body hunter.

“So there you be, my nemesis! Get away! Get away! Go find your body parts elsewhere, I say! The Cap’n never did you any harm, mon!”

I waved the shovel in Igor’s direction, but I could not chase after him, as that would have left my cargo unattended. Whether driven by moral conviction that stealing body parts was indeed evil, or by their curiosity to get a better look at “the Cap’n” himself, an army of children crowded around Igor shaking their fists at him, calling him a bad man, telling him to leave the Cap’n alone “so he can rest in peace,” to get away, get away. And indeed, as soon as Igor had turned and was heading toward the back yard, the children were all around the Cap’n and me, wanting a better look.

I opened the lid again, a little wider this time, and again, Igor appeared to frustrate the children’s efforts to get a full view of “the Cap’n.”

“Is he real?” they would ask, as I closed the lid and locked the padlock again.

“Real? What do you mean?” I’d ask back. “He’s as real as the day we charged up San Juan Hill! He’s as real as the day he lay dying on the battlefield, and made me promise I’d bury him in a place he could rest in peace!”

Some of the older children would assert that it wasn’t real – their voices revealing to me, at least, that they weren’t sure themselves.

“Well, he’s dead, now, if that’s what you mean. He’s been dead for -- gosh, now, it’s been so many years, I’ve lost count....”

Then some new children would arrive who hadn’t gotten any glimpse at all, and I’d be opening the coffin again, looking over my shoulder for Igor’s approach. We repeated this cycle several times, as different children arrived. One youngster wearing horn-rimmed glasses seemed especially eager to get a better look at the Cap’n. He looked about six or seven years old.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Charlie.”

“Charlie, I need somebody I can trust. I need to see if I can find a place to bury the Cap’n. Can I trust you?”

He looked up at me, squinting through his glasses.

“To do what?”

“I need somebody to watch the Cap’n while I’m gone. If I leave you the key, you can open the coffin and let other kids see the Cap’n – but no matter what happens, you’ve got to promise me – if Igor shows up, you’ll lock that padlock quick and tight, so Igor can’t get to the Cap’n.”

“Yes, yes! I promise! Oh, yes, please!”

Other children watched me hand Charlie the all-important key to the padlock. They watched me look over my shoulder again for Igor, and make Charlie swear he wouldn't let anyone else have the key – that he wouldn't let it, or the coffin, out of his sight.

With dozens of witnesses, Charlie swore himself to each of these promises. So I took my shovel in hand and moved into the darkness. None of the children noticed that I wasn't really looking for a burial plot. I was watching the crowd around the coffin to make sure the story unfolded as I'd planned.

Sure enough, Charlie took his vows seriously. He opened the coffin several times, allowing glimpses of the Cap'n, and even allowing some of the older children to reach in and touch the Cap'n's corpse – but only briefly, because Igor would show up, dragging his wagon of body parts, and Charlie would immediately shut and lock the lid while other children “shooed” Igor away from the coffin.

Then, as we'd planned, Bernie announced it was time for the scavenger hunt. Blowing a loud whistle, he summoned all the children around him in the driveway and divided them into three teams. He issued flashlights to the teams. All the body parts had been hidden somewhere in the Lords' back yard, he explained, and when he blew the whistle again, the teams would compete to find the most parts as quickly as possible. Did everyone understand?

Yes, they did. The whistle blew. The children raced into the back yard, including Charlie, who was sure to lock the coffin and take the key with him.

I emerged from the darkness. I shed the long overcoat I had been wearing over my white long-johns, handing it to Karen for safe-keeping. From my shoe, I removed the spare key to the padlock. I opened the coffin and climbed in, shovel and all. Karen closed the lid above me and locked the padlock. I reached behind my head and removed the “old man” mask from the Cap'n, placing it over my own head. Now, in my own white long-johns and with my new long white hair, white mustache, and white eyebrows, I *was* the Cap'n. In a heartbeat, children were coming back to the front of the house.

I could hear Bernie counting the body parts. Sure enough, all had been found, and the team with the most parts was declared the winner. Now, Bernie announced, it was time for the scary story.

He took his seat in the driveway, his back to the garage door, facing the street. He invited all to gather in front of him for the story.

The children looked about for the best places to sit, and just as I'd planned, they realized there were only three choices: the grass, which was slightly wet and furthest from the story-teller; the driveway, which was closer, but a little hard and low; and the coffin, which was conveniently arranged across the driveway about ten feet from Bernie. Immediately, as in a game of musical chairs, the fastest children occupied the coffin, packed tightly hip to hip, and the slower children sat down on the driveway, mostly in front and on the sides of the coffin. The slowest of all, and the adults, stood behind the coffin, all eyes and ears intent on Bernie and his story.

Accompanied by sound effects he had arranged on a tape recorder, Bernie described strange occurrences in a neighborhood with the same name as ours. These paranormal occurrences were consistent with haunting by the ghost of one "Captain" named "Hunter." The children listened carefully, and so did I. Meanwhile, from beneath the right leg of the dummy on which I lay, I removed the hammer I'd hidden there. And when Bernie's story neared its climax, I used the hammer twice, quietly, in quick succession on the lid of the coffin: *tap tap*.

A child's voice right above me, in mid-sentence, whispering to his friend, had stopped. I waited a few seconds. Then, again: *tap tap*.

"Did you hear that?" the child whispered. He got no answer. The story continued. "I think – I think I heard something in there."

Tap tap.

"There's something in here!"

Bernie kept reading. Haunting by Captain Hunter might explain many of the strange goings on in our neighborhood –

Bang! I struck hard at the underside of the lid. Bang! The coffin wobbled as children, sitting inches from my face, jumped off screaming.

Bang!

Bernie, outside, stopped the story and asked in a panicky voice, "Charlie – is the coffin locked?"

"Yes," Charlie assured him.

Bang! Bang!

"Do you still have the key?"

"Yes. It's right here."

Bang! I hit the hinge, which I had loosened that afternoon almost to the breaking point. As planned, the children's focus had been entirely on the padlock; I'd known that a hammer blow from inside could pop loose the hinges on the other side.

It did. My arm reached out of the hinged side while children screamed. I twisted the lid till the other hinge popped and I arose, my white hair flying in the night, a triumphant shovel raised overhead, screaming revenge against Igor as I leapt from the coffin, chasing a crowd of screaming children down the street.

T/HE QUANTUM LEAP

The class action lawsuit which had consumed me for nearly five years finally settled. But every action has consequences. Settlement of “the biggest discrimination suit in history” brought a stream of smaller suits, like spilled jelly drawing ants at a picnic. Everyone had rights, all their rights had been violated, and they’d all lined up to get their due.

I tried to cope, addressing fairly those instances where one of our managers may have made a mistake, defending zealously against claims of those undeserving. But no matter how well I did, it remained a contest of blame for whatever had happened before, who had done what and whether X was at fault or Y. Every new case forced a scrutiny of the past, and so the past became Brer Rabbit’s tar-baby: the more I struggled to escape, the deeper I was pulled into it.

I yearned for fresh air.

One Sunday afternoon in March, 1998, Kate and her new husband, Braden, were visiting us for the day. I was trimming the bushes by the side of my house with a large pair of clipping shears. The shears were spring-loaded and the blades were dull, making repeated use a chore. After an hour of exertion, I felt pains in my left elbow and shoulder. I stopped working and came around to the front of the house. The air was cool, so I knew I was not dehydrated. But now I felt as if a long iron bar had been run through the length of my arm. The tips of my fingers tingled, becoming numb. I wiggled them to restore the flow of blood, but as I did I felt my whole left arm and shoulder go numb.

By the time I reached the garage I was convinced I was having a heart attack or a stroke. My whole left arm was in pain for no apparent reason. Suddenly I felt faint, vertigo swirling in my head, and I quickly lay down on the concrete floor of the garage to avoid passing out. But this sure-fire

method of remaining conscious didn't seem to be working. Even as I lay on the cold ground, my arm was burning, my head was swimming with nausea. I concluded I might be about to die.

What's vivid in my mind about this moment is that, as I contemplated this belief, I was not afraid. Death which would bring such pain to an end would not have been a terrible thing. I had lived a full life. What more could I ask?

The ceiling of the garage swirled around me and I passed out.

When I came to, Braden was checking back on me, having already called an ambulance. I tried to get up, but I could not. My head was still spinning and the pain in my arm was still excruciating. I rolled about on the cold floor, trying to avoid fainting again, experimenting with the position of my arm to see if I could alleviate the pain.

Paramedics arrived and found nothing wrong. I went to the hospital, and after numerous tests, again, nothing was wrong. Apart from the payment of some doctor's bills, I had not been affected by the experience.

How interesting, then, that I had so quickly resigned myself to death.

In the months that followed, I forced myself back to the keyboard. When I could free myself from the legal contests that raged in my head, I insisted on writing, adding memories here and there, recording more recent episodes of my life as they occurred. Sometimes I thought of the document on my word processor as a journal, recording an event that had occurred that day or earlier that week. At other times, I reviewed earlier parts of the document, finding mention of events which were not fully explained – and so I filled in details, writing about them as memories from a place and a time far removed.

Often, I found my memory flawed – an explanation of what had occurred in March made no sense, as it depended on events I'd recorded in April. So I moved chunks, sorting out the bones of my past, adding electronic flesh. The mass of bytes I was creating began to grow before my eyes, from an outline of places and dates a few thousand bytes long, to a living, growing, changing organism of stories measured in hundreds of kilobytes. And with growth came differentiation, major parts, systems, a living organism starting to breathe as I shaped and fashioned and added more parts.

MARCH 11, 1998.

Strong gusts of cold wind came up from the lake. Among a few pine

trees at the side of the lake stood a telephone pole, rising 30 foot from the ground. Iron rods were stapled into the pole every few feet, providing footholds. Hanging from a wire cable above the top of the pole was a cow bell.

Nadine (our teamwork facilitator) explained the object of the exercise to me and the other Publix managers: producing a wooden baton, she described how any of us who could get to the top would be faced with the “Quantum Leap,” in which we would jump off the top of the pole and ring the bell with the baton.

Of course, provision was made to prevent death. Nadine produced a body harness made of nylon seat belt webbing, to which was attached a nylon rope. The rope would be looped through a pulley that hung on a cable above the bell; the other end of the rope would be held by a member of our team on the ground.

Three of us huddled together, discussing the acrophobia we shared. Our best estimates were that we would panic about halfway up. At whatever point it struck, we would become immobilized, idiots reduced to shuddering.

The first to ascend was Cheri, who strapped herself into the harness and climbed to the top of the pole, where she reported needing a rest.

“How the hell am I supposed to leap at that thing?” she asked when she spotted the bell above and behind her. “It’s still ten feet up there...”

“You’ve got to stand on top of the pole,” Nadine replied.

All of us, including Cheri, let this sink in.

“Stand on top of the pole?” she asked.

Eventually, Cheri managed to *sit* on top of the pole, nudge herself off and fall to the ground at a velocity somewhere between “gradual descent” and “plummeting.”

As each person approached the pole, Nadine asked for a goal. To ring the bell? To make it to the top? To get half way up?

As each person had ascended, I’d been thinking: what was *my* goal?

In the unlikely event that I could ever stand atop the pole, I had little doubt I could ring the bell. I would have no trouble leaping if I ever got that high up. I would *want* to leap from it.

But at what point would my panic set in? And would I be able to climb any higher, once it did? Was my will strong enough to overcome my fear?

It was 4 o’clock; the sun was weakening; the breeze was blowing colder, and Nadine was asking what my goal was.

Everyone else had expressed a goal in physical terms. To climb half way up. To get to the top. To just stand on the pole. They had, for the most part, met their goals, even though no one had rung the bell.

How pointless it would be for me to state a goal in physical terms! I knew that the panic would come. The fear would incite pandemonium in my mind and lock shackles around my feet, confronting me more powerfully than all the monsters in all the dreams I'd ever had.

"I don't have a specific goal," I lied. "I just want to do the best I can."

In fact, I was concentrating already, very hard, on my specific goal. I knew that if my fear had its way, I'd be grabbing the pole half way up with a bear hug I wouldn't be able to move. My goal, quite simply, was to *beat my fear* with an exercise of my will.

I strapped on the harness and strode toward the pole.

I'd need to get to the top quickly, without pausing and without looking down. Either action would be an invitation to panic, and my strategy for getting to the top was to have no panic. So I hit the pole climbing hard. Ten feet. Fifteen feet. Then, my sneaker slid down and wedged between the pole and an iron staple. I looked down to see if I could free it, and realized too late that the distance from my eye to the ground – about twenty feet – was more than I was ready for.

The spin that occurs in acrophobia, at least for me, is nothing like the dizziness of fainting. It's more visual. If I look straight down, it's as though some laser device on the ground locks my gaze while the world wobbles in peripheral vision.

I thought of stopping, but remembered the harness and rope. *There is no reason to fear anything*, I told myself. I pulled my sneaker from the crevice and reached for the next iron rung. I refused to think again until I was at the top of the telephone pole, my forty-seven year old lungs winded from effort greater than running along with a bicycle down the street.

Voices far below called encouragement to me. I ignored the distractions. They had nothing to do with the conflict at hand, or with my strategy of concentrating so intently on individual steps that there wouldn't be room for fear.

Eyes shut, forcing myself not to think about where I was, I hoisted myself up. My left hand reached the flat top of the pole and reached across it. My fingers hooked over it on the opposite side. The top was about 10 inches in diameter. Opening my eyes, I could see over the rim, out over the lake again. Any higher, there would be no more pole for me to hug.

Visualized how this had looked from the ground, I remembered there was one more rung in which I'd have to place my right foot – the one my right hand had just been holding. It was about a foot from the top rim. To get my right foot up that far, I would have to hoist myself higher, into the empty space where no pole would support me.

This meant forearm strength. I removed my watch, letting it fall to the ground. Using wrists and forearms and elbows, I lifted my body higher, dragging my right foot hard against the side of the pole for balance until it squeezed into position. The pinnacle down to my waist now, my arms were like the top ends of a clothespin, perched on a cotton clothesline in the breeze.

“Put your left knee up on top,” called Nadine.

The sky and the clouds sent me messages about height and imbalance. If I fell, would my harness get snagged on the top of the pole somehow, and leave me hanging? Would I drop just enough to hit an iron staple or two, on the way down, as if I were falling through a jungle gym again? My forearms were beginning to tire.

I strained. The knee wouldn't clear. I pushed down on the top of the pole as hard as I could, and arched my back. Finally, the kneecap sensed the rim of the pole. I squeezed it onto the surface and stopped to breathe.

That was when I looked down again. A man was standing in my peripheral vision, to the left. I thought it was Jim, but I refused to look at him. My eyes had fallen on a spot of ground a few feet from the lake. It was an entirely uninteresting spot of ground. But my eyes locked onto it, as the periphery began to fluctuate and spin. The ground beckoned and pulled, undulating round and round as if I were a child's toy swirling on the surface while the water in the bathtub drains.

Meanwhile, with my left knee up, I was cramped into a little bundle. No longer did I have long legs below me to steady myself against the pole. My small center of gravity was steadied only by my hands and forearms.

“Now lift your left knee up. Put your left foot on top of the pole.”

My *foot*? It had been hard enough to get my *knee* onto the pole. The only way for the *foot* to get onto the top was for the knee to come up where my chest now was, and for my chest to go even higher. How could I make more room, unless my arms grew a few more inches?

Suddenly, I heard strong, gusting wind. In my peripheral vision, I could see branches swaying. I tried to stare at a particular spot on the ground, but it moved back and forth as the pole swayed. I fought back against the wind,

the only thing that mattered. A few seconds later, it calmed. But I was beginning to ache, and I knew I didn't have a lot of time.

I got my left foot onto the top of the pole. Then I used my right hand to remove the baton from my harness. I put its tip on the top of the pole to help steady myself. Though the baton was only about twelve inches long, the extra length allowed my right shoulder to rise up just a bit, lessening the dead pressure of my chest and chin which had cemented themselves to my left knee. This slight bit of room would allow a little momentum to build for what, I knew, would be the most difficult movement of all -- lifting myself another foot or two, my right foot leaving the last iron rung to join the rest of me on the top of the pole.

The action I'd conceived could involve no forward movement or momentum. The right foot had to come straight up, without forward thrust -- then move a couple of inches to the left before planting itself next to the left foot. At the same time, my arms and hands would have to come up with my shoulders and -- what? hang by my side? Wave in the air? Grope in the nothingness for the cold iron rungs that would, this time, not be there?

All this would have to happen simultaneously, smoothly, with just the right force. Not enough effort and my right foot would not make it to the top. Too much and I might thrust myself forward, over the opposite side of the pole. There was only a ten-inch circumference, and there had to be room for both my feet. My landing would have to "stick it," like a gymnast's. There could be no side steps, no little rescues.

I gave a little push down on the baton, lifted my right hip, and swung my head and shoulders up. My right foot came down neatly. I'd stuck it! I was standing up! Not just in the highest cube of a jungle gym, but above it all, above the rest of the world, in the open air!

*

*

*

In front of me are clouds and the tops of trees, and seeing them overwhelms me. I refuse to be so high up. Jumping would ensure I'm not so high. The space between me and the ground contracts, creating the sensation of falling. My brain reacts by shifting weight back, away from the direction of the fall -- but this creates an imbalance, a wobble, flailing arms : a panic. I realize that my right leg is shaking uncontrollably.

Stop, I tell it, but it minds me as well as a mongrel puppy the first time it's told to "stay."

The leg is bouncing, now, actually jumping, the heel coming up off the pole in rapid bursts. Then Nadine's voice:

“Take a deep breath.”

It makes no sense, but I have to trust her. I draw in a very deep breath, and as I let the air out of my lungs, the leg stops shaking.

*

*

*

The bell was somewhere behind me, I wasn't sure how far. I lifted my left foot a quarter of an inch, rotated it an inch toward the left, and set it back down. Moving the right foot to catch up with it, I repeated this again and again until at last the cowbell came into view. As my toes did the last couple of turns, an internal zoom lens turned on in my brain – I lost my peripheral vision -- I saw nothing except the bell, bobbing in the wind, its gold surface just a little dented, sunlight bouncing off it.

There was no calculation left in me, no measurement of distance, no plan – only concentration on achieving the goal I had set. When I saw the bell, I simply thought how hard I wanted to hit it – if possible, I would break it in two.

I leapt for it. I could hear the attack as the baton first struck the bell. But as I was falling, swirling, landing, and listening for the great ringing, clamorous, vibrating CLANG that would be heard by every bird in the air, by every creature in the marsh, by every fish beneath the surface of the lake, as I yearned for countless waves of resonation, I heard nothing more than the wood's first contact with metal. Then nothing.

I was on the ground, my “sea legs” wobbling, the horizon in its rightful place around me. My teammates explained that I'd sprung off the pole so hard, and so far, that my ear had just missed the bell. The baton had hit the bell alright – but on the backswing! The product of all my labor was not a “shot heard ‘round the world,” but a far tinnier sound.

No matter. I had achieved my goal. I had beat my fear. I had proven the power of choice.

So. What would I choose to do next?

WALKING PROUD

JUNE 16, 1998

Today is "Bloomsday." Father and son co-exist, circling each other, acting their parts.

Daniel has learned to play chess, and now beats me more than I beat him. He's also been accepted at Georgia Tech. I am proud he plans to become an engineer, breaking away from any mold I might have made for him.

Karen and I have decided to book passage on a four-masted sailing ship for our 25th anniversary, cruising the Tyrrhenean sea.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13TH

Arriving in Civitavecchia, we could see white caps on the water. We've boarded our white sailing ship, the Wind Song, but it remains in harbor, and when I go up on deck, the wind is so strong I fear the contact lenses may be torn from my eyes. We've learned from our crew that last night's sailing was terrible. The food would not stay on the tables in the dining rooms. Much glassware was broken. Most of the passengers and crew have been seasick. The storm has not yet passed, and the crew fears going out to sea again until it has done so.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15TH.

This morning we woke about 7 a.m. to view the ship sailing past sheer mountain cliffs dotted with spectacular villas.

We set anchor off the ancient town of Amalfi and, tendered ashore in life boats, took a bus to Pompeii, where a city of 20,000 people had been buried under fiery hail and volcanic ash. Karen snapped a picture of me standing in the forum of the city with the culprit, Vesuvius, still gloating in the background.

After the volcanic dust was settled and packed tight, all organic material decomposed and disappeared. Centuries later, archaeologists excavating the site found many empty cavities in the packed volcanic ash, representing organic material that had decomposed. To determine the shape and identity of the item, they filled the cavities with plaster, let it harden, and then dug away the ash. So the plaster figures on display included men, women, dogs and children, all captured in the poses and facial expressions they wore at the moment of their deaths.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16TH.

We awoke late to find ourselves anchored off the island of Capri. This “Island of Dreams” is only 4 miles long and 1 mile wide, but it rises 2,000 feet above the sea in sheer limestone cliffs. The Emperor Tiberius used Capri as his private headquarters, directing the affairs of the Roman Empire from it. He would invite his political enemies here and during intimate after-dinner conversation on the cliffs, throw them off into the sea.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 19TH.

We spent the day aboard ship in the port of Livorno. At night, we went on deck and looked at the Milky Way. For the best view, we stood on the dark foredeck. But this was the windiest and coldest spot, so we didn’t stay long, preferring the comfort of our blankets and bed.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20TH.

Our week on the Wind Song over, we bused to Rome and arrived at the *Albergo del Senato*, directly on the *Piazza della Rotonda*, the fountained public square in front of the Pantheon. It was too early to check in, so Karen and I left our luggage at the front desk and decided to explore.

First, however, I had to use the rest room. The desk clerk directed me to the facilities in the basement, which I found, but I could find no designation of the room as Men or Women, Uomini or *Donne*, Signori or *Signore*. Believing I well understood the scarcity of restrooms in European hotels, I decided the room must be unisex. I couldn’t figure out how to lock the door, and there was no one anywhere around, so I just closed the door and began to urinate in the toilet. As soon as I began, I could hear someone outside the door, and before I could react, the door opened.

“Eek!” she screamed, “There is a man in the lady’s room!”

The door was quickly closed, and I now heard this elderly American

woman outside the door saying to her husband, “Can you believe it? There is a man in the lady’s room! Should we call the manager? I think you should call the manager...”

I finished as quickly as I could and looked for the flush mechanism – but there was none to be found, except for a long cord hanging from a lever high up on the wall, nearly to the ceiling. Could that be the flush mechanism? Concerned that the man would call the manager (or worse, the *Polizia Municipale*) I quickly zipped my fly and opened the door.

“I apologize,” I said to the man. “I didn’t know this was a lady’s room. Now I can’t figure out how to flush the toilet.”

I had hoped that he (or his wife) would at least tell me how to flush the toilet. But he apparently didn’t hear me, probably because his wife kept shouting at him to call the manager. It was obvious she felt strongly about the sexes using the proper toilet: I figured it was a good bet she wouldn’t want to use the men’s room while I finished my business in the ladies room. So, with her squawking and strutting outside the door like a hen while a strange dog (me) sniffed outside the hen house, I pulled the long string from the ceiling, unaware (until later) that this was the panic cord to pull for assistance from the front desk. I could see, clearly, that whatever this cord was, it did not have the effect of clearing out the toilet bowl. However, the woman was still yapping outside the door, so I finally just gave up and left the room to her.

Later in the day, when we returned to the hotel, I was sorry to see that she recognized me. She gave me an ugly look but I don’t think she has called the police.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21ST.

I must say a word about the rules of Italian traffic. If there are any lines painted on the roads, the cars ignore them. More often, there are no lines to be ignored. The Italian concept of a traffic “lane” is the shortest distance between two points. Driving is both more aggressive and more defensive than in America. Whereas we follow rules and take countless actions on the assumption that others do too, Italians don’t expect anyone to follow the rules, making them both more aggressive, and more alert.

As a part of this system, the “rule” is that pedestrians are permitted to jaywalk. Everyone jaywalks, of course – but if you get hit, it’s your fault, so you’ll have to pay your own medical bills. Meanwhile, at most intersections there is a pedestrian crossing marked by white “zebra” lines painted on the

road. These lines are sometimes so faded no motorist could possibly see them. But no matter. The “rule” is that a pedestrian crossing on one of these areas DOES have the right of way, and so CAN sue, if hit.

Now, as the pedestrian traverses one of these zebra crossings on a quiet corner, the “rule” is easily adhered to. But as we approached the *Piazza Venezia* we realized that no matter how large the crowd standing on a street corner waiting to cross, the scores (and sometimes hundreds) of vehicles whizzing past show no signs at all of stopping or slowing down. Like a swarm of bees they continue to speed by – until someone simply steps out into the oncoming traffic – asserting, as it were, his legal right to sue if hit and killed.

As our bus guide said as we entered Rome, the pedestrian in Rome “must walk proud.” Karen and I now understand what this means. If one steps into the oncoming traffic tentatively, the traffic will not slow down, collectively confident (communicating like bees?) that the hesitating pedestrian will retreat back to curbside. However, if the pedestrian “walks proud” into the traffic, confidently creating his own space on the zebra stripes, the swarm will take notice and success will be his.

Now, to one unfamiliar with Rome, all this might suggest that the “proud walk” will cause the swarm of bees to stop. But such a person is likely still hung up with the American idea of a “lane.” For when the proud pedestrian steps out into the middle of the oncoming Roman traffic, the nearest vehicle does not stop -- it simply sidesteps into an adjoining “lane” and crosses the intersection a foot or two in front of the proud pedestrian, without so much as slowing down. And as the pedestrian continues to cross the street, there comes a point at which some of the vehicles choose to speed by a foot or two behind the pedestrian, rather than in front of him – so that the pedestrian’s crossing is something like Moses’ parting of the Red Sea.

If a pedestrian were to do this in the States, he would be killed instantly and declared a fool by all. But Karen and I have gotten into the swing of things here, thrusting ourselves out into the oncoming traffic “proudly,” thus placing our lives in the hands of the system, content to know that if we are killed, we can always sue.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22ND.

We arrived in Florence on schedule at 9:15 a.m.

After getting lost (we first headed in the wrong direction and left town

altogether) we found our way back to “il centro” and walked up and down the *Ponte Vecchio*. Tonight, on this bridge where jewelers have been selling gold since Ferdinand the First granted them shops in the 1500’s, I bought Karen a gold necklace.

We left the bridge at 9:15 pm for *La Giostra*, where the walls are white stucco and the ceilings are dark wood rafters. We ordered a bottle of Brunello. It was brought to our table by the owner himself, an old man in a white apron and tall white chef’s hat. He said little, preferring to talk with his eyes and his big white eyebrows, moving them enthusiastically as he uncorked our bottle, passed the cork under his nose, inhaled deeply, and smiled.

He poured some wine into one of our deep, wide glasses, then poured the same wine into another glass, then back into the first, and so on, repeatedly. I expected that after this aeration, he’d give me the glass to taste. Instead, when he stopped pouring and repouring, he inserted his own large nose into the glass and breathed in deeply, sighing and smiling again. Finally, he set the glass down in front of Karen, gesturing for her to taste and approve. Upon her okay, he upended the rest of the bottle into the decanter and repoured from glass to glass and then to decanter again, all with great flourish of hands and sparkling eyes. Last, he removed a smaller glass from his apron, and filled it. Holding this glass proudly like a regimental flag, he proceeded back to the kitchen to drink it himself.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23RD.

It is Daniel’s first day of class at Georgia Tech, and the last day of our Italian tour.

I woke early, before Karen, and went out on our little balcony where the sky was blue and the morning air was cool and the scent of apple blossoms filled our courtyard. A shaggy dog and two little children played in the garden below, and the birds sang in the trees.

We ate breakfast at the hotel and saw Michelangelo’s *David*, Giambologna’s *Rape of the Sabines*, and Cellini’s *Perseus*.

Karen and I are so taken with Italy we’ve been making plans to invite our children to come back with us next year. Will it be by train, or car? Should we stay in the city or take a villa in the country? Which one of our children would most enjoy Rome, and which one Florence? Who would most likely be absorbed by the history, and who by the art? We speculate, we wonder, and we begin to live our next vacation.

NOVEMBER 8, 1998.

Every time Karen asks why I've kept some piece of junk in the garage, her question has the same answer – I've saved it because I might use it someday. Weights from an old set of barbells, copper tubing, corner molding, fishing line, wood, rope, twine, Styrofoam, lengths of lead pipe, pieces of screen, all saved because of their uniqueness. I've dawdled in my garage many times, staring at each of these objects in turn. And ever since the night I hid inside the coffin, I had thought about hosting a haunted house of my own.

I decided I'd call it "The Carving House." I'd play the part of a woodsman who would cut off body parts with a chain saw.

This theme aroused much disinterest. There was too much violence on television and in the movies, people said; children didn't need to see such things "live" in my garage.

I wasn't surprised. I'd noticed what had happened to Halloween over the years. Whereas vampires and Frankenstein monsters had roamed the streets when I was young, the streets these days were full of clowns, princesses and basketball players. Everyone knows that candy isn't healthy and that apples might contain razor blades, so adults give away non-food items like florescent bracelets and laser lights, always making sure they are too big to choke on.

I decided the carving house would be a maze of wooden walls. If I could cram enough turns into it, anyone negotiating the course would lose their sense of direction.

Saturday mornings I would get up at dawn, delighted at not having to go to work. I'd walk around inside my maze, thinking of my pieces of junk, imagining the thoughts of a child walking through.

On Halloween night, I put on my mask with the balding head and flowing, long white hair.

"Come in, come in," I invited. "Welcome to the Carving House."

Most kids just stared back at me, silent. Some said, "I want to get out of here." A few said, "If you hurt me I'll sue you."

In my hands I held a small chisel and a piece of wood with an intricate face carved into it.

"I carve faces for a living," I explained. "For the detail work, I use this chisel. For the big work, I use the *big cutter* there..."

I motioned to the chain saw resting on the footstool next to me. The children got the message.

As the children stepped back, they could see a ghoul ahead of them. This ghoul's long face – suggesting half bone, half flesh – was a dull gray color, with long, drawn eye-sockets and prominent teeth. It was hung from the ceiling with fishing line (invisible in the darkness). Two stone-gray hands, with fingers twice normal length, half-bone and half-flesh, reached out from behind black fabric. When I'd stood on the stepladder to hang this creature from the ceiling, it had taken me several minutes. Standing on the ladder, my hands over my head with scissors, hook and line, I had felt its large bony hands touch me. The creature's face just inches in front of mine, I had breathed into his face, and I had felt my breath come back at me.

Now, the children watched him, whispering to each other about the hanging creature – “Is that real? Is it alive? Is that – someone?”

I emerged from behind a black curtain, stepping out of the woodsman's house directly in front of the children, twisting a sword in front of my face. Pointing it at one of them, I asked, “Would you like me to carve *your* face? I would *love* to add it to my collection!”

The children cowered and screamed, holding on to each other.

In short, I gave the children a memory they would long remember.

TAKING CONTROL

NOVEMBER 11, 1998

Like my father, who enticed me to follow him into business, then led me into a career in law, I have become a balding, large-bellied man who works late into the night and spends too little time with his family. Today, my efforts have been recognized by being named a Vice President. My father would be proud: I have become what he wanted me to be.

I knew I'd spent too much time at the office in my life. I knew I had missed countless opportunities to be a good father. Determined to do what I could, to be the best father I could be, even though now my children were mostly grown, I decided to take control of events.

I announced to Karen and my children that if it could be done for a reasonable cost, I'd pay for a trip abroad. I could finally afford for my family the kind of enriching experience my father had always provided for me, and which had shaped me into what I am. There's nothing like a trip abroad, I thought, to provide a learning experience.

One night over dinner, we nominated destinations; then we rank-ordered them. Despite my votes for Italy, Greece, and France, when all ballots had been counted the winner was Spain.

I didn't know much about Spain but I plunged into research at the library. Kate, our eldest, downloaded information from the Internet. We agreed that because Madrid would be our arrival point, it would make sense to spend time there, especially due to the reputation of the Royal Palace. Fodor's Guide says that each of its 2800 rooms "vies for over-the-top opulence."

It also seemed to make sense to go south to Granada where the great Moorish citadel, the *Alhambra*, sounded spectacular. We agreed we should

travel by car between Madrid and Granada across the land called *La Mancha*, which means “the stain” – a desolate, windswept badland where Don Quixote and Sancho Panza jousted with windmills. What fun it would be, what pride I would feel, all of us sitting in an exotic Flamenco club after midnight, listening to guitars, castanets, and dancers’ metal heels, other patrons looking at this American and his family with curiosity – or even envy! This image became my vision.

One Sunday afternoon I voiced an assumption that we’d rent a minibus for all seven of us. My assumption, I was told, revealed my unconscious desire to control everyone else by keeping the minibus keys. I was informed I would not be permitted that power; we would rent two vehicles, so that others could do their own thing. Everyone would be his own master; no cruise directors allowed. I accepted this state of affairs, simply reminding everyone that while I would pay the major expenses – airfares, hotels, major meals eaten together – incidentals for individuals would be their own responsibility.

Kate found inexpensive villas on the internet. One site contained a photograph of rooftops and mountains viewed through a white masonry window.

The website gave no street address for *Casa de Desmond*, only a fax number, an e-mail address, and a statement that the villa was in Chité, a village in the Sierra Nevadas. A reply to my e-mail indicated that reserving the villa would require 235 British pounds wired to a numbered bank account at Lloyds Bank in London, England.

I looked for Chité on the map. I could not find it.

What a great scam this would make, I thought. Get an internet site, put a pretty photo on it, get people to wire substantial rental deposits to your bank... What recourse would I have if I wired the money and the villa didn’t exist at all?

The photograph of rooftops and mountains through a white masonry window would not leave my brain. I wired the money anyway.

*

*

*

I was in my office on the 20th of May when my sister Corinne called, excited, telling me she wanted me to sue the company where she’d worked twenty years earlier, “just like you won the lawsuit against all those women who sued Publix.” She raved on about her plans for all the money we’d win, told me she was driving to Tampa for a meeting of her *Tres Dias* group, and wanted to meet me at the church there so we could discuss her lawsuit.

Clearly, she was having another manic episode. I tried to talk to her, to find out the directions to the church she was headed toward, but she wouldn't let me speak. Ten minutes into the conversation, I insisted she should let me say just one word, and she hung up.

I called her back; the phone was busy.

I called my house and asked Jen to look in my files for the name and telephone number of Corinne's doctors. She wasn't able to find them. Leaving work, I got in my car and drove home.

As I looked through the file drawer myself, the phone rang. It was my mother calling. Corinne had called her as well. What could I do to help?

I got back in the car and started driving toward Saint Petersburg, hoping to find Corinne at home before she left for her meeting. Several times I called her apartment on my cell phone only to get a busy signal. That was good news – it meant she was still in her apartment, safe. But while crossing the causeway over Tampa Bay, when I finally got through, a police officer answered.

Corinne's deaf husband, Barry, had called her doctor's office, reporting that Corinne had spoken of killing herself. The doctor's staff had gotten Corinne to agree to go to Saint Anthony's. When Corinne had not shown up there after a couple of hours, the doctor's office had called the police.

The officers told me Corinne didn't appear to be an immediate threat to herself, and if I was on my way to help get her to Saint Anthony's, they would leave. I agreed.

When I knocked at the door of their apartment, Barry came out in tears and threw himself into my arms – he and Corinne hadn't slept for days and he didn't know what to do. I comforted Barry for a minute. Then, inside, I found Corinne expressing a willingness to go to the hospital, but taking every imaginable step to avoid doing it. She strutted, fretted, focused for a few seconds on getting a glass of water, then on a broken picture frame, then on showing me a postcard she had bought, then on getting her prayer book, then on straightening a picture on the wall in the hallway.

"Oh, just one more thing, before we go..."

I heard it a hundred times before we finally got her out the door and into the car.

In the emergency room at St. Anthony's, an admissions clerk – an African American – asked Corinne a long list of questions about herself and her past. Corinne rambled in response to every question, throwing out distracters like a ship at sea might cast off interference to confuse incoming

torpedoes. She told him that Jesus loves him. She said she bore no prejudice against “*people like him.*” This caused his eyebrows to rise a bit. Every time he got a phone call, or had to turn to another matter, she would scold him and complain about the lack of service, but he kept on working through the distracters, displaying the patience of Job.

Once she was registered, I sat next to Corinne in the waiting room. She told me how much she missed Dad even though he’d been an alcoholic, how she forgave him for that, how she knew from her support groups that the children of alcoholics are bound to have problems, and how her mother and father were both to blame for her troubles. One moment she was forgiving, the next she was assigning blame. She became tearful and told me how frightened she was. I tried to soothe her. I had a little success at first, but then she stood up and started screaming. The more I tried to settle her, the louder she became, stomping down the hallway from the waiting room. As I tried to restrain her, she threw her fists and arms at me, screaming, crying, saying she did not hate her father or her mother, but she cried for their sins, and for Jesus.

When Barry and I left her about nine o’clock, even Barry could hear her screaming at the attendants from behind locked doors. I presumed the staff would soon have her sedated, and that her lithium dosage would be adjusted, and that she’d be home in another month.

That weekend I went to visit her. She was calmer, but clearly delusional.

“Joe, did I tell you I am getting married this afternoon? All the family is coming. Even Chris is going to be here, with his children. Did I show you my dress? It’s beautiful. It’s in the other room. Would you like to see it?”

“Corinne, I think you’re mistaken.”

She peered at me intently. “Joe, I can see straight through you, you know. You play the mind game so well, but I can play it too. You hear me? Yes! You know just what I’m saying, I know you do!”

I left the hospital feeling helpless, but confident that the hospital staff knew what they were doing, and that Corinne’s doctors would adjust her medication and she would be out of the hospital soon.

*

*

*

Two weeks before our scheduled departure to Spain, I faxed a request for directions to *Casa de Desmond*. I received a fax in return, handwritten:

“The keys and directions to the house can be picked up in *Bar*

Nuevo in Lecrin. The bar will be open until 11:30ish Sunday night. I live around the corner, and will visit you on Monday afternoon. Directions: Follow the 323 toward Motril and take the Valley of Lecrin exit. Turn right at *Bar Garvi*. Look to the left for *Bar Nuevo* for key and map pick-up.”

I looked for Lecrin on the map, and could not find it. Worried I was being sucked into a scam, I decided the worst that could happen: I would take my family to the mountains outside Granada and simply find no towns called Lecrin or Chité at all. What harm would there be in that? I had credit cards. We could certainly survive.

More likely, we would drive across the “stain” of *La Mancha*, past the sites of the old Clint Eastwood westerns, and instead of finding my exotic Flamenco club in the mountains, I would walk into the *Bar Nuevo* and find some guy taking a siesta under his sombrero. How would I wake him up? How would I ask him for directions, in my virtually non-existent Spanish? If I angered him, would he draw a six-gun on me?

I began studying Jennifer’s old Spanish books and listening to her tapes in the car every day. I wanted to learn more Spanish and practice it every chance I could. I believe that foreign languages help develop one’s perspective on life, and I wanted more than anything for this trip to be a learning experience for the family.

Of special interest to me, I learned the reason that the formal form of address in Spanish – “*Usted*” – takes verbs in the third person. “*Usted*,” I learned, is actually an abbreviation for “*Vuestra merced*,” or “*Your Grace*.”

What a chivalrous country, where strangers address each other as “*Your Grace*”! Would *Your Grace* like a glass of Rioja? Would *Your Grace* like to hear another Flamenco? On the subject of the Spanish language I had the zeal and the inner confidence of Don Quixote himself – I was sure that, once there, none of us would be able to resist the call of the native tongue.

*

*

*

Meanwhile, however, the hospital was saying there had been no improvement in Corinne’s condition. They’d been unable to get her to take medication, and unable to get her stabilized. Now, three weeks after her admission, they said she had taken a turn for the worse. She had become incoherent. I drove back to the hospital to visit her.

"*Ai – eeee*," she said, over and over again.

"*Ai – eee, ai – eee*." It was nearly all she could say.

I stayed with her for several hours that day. Between "*Ai – eee*" and "*Ai – eee*," she spat frequently. Once, she must have caught the word "*Philadelphia*" coming from a television across the room, as she repeated it, "*Ai – ee.... Phil ah DEL phreeeee – ahh...*"

This was not the perceptive mimicry Corinne had been known for in childhood. It was deeper than that. She had retreated, lost somewhere in her innermost Self.

"*Help me*," she said, suddenly seeming coherent again. I moved toward her and asked what I could do.

I got only a frothy spit, drooling as if from a rabid animal, and more "*Ai – ee*."

I held her. She rested her head against my chest. Then she looked up at me and her face filled with terror.

"No! No ! It's hurting me! *Ai – ee*."

Barry consoled her on a couch and tried to get her to take her medications, but she simply spat them out. The staff said they could rarely get her to take them and that they appreciated Barry's persistence, as he did better at it than they did. Corinne rocked back and forth on the couch. "*Ai-eee!*" she howled.

"The fire!" she yelled suddenly, getting up from the couch and running toward a closet door. "Put it out!" – then fading back into more *ai-ees*.

Had I ever before looked so deeply into a person's soul? What was it that I was seeing? Surely, Corinne's imagination was running amuck, a monster wreaking havoc, trapped in a chaos of excruciating terror and pain.

"Corinne? This is your brother, Joe. I love you. Do you know who I am?"

"*Ai – ee*. It hurts, it hurts, *ai – ee...*"

I had promised my father I would take care of Chickie and Corinne. I had done nothing at all for Chickie before he died. And now, what could I do to help my sister? I held her in my arms, and I stroked her, and I told her I loved her.

"The devil! I know! I've seen you before! Are you the enemy, or my friend? *Ai – ee....*"

*

*

*

We were scheduled to leave for Spain on June 25th. I had spent ten thousand dollars on transatlantic airfares, on *Casa de Desmond*, and on

rental car and hotel deposits. I had invested months planning this trip for my family, the trip that would enrich their lives with the culture of the Old World. As Corinne's condition worsened, I remembered my promise to my father to care for her. But I had been able to do nothing. And I had a family of my own to care for.

I spent the last several days before our departure to Spain making sure the rest of Corinne's family was up to date about her status, had the names and numbers of the doctors and the hospital staff, and would be available if needed to help her.

Breaking my promise to my father, I made a decision. I chose to take my family to Spain.



T THE HEAD OF THE TABLE

FRIDAY/SATURDAY, JUNE 25/26 – TOLEDO

After a long transatlantic flight, a six hour time difference, and no sleep, we found ourselves on the roads of Spain, Braden and Kate and Daniel and Tessa in a little red Renault, Karen and Jen and I in a green Opel.

We got to Toledo about 4 pm. Daniel went to bed rather than join us for dinner. The rest of us showered and waited for the hotel restaurant to open at 8:30 pm. Someone had read about the delicious meatballs of Spain – “*albondigas*.” There were none on the menu. Still hot and tired, I ordered the cold, spicy gazpacho. I addressed the waitress at one point using the informal form of address, and Kate reminded me how offensive it was not to use *Usted*. Over melon and ham, lamb chops and partridge, we discussed our anticipations for the next day, when we would drive across *La Mancha* in search of our mountain villa.

SUNDAY, JUNE 27 - THE DRIVE ACROSS LA MANCHA

Braden took the lead in the little red Renault, with Kate and Dan and Tess on board. I followed in the green Opel, with Karen and Jen. Miles of reddish brown hills surrounded us. There was no visible crop except olive trees, which made regular polka-dot patterns against the background of the dirt. We saw no signs of other plant life – not even weeds.

As expected, it was hot. There were no towns to speak of. Every few miles, a small farmhouse sat among the polka dots, far off the highway. For

three hundred miles, the polka-dotted land was brown and empty. To pass the time, Jen agreed to read stories to me from an old Spanish book. I listened and practiced translating while Karen slept in the back seat.

Suddenly the road was turning corners over steep bluffs. My fists tightened over the wheel, I leaned forward, I slowed to a crawl. At the first opportunity, Jen took my place at the wheel. We were crossing the Sierra Madrona mountain range, and my old fear of heights was with me again, a back seat driver. At a fuel stop, Jen opened the compartment in the console where I'd left two peaches, and she had to evacuate the car due to the powerful aroma she'd released. Thanks to the absence of an overflow valve, I also spilled diesel fuel on my leather shoes. So as we left the station, the smell of baked peaches and diesel fuel complemented the brown and olive scenery.

Twenty three kilometers into the mountains South of Granada, we were relieved to find an exit sign for Lecrin. (Whether we were the victims of an Internet scam or not, at least the town really existed.) Neither Jen nor I noticed the one-way sign we passed at the entrance to town. As we watched the locals staring and waving and shouting at us, I thought they were being friendly, welcoming their new American visitors. Kate and Braden, who had noticed the one-way sign, could read the expressions on their faces more accurately, and later characterized the shouting as something else.

We found ourselves in front of the Bar Nuevo – a white-washed, stuccoed masonry building with a red barrel-tile roof and a gated wall in front, with an outdoor patio. I began to concentrate on what I might say to the man in the sombrero.

I had thought a lot about what to say. I'd reminded myself repeatedly that everyone – no matter how dirty or unkempt – would be *Usted* “*Your Grace*.” As for getting directions, a simple “*Donde esta la casa de Desmond?*” was something I could likely manage, but would this be enough? Perhaps more politeness would help: “*Buenas tardes, Senor. Por favor, buscamos [“we are looking for”] la casa de Desmond?*”

Kate and I had discussed this several miles back at the fuel stop. She had remembered the word for “keys” and had the perfect opening down pat. So as we pulled up in front of the *Bar Nuevo*, I was confident we could handle the conversation.

The doorway into the bar was hung with strings of plastic beads, which seemed intended to keep out both the sun and the larger flies. I parted the beads with my head as we entered the darkened room. On the left was a video game and two small pool tables. On the right was a bar with eight bar

stools, mostly occupied. All conversation stopped as we entered. Two Spaniards shooting pool and everyone seated at the bar had their eyes upon us. Their attention had been caught not by our entrance alone, but also by the several bead-strings that had become wrapped over my left ear as we entered. I took the beads in my hand and swept them aside with a casual, self-assured flourish. I must have got hold of all but one string, because this one clung to my ear like tape that's stuck to the bottom of a shoe and won't come off. I bent my neck and shook my head, but this only served to make the strand swing wide to my left and then, still fixed to my ear, swing back across my face to the right, and dangle from my right hip.

Finally disentangled, I "walked proud" up to the bar, projecting my head and shoulders between two seated Spaniards whose conversations remained on hold, and whose eyes remained intently upon me.

"*Buenas tardes*," I said out loud in the direction of the bar tender down at the other end of the bar. I was Clint Eastwood.

Kate, to my right, whispered quickly, "Do you know what you're going to say next?"

"Well, no," I answered her. Immediately she took charge. She addressed the bar tender as "Your Grace," confident in her command of the language. The bar tender seemed to understand her, and handed us an envelope which had my name written on the outside. He held out his hand and turned it at the wrist, as if turning a key.

"*Gracias*." We took the envelope and turned to leave. As we parted the strings of beads in the doorway, we could hear the patrons in the bar laughing at us. Outside, Kate confessed with embarrassment: despite all her forethought, she knew as soon as the words had left her mouth that she hadn't asked for the keys at all. Rather, she'd said, "*Por favor, Senor, tenemos reservaciones a la casa de Desmond. Necesitamos los huevos*." Or, "*Please, sir, we have reservations at Desmond's house. We need the eggs*."¹

In Chité, we retrieved our bags from the cars. As we did so, an old man led a donkey down the street. There are no yards in this town. The whitewashed houses are joined together side to side, and the front wall of one house is no more than fifteen feet from the one opposite. We entered *Casa de Desmond* through a doorway hung with beads. The house has tile

¹ I repeated this story just last month to our translator at work, who is from Spain, and she told me that while *huevos* literally means "eggs," it is also the common slang term for "testicles."

floors, white masonry walls, dark wood beamed ceilings, fine wood trim around built-in cabinets and windows. No phone or TV. In every window, there are solid wooden shutters and more beads. Over every bed, a mosquito net.

We showered and settled in. When the family began to play games in the living room, I climbed a second set of stairs from the bedrooms up to this rooftop patio, where I sit now and write.

At 9:45 p.m., it is still light out. I look over the white stucco and red rooftops of the houses of Chité, and across the valley to the higher mountains of the Sierra Nevadas to the southeast. Just like the photograph on the Internet. It is cool and breezy. There are no bugs at all. Despite the late hour, I have no trouble writing and birds still flutter from rooftop to rooftop, singing.

MONDAY, JUNE 28 – GRANADA AND “THE ALHAMBRA”

I awoke at about 9 am to the sounds of trucks and workers outside my window. The air was still cool and crisp. The rest of the household was up, or getting up, except for Daniel, who lay on the couch downstairs with sheets pulled up over his head, refusing all attempts to rouse him. After showers, six of us were ready to go into Granada, but Daniel was saying through his sheets, “Just five more minutes.” After repeated threats and no further response from Daniel, the rest of us left him on the couch as we departed to visit the famous *Alhambra*.

I remembered the ground rule about “no cruise directors.” I remembered my promise that I would not attempt to dictate what anyone else chose to do. But for Daniel to miss the Alhambra? I hadn’t previously conceived of such an unthinkable thing. The *Alhambra* was THE reason we had come to Granada. It included an old Roman castle (the *Alcazaba*); a summer home for the Muslim Sultan (the *Generalife*) with its famous gardens; and most of all, the centerpiece of the *Alhambra*, the spectacular Moorish *Nazrid* Palace, which contains the baths, the rooms where the Sultan kept his harem, and the room in which Christopher Columbus is said to have received his commission from Ferdinand and Isabella... How could Daniel choose to miss all this, in order to get a few minutes of sleep?

We arrived at the *Alhambra* without Daniel. We toured the *Generalife* first, with its gardens. It was interesting, but in a state of great disrepair. The walls contained only minor sections of tile or inscriptions that hinted, here and there, of the splendor that once filled the Sultan’s summer home.

Kate noticed that our tickets restricted access to the *Nazrid* Palace – we could only get in before 12:30. It was twelve already, so we set off at a brisk pace for the Palace. Moments from the entrance, however, Kate and Jen and Tessa announced they wanted to eat. Lunch could not be ordered and eaten in time to gain admission to the Palace by 12:30. We had come across the ocean to see the *Alhambra*, and now three more of our group were going to miss its most famous part – in favor of a sandwich! I expressed my concern.

“Don’t worry,” they said. “We’d rather get something to eat.”

I struggled to stifle my frustration.

So only three of us – Karen and Braden and I – entered the Palace. We marveled at the architecture, traveling down passageways and around corners that seemed designed for constant surprises of space, view and location – the *Cuarto Dorado* (Golden Room), *La Fachada de Comares* (Façade of the Comares), the Courts of the Myrtles and of the Lions, the *Espejismos* (Mirage), and countless others. The Hall of Ambassadors, where Columbus received his commission, especially awed me. I wondered what Columbus had done to get all three of his ships across the Atlantic successfully. Had his challenge been less daunting than mine?

We visited the harem’s room, and the room where Washington Irving stayed before attracting the world’s attention in *Tales of the Alhambra*. We passed under scores of archways, around corners, across balconies and balustrades which intrigued us with alternating views of interior gardens, sculpted rooms, and panoramic views of the City below. Much as I wanted to linger and enjoy it myself, I couldn’t stand the thought of my daughters missing these wonders. I left Karen and Braden and tried to find my way out, intent on rousing the others from their lunch and persuading them to join us. I turned corners, jogged up staircases, then down again, then around other corners – but I was a rat in a maze, disoriented. Soon I was stressed that I couldn’t keep track of my direction or approximate location. Every corridor seemed to double back on itself and take me wherever I least wanted to go. By 12:35, the deadline for admission past, I gave up my futile effort to share the *Nazrid* Palace with my daughters.

Frustrated, I found them waiting outside the Palace walls, where they had composed a poem:

*Yo quiero albondigas
Porque hay nada mas
Que es siempre tan rico*

The subject was meatballs, of course. More importantly, the word *albondigas* had impressed itself into their minds. My frustration at the failure of all seven of my “ships” to reach the Alhambra was quickly supplanted by satisfaction that my daughters were delighting in the Spanish language. I was, again, a proud and happy father.

Now, well past midnight, I write in my journal on the rooftop. I can hear little children next door and across the street laughing, playing loudly, singing, and talking to their parents. Teenagers and adults of all ages walk the streets, visiting each other, calling out, singing, whistling, mindless that in this little town of doors and windows that stayed open all the time, anyone might be trying to sleep.

TUESDAY, 6/29 – THE BEACH ON THE COSTA DEL SOL

At about 3 a.m., I woke to the ruckus of trash collectors calling out to each other, whistling, joking, operating their mechanized lift to dump garbage from the containers sitting outside every house. For half an hour I heard them, happy to be working at the coolest part of the night.

Shortly after dawn, I awoke again to the sound of an ambulance coming down the narrow street. At first, I assumed the siren meant someone was sick – but then I vaguely remembered having heard a siren the prior morning (in my half sleep) as well. The siren was just to alert our neighbor that his morning carpool was about to arrive. Still in bed, I could hear the woman across the street telling the ambulance driver that her husband had been out late the night before, drinking much wine, and would not be riding today. Meanwhile, I could hear masons in the street, knocking down old walls and building new ones.

Jen described a dream she had had, and we all agreed it was full of symbolic meaning. In her dream, I was driving a car in a foreign country, the family all in the car with me. I drove up to a building we wanted to enter, but I first had to speak across an intercom. I attempted to speak the language, but we were denied entry – the gate would not lift. I pulled the car over and we watched another car approach, its driver speaking into the intercom, the gate lifting, the car going in. Before the gate came back down,

² I want meatballs –
Because there is nothing else
That is always so good
In my stomach.

I drove through quickly behind the other car. A police cruiser appeared behind us and called to us over a loudspeaker. I could not find a place in the road to pull over easily, so I kept driving. Jen's anxiety grew that the police were losing their patience with me. Finally, proving her right, the policemen pulled out blow-darts and shot me in the back of the neck!

Suffice it to say the family's low opinion of my driving was rivaled only by their low opinion of my Spanish.

We drove south through the Sierra Nevada mountains (Jen driving) and descended to Motril, on the Mediterranean sea. Then we drove along the *Costa del Sol* to Almunecar. The road along the coast is high above the sea. Each time the cars stopped and we were allowed to get out for a stretch, I took a moment to unclench my fingers and fists. I was holding Tessa's little yellow Spanish dictionary; I noticed upon our arrival in Almunecar that the sweat in my palms had worn the words off its cover.

In Almunecar, we walked to the beach and put our toes into the sea. Then we drove along the coast to the Caves of Nerja.

Entering these caves, all eyes turned upward at the high ceilings and towering rock monuments beneath them; then, around a corner, deep caverns stretched out below. We entered a cave that contained a structure as enormous and as intricate as St. Peter's Basilica. Karen compared the stalagmites and stalactites to a colossal pipe organ. Twenty-thousand-year-old cave paintings on some walls made us wonder what primitive people must have thought when first they entered these vaults.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30 – CORDOBA

At about 11 a.m., our two car caravan left Chité for the drive to Cordoba. All the countryside seemed to look alike – more olive polka dots in more brown dirt. Right before entering Cordoba, we noted two fields of sunflowers, dried up in the sun.

In Cordoba, we visited the Mezquita. Though the Christians have since made an effort to convert this building into a cathedral, the Mezquita retains its character as a Mosque, built by the Moslem Abd al-Rahman in the eighth century a.d.

Whereas a cathedral is built to focus attention on the altar, the Mezquita seems built to prevent any focus at all. Larger than most cathedrals, it is filled throughout with rows of columns, evenly spaced, twenty rows of columns in one direction, thirty-six rows in the other – some 700 hundred columns filling the interior of the Mosque. This layout allows a person to

stand nearly anywhere inside and have a similar view. Namely, if one tries to look through the building along a diagonal, the view is blocked by a mass of columns; one feels isolated, as if in a small room. But look straight, along a row, and one can see a long distance, a parade of columns on either side, the way two opposing mirrors give the appearance of infinite repetition. And walking inside, one can look either left or right and see a succession of these infinite mirror-like views, one after another. The overall impression is a paradox: being enclosed in a small space, confined, yet being able to see infinitely far, with infinite freedom of movement, whenever properly aligned.

FRIDAY, JULY 2

At every point of decision, each member of our party has voiced different ideas about what we should do. Tired of trying to gain consensus for plans, today I needed a rest. Braden, Dan and Jen drove the Renault down to the Mediterranean. Kate, Karen and Tessa drove the Opel up the mountain to Alpajarras, famous for its crafts, and into Lanjarron, where Spain's natural spring water is bottled. I stayed home and wrote in my journal.

When Braden and Jen and Daniel returned from the beach, they reported seeing a big-buttocked, small-breasted woman sitting topless on the beach. She was "picking hairs from her knees" they reported. Braden and Daniel went out together for beer and tapas in Lecrin. They were still not home when I went to bed after midnight.

SATURDAY, JULY 3 – NORTH TO TRES CANTOS

We were in the cars by 9:30. Jen drove the Opel while I got happy with a bottle of wine and more Spanish stories. We sailed again for five hours through seas of brown dirt and olive polka-dots to the town of *Tres Cantos*, about a half hour north of Madrid. We arrived at 2:30 and I followed the gang to a Tex Mex restaurant for dinner. Braden left, not feeling well, and Kate gave us all a good laugh when, confusing *esposo* with *hermosa*, she asked the waitress for a doggy bag since her "goodlooking female" friend had become sick and had to leave.

Too tired and hot to do more after dinner, Karen went to sleep. I watched Spanish TV – a game show where contestants tried to erect towers out of enormous colored blocks while taunted bulls knocked them down – until I too fell asleep.

SUNDAY, JULY 4TH

At breakfast, I learned that Daniel was, again, resisting attempts to wake him up. We left without him at 8 a.m. for the walk to the train station, where we caught an 8:30 train into Madrid. Once again, I pondered what it was that had made Columbus a successful leader. Like Ferdinand and Isabella, I could finance an Atlantic passage – but I couldn't get my son out of bed.

The rest of us spent the day walking – first to El Rostro, an enormous outdoor flea market, where we walked up and down among the stalls. Then we walked the hallways and galleries of the Prado Museum, looking at paintings by El Greco, Velasquez, and Goya. After lunch we walked through shady El Retiro park, among artists and street performers, then up the wide Paseo, past the May 2nd Square and the Ritz Carlton with their fountains and flowers, all the way to Los Recoletas train station. After walking all day, it felt wonderful to sit on the train. We got back to our hotel and found Daniel up and awake, asking what we were planning to do for the day. I conceded to dinner at McDonald's around the corner.

Back at the hotel, we confirmed plans for the next day. We would see the highlight of our trip, the Royal Palace. I was up until 2 am, unable to sleep, so I watched more Spanish television.

MONDAY, JULY 5TH – DYSFUNCTION IN MADRID

We ate breakfast in the hotel lobby in staggered shifts, no one talking to anyone else.

I took a call in our room from Kate – she and Braden were leaving for the train station and would meet us in front of the Royal Palace.

The rest of us caught the train twenty minutes later. I felt better knowing that Daniel would at least get to see Madrid. Once there, I was concerned about keeping Kate and Braden waiting. I set a good pace twenty yards in front of my straggling companions, not stopping to window shop or look at the sites we passed.

We found Kate and Braden at the Royal Palace and got in line to buy tickets, anxiously awaiting the 2800 rooms which, Fodor's Guide had said, vied for "over-the-top opulence." After fifteen minutes in line, a step away from admittance, Daniel and Tess announced that they didn't want to go in if they had to pay their own admission – about \$5 each. I heard Mom ask where they were going to go, and they said, "Walk around – we don't know." Someone said there needed to be a meeting place and a time. Mom

asked if either of them had a watch, and the answer was no. Kate and Braden bought two tickets and went in. Now the rest of us were at the ticket window, a long line of tourists impatient behind us. And I was getting nowhere trying to persuade Daniel and Tess to join us inside.

In the end, I went back on my pledge not to control. Paying admission for five, I insisted, this time, that they join us.

The Palace was everything I had hoped it would be – the parade grounds, the apartments of King Charles III, the Hall of Columns, the smoking room, the Throne Room, the state dining room, the porcelain room, the fine woods room, the billiards room of Alfonso XII, the Stradivarius room, the royal chapel, the Royal Library, and more. Fodor's had not exaggerated. I had never seen such opulence.

Upon exiting the Palace, we began to follow Kate and Braden through the old city with sporadic, indecisive discussion of what to do next. Kate and Braden decided they wanted to wander around and shop, but the larger group was slowing them down. No one else expressed any preference about what to do, except that I still wanted to find a Flamenco club – but no one else expressed interest in that.

I followed the group into a bar, where they ordered lemon drinks and bowls of succulent green olives along. I ordered a beer for myself. Yet, when everyone was done, Karen asked if I was "ready" (meaning to pay the tab for the whole group). Bothered by the presumption that I would pay for things, when I'd made clear from the start I would not, I paid anyway, letting irritation fester inside me. I began to fixate on the issue of my role as father, financier – and follower.

Out on the street again, Kate announced that she and Braden were going off in a smaller group – one or two could join them if they wished, but due to the inevitable slow-down, they didn't want everyone staying together. This forced some quick decisions. Karen said she would go with me. No one else voiced preferences. Kate and Braden started moving southeast, Karen and I northwest, and Jen, Daniel and Tess stood in the middle, trying to decide what to do. Eventually, they said they were not joining either group; they would do something themselves. We separated.

Much as I hated to be in Madrid without them, at least it was good for Daniel and Tessa to have this additional independence. Whatever they did, their time in a foreign city, across the Atlantic from all they were familiar with, would be a learning experience for them. Though not all I had imagined, this journey I'd financed still fulfilled the obligations I felt to provide enriching experience for my loved ones. I was satisfied.

Still, as we parted company, I wondered how long the threesome standing there on the sidewalk would last before they disintegrated from lack of plan, initiative, or consensus.

Karen and I walked up Gran Villa a little, stopping to eat at a sidewalk café. I ordered more gazpacho. When I asked Karen what she wanted to do next, she came near to tears over the family's dysfunction, saying she was ready to go home.

After an afternoon at the *Museo del Centro del Arte de Reina Sofia*, Karen and I took the train back to *Tres Cantos*, finding everyone else back before us, safe and without reported catastrophes.

A little later, Tess came into our room. We learned that the three adventurers we'd left in the street in Madrid had stood on the corner for no more than five minutes before deciding simply to return to the hotel in *Tres Cantos*. Dan and Tess had spent the afternoon in their room, except for a walk down the street to eat, once again, at McDonalds. After missing the Palace in Granada, Daniel had now missed both days in Madrid.

Kate came in. She and Braden wanted to go to the Chinese Restaurant Karen and I had noticed the night before. I gave her one set of directions, and Karen gave her a completely opposite set. Kate listened to Karen's directions rather than mine. I fumed that Kate was ignoring my attempts to point out why I was right. Surely I had failed as a father, unable even to lead a small group of seven. I would never have been able to get the Nina and the Pinta to follow me across the Atlantic.

Kate and Braden took Daniel and Tess to the Chinese Restaurant. I played cards with Jen, watched more Spanish TV, and went to bed.

TUESDAY, JULY 6 – EL ESCORIAL

Today we took the red Renault and green Opal through small mountain towns to *El Escorial*, where virtually all the Kings and Queens, from the time of Ferdinand and Isabella to the present day, have been buried together in ornate crypts. It was eerie, standing in the middle of the burial chamber, surrounded by hundreds of years of mighty corpses. We enjoyed a wonderful lunch and a bottle of wine – all seven of us – under a spreading shade tree. We finished our perfect meal at 3 p.m. But the trip was not destined to end on a perfect note.

Back in *Tres Cantos*, I learned they wanted to eat at the Chinese Restaurant again. Though quite full from our large afternoon meal, I could not miss the final gathering on the last day of our trip. Jen declined to join the rest of us, but asked us to bring her some rice, with something mild, not

spicy, and, whatever we chose, no shrimp.

At the Chinese restaurant, I reached for the chair at the head of the table and realized that Kate was reaching for it at the same time. Making eye contact, I felt sure I projected my feelings: Kate, I am the father; I am the eldest; I'll be paying the bill; tradition says the place at the head of the table belongs to me! But apparently my face sent no such message, and after ten days together, I sensed that any attempt to discuss the matter might lead to division or confrontation. So I said nothing about the privilege and honor of sitting at the head of the table. Kate pulled out the chair and sat down at the head. Father, elder, financier -- I sat in the place at her left.

Proud of my family, and wanting to revel in this pride, I became fixated on the injustice of not sitting at the head of the table. This was the crowning meal of the trip -- and how much had I sacrificed to get us all here! I had agreed to come to Spain because that was the family's vote. In this chivalrous land where even strangers were addressed as "Your Grace," I had refrained (most of the time) from directing where and what we did. I had given up on my vision of the family gathered at a Flamenco Club. If this was to be the final meal together, didn't the father deserve his place at the head of the table? Don Quixote, intent on upholding honor and chivalric tradition, I lamented the younger generation.

I don't believe the family had any idea that these troubles were brewing in my brain. They had settled into occasional, sporadic conversation about what to order. I surveyed the menu, noticed a meal for six, and asked if anyone was interested in getting it. I got no response -- *a fitting response*, I was quick to think, *for a question posed by someone not sitting at the head of a table!* I tried again, and again I got no response. I gave up asking about the meal for six -- after all, it was just a meal for six -- but I did not give up stewing in my indignity.

I then asked if anyone was interested in getting a bottle of wine. Again, I received no response. From my position at the corner of the table, perhaps no one could hear me? I counted silently to ten, and I asked again about the bottle of wine. This time I knew they could hear, since my question (my tone of voice?) stopped the conversation. But still, there was no response to the question put by the man at the corner of the table.

Then the Chinese waitress approached. I looked up and made eye contact with her. I knew that the Chinese held special respect for the elderly, and I was clearly the oldest one at the table. I was also sure that she was wondering which of us was "in charge." My position at the corner of the table, to Kate's left, caused her some confusion. Perhaps I was even

older than I appeared. Senile, even. Not to be trusted at the head of a table.

“*Buenas tardes*,” I said, to help her understand that, notwithstanding the seating, I was still the head of our family, still the one who would pay the bill, still the one who would decide the amount of the tip.

Her demure reply was closer to a bow than a nod. Then Kate spoke to her in Spanish. And then Kate asked everyone at the table what they were having to eat. And everyone gave their orders to Kate, who related them all to the waitress, in Spanish, one by one. And then Kate asked *me* what *I* wanted!

Inside I was screaming – Am I no longer of any use to this group? Am I ready to be wearing *Depends*? Am I witnessing a piece of family political history unfold, as a pretender tries to assume the throne?

Desperate, but lacking a plan, I told Kate what I’d be having, in English. Then, as I listened to her translate my order into Spanish, I cringed as I heard her refer to me, not as her honorable “padre,” but by *pointing* to me and saying to the waitress “*El quiere....*” (*He wants...*)

What now? A mere *third person pronoun*?

The waitress glanced at me, and said, “*Quiere mas?*” (Does Your Grace want more?)

“*Si*,” I said, “*A llevar*,” and began to order a rice dish “to go” for Jen – one without a spicy sauce.

“No, no,” Kate said, telling the waitress not to accept my order, asserting that we would just get plain rice for Jen.

I lost my cool. The waitress asked me a question, but I didn’t hear it.

“*No se*” (I don’t know), I replied angrily – and added, gesturing toward Kate, “*Hable a mi abuela!*” (Talk to my grandmother!)

Kate and Tessa furrowed their brows. “*Abuela?* Dad, that means *grandmother....*”

I didn’t know if I had the grammar right, but I knew I had the vocabulary I wanted, and I told them so.

Kate said something (appropriately, I am sure) to the effect that if I were going to act like a child, at least I could leave the restaurant staff out of it. I let fly an angry insult to the effect she had a lot to learn about respect for her father. Everyone at the table cringed from the pain of open argument.

So! There it was! I ate the crowning meal of my Spanish vacation in awkward near-silence, not at a Flamenco club, but at a Chinese restaurant. Not a patriarch, basking in pride, but a scolded child. I couldn’t have felt worse if the waitress had brought me a high chair and bib.

When the meal was over, I could not go back to the room with the others. The Santa Maria had shipwrecked, and I knew that, ultimately, I had only myself to blame. As the father, the leader, the financier, it was my duty to figure out how to pull our wrecked ship off the reef. To go back and go to bed was to accept things the way they were – the terrible way I had let them become.

The night air was cool. I walked by myself around *Tres Cantos* for an hour. I kept asking myself what had happened that this journey was going to end this way. What had I done wrong? What could I do now to fix things? How far back in the events of the past would I have to go to discover where I had gone off course?

I could think of no answers. There in the night alone, there was nothing to help me but the stars. Perhaps, I thought, I could make everything right if I could just start all over again, at the beginning...

*

*

*

JULY 25, 1999

It has been several weeks now since our return from Spain. The memories of our trip have started to sort themselves out, as memories do – the bad ones fading, the good ones getting stronger – so our Spanish vacation as a whole has taken its place among the memories of life.

Reviewing my handwritten journal today in order to write an account of our trip, I was forced to confront the frustrations I had recorded in it. I thought of a dozen reasons to exclude them from my typewritten account, but their presence in my journal was proof they were real, and I found myself pondering what it would mean to exclude them.

My family knew before we left that Father would want to teach and to share – or, to use their words instead of mine, to “control.” It was no accident that our trip to Spain had ended with me sitting, not proud and respected at the head of the table, but scolded in my figurative “high chair.” My family, I have learned, has grown up. None of us can make decisions for the others any longer. This vacation taught me that. It is time now for me to accept a different role.

So, with all these blemishes I have left in this story, I sit here now, alone at my computer, thinking what a proud father I will always be, and thinking how much the voyage to Spain has been a learning experience after all.

T/HE LAST ESCAPE

Corinne remained in the Hospital until we were home, and then was released, restored to her former self, on my birthday. Unable to do anything else, I decided to pay her hospital bills.

AUGUST 3, 1999

David, your e-mail was most welcome. It has been a tough couple of weeks.

You ask whether I've seen our dear sister Corinne since she was released from the psychiatric ward. Yes. Three times.

The first time was the day she got out (my birthday). After going to work that Saturday morning, I drove to St. Pete and was present for the small surprise party that Barry threw to welcome her home. I was anxious about the party: the advice from her care-givers emphasized how important it was that she not be exposed to stress. But the crowd there was pretty tame – an over-sixty Baptist crowd – so it went alright.

While the old Baptists looked after Corinne, Barry and I went out and filled her prescriptions. Hearing-impaired, speech-impaired Barry dealt aggressively with the pharmacist, who spoke a very different language. But we definitely got the pharmacist's attention when he realized we were there to buy over half his inventory.

Barry is so attentive to Corinne, so dedicated, so patient.

Anyway, the second time we saw Corinne was Sunday, July 25th, when we had Corinne and Barry over for dinner. With Corinne unable to drive any more, and with Barry making only \$9 an hour, they are desperate for cash to finance their drug needs. Barry was very intent on me buying Corinne's car for Daniel.

Should I remind you of the background about Daniel? You may recall the situation leading to Daniel being thrown out of Georgia Tech. His first quarter there last fall, he got 3 F's and a D. I twice inquired what minimum GPA one must carry to avoid expulsion. Daniel said he didn't know, and twice promised to find out.

Then, while Dan was home for spring break following second quarter, reporting that he expected B's and C's, a letter arrived giving us 22 hours to drive to Atlanta and remove his belongings since he had flunked out. And he still hadn't found out what the minimum GPA was.

So much for the academic side. Meanwhile, since Georgia Tech didn't allow freshmen to have cars on campus and since our neighborhood association was threatening us with \$100/day fines for having an extra car in our driveway, Daniel had agreed last summer he was going to sell the car we'd bought as a High School graduation present. Throughout the first and second quarters, Daniel's car had sat in the driveway, and we'd paid insurance on it, because no one was doing anything to sell it. Two weeks before spring break, he had approved our selling it to the minister's son at a significant loss. That had been two weeks before he'd been thrown out, and was home in need of a car again.

During the 14 hour drive to and from Georgia Tech to retrieve his dirty laundry or risk the new tenant in his dorm room getting rights to it all, I made clear to Daniel that I am not giving him any more financial support unless and until he convinces me that he knows what he wants, that he has a plan for how to accomplish it, that he needs my financial support to accomplish it, and that my investment in him won't be throwing money away. He expresses a vague intent to register at USF this fall. Financing unclear to me. Transportation unclear to me. Weeks pass, and nothing is forthcoming from him by way of any such plan that I can see. I wait for him to approach me with one.

That was the background of my second visit with Corinne and Barry, Sunday, July 25th. As I've said, when she and Barry arrived for dinner, Barry was all excited about selling us their car. ("Us," it seems, meant me buying it and Daniel driving it.) Not adept at sign language, I tried explaining to Barry that I was the wrong person for him to be talking to

about the car. I tried to get him to understand that if he wanted to sell a car to Daniel, that would be between Daniel and him. I even pointed out that I wasn't sure that Daniel had the money to pay for it. I believed I had successfully communicated that to him. We had a nice visit. Corinne seemed calm, Barry patient and attentive to her.

Last Thursday, Karen told me Corinne and Barry were coming to dinner again this Sunday, August 1, because Barry wanted Daniel to test drive the car.

On Friday, unable to stand the idea of Corinne and Barry driving all the way over to our house to give Daniel a test drive when, best I could tell, Daniel could not afford to buy their car, I broke the silence between Daniel and me by saying to him, "Daniel, please, don't wait until Corinne and Barry are here, and then ask me for any kind of help buying a car. If you want to talk about that, you need to raise that subject before they get here." He agreed, and said he would, but he had to leave now to go out with a friend.

Daniel never did approach me about a loan, or any other matter involving the idea of a car. This was the background when, this past Sunday, we saw Corinne and Barry for the third time.

When they arrived, they were excited – they still seemed to believe a sale was imminent – as if they could feel that extra cash in their pockets. Daniel seemed excited too -- by all visible evidence, he seemed to believe he was about to have a car. Barry and Daniel went out for their test drive. In the kitchen, I took Corinne aside to discuss the situation. I explained my view that they seemed to have their hearts set on selling the car, but I didn't think Daniel had the money to buy it, and Daniel hadn't talked to me about getting a loan.

Corinne was quite surprised, saying she'd understood from Daniel that I'd agreed to buy him the car. I told Corinne that was entirely incorrect, and what's more, it was definitely not to be assumed that he could get a loan from me even if he asked me – so, to avoid embarrassment to Daniel or a family fight in front of company, could she take Barry aside and, using sign language or whatever, explain to him that he shouldn't be assuming an imminent sale?

Well, Corinne began to freak out. Her stress level rose high, she started to pace, she said the last thing she wanted to do was to create a crisis in our household, and lord, she didn't know what to do. Realizing I had stressed her out, against medical advice, I began trying to calm her down. I had just begun to try when Barry and Daniel arrived back from their test drive.

They were both beaming, smiles from ear to ear. Money almost in Barry's pocket. Keys to the car almost in Daniel's pocket. Barry was looking at me, smiling, his hand extended, tendering me the title to the car. I didn't know what to say.

Then Barry and Daniel and I together noticed Corinne making frantic gestures to Barry, signing to him. I wondered how much it would take before Barry and I were having to take Corinne back to the emergency room for another two month stay in the psych ward. I could only guess at what she was signing to Barry. And I knew she was signing so that Daniel couldn't understand what she was saying.

So when Barry turned to me and said "Joe, what's Corinne saying?" I had no idea how to answer. I hated to let him down. I hated to say, in front of Daniel, I had been asking Corinne to let Barry know that if Daniel wanted to talk to me about money, he should have done it already. I had boxed myself in.

Corinne physically took Barry by the shirtsleeve and led him into another room.

I sat in the kitchen. Daniel stood next to me for maybe ten minutes, speechless, seeming to expect me to say something. I didn't. Finally, it was just too awkward. I asked him if he was planning to ask me for money. He said no, but continued to stand there.

I finally got up and went into the garage and took out the hedge clippers and went outside into the hot, humid sun and began to attack the bushes.

As I worked the sweat out, Corinne and Barry approached me. Barry apologized and said he didn't realize I didn't want Daniel to have the car – but Corinne had explained to him that I wouldn't allow Daniel to have a car. He wanted to know why I hadn't told him that.

I began to explain that he hadn't understood it quite right, that it wasn't a matter of permission, but simply a matter of Daniel having to be the one to convince me if he wanted financial help from me. That, on the other hand, if Daniel had saved enough from his summer job to buy the car, and wanted to spend it on the car rather than college tuition, that was Daniel's decision, it wasn't up to me, I wasn't going to interfere.

These fine points, however, got lost in the barriers of speech and hearing, going over Barry's head, as he asked for a simple confirmation: "So, Joe, is it okay if Daniel buys my car?"

I start to nod yes (sort of) figuring it's the best I can do to communicate at that simple level. But Corinne sees me telling Barry yes, and struts up,

outraged that I am telling Barry something different from what she told him. And simultaneously, Barry starts questioning Corinne about why she told him that I didn't want Daniel to have the car, when I am telling him it is okay...

I hacked away at the bushes in the summer heat as hard as I could, remembering it was at this very same bush, with these very same clippers in hand, that I passed out last year and was taken to the emergency room myself.

All I could think was what a great scene this would make in a black comedy – the unstable sister screaming on the verge of another psychotic episode, the deaf-mute brother-in-law still not losing his inexhaustible patience and innocently wondering how things could be so confused, and me, the demanding father, wondering how in the world my simple effort of trying to teach a son about decision-making and responsibility could have led to this...

Well, Corinne calmed down a little, Barry left (as always) in a pretty good mood, and I went inside to look for Daniel.

He, of course, was sound asleep upstairs on his bed.

NOVEMBER 20, 1999

Work continues to pile up. I continue to insist on finding my way out of the stress.

I no longer write only on Sunday mornings. I work at my keyboard nearly every weekend, all weekend, going over the past fifty years as they have revealed themselves in the pages of this journal which – hesitantly – I have started to call a book. Is it really a book? Is it really my life? If it is my life, what am I doing each time I add another episode? When I rewrite a sentence? And most importantly, what is it I do each time I hit the delete key?

I have set a goal for myself: to finish this book by the time I turn fifty years old in July.

DECEMBER 18, 1999

The world has come nearly to a standstill as we await the new millennium. We debate the significance of the year 2000, and whether it is, indeed, a new millennium. We predict mass electronic malfunction, mass hysteria, or the Second Coming of Christ, depending upon our individual predilections. Will the banks run out of money? Everyone will be stocking

up. Will the stores run out of food and water? Everyone will be stocking up. My own view is that if we have problems, they will originate not from computer circuitry, but from the depths of our wild imaginations.

DECEMBER 26, 1999

It's been a wonderful Christmas, my family all here together. I got a book from Karen about human evolution, and I've learned a great deal more about our ancestors. While the archaeologists have spent the last two hundred years digging up bones, trying to reassemble the humanoid line from rib cages, femurs and skulls, the biologists have determined, based on mathematical analysis of DNA, that chimpanzees are actually more closely related to human beings than they are to apes and gorillas.

Think about it. Three creatures in a cage together – a gorilla, a chimpanzee, and myself. I look at the other two, thinking they have a lot in common, assuming they feel some affinity in each other's grunts, in a sharing of each others' pheromones. I assume they view me as the outsider.

But why should I so assume? It seems that in fact the gorilla is the biological outsider. For all I know, the chimpanzee understands my speech better than the grunting of the gorilla, sees my hairy body as more akin to his, finds my pheromones more like his own. For all I know, the gorilla sees no difference between the chimp and me.

JANUARY 3, 2000

We have survived the turning of the cylinders as the clocks and the calendars showed us three zeros. Nothing happened. A tribute to man's vanity.

I was listening to National Public Radio today. There was a report on the Millennium Bug, and all the disasters that were not occurring and how embarrassed were those who had predicted this or that. The exit from the last millennium proved easy, once the moment was upon us. It had been the anticipation of it that had nearly got in our way.

There was also a story about a lawsuit against a medical clinic. The plaintiff had given birth to a child with Down Syndrome, which had caused her hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages. The clinic had been irresponsible. Her rights had been violated. Justice demanded that she be paid. The theory behind her lawsuit? The clinic, she claimed, was to blame for the tragedy, as it had failed to tell her of the heightened risks flowing from the nature of her match. More specifically, during the early stages of

her pregnancy, she had told the medical clinic that the baby's father was her cousin. If the clinic had fully informed her of the risks, she claimed, she would have aborted the child.

Now a victim wronged, she had a right to be paid.

FEBRUARY 6, 2000

This morning I took a hot shower. I do some of my best thinking in the shower. The heat on my head always seems to bring oxygen to my brain. Often, this heightened chemistry yields solutions to the problems of work and litigation. Lately, with the time I've spent on these writings, the focus has shifted. The oxygen flow now stimulates images of my youth, connections between past and present.

This morning the hot water brought up one of the pieces of my writing I was struggling to complete. I thought, as I stood in the shower, about memory.

When we say that something is "on the tip of our tongue," where do we really think it is? Stored in the form of a chemical compound? Or of an electrical charge, as if on a silicon chip?

Do we remember things themselves? Of course not. We remember our later thoughts about the thing, and then later, we remember our memories of those thoughts. "Remembrances" aren't little pieces of the past, accurately retained in the brain through time, ready to be retrieved and seen again, like a jaw bone or a skull. They are created through a process of deduction, of re-creation, of invention, and of imagination.

These writings are not the "real" story of my life. I have imagined them, creating them from the loose pieces of rubble I have found.

As I shuttle back and forth, adding to the memories of my childhood, selecting and editing, I have been engaged in a hunt for myself. Finding the pieces, I've been trying to weave the warp and the woof into a single story.

MARCH 26, 2000

I've been holed up all weekend, books down from the shelves, old newspaper clippings, notes of trips and vacations strewn across the floor. I have printed out a draft of everything up to this point, and drafts of episodes before that.

Drafts of particular parts, scribbled-on, titled and retitled, revised and reprinted, lie in piles on the floor. I have started to add page numbers, to move pieces, to insert parts, to build a system of references and

connections, like neural pathways and muscles. My back aching, my buttocks sore, my hairy legs sweating in my leather chair, I have been carrying this thing inside me for many months. I don't think I can wait much longer.

MARCH 27, 2000

White figures prominently. It is the color of the creative soul. It is pure energy, the sum of all light, the spirit of creatorship we observe in the world.

Black is the void around us. It is Sartre's "nothingness." It is the playground of the creative spirit, the emptiness into which we lead our selves.

APRIL 18, 2000

Wracked with the pains of labor, I send an e-mail to my brother, David, because he knows how to write. I express my fear that my book is simply a collection of isolated episodes. How do I connect them? How do I provide continuity, give meaning to the whole? There are stark, empty spaces between the episodes. How do I connect the joints? How do I fill the spaces?

Writing about earlier years has been a simple process: remembering all that I can, I have simply recorded what I remember. Then I've read what I have written as if for the first time -- more reader than writer -- amazed at what I've read, seeing things come at me from the page that I had never known, simply editing what tales my memories revealed.

Writing about adulthood has been more difficult. I remember so much more, so I've had to choose, taking an active role in deciding what to include, searching for the over-riding themes. I have laid out my life as a mosaic. I decide one day that it leads to a patch of peaceful sky; and then, the next day, I see a different pattern, a stormy sea that threatens to drown everything. Which of these images is the truth? Which better describes the real story of my life?

Is it all about responsibility? Fatherhood? Free will?

Writing about the present has proven the most difficult of all. I find such words as "last week" and realize they've become inaccurate. So I delete "last week" and replace it with "in December" (a more stable statement about time). But then I find myself wondering if even that is accurate enough, whether "in December" should be replaced with "in

December of 1999.”

What I write about “today” is suddenly about yesterday. I find phrases like, “As I sit here, I believe,” and I realize it is no longer what I believe, and I wonder if it was ever what I really believed. So do I change it? As I edit what I’ve already written, do I substitute today’s thoughts for more accurate records of yesterday’s? Do I create fiction?

I am in my kayak, being carried down the river, and I’ve come upon an alligator’s head just off the tip of my bow: it is the present. And as I scribble furiously, editing, adding, trying to write faster than further episodes can occur, racing closer and closer to the present, I experience a special kind of dizziness, unable to sort out what I am writing from what is actually happening.

I am chasing a monster of my own creation.

How can I complete this history? As I review, move, edit and omit, how can I choose this theme to emphasize, that pattern to repeat? If I choose wrong, will I cast my life in a single way, as if my life were bound to an unchanging rock? Shaping and polishing the whole, I know that what I choose to include will define what I say that I am.

But the question now is no different from what it has always been: *What do I want to be?*

APRIL 28, 2000

It’s Good Friday.

Learning how to breathe. Experiencing the obsessive frenzy of creation. A room that now smells of my perspiration as I stitch together unconnected sequences. Is it the hospital delivery room? Is it three days in hell? Frankenstein’s lab? I am obsessed.

Reading back over the years, I see a series of cages and escapes. From near drowning in the big pool; from a tag on a jungle gym; from near death in a Thanksgiving fire; from a Self-inflicted Hell among the armpit boys; from a police station; from a bankrupt business; from a career of confrontation and blame; from a self-indulgent image of myself as a father, arranging the lives of his children.

With each escape, I have managed to elude what the past has caused me to be. With each escape, I have practiced the art of fathering *myself*.

Today at lunch, I was steeped in the past as I went through the cafeteria line, putting a yogurt on my plate and then, to make a sandwich, slices of meat, bread, lettuce, tomato.... I went to a table and ate, thinking not about

the day's litigation, but about my book. When I was finished eating the sandwich – when I stood up to clear my tray – I realized I'd finished the sandwich, but the meat was still sitting on my plate, alone, untouched.

This morning I was driving to work, jotting down notes, and at a traffic light, not looking at where I was going, I ran into the car ahead of me. It was only a minor impact. Again, I had escaped. As I print out the pages of my life, I struggle to finish it, to call it complete, but I just cannot let it go.

FATHER'S DAY

X's and Y's, we are each born into a certain skull, rib cage, set of bones and flesh, the creations of our parents, and we become the experiences of our lives. But “what we have become” is not “what we are.” Rather, as a person lives, he creates himself – it is his choices that define him.

And what does the writer of one's own life do? He searches his past – staring at his memories, in search of himself. He finds a child, innocent and impressionable, who is made in the image of the Father. Perhaps, the child realizes that blackness is not to be feared. That in an empty world, a child has room to move. And in seeing his life – in finding himself in his choices – he cannot help but tell the story to his children. He has come face to face with creatorship, and he has created himself.

He describes the child's awe at his first acts of creation. He tells of his early explorations, and as he becomes a man, he tells of his realization that as vast as the world is, it is not entirely empty – there are other creatures, co-inhabitants of the emptiness, whose lives are touched by one's every stroke. So his freedom is not absolute; his choices have consequences for others. And so he writes about those choices, and the responsibility that attaches to them.

But most of all, he realizes the great enigma: captive to his genes, to his parents, to the world he has occupied – captive, indeed, to everything he has become – he is still free to be what he chooses to be. He is still responsible to *father* himself.

He lives through his story, filling the void with his choice at the instant it presents itself – then shapes and hones and polishes, a craftsman working on what is already past, but also on the present, in his choice of what he wishes to be. Summoning all his efforts, he rails against the confines of his cage; he insists on creating his book.

Now he stands up from his keyboard and writing chair and sighs, happy. He walks out of his house. He looks up into the blackness of the infinite sky, and though it's late at night, and though everyone else has gone to bed, he has no interest in going to sleep. He dreams without sleep. He knows that from this instant on, he will understand the nature of his cage. He will understand that he is not, at heart, the businessman his father, or his past, has made him be. He will know he's been free all along.

And now, he has told his own story, just the way he wanted it told.

POEMS

THE PARTY	260
ON MEETING A TURTLE IN A PASTURE	262
PASSING THROUGH DOVER	264
JAW BONE OF AN ASS	266
MISS WAGLER	268
SOFTNESS, JUST SIXTEEN	270
THE TREE HOUSE	271
IT IS MORE THAN STRAW	272
WHEN AGE OR ILLNESS	273
TO KAREN	274
MY CHILDREN	276
THE REUNION PHOTOGRAPH	280
I TO MY SAPLING SING	282
DIGGING UP ROOTS	284
THANKSGIVING	286
THREE LOVERS	289
PAGES	292
TO THE CAT	294

THE PARTY

I went to a grand
grand party
where I met an oyster
wife and her pearl-eyed husband
who patted her behind and made a toast
to a better business world.

He smoked a fine cigar
and somehow dropped a
line about his brand new car
which purred and cost
about four thousand
bucks.

She was dressed in black
black stockings
a low cut dress
and necklace of pearls
and brandished
a long cigarette with a gold holder.

You must think she looked
rather elegant (and she did)
but she kept blowing smoke
in my face and winking at me
until finally she
found my hand and squeezed it.

We chatted a while
her pearl-eyed husband
was excused to mingle
and as soon as he'd left
her fingers played in my palms:
our hands were locked.

They must have seen us
leave the tinkling glasses
with her breath tickling my cheek
and lips growing restless
as we made our way
through the mingling toward the door.

I saw two pearl eyes and
He laughed angrily
She led me to the door
You know the one at the back and
We slipped through not unnoticed for
They knew and
I knew too well that

An oyster wife had caught me.

October 6, 1967

ON MEETING A TURTLE IN A PASTURE

Do turtles venture into pastures?
I thought not, until one day, when I was walking
Up a hill to see the other side,
Something in the grass caught my eye.
It was a turtle. Not a real turtle, mind you,
But a dung turtle. *Manure*.
It was crawling along on horns and snub-clawed toes,
Stout thighs and knuckled shoulders.
A cow dung patch crawled up to me
And swore he was a turtle.
Gullible still, I believed him.
I lifted him up by the back:
His waving limbs sailed slowly in the air.
His sad, beaded eyes stared at me through film and dust,
Crowded by crustaceous armor brows.
The horn of his upper lip fastened tight
his hairlipped mouth
While he swam a breast stroke in my grasp.

Stubs pulling by, smooth and ponderous,
Green, brown, climbing in the air,
His hind legs shoved off from a heavier sky.
In my hard grasp he peeped at me.
I grew angry, frowned,
Said I was sorry for what I was about to do,
But there comes a time for everything.
I took that swimming hunk in both my palms,
Set my fingers in the nooks of his shell,
Braced my forearms in the clouds, and squeezed.
He was hard, but crackable.
The shell split crookedly down the approximate middle
And the insides danced to be free!
Between my grasping fingers
That turtle innard cow dung oozed
From the sun-dried shell,
Soft, sweet and fresh in the barren soil
of my hands.

November 8, 1967

PASSING THROUGH DOVER

The fog had come before I had,
In the night sometime
When it was light and crisp
With wet brine,
White as it shuffled now
Thick and mountain cold,
On the road as I was,
Though I not half as old.

By my right hand I could
See green hills and fences
Where gates and cowbell
Jangling milked children's senses
And patches of grass and corn
Shot shivering stalks into the air
And the cheeks of the pigs were bare.

By my left hand, the famous cliffs,
And the sea that is gull fog
Gurgling and spilling drink all over
So that even the cliffs, palely ill,
Were unreal in the starved mist
That claimed they were near,
Clean pinnacles, untouched, unknissed.

Just as the fog hid the tower rocks,
It captured the sea sounds
Of salt slapping at the docks,
The gaping snails, the grit-grey clams,
And the spirits who slippery
Clambered on the waves to land.

So – running – begging to learn
The right and the left of the fog's hand
Before the city came waking
With its bolts of men,
Softly I entered the bluestorm;
Drank the cold breath of rain;
And slipped across the cliff edge

To fall slowly

With smooth
Mist, smooth
Pain, into the rocky
Jutted heaven of a channel snow,
Deaf to the waves that clogged my ears,
Deaf to the bolts I would now not have to know.

Summer 1968

JAW BONE OF AN ASS

In the bottom of a crater I found
The old jaw bone of an ass.
The moonlight struck it white
And the stars spoke out
Like diamonds with thousands of faces
And mouths all singing.

What kind of ass would die in this crater?
And where have his other limbs walked off to,
Leaving his jawbone here?

A cow mouth would not appear so desolate.
She would be chewing cud on all fours,
Hoofing and tonguing the grass,
Enticing it come and grow,
Fields of green fires!
To be lost in a sea of them!

How could I be so strange
As to hide in this place
Where cow mouths come to die?

No one looks for us, jawbone of mine.
No cow mouth passing in flesh
Plucks me a blade to chew on.

Cud, my cousins,
firegreen friends:

We live as prisoners
in white wooden fences
and die in fresher dirt than this,
if ever we die again.

Philadelphia, 1969

MISS WAGLER

Miss Wagler was a white woman
I read about in the newspaper.
Alone, but burrowing deeper into
Sections of alleys and litter filled passageways
Quiet but for trash can tops
And muffled winos,
She was bringing good things to them

When some youngsters
Poured gasoline all over her
Not bothering to rape
To rob or tease her
Just pouring on the stinky stuff
And setting everything afire
Everywhere she dared to look
Unable to turn back into blackness
Lightness and blazing whiteness
Killing her with that burning question:
What are you doing here?

She was alone
and thought she had loved them,
from whiskered boozers
spilling into gutters
To pigtailed and hair-pinned youngsters
In yellow skirts, brown and decked in Sunday best.
She had thought to live in their midst

And now she was blind from the gasoline
That stank in her hair, blackened,
burnt out to each root –
Her bare bald scalp scorched black
Her lips and ear lobes black
Her palms and fingernails black
Her foot soles black –

Her eyelids, when they closed them,
Still white as the moon.

Philadelphia, 1968

SOFTNESS, JUST SIXTEEN

The corners of a city block
Rip into the dunes
Like fingers into sandy breasts –
Nails and engines lock
Into the earth like claws –
And softness, just sixteen,
Awaits her boy
With his cratered face and long jaws.

How deeply do I run like him?
Are my arms his cranes,
My ribs his girdered frame,
My tongue his demolition ball?

Softness lies behind me, legs
Together, and places her palms
Against my back. Am I her last
Protector? Shall I turn on her –
Shall I turn *with him* on her,
Myself a bold constructor?
The steels within me rust
With indecision.
My chains corrode.
My abdomen contracts.
At last, I heave the mechanism out
And lie alone among windswept dunes.

1969

THE TREE HOUSE

With a nose bigger by far than any inner part,
Longer by far than any in his heart,
He rises to a leafy world of summer

Where all limbs join; – where a swallow's nest
Warms white and freckled breasts,
Shells as soft as any feather,

Where oracles call out from trees:
His heart is deaf to the whispering breeze
And he hides from the tongues of leaves that touch and scatter.

He's had his way: he's stripped her arms
And nailed a wooden fortress to her limbs.
Now from his lap of leaves he wonders whether

Hatchlings' beaks will crack white breasts,
Worms be fed in swallows' nests,
And someday he will live to build another.

Philadelphia. 1971

IT IS MORE THAN STRAW

It is more than straw; it is oats and wheat,
Wind-blown seed, once scattered and small:
Let us open our eyes and ears and eat.

Truth comes alive in the fields at death's feet
Unafraid of the scythe or the reaper's cruel call.
It is more than straw; it is oats and wheat.

Truth is grassy meadows in summer heat
Rising high to the sunlight, ripe for the fall.
Let us open our eyes and ears and eat.

Life breaks out on the millstones of death as hearts beat
From breath to breath in us all:
It is more than straw; it is oats and wheat.

We are summoned like swineherds, shepherds who bleat,
Gathered like guests in a great banquet hall:
Let us open our eyes and ears and eat.

While prophets around us beseech and entreat,
Truth overflows from the trough in the stall.
It is more than straw; it is oats and wheat;
Let us open our eyes and ears and eat.

December 24, 1995

WHEN AGE OR ILLNESS

When age or illness
Dries my veins, crooks my spine,
And I am dumb to speak,
You will not find me in a white gown.

When fire has burned my flesh,
Reduced to ash the gums, the teeth,
The tongue with which I speak,
You will not find me in an urn.

If you go outside to sip a drink
Under a tree I planted,
You may recall the day I dug its hole,
But will not find me in its leaves.

You may sit at a table I made,
But you will not find my spirit in its chair,
Or sleeping in the sawdust bed
Around my tools.

If you wish to find me once I'm gone,
Look deep within these lines:
Listen to my scripted sounds.

February, 1996

TO KAREN

When, bright as fire
And glistening clean on grass,
The warming of the morning on the earth
Makes me feel higher,
So do you.

But when midday comes,
The children tugging at your arms,
Pulling you this way
And that, crying
While you try to change the baby's clothes,
And I see you
Changing diapers,
Much the five month pregnant worker,
Curlers and woolly slippers on,

I can only say, "I haven't hurt her..."
And think the sometime thoughts:
Those lazy, thoughtless thoughts
That make their home
In the hot dry draughts of the soul...

They are
Sad, hot afternoons
Leaning back in my chair,
Hat tilting forward on my nose,
Guarding my porch.

I sit to myself exposed,
Blaming *you*
That I haven't been high.
You're out digging in the garden:
Another hole, another flower. And where
A dusty table was, a rose.
And where a glass of water was, a glass of wine.
And so it goes:
Time after time after time.

In the afterhours of selfishness,
To my lonely haunts
You come back again,
With baskets full of womankind
And warm me like the morning of the earth.

c. 1984

MY CHILDREN

If God is truth,
and my eldest searches out truth,
I believe she is consecrated
in the grace of god.

Tiny voiced, mouse eared,
still looking like a little girl,
she has traveled far, looking
in New England, in Latvia,
in Africa, and in New Mexico,
in Indian churches and African tribes,
among medicine men and preachers,
in the language of Japan
and the words of ancient Arabic,
for the thoughts and minds
and hearts and bones of humanness
and god-made men.

And in all this, I follow her
loving everywhere she goes.

Her darker, larger, younger sister,
deep voiced and willing to laugh,
lives in a far closer circle,
drawing the energy of the world near her
to produce an intensity of living,
and in that world she moves.
The hearty laugh, the dance,
the gathering of close friends
at every opportunity,
betrays her loving heart,
her personal warmth, and I know
that I am somewhere else,
I am not within that circle of nearness
where I can hold her, or even touch her,
though she lives right here.
Sometimes I hide in the corner,
wrapping myself
intensely in the cloak
of my secret love for her.

Their brother is an oddity,
 or so he claims he wants to be.
Bright, brainy, big words coming naturally,
 books disposed of quickly by
 his automated reading eyes
which never seem to rest or tire
 of that absorption of stories,
 mysteries and brave deeds –
 He is preparing, I know,
for some great undertaking of his own.
And he knows it too, as well as I,
but he dare not speak of his duty,
 of his future obligations,
 of his ultimate calling,
because they are too grandiose
 for a wiry boy whose voice
 has only just changed.
 So he prefers to seem
 a simple oddity for now,
 and I love him for that,
and for the secret knowledge
 of his future we share.

His little sister, of course,
is not so little anymore.
When engaged in battle for this or that,
she sometimes throws out words
and sometimes shields herself
in stubborn silence. She does this
in a search for balance.
She sees the traveler,
the dancer, and the oddity,
and asks herself, "What am I?"
She knows she isn't "the baby."
She knows she has the brains,
the skills, and all the tools
it takes to mold herself to be this or that.
So for now, she is a philosopher
of all the things she might become.
To choose one is to forego others.
She contemplates her viola bow,
treating it with care.
She tries to hide a smile when asked
about report cards. She refuses to be
like anyone else.
I love the anticipation
of all that she can be.
I can fall asleep in comfort,
I can even die, knowing that she
has yet to be.

March 15, 1996

THE REUNION PHOTOGRAPH

An October cameraman
Balances at ladder top
Holding steady, making ready
For the capture of his prize
On a photographic plate:
The class of '68.

An unfamiliar classmate, tall in front
Converses left, then right:
He shutters back and forth,
Blocking me out of sight.
So back and forth I parry
To remain in the camera's eye,
Loath to miss my long awaited
Instant in the light.

But the man at the top of the ladder
(As elders often are wont to do)
Is taking his time about letting it happen.
Are we not yet correctly composed?
Not yet fully illumined?
Lacking focus, I suppose?

Then, at the end of the rippling crowd,
In the grasp of a stranger's wife,
I see (in the eyes of an older man)
A friend from a long ago life.
I want to go to him.
I yearn to hear his years from him.
I want the man to tell me
What the boy had been.

Yet I'm determined to be seen
When the flash finally fires.
For the sake of this photograph trying to be,
For the sake of the past, and posterity,
I postpone the moment with my friend
And stand my ground.

The old man at the top of the ladder
Lifts the lens to his eye,
And that happy release
When it all finally happens
Arises within us, again.
The instant framed, the deed done,
We disperse in the current of living;
It is June again; boys become men take heart.

Then there marches learnedly forth
Emeritus Master of old: "Sarcophagus,"
Whose words made the dead come alive.
I linger (too long) on his "Everything flows"
And "Even as we'll speak, a lifetime will have flown."
The posed assembly dissolves in a flood.

The living boy of years gone by
Is nowhere to be found;
I turn, and cross the swirling crowd
As if, on murky waters,
I comb the bottom for the drowned;
But he is gone. And I have only the photographer
To reach back into the wintry bath
And raise the papered faces of October.

October, 1988

I TO MY SAPLING SING

(To Kathryn, away from home at age 15)

Falling leaf, I
to my sapling sing
about summer and winter
and living things:

where are you now?
Is it the distance
to your touch,

out of my swirling reach,

or is it the time
since our parting –

the dizzying turns
of our aging –

which have made me
not know
how to touch
you, youth, again?

Your loneliness flatters
as a missing of us
but doesn't really matter
since time has parted our
paths and the past
is what you really miss.

You can never regain
Lost days of spring.
If you long for us,
imagine *our* longing:
leaves falling from branches...

We once waved in unified glory –
We once fired you,
all *color and crescendo* –

but now we only swirl and sing
about summer and winter
and living things.

Tampa, 1989

DIGGING UP ROOTS

Pick a word, any word.
Uproot it. Brush it off,
Bring it under roof
And dissect it with care
On your cutting board.

The word may be shrouded
At first, with the dirt of its age
And parasites from the soil
By the log where it lay.
Hold it under water.
Scrub it clean.

Its wooden stem
Would reveal world
History with its rings.
Count its lines.
Explore its spaces.
Catalogue its shoots
and tendrils.

Hold the whole thing
up to a window
Where the morning shines;
Examine its cells and sections
Feel the down on its surface
Which reveals it as a living thing.

Your chosen word is a name
Which someone planted,
Your ancestors nourished,
Which past generations pruned.

Now it is yours to speak out loud,
To pronounce it distinctly.
Unheard before, the word may answer
And dialogue with the dead begin.

March - July, 1996

THANKSGIVING

For my father,
Who rests now in the grave,
Having passed me crumbs

And passed on life
In the empty days of winter;
For my mother,

Whose heartbeat I knew
Long before any other;
And for their hundred

Fellow travelers
Who stood on deck
Before the salt winds

Of the ocean passage;
For each of them,
I write these words.

I thank you for your vision
And the dreams
That brought you here;

I thank you for copper kettles
And pewter
And cobbled shoes;

I thank you for the axe,
And the adze, and the hammer,
And the kegs of twelve penny nails;

I thank you, father, for the table
Where you last gave thanks
In the throes of your final winter,

I thank you all for blankets,
For winter clothes,
For wagon wheels;

For the chest of keepsakes,
And the Bible,
Wrapped in mother's quilts,

And the words of elders
Recorded in books,
And the tin, with the ink and writing quills....

For I see, in these cobbled shoes,
The journeys I will someday take;
In the axe and the adze you made,

I see bedframes I will make;
With the quills that you gave me,
I pen this refrain:

ALL THAT I HAVE, I HAVE IN YOUR NAME.

Let me make of my life
What you have made,
And give what you gave me to others.

For your life, father White,
That you gave in the famine,
That I and the others might live,

Peregrine am I,
Your son forever,
And I have thanks to give.

November, 1989

Note:

Peregrine White was born aboard the Mayflower while it was anchored off the Massachusetts coast, while the rest of the ship's passengers contemplated the founding of a new world. His parents named him "Peregrine," meaning "a foreigner in a strange land." The pilgrims landed, and of course, had a very hard winter, in which many starved in a famine, including Peregrine White's father. Peregrine survived and prospered, eventually claiming that he authored the above piece, rather than me.

THREE LOVERS

Two lovers lie beside me in my bed;
And as I touch the one I wed,
The other sucks my soul.

One is flesh and blood and bone,
My fingers feel her (feel at home)
Exploring darkest clefts and mounds

While silently I tongue the sounds
My mistress (who is never far)
Delights to speak, and longs to hear.

Mother of my children, you
Who soothe my soul with warm breasts
And cradling arms,

I wonder what you feel or know –
Your eyes are closed; a silent O
Lies on your lips –

I turn away to let her sleep
And find my other lover by my side
Wide awake between the sheets.

My mistress comes to me
With whispers, syllables and moans,
Enticing me with lines for poems;

She teases, answers, asks, supposes,
Hypothesizing words like roses –
Spelling kisses with her lips.

She utters a darting consonant,
Teeth and tongue telling me things,
Then mouths the sound of a long, low vowel.

She phrases puzzles, riddles, mazes;
I roll them round my tongue and brain
And answer her. She comes again,

Proposing words in new positions,
Mingling images, orations,
Exploring lingual excitations.

Our breathing rises rhythmically –
She throws her sighs like thighs around me
Till she has me listening for white jasmine and the moon.

I thrust a thought her way, she mine:
We make under the sheets a synthesis
Of sounds, syllables spilled everywhere!

*

*

*

My mind is weary; my words are spent.
Discarded rhymes lie flat and limp.
My mistress fades away.

Exhausted, I turn to the woman I wed
(Who lies still asleep, unaware, in my bed)
And wonder why things won't sleep until said.

I face you, my lover of flesh, blood and bone.
I ask for understanding,
And offer you this poem.

November, 1995

PAGES

In this room where I live,
The walls are covered
 With shelves,
 Packed with books
 Stacked upright
 Shoulder to shoulder,
Each book bound,
Glued or sewn.
 Rich leather binds the best.
 Paper, pressed
From pulp of trees or rags,
Packs each book
Flyleaf to flyleaf.
 Each white page –
 Compressed from
 Thousands of fibers
 Aligned like fields of wheat—
Serves as a backdrop sheet,
Unseen behind the stark ink print.

Black characters stand in rows
Shoulder to shoulder
Like soldiers,
 Short vowels like footmen,
 Tall consonants like mounted
 Standard-bearers,

Organized in platoons,
Companies, brigades,
Aligned in armies
 To defend the kingdom,
 Millions of them all at once,
Wave after wave,
Page after page.

After war and conflagration,
Among forest trees
 Blackened by fire
Against the snow,
Ashen figures,
 Millions of them lying
 Upright but still
Between white sheets,

I have searched for signs
Of their fathers' lives.

Rags pressed into service as pages
Offer a choice of forms,
But the corpses are remnants of aspirations.

Here, in the room where I write,
I create white fields of such characters:
May you find among their sheets
The Spirits of their first dawning.

January 1996

TO THE CAT

I'd rather steal cat-like into death at night;
Not rail against doctors, or clutch at the day.
Open the window, and put out the light.

I could wail in some ambulance, put up a fight;
I could rage against dark, against blindness inveigh;
I'd rather steal cat-like into death at night.

What is the reason for struggle or fright?
Why should old men curse as they
Open the window, and put out the light?

I have known smaller creatures to slip out of sight,
And shutting my eyes in darkness, I pray:
I'd rather steal cat-like into death at night.

What good would raving do? What rage incite?
This, my flesh – it is only clay –
Open the window and put out the light.

I have watched the moth flutter, the fledgling delight,
And won't now grieve for the lost child's play;
I'd rather steal cat-like into death at night.
Open the window, and put out the light.

April, 1998